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Don't Look Up, Environmental Violence, and Apocalyptic Climate Allegories

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Engaging Environmental Violence

Amidst the popularizations of eco-crisis in movie and television media in the past two decades, the internationally vaunted ecofiction film *Don't Look Up* (2021) stands as a recent, explicit near-term allegory for political-economic culpabilities, technocratic infatuations, and social-ecological consequences of anthropogenic climate changes. How might this contemporary, culturally acclaimed allegory help to illuminate some of the textures of environmental violence as proposed by Marcantonio and Fuentes; and how might notions of climate coloniality challenge the allegorical presentation of climate crisis in *Don't Look Up*? Drawing on ecocinemacriticism, literary ecocriticism, contemporary Indigenous studies, and social theory, this chapter assesses the presumptive Whiteness of vaunted mainstream ecocinema as a form of cultural narrative; the generally myopic coloniality of apocalypse narratives; and linkages to other forms of spectacle in an international polity dependent on neoliberal political economics and structures of extraction. If these dynamics are interwoven with legacies of colonialism and racism, what are the implications for media representations of environmental violence?

> *Yule*: "I don't know, I'm starting to think that all this 'end of the world' stuff is bullshit."
>
> *Kate Dibiasky*: "It's not. It's definitely happening. I've seen it."
>
> –Don't Look Up *(2021)*

> "So much is invested in not noticing how social and institutional gatherings are restricted."
>
> *–Sara Ahmed (2017)*

> "I'm curious to hear what it's been like for you in this industry dominated by white dudes."
>
> *–Yessenia Fuentes to Mary Annaïse Heglar (2021)*

10.1 Introduction: Environmental Violence

Since the mid-2000s, feature films of a variety of genres have turned to ecological and ecocritical topics with increasing frequency – especially since the Hollywood disaster fiction film *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) and the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). At present, documentaries, animated films, dramas/thrillers, and speculative fiction films continue to present themes such as the perils of anthropocentrism, the significance of planetary perspectives, the vitalities of the more-than-human world, and the underside of neoliberal political ecologies. Scholarly and pedagogical reflections on these topics have multiplied in recent years. In 2021, the Netflix feature film, *Don't Look Up* – written and directed by Adam McKay – garnered international attention and much acclaim for its characterization of the political-economic culpabilities and social-ecological consequences of planetary destruction. In this chapter, I engage *Don't Look Up* (hereafter, DLU) in order to reflect on dominant portrayals and understandings of environmental violence, as well as what this might mean for the aspiration toward critical climate justice and a more supple understanding of environmental violence. First, though, it is important to clarify the term "environmental violence."

Marcantonio and Fuentes (2023) have proposed a model of environmental violence (EV) that intends to streamline and render a "more precise definition." The authors rightly summarize that such a notion signifies across a range of discourses, from political ecology to ecocriticism (as in Rob Nixon's "slow violence") to environmental justice and environmental security. The approach proposed by Marcantonio and Fuentes focuses specifically on the global public health impacts of "human-produced harms by way of pollution emissions." They describe EV as both a "human health hazard and a process" that, in each iteration, has structural dimensions; exploits vulnerabilities; and both creates and exacerbates a variety of harm and power differentials. The importance of the framework also consists in its aim to provide "a specific, functional, and measurable analytic … while, importantly, recharacterizing excess pollution as violence." The authors link conceptual frameworks with policy imperatives – in this case, explicitly seeking ways to "drive support for more effective and restrictive policy" for reducing pollution. Since no frameworks are truly neutral, the utility of a framework resides not only in its descriptive accuracies, but also in relation to the goals and outcomes that orient it.

Two critiques of the EV framework are appropriate and relevant to this chapter's argument. First, the focus of this framework is generally anthropocentric – that is, it attends primarily to human health and well-being, though there are connections to ecological and environmental health vis-à-vis the feedback loops between environmental degradation and global health or social well-being. As John Mulrow, Mariam Abazeri, Santanu Pai, and Max Ajl argue in this volume,

one problem with this formulation is that it "centers the scope of [environmental] relations to an anthropocentric one in which humans and their health and exposure to chemicals and substances becomes the framework through which ecological entanglements are understood." One effect is that "limiting violence to human-induced pollution and its consequences on human health erases the number of other ways violence is enacted and received within social and ecological relationships." There is practical utility to this approach when considering public health interventions or policy initiatives, but it is nonetheless an incomplete lens. Second, while the EV framework rightly points to structures and power differentials, it does not explicitly name the legacies of colonialism, economic extractivism, and White supremacy that have determined the shape and preponderance of many instances and dynamics of EV into the present day. Addressing those considerations will be essential in refining the EV concept.

Many chapters in this volume rightly address real-world occasions, measures, and textures of environmental violence. I hope to add some additional dimensions to the conversation: What is the significance or role of fictional, allegorical storytelling in framing understandings of environmental violence, specifically through the allegory of climate crisis in *Don't Look Up*? How do anthropocentrism and legacies of power and colonialism manifest in such ecofilm representations? How do media representations of environmental violences, including climate crises, fall prey to stereotyped framings and societal illusions across genres, and what kind of impacts do they have on attitudes and behaviors about climate changes? Such questions are, by no means, idle in an increasingly media-saturated and for-profit journalism world, when iconic businessmen exert major influence over the shape of journalism, and environmental content in both fiction and factual framework is frequently funded by fossil fuel corporations.

10.2 Ecocinema and Environmental Violence

Environmental events and motifs have become increasingly prominent in English-language films of the twenty-first century. Recent fictional hits like *Don't Look Up* (2021) and prior classics from the early 2000s – such as *Avatar* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) – all portray forms of environmental violence. Ecocinema, a categorization of these types of films, is also now an "interdisciplinary form of film studies … [that] works to bring back a sense of political participation to a field that has lost some of its explicit engagement with political issues," according to film studies scholars Kääpä and Gustafsson in their influential co-edited volume, *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation* (2013). The ethical and political implications of ecocinema are genuine questions for many

scholars and critics. How might ecocinema inform and shape perception? Kääpä and Gustafsson, for example, wonder whether "a transnational scope and sense of connectivity may expand producers and audiences' ecological perception and cognitive abilities." Might environmental values communicated in a film spark action? "Perhaps the real and most pertinent question we should ask is not how cinema can make a contribution to global ecopolitics," they muse, "but whether, ultimately, it can do something beyond raise awareness." Echoing this, Kiu-Wai Chu summarizes a question posed by Weik Van Meissner in 2014: "Can the viewers' affective responses to ecocritical films lead them to take further action in solving or alleviating environmental problems of the world?"

The specific sub-genre of speculative fiction has effloresced in literature and film – sometimes as refractive commentary on the state of contemporary ecosocial realities, and sometimes offering prescriptive visions for alternatively imagined futures. Literary ecocritic Shelley Streeby notes that speculative fiction now serves as an umbrella category for a range of approaches to fiction, including sci-fi or cli-fi. Kiu-Wai Chu notes that in ecocinema, "speculative fictions, in the form of science fiction (sci-fi) or climate fiction (cli-fi), are increasingly dominant as a genre that lends itself readily to ideological interpretation and facilitates humans to foresee and prepare for the likely worsening conditions in the near future." Streeby agrees, underscoring novelist Paolo Bacigalupi's observation and hope that "by experiencing climate change 'viscerally' through fiction, instead of abstractly or theoretically, readers of cli-fi will be ready to 'think long-term' effectively." DLU is situated in this matrix, and so, in this chapter, I am interested both in the story and, to quote film studies expert Adrian Ivakhiv, "the telling of the film itself – its discursive and narrative structures, its inter-textual relations with the larger world, its capacities for extending or transforming perception of the larger world – and the actual contexts and effects of the film and its technical and cultural apparatus in the larger world." The story and its pericinematic context are, in effect, the text.

Unsurprisingly, this chapter will be most comprehensible to those who have viewed the film. As a summary, in the 2021 blockbuster *Don't Look Up*, a just-discovered comet's trajectory for Earth is identified by North American graduate student Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence) and her Michigan State University adviser, Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio). Stunned, the (White) scientists are drafted into the vortex of governmental science, political messaging, click-bait media, and entrepreneurial technocrats while trying to signal to a largely nonchalant and erratic audience that this "extinction-level event" is, in fact, going to destroy life on Earth in six months. Netflix's byline for the film reads, "Two astronomers go on a media tour to warn humankind of a planet-killing comet hurtling toward Earth. The response from a distracted world: Meh."

DLU is a spectacle of speculative fiction. With cinematographic stop-frame pacing, a rollicking soundtrack, and sardonic yet earnest and often hilarious dialogue, writer David Sirota and Director Adam McKay spin a contemporary diagnostic about how human societies governed by short-term economic and political thinking relate to flagrant atmospheric portents. Many commentators have rightly remarked upon the parallels with the civic, pandemic, climate-crisis perception moment in the United States: There's the opposite-of-subtle, but damningly appropriate, depiction of political-corporate collusion and willful collective delusion at the hands of United States President Janie Orlean (played as a convincing narcissist by Meryl Streep) and CEO Peter Isherwood (Mark Rylance), a billionaire tech entrepreneur (his company is the aptly named BASH Cellular) whose modest demeanor belies the debased entrepreneurial power he wields as a shadow influence on government. There's the steadfastly scientific, but politically over-it, Planetary Defense Coordination Office director Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe (Rob Morgan) – the only protagonist who does not represent normative Whiteness – who makes the call to leak news of the comet to the media after the scientists are rebuffed by President Orlean and her sniveling, self-satisfied son Jason (Jonah Hill). Narcissicm, nepotism, economic and technological fatuousness, and ethical negligence collide in this thinly veiled allegory for contemporary anthropogenic climate changes, and the vicissitudes that lead to the total destruction of life on Earth. Through its absurdist political and technocratic characters in the face of extreme comet quandary, DLU cinematically strives to "challenge mainstream conventions by providing subversive impressions of their ideological connotations." DLU is a speculative climate fiction film that has been characterized as satire, metaphor, analogy, parable, and allegory – often simultaneously, by its own creators.

10.3 *Don't Look Up* as a Climate Change Allegory

Film studies scholars and literary ecocritics have developed nuanced ways of describing and analyzing media that deal with ecological, political, and social realities. In the case of DLU, several distinct interpretive strategies drawn from literary studies can help to illuminate the textures of this 2021 blockbuster and other cultural productions in light of environmental violence. The first central point is that DLU is an allegory, a claim made on multiple occasions by McKay himself. "I think that's the way the movie works, as a direct allegory to climate," he noted on PBS News. Screenwriter David Sirota likewise described the film as allegory when I co-interviewed him at an academic conference in 2022.

To better understand the concept of allegory, it is useful to turn to literary studies scholar Elizabeth Deloughery, whose book, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*,

analyzes literary forms, representations, and realities of various anthropogenic environmental degradations. Deloughery cites critic Frederic Jameson: "If the allegorical is attractive for the present day and age it is because it models a relationship of breaks, gaps, discontinuities, and inner distances and incommensurabilities of all kinds. It can therefore better serve as a figure for the incommensurabilities of the world today." She adds: "modern allegory often directs our attention to narratives of progress, authority, and development as myth." A similar logic can be applied when analyzing the story told in DLU. The film depicts a standoff between ethically beleaguered scientists and feckless politicians allied with profit-oriented technocrats. The impasse, bolstered by ineffectual or ideological collective organizing, ultimately leads to the total destruction of humanity and all life on Earth. In the ecocinematic speculative fiction of DLU, the allegory presents irresolvable dissonances between political-economic ideology and biophysical/ecosocial reality.

Among the allegorical techniques that Deloughery identifies and DLU deploys is "scalar telescoping." This technique moves descriptively between local and global (or planetary) perspectives. In DLU, there is a preponderance of cinematic scalar telescoping between the local, global, or planetary. For example, while nations of the world are collaborating to send missiles into the comet (aiming to break it into smaller pieces and thwart its destructive course), the scenes move among individuals in various parts of the globe under the spell of hopeful militarism; a panoramic of rocket launches; a space-shuttle-nose view of the upper atmosphere while the warhorse pilot resonant with Dr. Strangelove sings "Oh Susannah" and spouts racist stereotypes. Immediately thereafter, the BASH CEO summons President Orlean to a private conference and calls off the entire enterprise in the name of potential profit from mining the comet, as romances unfold on screen and sweeping orchestral music accompanies images redolent of the Enola Gay carrying nuclear warheads. In still other examples of scalar telescoping, the camera zooms out from a roiling political scene or concert and extends into extraterrestrial space, with the quiet dark floating sensibility of an astronaut or asteroid.

10.4 Allegory Is Not Algorithm

Allegories are not algorithms: The correlation is not always clean, and the upshots are subject to interpretation. Such irresolvability is often part of the point. But even beyond the productive dissonance between the imagined scenario of comet-induced planetary destruction and the reality of climate change, there are some disanalogies that bear mentioning in DLU. These disanalogies by no means discredit the project, and McKay willingly acknowledges several himself. Still, the incongruities are important to reflect upon, lest viewers take too blithe a view of the project of allegorical correlation and interpretation.

For example, in DLU the comet's strike is perceived within only a six-month time frame; its course is direct, and its effects are uniform across the planet. Climate change impacts, by contrast, are accretionary and distributed, while also accelerating over time spans. In DLU the comet's threat has a singular cause; in climate change, there are multiple causes, effects, and ongoing feedback loops in complex systems. In DLU the comet has "natural" (extra-human) atmospheric and interstellar causes over vast periods of geological time, but contemporary climate changes are disproportionately and decisively amplified by human histories of colonization, racialized labor and property regimes, extractivism, and consumption. Where the comet will cause an unarguably uniform, planetary-wide cataclysm, human histories of colonialism and extractivism could have been – and still could be – otherwise. This aspect of the specter of catastrophe or apocalypse is the most crucial disanalogy between DLU and climate change, and it is worth delving into in more detail. Not all finality is morally equivalent.

10.5 Apocalypse, How?

Leonardo DiCaprio, in a publicity video for Netflix France, noted that the climate challenge is crucial right now because it determines whether "as a species [we] can evolve to truly focus on what is ultimately the most important issue that has ever faced humanity in the history of civilization." (Multiple other quotes could be adduced to similar effect.) Here, the climate crisis is framed as singular, unitary, and equally apocalyptic for all humans everywhere on Earth. But this characterization is erroneous, it glosses over vast differentials in wealth, power, and privilege and how these render some people vulnerable to environmental violence, while others can evade it. This fundamental set of structural, yet specific, inequalities is crucial to note. Where Marcantonio and Fuentes' framework notes these explicitly, DLU did not. Perhaps the biggest point of dissonance between the film's storyline and climate change is that the social severity of climate impacts, unlike comet hits, reflect vast differentials of power and privilege.

There is also an important question to be raised about the colonial fetishization of apocalypse or catastrophe narratives. Yes, the slow dramatic catastrophes of anthropogenic climate change are distinctive in some ways in the present moment – they are not necessarily singular. Decolonial and Indigenous scholars have been pointing out for some time that the destruction of worlds – social, cultural, environmental, economic, political, bodily – is part of the premise and function of coloniality. Apocalypse, viewed with this insight, is neither new nor singular. Instead, the devastation of worlds has been going on for a long time; what is new is that Whiteness is perceiving it as a threat to established colonial formations of life.

Consider two temporal scales of destruction. The first scale is the centuries-long dynamics of colonialism and destruction of Indigenous ways of life; the second, related scale of destruction, is in the decades-long climate change impacts for marginalized communities and bioregions such as islands. Unfortunately, these realities have received little to no attention from dominant international powers or mainstream White western creators. Apocalyptic allegories such as DLU play into this category error: Not all environmental violences are created equal, nor are they external to, or independent of, historical colonial extractivist practices.

From an explicitly decolonial perspective, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd have argued that, to attend sufficiently to colonialism in the genesis of anthropogenic climate change would be to highlight:

> … the violence at its core, and calls for the consideration of Indigenous philosophies and processes of Indigenous self-governance as a necessary political corrective, alongside the self-determination of other communities and societies violently impacted by the white supremacist, colonial, and capitalist logics instantiated in the origins of the Anthropocene.

Davis and Todd cite Kyle Powys Whyte, a leader in articulating distinctive Indigenous studies approaches to climate change that recognize both attention to seasonality and place, and recurring violent histories of disruption. Whyte diagnoses how "climate injustice is part of a cyclical history situated within the larger struggle of anthropogenic environmental change catalyzed by colonialism, industrialism, and capitalism." A complementary insight about the cyclicality of colonial history comes from Nick Estes, in his powerful book *Our History is the Future*, where Estes rightly diagnoses that "settler narratives use a linear conception of time to distance themselves from the horrific crimes committed against Indigenous peoples and the land," but for Indigenous communities, "our history is the future," and even amid the ongoing destructions of capitalism and extractivism and White supremacy, there are revolutionary practices and theories built into Indigenous community experience.

For their part, Davis and Todd underscore that "the story we tell ourselves about environmental crises" matters enormously for "what we need to do." They suggest that, "if we use the momentum that this concept has gained to train our imaginations to the ways in which environmental destruction has gone hand in hand with colonialism, then we can begin to address our relations in a much wider context." Something similar might be said of climate change in the popular imagination more generally, and in the film DLU specifically. Noteworthy is the absence from DLU of centuries of colonial or racist history beyond the lifespan of the current political operatives characterized with absurd plausibility in the film. Unlike an Earth-annihilating comet, anthropogenic amplifications to climate changes are

entirely sociogenic and uneven in impacts that derive from histories of colonialism, extractivism, and enslavement – and they manifest in deep and abiding climate injustices. It is problematic that McKay and prominent actors associated with DLU fail to recognize this, even when speaking explicitly about DLU as allegory for climate change and political inaction. So, while it is laudable for ecocinema and other cultural productions to turn attention to matters of climate change and destruction, it is hubris to suggest that this apocalypse is sudden, or new, or (to paraphrase DiCaprio) that we "as a species" need to attend to the destruction of "civilization." For unmarked in that "we" is a Whiteness that conveniently glosses over the histories of loss and patterns of identifiable historical responsibility for planetary climate changes – patterns that are, at core, traceable to Western extractive political-economic paradigms, and which continue in the present day. It should not come as a surprise, then, that beyond film, there are many other "theaters" where this kind of performativity takes root.

10.6 Theaters of Climate Privilege

Feature films are not the only cultural productions where the causal tentacles of colonialism, racialized labor and property regimes, and extractivism occur. Geographer Farhana Sultana has identified a different, but quite related, kind of spectacle: international negotiations on climate agreements, specifically COP26. "The COP 26 can be seen as one of the theaters of climate colonialism (led mainly by corporations, powerful governments, and elites)," she writes.

> International climate negotiations falter in addressing climate change without meaningfully reducing fossil fuel dependency, growth models, and hyper consumption, along with the systems that undergird them across scales. Rather, these spaces become spectacles, one of performance, that erases historical and spatial geopolitics and power relations.

"Climate coloniality" is a useful heuristic that points to how these entrenched extractivist, capitalist dynamics perpetuate cycles of carbon emissions, displacement and forced migration, and many attendant inequities linked to colonialism, racism, and extractivism. As Sultana and others powerfully point out, these dynamics of "colonialism, capital, and empire" are not merely historical, but are ongoing. In Sultana's analysis: "Ongoing climate coloniality is expressed through insidious racism globally and continued Othering, dispossessions through colonial-capitalist extractivism and commodification, rapacious displacement and destruction, creation of sacrifice zones, and excessive exposures to harms from climate-induced disasters." Moreover, "because much of the underdeveloped Global South provided the resources that overdeveloped the Global North over centuries through colonialism and then imperialism and neocolonialism,

many countries in the former were left less capable of addressing climate impacts and having reduced or ineffective state capacities." The error in thinking of climate changes as a planetary or species-wide problem that affects all humans on the planet equally is clear.

What then is a White creator, scholar, or politician from a climate-privileged position or dominant nation-state to do? Theological ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda notes that recognition of "climate debt or climate colonialism" is frequent in nations of the Global South and oppressed communities of the Global North; so what is needed is people "in climate-privileged sectors [who] will help forge paths away from this scenario of climate injustice and toward a more just and human future, what some call 'climate justice.'" Moe-Lobeda puts the matter plainly by demanding attention to the differences between "the climate privileged and the climate condemned. Who causes climate change in relationship to who dies from it is a foremost moral issue of the early twenty-first century … Climate change may be the most far-reaching manifestation of White privilege and class privilege yet to face humankind." What is needed, then, from McKay and others is more recognition of climate privilege, and less reliance on the trope of apocalypse, in order to find ways forward.

10.6.1 Climate Crisis and the Whiteness of Mainstream Media

DLU is an important contribution to mainstream film culture, and McKay has a knack for burrowing into myopic economic-political structures, as well as the psychologies of power and profit that fuel their perpetuation. His distinctive, sardonic absurdism allows audiences simultaneously to laugh and to absorb the severity of the spectacles that govern conditions of social existence. Personally, as a White woman with a particularly dry euro-american feminist sense of humor, I loved much of the movie: Kate Dibiansky's incredulity at being ripped off in the White House by a military general, or her disdain and incredulity that talk-show hosts would fail to understand the world-ending concern. ("We make the bad news good!" proclaims Bree, Cate Blanchett's vodka-slugging TV host character.) The consistency of Dibiasky's literal eye rolls is more than metaphor for all of the absurdities that smart women wielding facts must bear in a profit-preferential patriarchal polity.

Another figure, external to the plot or cast of characters, is also deeply imbricated in the film and worthy of consideration. Numerous interviews have featured Adam McKay – centrally, extensively, and often exclusively. (Fewer have featured David Sirota, who was also key in the genesis of the film's concept and screenwriting.) So, it is worth asking how the film fits into broader social dynamics, not just of representation (where are the plot-driving characters of color, or polities beyond the United States?), but also of creative authority. In other words, it is also worth

asking, why Adam McKay, for Netflix, on climate change, now? Why him, and not someone else? Yes, he has an impressive track record in television and film. And yet, on the issue of climate change, he's new to the plot, but also centralizes himself with regard to it. McKay is as much a figure in the pericinematic context of the film as are any of the main characters.

This centripetal energy is underscored and lauded by DiCaprio (who plays scientist Dr. Randall Mindy) in the interview with Netflix France. DiCaprio hails McKay as an "incredibly outspoken individual on the climate crisis," someone who succeeded in producing a movie about a contentious topic. Here, the film's creator is lauded for having achieved a synthesis of ethics and craft; the film is a story told through his eyes, a world created and destroyed, an allegorical instruction. "I just love the way that he ended this film," DiCaprio gushes,

> … because it makes us take a hard look at where we are going, and the fact that a lot of this stuff is slowly becoming irreversible, and that we have this very finite window of ten years to make this transition. If we're not voting for leaders or supporting everything that has to do with climate mitigation, we're going to have a fate very similar to these characters. We're already feeling the ramifications of the climate crisis, and the world is going to be a very different place for years to come … we are seeing the ramifications of what scientists have been telling us for the past few decades. … It's not that we're not listening, we're just not taking the necessary action.

Here, I am curious about the ways that the White male becomes the revered and praised storyteller, whose creative productions are facilitated and promoted over others. This is not a question for McKay alone, but for other White creators – especially White men – who have access to major platforms and the confidence to pitch those stories. The potential problem is, as Shelley Streeby points out in *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, that the imaginations and complications of planetary dynamics, climate changes, more-than-human forces, and neoliberal social formations have been engaged for decades in speculative fiction and collective action – from Ursula LeGuin to Octavia Butler into the present day with considerable nuance by writers of color, and notably, by women+ writers of color such as NK Jemisin. So why is the White male still the revered, praised, and promoted storyteller for climate change allegories – and not other voices? Whose allegory is it anyway?

10.6.2 On the Power of Institutionalized Authority

McKay's distinctive creativity in DLU should be saluted, even as it is important to question the dynamics that foreground White male creatives who raise the alarm on climate changes as if it were a newly discovered issue. By "White men" here I mean, in one sense, individual men (usually cis-gendered) who happen to be racialized White and who benefit from the structures of White supremacy in

patriarchal contexts – including educational privilege, collective political power, a general lack of gendered or racialized bodily endangerment, and the kinds of confidence that can derive from these often-invisible psychosocial freedoms. (McKay is in this sense a White man.) Of course, not all White men assume their privilege to be natural or neutral, but this points to the second way that I use the term: White masculinity is the terrain on which American discourse is constructed; it is the norm, the baseline, from which all else is deviation. Thus, I am following the approach articulated by Sara Ahmed, who writes: by "white men I am referring to an institution," a way of organizing the world and authority and experience within it. She continues:

> When we talk of white men, we are describing something. We are describing an institution. An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community. So when I am saying that white men is an institution, I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure.

This is not a new problem. But it is work to push against this normativity, precisely because the baseline is White and generally male. In the United States it is incontrovertible that White men's voices and perspectives will be valued above others – whether in the context of gun violence, bodily autonomy, or environmental racism. In the context of climate change, this truism remains even though there is a stunning range of voices, perspectives, and local experts who have been writing, directing, producing, and creating communications about climate change for decades. But still, the White male expert endures. As Ahmed says, "It is ironic, really, or perhaps not: you do not need to assert yourself when the genealogy does it for you."

One very simple outcome of this terrain is that some White men tend to exhibit a certitude, or at least a lack of anxiety, about the integrity of their creative output on matters of social concern. McKay is a case in point: Numerous interviews across multiple media platforms attest that he is confident that the problems he's pointing to are real, and that his film is a useful depiction that may have lasting legacies. He is not, apparently, interested in raising the question of whether he may have misrepresented anything; or that others might have works worthy of equal Netflix funding or promotion; or that there may be tokenist representations in his film. Perhaps most troubling, for me, is that in interviews, McKay does not point to any non-White scholars or activists as informing his thought or leading on matters of climate, even though their numbers are many. He is lauded as a hero by other White male actors, such as Leonardo DiCaprio. He names his production company after a much-vaunted notion, "Hyperobjects," coined by ecocritic Timothy Morton. These vaunted men's conceptions of the project situate it as a particularly potent example, not just of cli-fi, but also of the project of singularity

that often accompanies White males' turn of attention to this issue. Again, I concur that McKay and his team have created an important film, one that I enjoyed, and which has troubled my thoughts enough to warrant an entire essay on it. But who speaks authoritatively about climate change; who is lauded for doing so; and how that replicates systems of elision while reifying a White male creator – these are the questions that interest me.

So again: What is a White climate-privileged creator to do? When creators who also represent demographics of climate privilege have the podium, it would be stupendous to see them name those who have been precursors to their work and to engage citations as forms of gratitude and education, as Ahmed (2017) and Max Liboiron (2021) demonstrate. For creatives, as well as academics of climate privilege, this means that direct naming of prior and current creatives/authors is imperative – use the podium to point, not just to one's own creative intent, but also to those trying to navigate these themes from spaces often occluded by mainstream media. Send some easter eggs and shout-outs their way, but better yet, hire them as writers, consultants, and experts. Cite and engage professors Michael Mann and Timothy Morton, sure; but why not also call on doctors Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, Katharine Hayhoe, or Katharine Wilkinson, or writers Mary Annaïse Heglar and NK Jemisin, to name just a few? This is, of course, only a beginning to the problem of whose stories and authorities are told and revered across Western/Euroamerican media. But, it is a start.

Perhaps the presumptive authority of the White male with regard to the significance of climate crises can, in fact, lead to salutary effects in some quarters. It is familiar and, thus, may have mass appeal to a White-dominant culture, where DLU may have the potential to impact middle-left or centrist viewers in positions of economic and political power. Time will tell. I am here suggesting that, in light of their default presumption of social authority and the fact of White men as institution, at a minimum, such creators should point toward those who have been working on the issues steadfastly, longer, and in immersive contexts that generate different forms of authority and narrative.

These questions of authorship, creative ethical commentary on climate change, and White privilege are not easy. The persistence of the vaunted White male creator figure – the way he is often viewed as a genius, the way he does not cite his sources (and if he does, they are usually fellow White men) – suggests that it is time to think about an ethics of presentation and an ethics of citation for multi-genre cli-fi in an era of rampant environmental violences. For how violence looks depends, in no small part, on how one has experienced, borne witness to, or studied it. I would argue that White creators (myself included), in particular, need to think ethically about the parameters and citations of their (our) projects, not just as top-down theatrical creations that raise attention to

a global singularity and embody the vision of a particular creative figure, but, rather, in connection with persistent colonial dynamics in climate change storytelling. They/we also need to listen to, advocate for, and indeed sometimes step to the side for, those who have been doing the work longer, better, and with more community accountability.

Specifically, I would argue that White creators – especially White males – have a responsibility to consider, cite, and decenter themselves as singular storytellers, to point toward, honor, and learn from the theorists and writers from marginalized contexts who have been working on these issues for a long time. White male creators with industry access can also advocate to powerful studies (from Netflix to Hollywood and beyond) that those kinds of stories get told, and by the experts who have intimately known and created them. Much of this work is ongoing in various genres, of course. The hope is that such attention helps to remedy some of the epistemic violences that perpetuate unequal dynamics of power in the imaginations of climate changes, climate futures, and the question of authority. This matters because, as the conditions of DLU's creation imply, the Whiteness of climate change perception and portrayal is real.

10.7 Conclusion

There is both allure and peril to theorizing planetary changes through allegorical film. Creator Adam McKay is to be commended for his allegorical film *Don't Look Up* that foregrounds various forms of culpable structures, collusions, and inactions. However, in conversation with social theorists, this essay has also argued that DLU replicates particular kinds of epistemic violences that, unfortunately, do little to demonstrate or suggest ways forward in the particular context of climate colonialism and climate privilege. While a reading of the film and its attendant modes of creation, dissemination, and popularization can yield important insights and constructive suggestions for ways forward in ecofilm, the fundamental question posed by film scholars about the genre of ecocinema persists when the western White male gaze is taken as the primary lens on the problems of climate change. These quandaries leave unanswered the question about the interrelation between cultural productions and ethical action. To incorporate these critiques into both the production of ecocinema and the discourses of environmental violence are ongoing, important, and create tasks ahead.

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