

T. J. Demos
**The Agency of
Fire: Burning
Aesthetics**

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With the recent burnings of our planet – in California, Australia, Greece, Sweden, Brazil, and more – we confront the hypervigilant immediacy of catastrophe: devastating and indiscriminate, the complete consumption by fire, the destruction of everything flammable, asphalt and metal melting. We – and especially those of us worldwide viewing the reporting of the burnings through an endless stream of media – witness a new kind of fire, which threatens witnessing itself: its intensity, we're told, is unprecedented, requiring a new language – firenadoes, pyro-cumulus clouds, weather-producing infernos that spread violence at eighty football fields per minute, giving terminal velocity another meaning. An explosive lethality. The massive loss of life, homes, and habitats, the financial costs and lives ruined, all inconceivable. A world-ending event, on many scales at once.

It's an intensity with global reach too: last summer, more than six thousand wildfires burned worldwide, large and small. In California, the Mendocino Complex Fire incinerated half a million acres, with smoke spreading over half the country. In November of the same year, the Woolsey Fire struck Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, and the Camp Fire, California's Central Valley; the latter was the deadliest blaze in the state's history. In British Columbia, more than three million acres burned in 2017, with smoke making its way to Europe. In frozen (melting) Greenland, around the same time, wildfires spread, as they did in Sweden the following year, where forests in the Arctic Circle burned to the ground, similar to scenes on the Russia-Finland border, and smoke from Siberian fires was blown all the way to the US mainland. In summer of 2018, Greece's seaside burned, killing one hundred people, trapped in flames so hot that aluminum wheels melted into liquid. Over the last year, there were record-breaking fires also in the UK's Saddleworth Moor, and devastating peatland conflagrations in Indonesia, releasing 2.6 gigatons of carbon (nearly half of average annual global emissions). Approximately one hundred thousand fires burned in the Amazon in 2017 alone, more destructive to the rainforest than logging.¹

Despite all the pictures of devastation circulating online with each new wildfire, we face the insufficiency of the image. Frozen and flattened, images of fire present a misleading visual field of aesthetic contemplation. Framed and objectified, they offer only a privileged sort of distanced voyeurism, a reassuring domination of disaster, but also a failure to capture the momentousness of loss, its duration and nonspectacular wake of suffering, its bureaucratic and financial devastations that

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Brazil's National Museum burns, Rio de Janeiro, September 3, 2018.



Farmworkers in Camarillo, California continue to work the fields regardless of the smoke hazards or oncoming fires. Nov 13, 2018. Photo: Andy Holzman/SCNG

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Inmate firefighters build a containment line ahead of flames from the Butte Fire near Sheep Ranch in September 2015. Photo: Rich Pedroncelli/AP

move trauma to banality. With these images, we face the un/meaning of visual evidence; they constitute indisputable facts on the ground, but remain unclear in significance, as if fires burn meaning itself. We have *images of devastation*, but these images, mostly found on news and social media sites, don't, can't, show the *devastation of images* wrought by such apocalypses: burning aesthetics.

Welcome to the Pyrocene, the geological age of fire, matched by the overwhelming affects of fear and dread, and complicated by the very incomprehensibility of responsibility. We're dealing with the unstoppable spread of chain reactions of material oxidation, releasing more carbon dioxide that causes further warming and droughts and that prepares more ground for fires, all sparked by the depersonalized, historically agglomerative networked agency of the petrocapiatist political economy – that ultimately burns itself. The power of this socio-climatic event ultimately negates the safe separation between traumatic experience and investigative security, between present emergency and forensic aftermath. Its threat is that there will be no aftermath.

We're not only talking about the human toll, but also costs to the web of life: animals, insects, plants, trees (with fires contributing to the death of over one hundred million trees, mostly conifers, in California during the 2010s).² It's a massive winnowing, part of the ongoing destruction of ecosystems worldwide, planetary habitat loss (twenty-seven soccer fields of forest per minute), insectageddon, biological annihilation, and darkening seas. Climate breakdown is leading to a mass species extinction event, the sixth in world history where more than 75 percent of species die out. In fact, 60 percent of animals have been killed off since 1970, as the WWF reported recently,³ in part a consequence of burnings. So too have wildlife representations burned: bioacoustic ecologist Bernie Krause's archive of fifty years of audio recordings made in habitats around the world for his company Wild Sanctuary was charred in the Camp Fire.⁴ With the burning of habitats comes the burning of media environments, the extinction of life and the obliteration of its traces.

What is an image of extinction but a perversion of visuality? The late ecological ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose offered the phrase "double death" to describe the full scope of this perversion: the death not only of individual animals, but also the death of livability itself, the latter escaping the realm of the visible.⁵ Not even the techno-utopia of what's called "de-extinction," or resurrection biology, aided by genetic engineering, can repair the

termination of ecological systems, of symbiogenesis that makes life possible in the first place. Owls cannot live on beaches, like the one seen desperately seeking clean air on the Malibu coast during the Woolsey Fire, a refugee without a refuge, a forlorn but temporary survivor, soon to fall prey to double death. In freezing life, images are also part of the problem. They are a salvage paradigm, compensatory, fetishistic, taxidermical, a last-ditch effort to deny the undeniable, to restore hope in hopelessness.

Fire images are situated in a media ecology of denial. According to the nonprofit organization Media Matters for America, mainstream news networks mentioned "climate change" in less than 4 percent of their recent coverage of the deadly California wildfires.⁶ Images, media, corporations form an edited scenography of climate denialism, a hyper-visibility of blindness, where the narration of fires typically points to singular occurrences, displaying an emergency temporality but a forgotten history, a negated context. Or they tell a story of the "normal" cycle of destruction and rebuilding on the West Coast, but one divided between resource support for luxury enclaves like Malibu and Laguna, and structural privation for inner-city communities.⁷ I suspect this pattern is global. Normalization is the enemy in the ecological state of exception. Coincidentally, is it surprising that even in the wake of devastation, climate-change-denying survivors of fires retain their denials, motored by right-wing media that shows exactly these images of dramatic unprecedented burning to selectively frame the disasters? Is it possible that circulating social-media images themselves are somehow expressions of climate denialism, a denialist visual epistemology where fires burn more than wood and bodies but also scientific knowledge, a different kind of double death? If so, then it's the very fantasy of separation, between the security of being here and not there, that helps seal that conviction, enhancing the power of media narratives, government propaganda, industry lobbying, with burning aesthetics. We confront the visual culture of human exceptionalism, reassuring even in the face of the most devastating evidence of devastation. Perhaps we should let these images burn.

Even more perverse than using evidence itself (of drought, mega-fires, devastation) to negate causality (global warming, climate change, petrocapiatist agency) is the aesthetic delectation of images of beautiful destruction, where the photographer, or more likely cell-phone user, positions themselves in the thick of things, so that the viewer, distanced, protected – at least temporarily so – can witness destruction

as a sublime aesthetic object. It's an "IPOcalypse" brought to you by Apple, Facebook, and Google. Haunted by the ghost of Benjamin, whispering about fascism (still) enjoying its own destruction aesthetically, images are fed into media streams, as disaster drives a networked imaging system in which viewers are able to escape the clutches of death, even as they can witness, in acts of perverse enjoyment, its visual, if not physical, encroachment. It's familiar in other kinds of disaster imagery and its psychodynamics of trauma – but I'm afraid that history is itself burning with these fires, overwhelmed by current emergency alerts. Imminent disaster demands response, but there's no time for structural analysis of etiology. We seem to be blinded by emergency, restricted to its immediacy, magnifying the emergency itself. Plus, belying its own seemingly invulnerable systems, the IPOcalypse ultimately cannot provide witness to ultimately unassimilable experience, where fires rise up, suddenly, uncontrollably, in the sudden termination of life. Fire's rising agency threatens the death of the witness (not so much in terms of the photographer killed by fire, but in fire's life-killing power, where the only image it leaves is ultimately ashes of death).

I'm less interested in the *picturing of ecology* – a proposition that, for me, reiterates the basic problem of the institutional enclosure of ecology as framed image, contradicting ecology's radical relationality, its living and boundless intersectionality⁸ – than an *ecology of pictures*: how social-media and network images might be read against the grain, against their conventional framing, against the burning – despite all. I'm curious about what they might indicate, also, in relation to the fate of research and museum exhibitions, in the era of catastrophic climate breakdown, with fires providing a glimpse of a coming Ballardian burned world, elsewhere a drowned world, even while acknowledging the privilege of being in a position to research these days, a privilege granted by surviving the flames and floods (even though none will survive completely the onslaught of ongoing environmental destruction).

When the issue of fire emergency response is raised by environmentalists – the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Environmental Defense Fund – it's typically to proclaim sympathy with victims, to highlight the exacerbating factors of global warming, drought, unsustainable development, industrial logging, and forest mismanagement. With their ecology of images, they call on politicians to act so as to limit the causes of environmental breakdown, signaling that the denial of cause represents an ongoing political failure.⁹ But what's meant by "cause"? Sierra

Club is exemplary of mainstream environmentalism: "Global climate disruption," they say, is "caused by the unfettered emission of air pollutants called greenhouse gases, most notably carbon dioxide."¹⁰ The passive-voiced formula (conspicuously without agent) repeats the technocratic and scientific language typical of the IPCC, which, in its most recent report, warns of twelve more years before we commit the earth, without significant mitigation efforts, to a minimum global temperature rise of 1.5C above preindustrial levels, and likely more. That's right around the corner. The environmental journalist David Wallace-Wells notes that the IPCC warning is a "beyond-best-case scenario."¹¹

Of course fire imagery doesn't show broad-scoped and complex causality. And while Burning Man might supply the Anthropocene's exemplary figuration according to Donna Haraway,¹² such imagery doesn't capture the deep circumstances of its emergence, focusing instead on the visible effects, capturing the burning and aftermath of when emergency, abetted by decades of invisible neoliberal structural debilitation, overwhelms history and contextual determinants – though we get a little closer with images of scorched cars and fossil fuel infrastructure. But where are the views that dramatize how PG&E, which provides power to sixteen million Californians, is currently under investigation for causing last November's Camp Fire, owing to unmaintained electric lines? (One could take this much further still: where are the images of petrocapiatist and juridico-political responsibility for allowing corporations like PG&E to operate as such, historically and in the present day?) While the power company will doubtlessly pass on liability costs to consumers through jacked-up rates, no state regulation prevented CEO Geisha Williams from resigning with a severance payment of \$2.5 million even while PG&E's stock was downgraded to junk status.¹³ The fires, though capable of being recorded in the image, nonetheless burn the bridges to causality, offering instead the visuality of acute stress.

Meanwhile, the US president believes that global warming is "a total, and very expensive, hoax," and recently claimed that his "natural instinct" for science made him confident that the climate will soon "change back."¹⁴ Trump blamed the fires in California on "gross mismanagement of forests," and while visiting devastated parts of California last November, he was asked if what he had seen and heard had changed his mind about climate change. He responded dumbly with a monosyllabic "No."¹⁵ But let's not allow such buffoonery – what would be criminal in a just world – to distract from the real work Trumpism (as well as Kochism) is doing for the fossil fuel and logging industries in eliminating

half a century of environmental protections after the recent fires.¹⁶

These fires, part of a global pandemic, represent the violent entrance of the ontological into our realms of being – in other words, something more than mere representation. But if for ontology existence and meaning are synonymous, with fire it's largely a matter of de-existence. The immediate meaning of fire is its very physical transformation of material existence, which is rapid, final, and nonnegotiable (these new fires obliterate the idea of "management" and simply demand escape from the oncoming vector of destruction). But it's not enough, apparently, or as yet, to disrupt political epistemes, evident when victims of California fire storms, among them Trump supporters, continue in the aftermath of their destroyed lives to deny the reality of climate breakdown. Producing scenes of devastation where whole landscapes and habitats are transformed into geographies of nonlife, filled with fossils of ash, fires mirror the spread of intellectual death proffered by capitalist automation. The zombie apocalypse is here and they are wearing red MAGA hats. The haunting knowledge that Paradise – as in the California town of the same name that burned to the ground last November – won't be the last, these images fuel future hauntings, giving rise to a hauntological futurism. We remain focused on our homelands, as our homes burn. Just as the answer to gun violence is more guns, as conservative pundits tell us, the solution to climate change, more economic growth, if only "sustainable" – a slippery non/meaning supporting above all the interests of sustaining economic development. But the future belongs to fire.

These images provide a sense of the visual, and by extension, physical mastery over an uncontrollable situation (where in fact it is really humans being mastered by fire). It's a situation that by definition can't be controlled, both in the physical proximity of destructive wildfires, and in the cosmological witnessing of the irrepressible destruction of the world – at least of the twelve-thousand-year-old Holocene, which we know has been made historical. What's behind this desire for mastery? The short answer: disaster capitalism, which flips runaway climate change into an economic opportunity, achieved through techno-scientific rationality matched by Silicon Valley funding (namely, geoengineering as technofix, which I've written about elsewhere¹⁷). The benefits tempt fossil industry greed (yet more pipelines, drilling sites, airports, self-driving cars, spaceships), and, with government compliance (deregulating the industry, providing subsidiaries, denying climate change) motored

by corporate media (cheerleading for the growth economy), it proves irresistible. Consequently, causality and culpability are denigrated. Yet the logic represents nothing less than a recipe for world-ending catastrophe, and a crime not only against humanity, but life, even the earth itself – for which there's no real word. "Ecocide" doesn't quite do it, limited as it is to regional ecosystem death; plus, if the word remains decoupled from criminal enforcement, it remains defanged, marked too by an indefensible belief in a just legal system that more often than not serves the status quo. Probably the only appropriate term for what brings about the earth's sixth mass species extinction would be one that simultaneously experiences its own destruction when articulated – another version of burning aesthetics. If aesthetics concerns cultural modalities of organizing sensibility, then burning aesthetics extends both to the incineration of sensation and to the destruction of the ability to sense, burning sense-ability, constituting a further debility that renders those affected more vulnerable to future burnings, impacting in turn response-ability (to use Haraway's terms). At times, and perhaps increasingly, these two aspects of burning aesthetics converge.

Consider the burning of art institutions. In December 2017, the Getty Museum was threatened by the Skirball Fire, another of California's recent conflagrations. But the museum, private and bequeathed by petro-industrial wealth with a nearly \$7 billion endowment, survived untouched. Manfred Heiting's substantial holdings of photobooks and vintage photographs weren't so lucky in 2018 – the more than thirty-six thousand volumes were incinerated in ten minutes in Malibu's Woolsey Fire just before Thanksgiving, a massive loss to photography history.¹⁸ Burning aesthetics includes the burning of aesthetics. Brazil's National Museum – public, and systematically defunded over the years – burned in September of 2018, telling yet another story. A result of years of structural neglect, set within the broader context of Brazil's right-ward movement toward post-democracy and authoritarian capitalism, the museum's destruction seemed to foretell the catastrophe of the soon-to-be with the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who expresses a deep nostalgia for the country's erstwhile military dictatorship and has openly threatened genocide against Indigenous peoples who stand in the way of his extractive plans for the Amazon – for environmentalists, the planet's lungs; for Indigenous peoples, Mother Earth; for Bolsonaro, a commercial bank with unlimited funds.¹⁹ The National Museum's fire allegorizes petroculturalism's destruction of culture and science. As the museum's artifacts, taxonomies,

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genres, conservation, and dioramas burn, so too does history burn, forever more impoverished, glimpsing its own extinction. Perhaps, as indicated above, the very problem is enclosure, control, ownership – which the logic of anthropocentric whimsies that turns living ecologies into dying ecologies, ecologies of death and dying, of quick and slow violence, of quick and slow death, in the last analysis, will lay waste.

Other images do show climate breakdown as more than abstract biogeophysical transformation, portraying the former's effects unevenly distributed according to unequal access to resources. These translate into social injustice, showing climates of extractive labor and racial capitalism. In those areas not directly burned but still affected by fire's air pollution, many (including my family in Santa Cruz) were safely ensconced in their homes breathing clean air thanks to consumer air filters – an index of individualized neoliberal response to toxicity exposure. Others, such as farmworkers, many of them migrants, some undocumented, continued to work the fields, picking fruits and vegetables, while the homeless sheltered in cardboard boxes and tents, all without the luxury of choice. More than a hundred thousand people, representing California's houseless population, had no protection from air pollution levels rated as unhealthy to hazardous, where air mixed with particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide, potentially causing asthma, respiratory illnesses, neurological disorders, and cancers.²⁰ This is especially the case when fires sweep through constructed environments and burn all manner of products (cell phones, computers, refrigerators, cars). Where the Pyrocene meets the plastisphere, the result is a swirling toxic miasma composed of hydrochloric acid, sulfur dioxide, dioxins, furans, and heavy metals. Washington State's air, normally pristine, was worse in quality than Beijing and Delhi combined, as California's airspace became a toxic waste site. Meanwhile, nearly a quarter of the thirteen thousand firefighters battling blazes across California were, are, prisoners, earning \$1 per hour, with convict labor saving California up to \$100 million annually.²¹

These class and racial divisions point to the socio-environmental inequalities of disaster, which bely any claim that climate breakdown strikes all equally. Placed in the terms of racial capitalism, climate – in the expansive socio-environmental terms that integrate its differential impacts, histories of violence, and social conditions – means anti-blackness, as Christina Sharpe has phrased it.²² Indeed, fires produce emergency environments of racialized

inequality, necropolitical atmospherics where environmental maladies are submitted to privatized health systems, fueling their corresponding cycles of indebtedness and expanding structural debility. This is one form of extraction, the dominant paradigm of advanced capital, yet invisible to much environmentalist concern.²³

One problem of mainstream environmentalism is that it views climate crisis as a political *failure*, instead of the *answer* it represents, particularly within post-democratic populist formations. "Catastrophic climate change is not a problem for fascists – it is a solution," writes Umair Haque.²⁴ He's not wrong. "The government has not *failed* on its own terms. It consistently *fulfills* its primary role: protecting the interests of fossil capital," notes Chris Saltmarsh, an environmentalist addressing the recent activism of the group Extinction Rebellion.²⁵ He points out how Extinction Rebellion, at least its UK branch, frames climate breakdown as a moral issue instead of a political one, and seeks to universalize the legitimacy of its movement on this basis. However, in doing so, it risks overlooking the inequalities that structure the crisis as a manifold rift-zone where a well-resourced minority imposes climate violence on a systematically disempowered and dispossessed majority. Saltmarsh says: "Capitalism-colonialism-patriarchy is the nexus organizing our global economy and underwriting climate breakdown. If our movements only make demands within the current paradigm rather than seeking to fundamentally transform our economy we can neither decarbonize it adequately, nor do so in the interests of social justice."²⁶ The urgencies demand, however, that, rather than simply critically attack these movements (as does Saltmarsh), we actively join ones like Extinction Rebellion, or the Green New Deal, pushing them to mobilize around these radical analyses.²⁷

In a recent *New Yorker* article, environmentalist Bill McKibben points out the crimes of the oil majors – Exxon, Shell, BP – and details how their disinformation campaigns have cost humanity, and the earth, a generation of nonaction, ramping up wide-scale suffering, loss, death, and extinction to untold levels, all for short-term profits.²⁸ But these fire images, when mobilized critically, show an ecology of relations that extends well beyond the fossil fuel industry. Indeed, it includes the criminal justice system, slavish agricultural and penal labor, economic inequality, and racial injustice – in other words, the nexus of capitalism-colonialism-patriarchy, which, when engaged directly, expands our struggle outward toward all major organizational systems.

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Jean-Baptiste Fressoz terms current apocalyptic populism global “carbo-fascism,” considering the regimes of Trump, the Philippines’ Duterte, and Bolsonaro in weaponizing and instrumentalizing climate change in their own interests.²⁹ That position updates Naomi Klein’s analysis, in *This Changes Everything*, where she observes that what makes environmental transformation catastrophic is its historical coincidence with neoliberalism, an era when policy-makers, thinktanks, economists, and politicians, are all seeking ways to dismantle the state’s social provisioning functions, privatizing everything, from healthcare to education, the penal system to social security. Consequently, there is only meager state-level capacity to respond to the newly regional and global-scale crises. Shaping ability and debility becomes a structural act of power.

The fires are also particularly hard on elderly people; in addition, for the multitudes without wealth and resources, without the ability to afford air filters or pay private firefighters to protect their mansions, they, we, are structurally disabled. As Jasbir Puar would point out, this is a result not of failure, but of the successful continuing and intensifying conditions imposed by extractive capital and its alteration of climate.³⁰ With infrastructural debilitation, we critically lose our sense-ability, response-ability. As fascism, authoritarian capitalism, nuclear nationalism – complimenting what Wendy Brown calls apocalyptic populism – become global, spreading as if like wildfire, we face new and emboldened regimes around the world that mobilize emergency to suit their causes, whether against migrants or minority ethnic groups, Indigenous land protectors or religious communities, as the ongoing work of petrocapiatalism continues unabated.

Pyro-aesthetics spark affect, discernable too in these flaming images. It begins with the register of fear, including worry, apprehension, dread, foreboding, panic. They extend to pain, invoking agony, anguish, hurt, misery. They move on to sadness, as in depression, dejection, despondency, gloom, melancholy. And they end with disconnection and disassociation, expressed in feelings of alienation and abandonment, immobilization and end-of-world numbness. If climate breakdown evokes emotions of “pre-loss,” similar to what some enviros call “pre-traumatic stress syndrome,” these images concern what’s to come, what’s to lose, what soon will be, what eventually will have been. It makes it hard to carry on, as nihilism tempts.

Critically reading these images does some work to restore hopefulness – that provided by research, interpretation, writing, teaching,

learning, building community. It grants new life, against all odds, even if against optimism and its cruelties, perhaps resulting in something like undefeated despair. Yet if anything is recovered through its process, then it can’t be in the name of what’s come before, life in the name of hierarchy and privatization, capital and uneven dis/abilities. Any cultural analysis that might emerge must be dedicated to decolonizing knowledge, opposing the nexus of capitalism-colonialism-patriarchy that set fire to the planet in the first place, and building new worlds in the ashes.

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1
See David Wallace-Wells, "The devastation of human life is in view": What a Burning World Tells Us About Climate Change," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2019 <http://e-flux.com/journal>; and David Klinges, "Human-Caused Fires Are Destroying the Amazon," *Pacific Standard*, August 6, 2018 <https://psmag.com/environment/manmade-fires-are-killing-the-amazon>.

2
Meanwhile, underwater heatwaves are increasing dramatically and putting marine life at risk (particularly in the northeast Atlantic, the Caribbean, and the western Pacific) by killing kelp forests, seagrass meadows, and coral reefs, and adversely affecting fish, mammals, and seabirds. See Damian Carrington, "Heatwaves sweeping oceans 'like wildfires,' scientists reveal," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/04/heat-waves-sweeping-oceans-like-wildfires-scientists-reveal>.

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Damian Carrington, "Humanity has wiped out 60% of animal populations since 1970, report finds," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds>.

4
Carolyn Beeler, "After his life's work burned, audio recordist links California fires to the 'extinction of whole habitats,'" PRI, November 20, 2018 https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-11-20/lifes-work-goes-famines-audio-recordist-says-california-fires-are-extinct-on-whole?utm_medium=SocialFlow&utm_source=Facebook&utm_campaign=ClimateChange&fbclid=IwAR3Gawu0Cj39hCifCMeK-bgTUys7oW0YP88DOBPvm08700TQz1RDm1Qil.

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Deborah Bird Rose, "What If the Angel of History Were a Dog?" *Cultural Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2006): 67–78.

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Ted MacDonald, "National broadcast TV news mentioned climate change in less than 4 percent of California wildfire coverage," [www.mediamatters.org](http://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2018/11/16/National-broadcast-TV-news-mentioned-climate-change-in-less-than-4-percent-of-California-w/2220.97), November 16, 2018 <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2018/11/16/National-broadcast-TV-news-mentioned-climate-change-in-less-than-4-percent-of-California-w/2220.97>.

7
See Mike Davis, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 1–36. In his searing investigation of resource inequality, Davis explains: "Both politicians and the press have allowed the

essential landuse issue – the rampant, uncontrolled proliferation of fire suburbs – to be camouflaged in a neutral discourse of natural hazards and public safety. But 'safety' for the Malibu and Laguna coasts, as well as hundreds of other luxury enclaves and gated hilltop suburbs, is becoming one of the state's major social expenditures, although – unlike welfare or immigration – it is almost never debated in terms of trade-offs or alternatives ... Needless to say, there is no comparable investment in the fire, toxic, or earthquake safety of inner-city communities. Instead, as in most things, we tolerate two systems of hazard prevention, separate and unequal" (33). Davis's social-justice-framed analysis remains ever relevant today.

8
This essay was first a presentation given in December 2018 at a Princeton symposium entitled "Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective," organized by Karl Kusserow.

9
See <https://www.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2018/11/sierra-club-statement-california-wildfires>, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/what-should-we-know-about-wildfires-in-california>, and https://www.edf.org/blog/2018/11/15/4-ways-stop-deadly-cycle-wildfires?_ga=2.243315783.339016181.1542670148-1328517660.1542670148.

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See <https://www.sierraclub.org/california/air-quality-climate-disruption>.
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David Wallace-Wells, "UN Says Climate Genocide Is Coming. It's Actually Worse Than That," *New York*, October 10, 2018 <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/10/un-says-climate-genocide-coming-but-its-worse-than-that.html>.

12
Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 46.

13
PG&E has also been found responsible for other recent disasters in California, including the 2017 North Bay Fires (killing forty-three people and destroying 14,700 homes), the 2015 Butte fire (killing two and destroying nine hundred structures), and a 2010 gas line explosion in San Bruno (killing eight and injuring fifty-eight people), for which it was fined \$1.6 billion and found guilty of six felony charges.

14
Quoted in Bill McKibben, "How Extreme Weather is Shrinking

the Planet," *New Yorker*, November 26, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/26/how-extreme-weather-is-shrinking-the-planet>.

15
Quoted in Oliver Milman, "Climate change 'will inflict substantial damage on US lives,'" *The Guardian*, November 23, 2018 <http://e-flux.com/journal>.

16
Oliver Milman, "Trump officials accused of using deadly wildfires to boost logging," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/27/wildfire-s-ryan-zinke-logging-environment-thinning>.

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T. J. Demos, "To Save a World: Geoengineering, Confictual Futurisms, and the Unthinkable," *e-flux journal* no. 94 (October 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/94/221148/to-save-a-world-geoengineering-confictual-futurisms-and-the-unthinkabl-e/>.

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"Major Collection of Photobooks Destroyed in California Wildfire," artforum.com, November 26, 2018 <https://www.artforum.com/news/major-collection-of-photobooks-destroyed-in-california-wildfire-77762>.

19
A group of Brazilian scientists estimate that Bolsonaro's plans for deforestation will release approximately 13.12 gigatons of carbon between 2012 and 2030, while the US, with all its airplanes, automobiles, and coal plants, released approximately 5 gigatons in 2017. See <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/fate-of-the-amazon-is-on-the-ballot-in-brazils-presidential-election-commentary/>.

20
The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2017 count of California's homeless population is 134, 278. See https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/reportmanagement/published/CoC_PopSub_State_CA_2017.pdf. Also see Emily Atkin, "The Toxic Air in California Is a Public Health Crisis," *The New Republic*, October 12, 2017 <https://newrepublic.com/article/145259/toxic-air-california-public-health-crisis>.

21
"A New Form of Slavery? Meet Incarcerated Firefighters Battling California's Wildfires for \$1 an Hour," *Democracy Now*, September 12, 2018 https://www.democracynow.org/2018/9/12/a_new_form_of_slavery_meet.

22

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 21.

23
See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "On the Multiple Frontiers of Extraction: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism," *Cultural Studies* 31, no. 2–3 (2017).

24
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