

## 2 Red

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If I said fire, if I said blood welling from a cut—  
... Red, I said. Sudden, red.

—ROBERT HASS, “The Problem of Describing Color”

### Cavel West

During its years of operation, the Cavel West slaughterhouse in Redmond, Oregon, killed up to five hundred horses a week and shipped the meat to European and Japanese markets. Cavel West was owned by a Belgian company, Velda Group, which ran several horse-slaughtering facilities in the United States and Canada. Its manager, Pascal Derde, described the speed and transnational scope of the plant’s slaughtering operation this way: “Killed on Friday, processed Monday, Thursday we load the truck, and then it’s flown to Europe. Monday it’s sold in Belgium, Tuesday eaten, Wednesday it’s back in the soil.”<sup>1</sup> Derde’s description of an efficient, waste-free globalized circuit of capitalist production, circulation, and consumption elides a more disturbing reality: Cavel West was notorious in the Redmond area not only for the stench it produced but also for the blood, tissue, and contaminated sludge that entered local waterways, sometimes overwhelming the wastewater facility. Such problems are endemic to areas around horse-slaughter plants, where blood and tissue are a common sight in local streams, even spilling from taps and bubbling up in bathtubs. For years, Redmond residents had protested the plant’s environmental abuses, but to no avail. The plant gained further notoriety when it was revealed that many of the slaughtered horses had been rounded up by the Bureau of Land Management under the aegis of a program originally intended to protect them.



On July 21, 1997, the Cavel West slaughterhouse burned to the ground. Later in July, a communiqué was sent from the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front (ELF) to the media, claiming responsibility for the fire. According to the communiqué, the fire was set with three electrically timed incendiary devices and “35 gallons of vegan jello” (identified by authorities as a blend of soap, gasoline, and diesel); in addition, they left “two gallons of muriatic acid” to taint any remaining horse flesh. The arson, the activists claimed, “would bring to a screeching halt what countless protests and letter-writing campaigns could never stop.”<sup>2</sup> Part of a string of ELF arsons in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1990s, the Cavel West fire is considered by radical environmentalists to be one of the most successful acts of “ecotage.” Will Potter, in his study of radical ecoactivism, *Green Is the New Red*, describes its status among activists as “folkloric.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did it cause \$1.4 million in damages, but it led to the plant’s permanent closure and drew national attention to the environmental issues involved in the industrial rendering of horse meat. The incident also highlighted the rise in the United States of a radical, underground movement carrying out direct action aimed at environmentally destructive corporations and a juridical order dedicated to protecting private property. What its participants describe as “ecodefense,” the state has characterized as “ecoterrorism.” By March 2001 the ELF was named the greatest domestic terrorist threat by the FBI.



### The Sign of Red

In this chapter, we read the story of Cavel West—the slaughterhouse and the global market, the blaze of resistance in the name of the nonhuman, and the state’s hyperactive response—in terms of a dialectic of appearance and nonappearance, which we associate with the sign of red. The philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce returned often to the semiotic primacy of red. “First, imagine a person in a dreamy state,” he writes in “What Is a Sign?” “Let us suppose he is thinking of nothing but a red color. Not thinking about it, either, that is, not asking nor answering any questions about it, not even saying to himself that it pleases him, but just contemplating it, as his fancy brings it up.”<sup>4</sup> Redness is an example of “firstness,” which Peirce elsewhere defines as “a degree of disturbance of your consciousness. The quality of red is not thought of as belonging to you, or as attached to liveries.



It is simply a peculiar positive possibility regardless of anything else.”<sup>5</sup> In laying the groundwork for a theory of signs, Peirce repeatedly refers to the color red as an instance of primordial vividness, an apprehensible quality distinguishable from the given forms it takes. This phenomenological “possibility”—the availability of red to “fancy,” its elemental potential as sign, separable from its “object”—is the first condition of semiotic activity, as it comes to manifest, say, in the red hourglass of the female black widow spider, the red flag of the revolutionary, and, symbolically, in the words themselves: red, rojo, rouge. Attesting to this semiotic primacy, “red” is the only color word for which there is an evident Proto-Indo-European root (*reudh*); in the Middle Ages, red and not black was considered the opposite of white; and the Berlin-Kay hypothesis identified red, after black and white, as the most basic color term across languages.<sup>6</sup>

Two conditions underlie the semiotic conspicuousness of red. First, red appears at the longest wavelengths of the visible spectrum of light and is considered the most acutely noticeable color to those mammals and birds capable of perceiving it. This vividness is physiological but also environmental. On our verdant, terraqueous earth, green and blue are the hues of contexts, enveloping atmospheres, whereas red, in most natural environments, signals disturbance and rupture. Red is the most prevalent color of “aposematism”—from the Greek *apo-* (away) and *sema* (sign)—as in the bright body of the granular poison frog, the hairs of the velvet ant, and the bands of the coral snake. In these cases, red stands, conspicuously, for an otherwise invisible threat, much as a stop sign warns of danger. The second set of conditions for the semiotics of red is associative. Red is the hue of burning wood and of blood exposed to oxygen, and is thus widely linked with fiery destruction and the violent breaching of boundary, “nature red in tooth and claw.” The association of red with political radicalism—whether republican, anarchist, or socialist—is long-standing and pervasive. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the correlation between red and revolution in Europe to the thirteenth century and the use of the red flag as a signal of defiance to the sixteenth century. In the 1790s the sans-culottes wore the bonnet rouge, and red came to be associated with socialism during the brief establishment of the “Red Republic” in France in 1848.

Red marks kairotic condensation, rift and inversion, beginnings and endings, the red earth from which Adam and the animals are created and



the red skies that presage the imminence of Judgment Day. Because of its vividness, red is often the sign of what remains otherwise unseen: the absent cause, the hidden poison, the underground resistance. It signifies in extremis, borders and their rupture, consolidating but also interrupting the symbolic order. In what follows, we examine blood and fire, the symbolic status of creaturely consanguinity and radical political action, but also the disappearance of red, the nonsignification of limit, violence, and risk in the Anthropocene. Red ecology, as we characterize it, draws on the semiotic and symbolic conspicuousness of red to turn attention to the otherwise invisible sites, the slaughterhouse and the market, where organisms and ecological matter are transformed into commodities. It is attuned, dialectically, to the reemergence of red, from horse blood in the waterways to the sparks of revolutionary action, but also to the possibility that these red alerts will fail to illuminate the crises of the present.

### **Blood: Sacrifice and the Slaughterhouse**

According to the second chapter of Genesis, the first man was a clod of red earth—*adamah* in Hebrew, part of a semantic constellation that includes *edom* (red) and *dam* (blood)—animated by divine breath: “The LORD God formed the man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (2:7). The animals were then created out of the same blood-colored soil: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground [*adamah*] all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air” (2:19). Like many origin myths, the second Hebrew cosmogony recognizes, as an elemental condition of being, the consanguinity of living creatures. God’s granting of dominion (*radah*) and Adam’s naming of the animals are crucial points of differentiation, a supplementary response to the initial fact—the common origin, the shared capacity to bleed—of creaturely affinity.

While other species differ from humans in their behaviors and bodily forms, their essential likeness becomes vividly evident when the shared substance of life spills from the body. Blood bespeaks corporal vitality at the point of its vulnerability, life in its capacity to die. In Israelite society and throughout the ancient world, sacrificial practice follows from the consanguinity of human and animal, as is attested in stories of animal substitution like Isaac and the ram. In Leviticus, God identifies blood as



the primary substance of sacrificial ritual: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (17:11). William Burkert, in *Homo Necans*, sees in ritualized hunting practices and traditions of animal sacrifice a primal apprehension of shared corporeal vulnerability: “This similarity” of animal “with man was to be recognized in killing and slaughtering . . . most important of all, the warm running blood was the same.”<sup>7</sup> Whether in the hunt or the sacrifice, the symbolic violence that sustains cultural authority derives from the innate human distress in witnessing blood pour from the ruptured body: “In the shock caused by the sight of flowing blood we clearly experience the remnant of a biological, life-preserving inhibition.”<sup>8</sup> To break the skin, ceremonially, is to seize the line that distinguishes life from death for humans and other animals alike, giving symbolic form to the natural semiotics of red.

In *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), the political economist Bernard Mandeville considers the relation between creaturely consanguinity—this innate sympathy with other animals whose bodies, like ours, may be wounded, pierced, cleaved—and the dissimulation of violence in an emergent capitalist society:

In such perfect animals as sheep and oxen, in whom the heart, the brain and nerves differ so little from ours, and in whom the separation of the spirits from the blood, the organs of sense, and consequently feeling itself, are the same as they are in human creatures; I can’t imagine how a man not hardened in blood and massacre, is able to see a violent death, and the pangs of it, without concern. . . . Some people are not to be persuaded to taste of any creatures they have daily seen and been acquainted with, while they were alive; others extend their scruple no further than to their own poultry, and refuse to eat what they fed and took care of themselves; *yet all of them will feed heartily and without remorse on beef, mutton and fowls when they are bought in the market.* In this behavior, methinks, there appears something like a consciousness of guilt, it looks as if they endeavored to save themselves from the imputation of a crime (which they know sticks somewhere) by



*removing the cause of it as far as they can from themselves; and I can discover in it some strong remains of primitive pity and innocence, which all the arbitrary power of custom, and the violence of luxury, have not yet been able to conquer.*<sup>9</sup>

Mandeville points to our innate aversion to spilled blood, as what signifies what Jacques Derrida calls “the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life.”<sup>10</sup> He also identifies the ways we overcome this recognition of consanguinity: in the justifying authority of custom and the emotional hardening of habit, but even more powerfully in the distancing facilitated by the marketplace. Rather than ritualize violence, modern societies place it at a distance. The slaughterhouse replaces animal sacrifice, the sanctification of dominion through performative violence. Yet, as Mandeville suggests, the structural dislocations by which society hides its constitutive brutality are themselves a symptom of “primitive pity.”

As Noëlie Vialles writes in her study of the abattoir, *Animal to Edible*, the industrial slaughter of animals “has become an invisible, exiled, almost clandestine activity,” “condemned to an existence on the fringes of urban and rural society,” like Cavel West, located on the outskirts of a small town in eastern Oregon.<sup>11</sup> Vialles dates this process to the early nineteenth century, but Mandeville’s account of the gap between the slaughtering of animals and the selling of meat suggests a longer history. Technological modernization made slaughtering animals an increasingly sanitary, monitored, institutionalized, and en masse process. The premodern logic of ritual sacrifice, dependent on the act of bringing to visibility the dying animal’s blood, was supplanted by an assembly-line process of “exsanguination.” The transformation of the animal in the abattoir centers on the systematic process of debleeding, to produce meat: “bloodless flesh.”<sup>12</sup> What must disappear from the animal to deanimate it and produce a substance fit for human consumption is its warm blood. The slaughterhouse itself is structured around managing blood, not only by washing, hosing, draining, and gathering excess blood for industrial use but also through its architectural divisions into “clean” and “dirty” areas, “where progress toward the ‘clean’ sector may be traced on the floor in terms of the gradual disappearance of bloodstains.”<sup>13</sup>



The structural position of blood at the heart of the slaughterhouse's operations reveals the larger cultural repression necessary to the industrial production of meat. What must not be seen or acknowledged by the modern consumer is the death, the spilled blood, of the animal. If, as Vialles argues, "we demand an ellipses between animal and meat," the slaughterhouse oversees the production of this ellipses, the disappearance of the red blood of the living animal, the primary violence of its spilling dissimulated into regulated industrial process.<sup>14</sup> Blood becomes waste, sluiced down the drain, and the animal is transformed into meat—pork, bacon, ribs, steak—for the market. To make use of the animal as commodity, any semblance of a sympathetic recognition of its corporeal likeness must be overcome. In subsuming violence into industrial process, the slaughterhouse performs the cultural work of absolution: segregating the consumer from animal life, enabling him or her to enjoy, in innocence, the animal product like any other commodity. Of course, the suggestion of a "crime," written in blood, lurks in these very disavowals.

### **Red-Green Criticism: Ecological Matter and the Commodity Form**

While Americans value wild horses—which are themselves, ironically, a legacy of ecological imperialism—as charismatic embodiments of the freedom and beauty of the West, the global market recognizes their flesh as a potential commodity, a resource from which value may be extracted. As Mandeville observes, it is the "market" that oversees the transformation of living animals into saleable commodities, refiguring the affective relation between human and animal as an economic transaction between persons. What the slaughterhouse undertakes by design, the market accomplishes in its very structure: the effacement of the violence—abstraction, extraction, transformation—that occurs in producing the commodity. Such effacement occurs not on the level of ideology, in anthropocentric ideas of nature; it is immanent to the structural conditions in which ecological matter is transformed into commodities. A red-inflected green criticism would attend to the free market, under industrial capitalism and in its globalized forms, as the primary agent, the historical absent cause, that organizes human relations to nature in late modernity. We emphasize three aspects of this displacement: (1) the "real abstraction" of exchange,



(2) accumulation and global expansion, (3) and the changing of form that occurs in producing the commodity. It is an ontology of the commodity and not the object in general, we believe, that provides insight into the scenes of displacement, the “withdrawn core” unique to the commodity, that underlie the contemporary environmental crisis.

That ecocriticism has largely ignored the role of the market reflects its preoccupation with the encounter, conceptualized in idealist or ideological terms, between the thinking subject and the order of nature, from Andrew Marvell’s pastoral “green thought in a green shade” to Timothy Morton’s postmodern “ecological thought.”<sup>15</sup> The historically consequential form of *thought* concerning the environment, however, transpires not in the individual subject’s consciousness but in what Alfred Sohn-Rethel describes as the “real abstraction” of commodity exchange.<sup>16</sup> Mediated by money, commodity exchange makes equivalent labor, property, and natural resources, subjecting all to an abstract, quantitative valuation. The market is, *in effect*, always thinking about ecosystems and organisms, regarding them as sites of potential value and translating those quantifications into concrete activity. “It is the abstract logic that attaches to the creation and accumulation of social value,” in the words of Neil Smith, “that determines the relation with nature under capitalism.”<sup>17</sup> However individuals or societies regard the natural world, it is the market’s valuation of ecological matter that is responsible for the most productive thinking about the global environment.

Fredric Jameson has often claimed that a defining characteristic of modernity is a breach between the global economic systems that determine experience and the perceptual or ideational content of that experience. While we may perceive ourselves to be enmeshed in a local, phenomenal environment, in reality our individual relation to nature is mediated by a global market, whose workings remain always at a distance. The market’s driving tendency is not merely the reproduction of its conditions of production but ever-increasing accumulation of surplus value; in the words of Karl Marx, “capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier.”<sup>18</sup> Accumulation depends on expanding into new markets, discovering new sources of exploitation for profit, and extracting maximum value from whatever resources it can find. The market’s thinking spans the biosphere, contemplating a global totality of resource extraction,



productive development, circulation, and consumption. In this regard, all nature has come under the purview of development, a fact Marx recognized when he claimed that the “nature that preceded human history . . . today no longer exists anywhere.”<sup>19</sup> The point is not that ecological and biogeochemical systems are no longer operative, but that the market has already valued their productions. What Rob Nixon calls “capitalism’s innate tendency to abstract in order to extract”—its ability to detach an entity from its ecosystem and value it as resource for development—is intensified by a global market wherein, “to an almost occult degree, production has been disaggregated from consumption.”<sup>20</sup> Geographic displacement is, today, the governing fact of ecological relations.

The abstract and speculative valuation of ecological matter determines the actual and ongoing production of nature as commodity. This material transformation involves a fundamental ontological displacement. Marx’s account of the mystification that occurs in commodity exchange is well-known: the “social relation” among laborers is “presented to them” as a relation “between the products of their labour,” leading to the fetishization of the commodity.<sup>21</sup> Marx identifies the imperceptibility of the commodity’s concrete history as produced by human labor and the social relation implied in its exchange. There is, however, a further displacement generated in commodity exchange: between matter and organisms, as they exist within the chemical, geological, and ecological systems from which they are extracted, and the commodity as it appears to the consumer. The material prehistory of ecological matter is elided along with the conditions of its production for exchange. Like the transformation of the animal that occurs in the slaughterhouse, the commodity’s appearance on the market signals a twofold metamorphosis, an absolute changing of form, which erases both its ecological sources and its human production. This allows the consumer to partake, innocently, in the consumption of a commodity that appears unrelated either to the realm of social relations or to the ecosystem from which its matter was initially derived. What the commodity form mystifies, then, is not only the relation between consumer and laborer, the “social” relation Marx stresses, but also the relation of the consumer to the biological systems and organisms from which the commodity is extracted.

It is useful to distinguish this account of the production of ecological matter as commodity not only from models of green consciousness but



also from the familiar thesis regarding the instrumental domination of nature, associated with Martin Heidegger and the Frankfurt school.<sup>22</sup> While the instrumentalization thesis identifies as a recognizable and localizable agent technology in its varied forms—the tool, the machine—mediating the human–nature (or subject–object) relation, we are stressing that the production of nature in modernity occurs at a remove. The beginning and the end of this production both manifest away from the site of active, visible intervention. Surplus capital in Belgium is invested in a slaughterhouse in Oregon, and at a later point, horse meat is purchased and consumed in Europe and Asia. It has been fully rendered, cleanly separated not only from the living horse but from the systems—ecological, political, and economic—in which the horse lived and died.

The chromatic intensity of contemporary life is itself structured by mystification. Even red is subject to the logic of the commodity. Allura Red AC, or Red 40, is the most commonly used synthetic dye approved by the Food and Drug Administration for food as well as cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. Allura Red is, not surprisingly, derived from the crucial commodity of industrial modernity. The bright red in Froot Loops and Gatorade is highly refined petroleum: long-ago decomposed organic matter, drilled, processed, and transported across global space. The effects of Allura Red go beyond vivifying the products of the industrial food system, repurposing a biological association of red with ripeness; there is significant research identifying the health risks of synthetic dyes, including increased hyperactivity in children. An alternative to Red 40 is natural red dye, such as the carmine that is also used widely in processed foods (including Cherry Coke) and cosmetics. Carmine dye derives from the cactus-eating cochineal beetle, *Dactylopius coccus*, of the American tropics. Its unparalleled crimson intensity made it a highly sought-after resource among the European powers in the eighteenth century (unsuccessful in breaking a Spanish monopoly, the British paid handsomely for the dye to color the uniforms of their soldiers), and it has in recent years come back into industrial production. In rare cases, carmine dye causes anaphylactic shock. A somewhat more common form of shock is the surprise of consumers, especially vegans and vegetarians, who discover that the red coloring in their Strawberry Frappuccino comes from the ground-up bodies of insects.



## Red Sludge and Horse Blood

The unintended consequences of nature's commodification are mostly invisible, as cause and effect, origin and end come to be disaggregated in producing the commodity. How, then, to explain the alarming emergence of displaced red—horse blood passing into the waterways, red bees in Brooklyn soaked in Red 40 from a local maraschino cherry factory—which seems to expose, as symptom, the network of relations, at once productive and destructive, ordinarily hidden from view? Pascal Derde's account of the global circulatory loop that organically intertwines economic and ecological systems represses the violent beginnings and toxic ends of capital's production of nature. Blood seeping from the slaughterhouse wrests attention from this virtuous portrait of global capital's "ecosystem"—a fantasy of a perfectly efficient, waste-free, naturalistic capitalism echoed in contemporary discourses of green capitalism—to reintroduce the unmanageable excesses of its productive processes. The commodification of nature produces strange, spectral objects, integrated into neither ecological nor economic systems, objects that have neither the intrinsic value of a living being nor the exchange-value of a commodity: agricultural land denuded of fertility, waste and ruins, oceanic garbage patches, cancer clusters, carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere.

Waste is value's counterpart, the disavowed other of the commodity, and as such it must be identified and minimized or, ideally, itself found to contain value.<sup>23</sup> Animal rendering presents one such market for producing surplus-value out of industrial waste. In her recent book of experimental poetry, *The Cow*, Ariana Reines explores the mechanical, thermal, and chemical processes of industrial animal rendering, all of which transform waste into new sources of capital. Yet, as she writes, excess—viscera, blood, unusable flesh—lingers: "Something gets out from under the end."<sup>24</sup> Waste is the unproductive outcome of production, a by-product from which no value can be extracted. Sometimes this "something," like the blood in the Redmond water system, is reintroduced, accidentally, into a given regime of social or environmental visibility. Toxic red sludge from an alumina plant flooding towns in Hungary, killing nine people and hundreds of animals. Red tides caused by rising sea temperatures and pollution. Dolphins, tortoises, and pelicans shrouded in spilled oil. Such instances graphically



reveal the unpredictable ecological effects of capitalism's production of nature, presenting a powerful corrective to the fiction of a harmonious market cycle that coexists with natural ecosystems, each inevitable and governed by orderly laws.

Such stories make national, even international, headlines. Horrifying, revolting, they evoke collective fears of widespread ecological catastrophe and apocalyptic contamination. These accidents illuminate the material intimacy we share with the second nature of waste and the limits of its containability within a globalized industrial market. Julia Kristeva describes abject substances such as blood and refuse as “*show[ing] me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live*”; as such, the appearance of such forbidden matter is profoundly disturbing, intimating not only a temporary boundary breach but the larger frailty of the social, symbolic, and economic order.<sup>25</sup> Yet it is, finally, the very startling visibility of these incidents, their sudden emergence into collective consciousness, that allows them to be treated as aberrant. These instances of accidental breaching are represented as exceptional, prompting calls for greater governmental oversight of particular industries or prosecution of factory owners. Human error becomes a rationalizing explanation, pointing to specific failures of an otherwise functional system. And amid the swift cycles of contemporary media, these stories quickly recede from view. The symptom is treated—the sludge recedes, the blood disappears—and the overarching cause, the production of nature under late capitalism, remains everywhere and nowhere to be seen.



### Fire: Illumination and Negation

Thus we turn to the symbolic nature, the *red* aspects, of ELF's activism. In the past three decades, radical environmental groups have, in the United States, offered a sustained and powerful form of resistance to the ecological violence of the free market and the state institutions that support it. This model of nonviolent civil disobedience, directed against capitalist development, is usually traced back to Edward Abbey's novel of 1975, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, where a band of environmentalists, committing acts of ecotage in the American Southwest, are goaded to increasing radicalism by the Vietnam veteran George Washington Hayduke, who uses the pseudonym “Rudolf the Red.” ELF described its actions as embodying “the burning rage of this dying planet,”<sup>26</sup> a return of the repressed, vivifying,



through intentional symbolic action, the accidental breaches of capitalist production. The fires set by underground ELF activists—targeting SUV dealerships, ski resorts, condominium developments, logging companies, slaughterhouses, and research laboratories—offer the most visible sign of radical environmental resistance in the United States. More spectacular than tree spiking, more destructive than tree sitting, and more high profile than direct actions in unpopulated regions, ELF fires signify as consequential action and shadowy threat, as manifestation of “burning rage” and as promise of conflagrations to come. The “elves” themselves characterize these actions as *ecotage*, economic sabotage in the pursuit of ecological justice, intended to halt, however temporarily, the workings of a particular corporation. The success of the Cavel West arson in forcing the slaughterhouse’s permanent closure is legendary in this regard.

These fires are less significant in their practical consequences than as symbolic action, red alerts that in drawing attention to themselves, draw attention to the commodification of nature continually underway. ELF communiqués point to this symbolic aim, to make visible the ecological violence on which globalized capitalism depends. Believing that “direct actions speak louder than words,” the ELF follows in the long anarchist tradition that understands revolutionary resistance as performative.<sup>27</sup> The pedagogical dimension of these fires is underscored by ELF’s insistence on publicizing its acts through communiqués that describe the techniques used to produce the fire, the justification for targeting a particular company, and the systemic critique that drives ELF’s activism, which is directed at “the capitalist state and its symbols of propaganda.”<sup>28</sup> ELF’s tactics challenge the work of the market by mimicking its form. Unlike other modes of environmental activism, which depend on the bodily presence of activists sitting in trees or blocking roads, ELF’s strategy of invisibility produces an abstract and delocalized agency, able to “strike when least expected,” as an ELF communiqué claims.<sup>29</sup> A faceless, leaderless resistance movement without an organized agenda or preordained set of targets, ELF maintains that any individual “cell” can form spontaneously and take action in its name, so long as this action follows the movement’s central principles. Each act signals the presence of an agential but decentralized antagonist to capitalism, which is, like the market itself, always thinking and planning, always potentially expanding in unknown directions.



It is, apparently, this classically “red” dimension of the activities of ELF and ALF that has led the US government to identify them with “ecoterrorism,” a peculiar appellation given that none of the thousands of acts attributed to these groups have caused injury or death. The extreme caution exercised during the ecotages reflects one of ELF’s central guidelines: the necessity of avoiding violence. ELF categorically distinguishes between the destruction of property and violence to living beings, a distinction that the government itself acknowledges in a profoundly revealing 2008 Department of Homeland Security report on ecoterrorism. Yet for the DHS, the destruction of property is itself understood to be violent and terror inducing.<sup>30</sup> The DHS document states that “the concept of direct action, as eco-terrorists practice it, is a euphemism for illegal *and violent* activities designed to halt the destruction of the environment and liberate animals.”<sup>31</sup> It is not violent, according to this logic, to raze an old-growth forest; what happens in the slaughterhouse is not violence; yet destruction of private property is a violent activity. In so defining the violence of ecoterrorism, the state assumes as self-evident the same conceptualization of value as does the free market.

One remarkable quality of the DHS report on ecoterrorism is its explicit admission that these groups pose no practical threat to national security. Instead, ELF threatens to resist and reveal, in the amazingly apt words of the Department of Homeland Security, “the damaging encroachment of capitalist societies whose sole concern is profit regardless of any social or ecological costs or consequence.”<sup>32</sup> The DHS worries that, given the reality of global warming and the government’s lack of action, ELF’s worldview is potentially contagious:

Perhaps the most constructive way to gauge the current and future strength of ecoterrorists is not to think in terms of actual numbers, but as a growing trend. The general perception that the planet is in peril, and the reluctance or even refusal of some parts of the U.S. government to acknowledge the damaging effects of global warming may increase the number of potential ecoterrorists. Individuals sympathetic to ecoterrorist philosophy or those generally concerned with the welfare of the environment, may become increasingly tempted to abandon traditional methods of



environmental conservation and animal protection . . . and embrace militant tactics as a viable alternative.<sup>33</sup>

Without a state apparatus designed to stop them, anyone “concerned with the welfare of the environment” might become an ecoterrorist, given the insufficiency of “traditional methods of environmental conservation” to save the imperiled planet. Looking ahead to a future of continued ecological destruction, the DHS fears a “growing trend” of radical, ecologically minded anticapitalist actions.

ELF’s fiery protests intervene in a symbolic order, largely coextensive with the juridical order and the state, that sees private property as the locus of value and limits our historical ambitions to a future defined by the totalized capitalist world-system. Radical ecoactivism introduces a principle of uncertainty into the propulsive forward-thrust of capital accumulation and crisis. It signals a commitment to a different and unknown future. The willingness to act under the sign of red depends on a belief that nonaction is itself agential—that, as Blaise Pascal puts it in his description of the wager on God’s existence, “you are already committed.”<sup>34</sup> These conflagrations do not offer a glimpse of what such a future would look like, or what actions might bring it into existence. Instead, they signal the clearing away that provides an opening for new growth. At the same time, the fires embody the infectious potential of activism that so concerns the state’s security apparatus. This potentiality, the spark passed from hand to hand to light a larger fire of protest, is a recurring symbol in the poetry of revolutionary action, as in Brenda Hillman’s poem on the Occupy protests, “Types of Fire at the Strike”: “Some carry fire in red shirts. / Some make sparks with their bikes. / Some bring boxes of burning words grown from roots / in the earth.”<sup>35</sup>

### Apocalypse: The Anthropocene

Etymologically, the word *apocalypse* refers not only to a terminal event, a rupture in time’s flow, but also to a moment of disclosure, an “unveiling” that prepares the world for judgment. It should come as no surprise that the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic imaginary is shaded deep, dark red. The total destruction of the Creation, before its refiguration in the “world to come,” is known by its red auguries, a blood-red sky signaling the



denouement of a story that begins in the blood-red soil. In “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” (1645), John Milton captures the red presages alluded to in the Old and New Testaments:

With such a horrid clang  
 As on Mount Sinai rang,  
 While the red fire and smoldering clouds outbrake:  
 The aged Earth, aghast,  
 With terror of that blast,  
 Shall from the surface to the center shake,  
 When, at the world’s last session,  
 The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread his throne.<sup>36</sup>

Even more strikingly, given the thematics of this chapter, John of Patmos envisages the second horse of the apocalypse as red (the others are black, white, and pale): “When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come!’ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword” (Revelations 6:3–4). Through its metonymic association with the agents of transformation—the violent spilling of blood, a fire that burns the earth—red serves as the acute sign of apocalyptic revelation itself.

Since the 1960s, environmentalists have drawn on the rhetoric of apocalypse, anticipating the time when the ecological crisis will make itself unequivocally apparent, leading if not to redemption then at least to a final judgment.<sup>37</sup> While emphasizing the modern displacement of violence and crisis, in this chapter we too have drawn attention to the signs of the times: the disturbing reappearance of uncontainable waste, the fiery sparks of ecological resistance movements. Red returns yet, however insufficiently, at the edge of the symbolic order. This said, the defining material conditions of our historical present remain almost entirely unavailable to such disclosure. Of the mostly invisible by-products of industrial capitalism, the most consequential, if among the least conspicuous, are the greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide and methane, produced in the combustion of fossil fuels. If waste is the disavowed other of the commodity, the atmospheric accumulation of greenhouse gases is the disavowed other of late



modern capital accumulation. It is this recent, rapid transformation of the atmosphere's chemical composition—and thus, of the global climate—that has led geologists to define the emergence of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, the first in which a biological agent, human beings, shapes global geologic processes.<sup>38</sup> The “ecological rift”—in carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere, but also in extinction rates, phosphorus transfer, ocean acidification, and land use—and its historical causes together amount to an ontological reordering of the economic, ecological, and biogeochemical conditions in which objects come into being. As has been widely noted, the temporal and geographic scale of this agency, our collective human capacity to transform the basic conditions of biological life, renders it unlocalizable. The paradigmatic instance of this displaced agency, unavailable to narrative representation, is the tipping point, where positive feedback loops related to forest dieback, permafrost methane release, and the ice-albedo effect generate—in some scenarios—“runaway” climate change, independent of human action.

If there is any concrete lesson from the two definitive crises of the present, the global economic contraction and human-forced global climate change, it is that liberal democratic nation-states are unequipped for the new ontological order of carbon-based global capitalism. Indeed, rather than respond to these grave emergencies, the US government expends its resources in hyperactive scrutiny and prosecution of those who seek to draw attention, under the sign of red, to the increasingly catastrophic work of the free market. We may take some ironic solace in the fact that the Department of Homeland Security, which surely knows more about these things than we do, responds with outsized vigilance to the scattered sparks of resistance. Perhaps the alignment of crisis and critique that would precipitate the transformation of a political order dedicated to the free market is closer than we imagine. The likelier alternative, from the vantage of the present, is that we will fail to apprehend modernity in its two “total” forms, global warming and global capitalism, as anything other than a red flickering, a slight disturbance at the edge of consciousness, unless or until this perceptual failure is pierced, by degrees or with sudden illumination, as the margins inexorably expand and the debris piles up, beneath fiery clouds and the smoldering sky.



## Notes

1. Martha Mendoza, "From Symbol of American Frontier to Dinner," *Los Angeles Times*, January 5, 1997.
2. Quoted in Craig Rosebraugh, *Burning Rage of a Dying Planet* (Herndon, Va.: Lantern Books, 2004), 22–23.
3. Will Potter, *Green Is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement under Siege* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2011), 65.
4. Charles Sanders Peirce, "What Is a Sign?," *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Nathan Houser et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 4.
5. Charles Sanders Peirce, "To Lady Welby," *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 8 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 221.
6. Herman Pleij, *Colors Demonic and Divine: Shades of Meaning in the Middle Ages and After* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17; Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
7. William Burkert, *Homo Necans: An Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 20.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, vol. 1 (1714; Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1988), 137–38; our emphasis.
10. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. Marie-Louis Mallet and David Wills (Bronx, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 2008), 28.
11. Noëlie Vialles, *Animal to Edible*, trans. J. A. Underwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5, 27.
12. *Ibid.*, 73.
13. *Ibid.*, 75.
14. *Ibid.*, 5.
15. *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), 101; Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).
16. "It is the action of exchange, and the action alone that is abstract. The consciousness and the action of the people part company in exchange and go different ways" (Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel [Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1978], 26).
17. Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 70.



18. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 334.

19. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 63.

20. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 41.

21. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 164–65.

22. Neil Smith observes that in the 1940s, Frankfurt school thinkers turned from the problem of the commodity—a “retreat from exchange-value”—toward an emphasis on the “instrumental” domination of nature (*Uneven Development*, 45).

23. Waste offers new markets for development, an example of the feedback loop of “disaster capitalism,” described by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Picador, 2007), where the market discovers new sources of surplus-value in the very crises it generates. As John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York note in *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), “whole new industries and markets aimed at profiting on planetary destruction, such as the waste management industry and carbon trading, are being opened up” (70).

24. Ariana Reines, *The Cow* (New York: Fence Books, 2006), 80.

25. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

26. Potter, *Green Is the New Red*, 57.

27. “Direct Action Speaks Louder Than Words” is the title of an essay by ELF/ALF activist Rod Coronado, in *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Reflections on the Liberation of Animals*, ed. Steven Best and Anthony Nocella (Herndon, Va.: Lantern Books, 2004), 179.

28. Quoted in Paul Joosse, “Elves, Environmentalism, and ‘Eco-Terror,’” *Crime, Media, Culture* 8, no. 75 (2012): 79.

29. Quoted in Leslie James Pickering, *Earth Liberation Front, 1997–2002* (Tempe, Ariz.: Arissa, 2007), 10.

30. Department of Homeland Security Universal Adversary Dynamic Threat Assessment, “Ecoterrorism: Environmental and Animal-Rights Activists in the United States,” May 2008, 1, [http://www.humanewatch.org/images/uploads/2008\\_DHS\\_ecoterrorism\\_threat\\_assessmentpdf](http://www.humanewatch.org/images/uploads/2008_DHS_ecoterrorism_threat_assessmentpdf). The existence of this document points to a peculiar fact of the ongoing post-9/11 “war on terror.” Governmental resources ostensibly dedicated to fighting Islamic terrorism and national security threats are instead being allocated to prevent the largely symbolic property damage of ecoradicals. “Terrorism is terrorism, no matter what the cause,” stated FBI



director Robert Mueller, tautologically, at the January 20, 2006, press briefing (quoted in Potter, *Green Is the New Red*, 64). Arrests and convictions of ELF members in 2005 and 2006 for various arsons, including the Cavel West fire—and the posttrial addition of “terrorist enhancement penalties” to their sentences—were touted as a major success by the Justice Department and the FBI, representing much-needed proof of their achievement in battling terrorism.

31. Department of Homeland Security, “Ecoterrorism,” 4; our emphasis.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 11–12.

34. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Anthony Levi and Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 154. Michael Löwy writes that the “Marxist utopia of an authentic human community is of the order of a Pascalian wager: it is the engagement of individuals—or social groups—in an action that involves risk, the danger of failure, the hope of success, but to which one commits one’s life” (*Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* [London: Verso, 2005], 114).

35. Unpublished poem in manuscript, “Seasonal Work with Letters on Fire,” which will complete Hillman’s tetralogy of the elements.

36. “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 2005), ll. 157–64.

37. Frederick Buell identifies environmental rhetoric with four features of “Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition”: “sudden rupture with the past, presentation of a revelation, narration of a world-end and dramatization of a last judgment” (“A Short History of Environmental Apocalypse,” in *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Stefan Skrimshire [London: Continuum, 2010], 15).

38. Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature*, January 3, 2002, 23.

