“Love beyond anything I will ever make of it”: Lyric Poetry as an Approach to Writing about Climate Crisis

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Introduction

> *"One evening, I turned a corner and panicked at a sudden flash in my rearview, teeth chattering into my highest throat. Every nerve prepared for the acrid drip of cop talk until I realized: it was no cruiser. It was the sky. The sky, shocked with dying."*
>
> "How to Let Go of the World," Franny Choi

> *"I try to wrap my head around*
> *An eye for an eye full of iodine*
> *I try to remember the history of time*
> *I try to laugh, or sleep it off*
> *That awful feeling something's off*
> *By eye I measure the narrow length across*
>
> *Today the sky is orange*
> *And you and I know why."*
>
> "Orange," Pinegrove (2020)

In their single "Orange," the American rock band Pinegrove gives voice to emotions that many feel so deeply when it comes to the pressing crisis of climate change: anxiety, helplessness, sadness, anger, and uncertainty. It doesn't take an avid environmental activist or climate scientist to attest to what the lyrics call "that awful feeling something's off"; such a disposition seems all too familiar as we continue through the 2020s. The song's title and imagery call back to 2020, when historic wildfires raging on the U.S. West Coast, particularly in Oregon, tinted the skies an eerie orange hue. Images flooded social media and news outlets, and as seems to be happening with more and more frequency, climate change once again made headlines. In a year where this atmospheric "anomaly" coincided with the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic that shut down nearly every aspect of daily life, the startling reality of climate change's potential for havoc had a largely captive audience. With ever-heightening political tensions and egregious inequality in the U.S. and abroad, the immediate aftermath of years of a devastating global

pandemic, and climate change becoming a greater threat with each day, any sense of normalcy seems a phenomenon of the past. The steady waltz of the melody of "Orange," while in a typically joyful major key, carries an unmistakable heaviness as each verse expresses more frustration at the state of affairs.

In a post shared via Instagram, Pinegrove lead singer Evan Stephens Hall said of the song,

> [it] tries to balance outrage at those preventing progress—politicians elected in good faith to protect us who instead believe themselves celebrities—with the ethereal, almost dissociative feeling of being alive at the end of history. The mirage on offer by today's political theater does nothing to assuage our concerns as we watch where the money actually goes: the American military, one of the single greatest global sources of fossil fuel emissions. (Pinegrove)

Hall, like many contemporary artists, has turned to song and lyric to express frustration, disappointment, and fear when it comes to the current climate crisis. Likewise, in the excerpted epigraph above from "How to Let Go of the World," Franny Choi couples the eeriness of a discolored sky with reference to the police as a violent institution, reiterating the sense of the world dying before our eyes. The sentiment of watching as institutions do active harm to the environment or do too little (and too late) to mitigate the crisis permeates both Hall and Choi's writing.

Why are songwriters like Hall and contemporary poets like Choi, Craig Santos Perez, Barbara Kingsolver, Tommy Pico, and many others turning to the lyric form to express their emotions and perspectives on climate change? This thesis considers how the mechanics of lyric poetry, from its form and content to its distinct affective abilities, enable poets to engage with the immensely challenging issue of climate change in a way that facilitates a variety of modes of care toward the environment.

Culture is the arena where much of the necessary social change needed to address environmental threats plays out. As such, the arts play a key role in shaping our response to climate change. Contemporary artists across a range of genres have addressed climate change in their art; forms like film, painting, and fiction have served as bridges that connect the environmental and climate science fields to those that typically fall outside it.[1] In the realm of English literature, climate fiction or "cli-fi" has become a popular genre for engaging with the climate crisis. "Cli-fi" is a form of science fiction that focuses on stories about climate change, such as Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, which imagines a post-apocalyptic world stricken by climate crisis and severe inequality. Yet while cli-fi has increased in popularity in the past decade, literary engagements with climactic changes go as far back as works like Lord Byron's "Darkness," a poem written in 1816, or the Year Without a Summer.[2] Lyric poets, then, among many other artists, have long attended to notions of the unthinkable when it comes to climate change.

What artists across a range of mediums grapple with is the fact that climate change is fundamentally difficult—if not impossible—for us to conceptualize. Timothy Morton's term "hyperobject" in their 2010 book *The Ecological Thought* tries to tease apart this difficulty. The term "hyperobject" as Morton uses it refers to objects (though not in a strictly material sense) that are massive in terms of how they engage with both time and space, such as plastic, Styrofoam, and global warming (Morton 130-135). Without getting too deep into the more

[1] For examples of film, see *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *2040* (2019), and *Don't Look Up* (2021); for an example of painting, see "Manifest Destiny" by Alexis Rockman. For more climate change art, see "Climate change in literature and literary studies: From cli-fi, climate change theater and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism" by Adeline Johns-Putra.

[2] In April 1815, Indonesia's Mount Tambora erupted, spewing so much ash and aerosol particles that Earth's global temperature dropped significantly. The result was an unusually and devastatingly chilly summer that resulted in foods scarcity ("Mount Tambora and the Year Without a Summer.")

challenging philosophical and theoretical components of Morton's work, having at least this cursory understanding of the term may help us consider why exactly climate change is so difficult when it comes to representation. We are dealing with a phenomenon that merits, according to Morton, the creation of an entirely new terminology, one that our regular vocabulary cannot fully encapsulate.[3]

In his nonfiction book *The Great Derangement*, novelist Amitav Ghosh further describes the challenge of scale within climate change literature and art. He also highlights the limitations he perceives in forms like fiction as writers try to engage with climate change. One of the barriers to conceptualizing climate change is its sense of being unprecedented and often improbable. Ghosh cites his encounter with New Delhi's first ever recorded tornado in 1978 to describe how this sense of near impossibility crystallized in his own life. Climate change is also gargantuan in scale and impact, and statistics like 1.5 degrees C of global warming mean little when many of us in the West lack an understanding of the impact of such figures in our daily lives. Ghosh argues that no creative form of writing (fiction, elegy, lyric, etc.) can capture the reality of a situation that seems so unreal. He writes, "…we are confronted suddenly with a new task: that of finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era" (33). In other words, we cannot have "ordinary" fiction (or any kind of art, for that matter) in extraordinary times. Ghosh's primary concern with writing, specifically fiction, when it comes to representing climate change, lies in the sense of improbability of the environmental catastrophes at hand. Just as the cyclone Ghosh encountered was so incomprehensible, so too are many facets of climate change, from scenes of horrific wildfires spanning vast distances or hurricanes that break records nearly every year with their sheer power. Yet, they are undoubtedly

[3] For a more detailed look into hyperobjects, see Morton's 2013 book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*.

real and urgent, and very much worthy of representation in literature—but writers may need to rethink or expand their approaches.

While Ghosh remains skeptical about the ability of fiction to overcoming the challenges posed by a "hyperobject" like climate change, we might consider the affordances of other genres like the lyric. Min Hyoung Song's 2021 book *Climate Lyricism* defines and surveys the genre that gives the book its title by describing the problems and themes within this form of poetry that demands both attention and response. Song writes:

> *Climate lyricism* thus names both an active mode of making (trying to write literature that is relevant to an understanding of the environmental troubles plaguing the present) and an active mode of attending (making sense of how literature, regardless of its manifest content, might have something relevant to say about these troubles). (Song 3)

Lyric poets, per Song's argument, are uniquely situated to tackling this attentional requirement due to the very nature of the form they champion, one that makes skillful use of compression and vivid imagery to draw the reader in. He makes a case for reviving the lyric (as opposed to fiction or nonfiction) to approach climate change conversations in poetry, while also looking at phenomena like climate denial and the role of bad feelings that may arise when paying attention to environmental issues. While Song lays out the exciting underpinnings of this subgenre, I want to expand his work further and apply the themes and lessons of climate lyric poetry to its potential for sustained attention and action beyond the page.

One thing I want to emphasize is that if climate change poses an immense conceptual challenge, it also presents an attentional one: our focus on climate change can be incredibly difficult to sustain. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* probes the question of how we notice crises of long duration. The "slow violence" that Nixon coins in his seminal book refers to sustained harm that occurs incrementally and often invisibly (at least in the public eye), such as poverty, systemic racism, and environmental degradation. Nixon uses

slow violence to explain why we struggle to stay focused on longer-term issues and teases out concerns about countering this disposition:

> …a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? (3)

A possible answer to Nixon's question lies in lyric poetry's capacities. As Song notes, the lyric can sustain attention and encourage readers to care about crises like climate change through a variety of affective strategies.

My primary focus in this thesis is these strategies and modes of care used by climate lyric poets. Care is a form of attention, one strongly tied to emotion and with the potential to facilitate meaningful action. What is meant by "care" in the context of this thesis specifically is the ways in which climate lyric poets engage emotional attitudes toward climate change to encourage similar feelings in their readers, enjoining their audience to not only pay attention to climate change but to invest emotionally in remedying environmental harm. To help us better understand care as it pertains both to humans and nonhumans, I turn here to the work of a couple of theorists. As Rachel Adams emphasizes, care is tightly bound with human health and the human body. She writes, "Care is work, an attitude toward others, and an ethical ideal" (Adams 20). Adams figures care in her work as a relationship between humans, one that, while rife with the potential for inequality (i.e. caretaker roles being disproportionately delegated to women and people of color), is an essential function of society, from healthcare to elder care. Through this lens care is labor, a choice that one human makes to help another.

While Adams frames care as a human phenomenon, Martin, Myers, and Viseu offer another perspective by focusing on multispecies care within the scientific community. The authors describe care as a necessary but inherently flawed mode of attentiveness, noting that

there is such a thing as "bad" care, or care that unjustly tilts power dynamics and excludes certain populations, as in colonialism (627). Indeed, even multispecies care has its pitfalls, as in situations where care is extended to the nonhuman at the expense of the human. A stark example is the development and expansion of conservation efforts in national parks that privilege a vision of pristine wilderness over the lives of Indigenous peoples who have occupied the land for thousands of years.[4] However, positive instances multispecies care abound, as Potawatomi author, botanist, and professor Robin Wall Kimmerer describes in her 2013 book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. In chapters like "The Council of Pecans" and "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," Kimmerer unfolds her worldview of care between all living beings, informed by her Indigenous background. She describes how even the Potawatomi language inscribes care between species and often emphasizes the importance of only taking what we as humans need from the earth and being attentive to the needs of other living things (Kimmerer). Care, then, can take many different shapes, and as "a selective form of attention," as Martin and her cowriters put it, it demands critical practices that interrogate to what or whom we choose to extend care and why (627).

These theorizations of care provide an avenue for us to understand more-than-human care, which will help when approaching the affective choices analyzed in the climate lyric poems that follow. Climate lyric poems and ecopoetry across history have incorporated various modes of multispecies care (or at least attentiveness) into their lines and stanzas, from personification to pathetic fallacy and reverence or awe for the natural world. The poems I will look at in depth in subsequent sections push readers to reconsider how they relate to the nonhuman world and what impact these attitudes have on our willingness to confront climate change. They also prompt us

[4] For more of this history in the United States, see David Treuer's "Return the National Parks to the Tribes."

to consider how, as Astrid Schrader notes, "'practices of knowledge can become practices of care'" (qtd in Martin et al. 634). The tightly formed, imagery-packed stanzas often associated with the lyric poem train readers to focus on the minute and potentially overlooked, a behavior that mimics the attentiveness required to meaningfully engage with environmentalism.

However, what happens if we question or even subvert traditional modes of care? In this case, turning to critics who push us to think about the full range of affective strategies within environmental writing may help us form a fuller picture of what strategies exist for approaching such an emotionally demanding problem. Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, for instance, proposes alternatives to the more traditional, empathy-based model of engaging with environmental issues. Poets like Tommy Pico work boldly within this realm of disaffection, using irony and subverting expectations of care to talk about climate change and our human relationship nature more broadly.[5]

The driving force of my research and interest in this project is discerning what exact aspects of the lyric form invite (or in some cases, reject) care about the climate crisis and probing the affective strategies these poets use to keep audiences trained on the slow violence Nixon describes. Climate change is ongoing whether or not we see the effects in our daily lives, though unfortunately, what stays out of sight often stays out of mind. Yet the data does not lie about the significance of the emergency we face.[6] With high confidence, the 2022 International Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, report states, "Human-induced climate change, including more frequent and intense extreme events, has caused widespread adverse impacts and related losses

[5] Xine Yao also engages with these tactics in her book *Disaffected*: *The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*

[6] The current carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere is just over 420 ppm, a number that might not mean much until one considers that for much of human history, the concentration was around 280 ppm (Lindsey). This stark increase is undoubtedly (though not uniformly) anthropogenic, as determined by the IPCC in their 2013 Assessment Report (Stocker, et al.).

and damages to nature and people, beyond natural climate variability" (Portner, et.al). Sustaining interest and facilitating care for the environment is essential to confronting the challenges posed by the escalating crisis.

In what follows, I first provide key historical background on lyric ecopoetry and how poets have engaged with nature using a variety of lyric tropes and themes, pathetic fallacy being a key example. Starting with a cursory overview of poets from Milton to Whitman to Frost, I explore the range that this genre of the environmental lyric poem encompasses and how it has evolved into the shape it takes in contemporary work like climate lyric. I also attempt to construct an affective foundation on which to build my analysis, which involves considering the variety of approaches to environmental care that climate poets take, drawing on the aforementioned pieces by Song, Seymour, Nixon, etc. Whether empathetic, reverent, anthropomorphic, or ironic, the affective stance that climate poets take is critical to the rhetorical work of their poetry and the takeaways that an audience receives regarding their perception of climate change.

The bulk of my analysis takes the form of close readings of three contemporary climate lyric poems to engage with their different modes of approaching the climate crisis and what each has to offer to the conversation around climate and lyric. These three poems are "Rings of Fire" by Craig Santos Perez, "Great Barrier" by Barbara Kingsolver, and *Nature Poem* by Tommy Pico. Selecting only a few poets—and poems—here inherently means I am withholding attention from others, a decision I am very conscious of and the irony of which, in an argument that chiefly rests on the importance of attention, does not escape me. Yet, to treat each poem carefully as climate lyric requires being selective within the space of this argument. Pico's work opens up conversations about queerness and Native American identity; Kingsolver's background

as an award-winning female novelist living in Appalachia inflects her writing; and Craig Santos Perez's engages with Guam and Hawai'i as sites rich in Indigenous cultures that inform his commitment to sharing their beauty and advocating for environmental protection. The work of these three poets offers particularly resonant and clear glimpses into how writers interact with and bend the lyric form to share their relationships to climate change.

The final section of this project offers thoughts on the power of climate poetry to create in readers an attitude of care for the environment and a desire for change. Is the potential impact of climate lyric poetry doomed to fall victim to our depressingly waning attention spans, overtaken by the dopamine rush of whatever is new and exciting rather than staying with slow violence? As encouraging as it would be to offer readers the consolation that yes, these poems *do* matter and *do* inspire action, I fear it is not that simple. Without becoming too cynical, though, I am hopeful that the tactics that climate poets use in their work may have purchase elsewhere. Climate lyric poetry is just one method of attracting readers' fleeting attention, but perhaps there are more ways to use the affective strategies employed by these poets and others. In short, these final words praise lyric poetry as a multitudinous form that, when applied to pressing issues like global warming and environmental degradation, has so much to offer within its myriad tropes, themes, and stylistic choices.

I. Climate Lyric Background and History

Definitions of lyric in criticism have been less than decisive, with some starting from the angle of form, others using a temporal lens, and still others characterizing the lyric based on the speaker. The lyric is afflicted, Virginia Jackson notes, by a "persistent confusion," but it is in the heart of this uncertainty that contemporary lyric poets thrive (826). In the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Jackson provides the entry for "lyric" as "a kind of poetry that expresses personal feeling in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form and that is indirectly addressed to the private reader" (826). It is this concise definition that I will be using to inform my own understanding of climate lyric in this work, recognizing that lyric is marked by its difficulty to be pinned down by a handful of qualities.

The content and shape of the lyric has also morphed and evolved over the hundreds of years it has existed. We can see this in medieval lyrics like "'*Pax vobis,'* quod the fox," Renaissance poems like "Lycidas" by John Milton, and nineteenth century works like Robert Frost's "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things." Sonnets, epigrams, elegies, and pastorals have all fallen under the heading of lyric during its lifespan, proving the form's diversity and Jackson's notion of the lyric as more idea than concrete genre (827). However, perhaps a uniting quality within lyric poems is their consideration of affect, as emotions tend to weave in and out of many iterations of the lyric, a form that is deeply transhistorical.

The lyric form allows poets to lay out a set of relations between self and world, a dynamic that has changed greatly over time. This relationality is at the heart of lyric expression and emotion, and before arriving at contemporary 'climate lyrics,' it's worth spending some time considering earlier forms of environmental relation within the context of the lyric tradition. Anthropomorphism is one form the relationship between humans and the environment takes in

poetry, one that we see in many medieval poems such as "'*Pax vobis,*'" which trains its focus on animals by directly personifying a fox and a goose. Sometimes, a third interlocutor like the divine joins the poem, complicating the human-environment relationship portrayed on the page. This becomes particularly prevalent in the Renaissance, during which we see a complex engagement with the natural world. Nature in this era of poetry is a multivalent, unstable category, as reflected in the variety of environmental lyric works produced at the time. In poems that bring divinity into the picture, we frequently see the use of invocation, in which a deity or supernatural being is called upon or summoned by the poet or speaker. With invocation, space is carved out for the sacred, as in George Herbert's "The Flower." Herbert's speaker writes of himself as a flower, with God as a sustaining power and heaven His garden. He calls upon and praises God through this floral metaphorical framework.

In other Renaissance lyrics, nature may be used as metaphor or even a sounding board for humans negotiating a rapidly changing world. An example of this is the pastoral elegy, such as "Lycidas" by Milton. In this piece, Milton's speaker elegizes a king through environmental imagery, with nature mourning the titular figure's absence. Describing the pastoral, literary theorist Heather Dubrow emphasizes how "the contrast between the *here* of the country and the *there* of the city or court is the spatial analogue to its recurrent temporal preoccupation with *then* and *now*; the former is generally represented as the idyllic time before the pastoral world is threatened…" (Dubrow 125). In "Lycidas," the idealized past Milton describes could be both the time prior to the king's death and before the beauty of the landscape he idolizes was threatened. The idea of an endangered bucolic space is eerily relevant today when thinking about the impacts of climate change. As Renaissance lyric reveals, it is perhaps the very "instability of th[e]

category" of lyric, as Dubrow puts it, that lends this malleable form to discussions of climate change in contemporary poetry (126).

Many of the most well-known pastoral poems in English come from the Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and John Keats, as well as American transcendentalists. In Romantic lyrics, the natural world is often seen as transformative of the self, and poets of the time turned to nature for wisdom and knowledge. There is no shortage of pastoral, idyllic imagery within Wordsworth's oeuvre, from "Daffodils" to "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." A common feature seen across poetry about nature, and one that Wordsworth uses often, is the pathetic fallacy. The titular first line of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" illustrates the so-called fallacy, drawing a comparison between human emotions and a nonhuman object, a cloud[7]. Emotion lies at the very heart of pathetic fallacy, a fact that led to its critique by John Ruskin, who was the first to give it a definition.[8] Ruskin described this phenomenon with disdain, viewing its implementation in poetry as reflective of a poet's weakness of character and lamenting its creation of "a falseness in all our expressions of external things" (Ruskin 155). In "The Pathetic Fallacy and the Thing Itself," Josephine Miles softens Ruskin's definition by reminding readers that pathetic fallacy "was, on the contrary, for the Romantics a most reasonable, normal, and intrinsically poetic way of expression…" (Miles 212).

While pathetic fallacy is not unique to the Romantics and appears in medieval poetry (though, of course, not by name), in the work of poets like Wordsworth and others it reveals yet another mode of relation when it comes to nature: reproducing the human in the nonhuman. With

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[7] Scholars continue to debate the critical frame that Ruskin places on this trope, challenging the use of "fallacy," which holds a negative connotation. For more, see Maureen N. McLane's "Compositionism: Plants, Poetics, possibilities; or, two cheers for fallacies, especially pathetic ones!"

[8] According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, pathetic fallacy is "a phrase coined by John Ruskin in volume 3, chapter 12 of *Modern Painters* (1856) to denote an enduring practice in Western lit.: the tendency of poets and painters to imbue the natural world with human feeling." ("Pathetic Fallacy.")

its variety of unique uses and possible combinations with other tropes like personification (which one could argue is a larger umbrella under which pathetic fallacy falls), pathetic fallacy adds yet another tool to the arsenal of poetic devices that helps bring out the sense of emotion that characterizes so many lyric poems. More precisely, this device enables poets to cultivate a profound sense of empathy between the human and the nonhuman, inviting us to consider a new perspective through which to view environmental issues like climate change.

Although the lyric poets mentioned thus far tend to assume a discrete interaction between poetic speaker and the world, others, like Walt Whitman, view human-environment relationships with a sense of porosity, a relationality akin to what Timothy Morton has called "mesh" and Stacy Alaimo describes using the term trans-corporeality[9] (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 28). Whitman's work, notably *Leaves of Grass*, challenges boundaries and borders both environmental and stylistic. Structure fades, replaced with sensual free verse and vivid imagery. Whitman also famously incorporates a sense of embodiment into his work, embracing a rawness of the human body and emotion. This feature also pervades several of Craig Santos Perez's poems, such as "Rings of Fire." Its enmeshment of bodily sensation with environmental harm evidences the integration of a distinctly affective dimension in ecopoetry in order to reckon with a crisis of such immense scale; if the boundaries between human and nature are at the least hazy and at most nonexistent, then this enmeshment necessarily affects frameworks of care and suggests the importance of extending care to all life on the planet. While engaging with embodiment is not a recent development of lyric ecopoetry, Santos Perez and others draw on this aspect to put forth a different way of conceptualizing the climate crisis.

[9] For more, see *Bodily Natures* by Stacy Alaimo.

If a shared sense of embodiment between the human and nonhuman is one approach to climate lyric, it is certainly not the only one that ecopoets use. Other affective strategies like reverent or spiritual appeals, anthropomorphism, and aestheticizing nature have also aided poets in writing about the environment or climate change. However, what happens when poets employ less "pretty" rhetorical strategies, as Min Hyoung Song describes? Here, Frost comes to mind: while he is perhaps best known for his charming portrayals of New England rural life, he does not shy away from the realities this experience entails. In poems like "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," he eschews tropes like pathetic fallacy in the face of tragedy. While a farmhouse burns to the ground, the poem's speaker concludes that nature does not mourn such a loss, and that believing so would indicate one has not been grounded in the reality of "country things." Seamus Heaney offers another example of this sobering affective stance in his poem "Death of a Naturalist," revealing that nature is not as idyllic and romantic as some make it out to be while describing the loss of innocence that comes with seeing the grotesque and potentially horrifying realities of nature.[10] These alternative affective modes in the history of environmental poetry are perhaps more important for reflecting on contemporary climate lyric than familiar Romantic modes that privilege positive affect. What could be called 'pragmatically negative' environmental poetry such as Heaney's and Frost's is an important genealogy through which to understand the shape climate lyric takes today.

So much of climate lyric poetry relies on confronting the future, but poets like Santos Perez, Kingsolver, and Pico return to longstanding aspects of the lyric form to represent climate change in compelling and evocative ways. Santos Perez draws on the sense of embodiment of poets like Whitman; Kingsolver integrates reverence and invocation; and Pico turns toward

[10] Heaney's "The Early Purges" also explores this theme quite viscerally.

irreverence and grounded, matter-of-factness akin to the approaches of Frost and Heaney. With the aforementioned lyric strategies, subgenres, and theorizations in mind, let us turn to the work of contemporary poets to explore how their work breaks critical ground in writing about a world in crisis.

II. Climate Lyric and Embodiment

"So much of my ecopoetry is about articulating an eco-consciousness so that people are aware that everything is interconnected…whether between our bodies and nature, the self and other, Hawai'i and the Pacific and other parts of the world," explained Craig Santos Perez at the University of Virginia's Poetry and Climate Change Symposium in March 2024 (Santos Perez). Santos Perez is an Indigenous Chamoru poet, environmentalist, editor, scholar, and activist from the Pacific Island of Guåhan (or Guam). The author of five books of poetry, as well as a monograph titled *Navigating CHamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization*, Santos Perez often focuses his poetry on what he describes as "transcorporeality or borderlessness between our bodies and the world" (Santos Perez). While his poetry is mostly written in English, he does incorporate the Chamoru language in some of his pieces across his body of work, writing on themes of Indigenous identity and environmentalism.[11] He currently works as Professor of Pacific literature and creating writing at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

From Santos Perez's book *Habitat Threshold*, "Rings of Fire" is a poem about birth, climate change, and war condensed to the point of explosion into one poignant metaphor: fire. Although, in the context of climate change and war, fire seems more far more adjacent to reality than metaphor lately, from the wildfires raging across California to the near-constant bombing in Gaza as I write in spring 2024. Santos Perez wrote this poem in free verse with unrhymed couplets, creating a split feeling between (or perhaps a yoking together of) the different threads of his focus. On the one hand, as the poem's opening lays out, the speaker celebrates their daughter's first birthday—a presumably joyous occasion. In the background, though, are scenes

[11] See Santos Perez's "Praise Song for Oceania."

of war and climate catastrophe. Santos Perez's use of the lyric mode and a "double sonnet" structure (twenty-eight lines separated into couplets) allows both to coexist, eeriness and all.

> We host our daughter's first birthday party
> during the hottest April in history.
>
> Outside, my dad grills meat over charcoal;
> inside, my mom steams rice and roasts
>
> vegetables. They've traveled from California,
> where drought carves trees into tinder—*"Paradise*
>
> *is burning."* When our daughter's first fever spiked,
> the doctor said, "It's a sign she's fighting infection." (Santos Perez 1-8)

Immediately, life and death are juxtaposed here, at least implicitly: Santos Perez's daughter celebrates one full year of life, but at the same time, the looming fact that the planet is warming drastically is inescapable. Enjambment is one of the most pervasive poetic tropes in this piece, throwing the reader off verbal cliffs at almost every line break and enhancing this sense of splitness between the quotidian and the catastrophic. Between the second and third couplets, "roasts" hangs alone on a line before "vegetables" completes the thought, though in the process the reader is asked to dwell on the presence of heat that the poem hinges on. The return to "vegetables" takes readers back to the mundane act of cooking.

A few lines later, another instance of enjambment troubles this attempted buffering of images of violent climate and humanitarian disaster: "*'Paradise' / is burning."*" reads the split between the third and fourth couplet. The line break here dwells for a moment on Edenic ideas of places like California that are so often idealized, before delivering the reader back to the image of fire.[12] Simple but poignant lines like these evince one of the driving elements of this poem: a

[12] I cannot help but hear parallels here to the first line of Barbara Kingsolver's "Great Barrier": "The cathedral is burning" (1).

profound sense of heat repeatedly grounding readers in the physical. Santos Perez intertwines bodily heat with global heat, human pain with environmental pain, further blurring if not erasing whatever perceived lines exist between the human and nonhuman. The speaker writes of his daughter's first illness and his wife's experience in labor, two instances where he sees human bodies struggling through pain and discomfort. His daughter's fever climbs just like global temperatures, both her body and the earth "fighting infection" (Santos Perez 8). Fevers are evidence of the human body working against sickness that has invaded it, but the heat we see mounting today from human-driven carbon dioxide emissions is a result of attacking ourselves from the inside out, unable to reach a sense of homeostasis.

Embodiment is key here, specifically an embodiment that collapses world into the self. Santos Perez is engaging with this trope in a manner not unlike another contemporary Indigenous poet, Natalie Diaz. In her poem "The First Water Is the Body," Diaz zeroes in on the connectedness she views between the body and water through her upbringing in the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, or ʻAha Makav, meaning People of the River:

> This is not juxtaposition. Body and water are not *two unlike things*—they are more than *close together* or *side by side*. They are *same*—body, being, energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine. (Diaz 49-51)

Like Santos Perez, Diaz enjoins readers to consider or *re*consider the divisions that are often drawn between human and nonhuman. She urges readers to imagine a world like hers in which the nonhuman is sacred because it is part of the same "nature" that humans belong to.

In Santos Perez's "Rings of Fire," body and planet are not separate, but continuous with each other.[13] The heat felt by the human body during sickness is no different, Santos Perez suggests, from the climbing temperatures and violence of climate change.

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[13] Another of Santos Perez's poems from *Habitat Threshold*, "Age of Plastic," uses a similar yoking of the physical human body to the environment and its degradation, with plastic being the source of harm.

> Bloodshed surges with global temperatures,
> which know no borders. "If her fever doesn't break,"
>
> the doctor continued, "take her to the Emergency
> Room." Airstrikes detonate hospitals
>
> in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan . . .
> When she crowned," my wife said, "it felt like rings
>
> of fire." Volcanoes erupt along Pacific fault lines;
> sweltering heatwaves scorch Australia;
>
> forests in Indonesia are razed for palm oil plantations—
> their ashes flock, like ghost birds, to our distant
>
> rib cages. (9-19)

Santos Perez immerses the reader in these scenes of eruption and flame, so visceral in comparison to the more average moments in the poem like a birthday party or cooking food. In these lines as before, the day-to-day is interspersed with horrors like bombing of civilians or another devastating drought, with hardly a breath between the two. Tension rises just as temperatures, bodily and global, increase. The enjambment throughout the poem puts anthropocentric ailments like fever alongside drought, bombing, deforestation, and temperature surges, encouraging readers to deeply feel this threat emotionally and perhaps even imagine it physically.

Line 9 utilizes zeugma to link wartime violence to global warming with one powerful verb, “surges.” It’s worth noting that this diction usually indicates a specific temporality, something occurring with great speed. Climate change often defies this norm, a catastrophe that has taken years to rear its nasty head in the form of the raging wildfires and oppressive heatwaves that we see today. [14]This is also one reason why climate activists have had such

[14] Catastrophes like climate change may seem new to Western, settler society, but according to Kyle Whyte, this is an all-too-familiar experience for many Indigenous groups: “Climate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the spectre of a new future and more like the experience of déjà vu” (Whyte).

trouble maintaining momentum: humans are accustomed to bad events that take place in big spikes, not drawn out over decades, as Rob Nixon's term "slow violence" suggests. The energy that Santos Perez's use of "surge" here employs is a snapshot of another affordance of lyric poetry when it comes to engaging an audience. Poems like this one encourage shifts in readers' perspective, from the yoking together of a child's fever and heatwaves to the shifting of how we view climate change from a temporal view. Having readers imagine states of physical illness alongside environmental degradation, while anthropocentric, is what makes Santos Perez's poem so powerful in portraying climate change on the page. While the temperatures on Earth have reached and surpassed our current state before, they have never done so naturally, nor when humans have walked the planet (Scott and Lindsey). This global crisis is one unlike we have seen before, and thus requires unprecedented efforts and new strategies, political and poetic.

In the next section of the poem, Santos Perez slows down the mounting energy for a moment:

> Still, I crave an unfiltered cigarette,
> even though I quit years ago, and my breath
>
> no longer smells like my grandpa's overflowing ashtray—
> his parched cough still punctures the black lungs
>
> of cancer and denial. "If she struggles to breathe,"
> the doctor advised, "give her an asthma inhaler." (19-24)

The word "still" halts readers in the middle of line 19, mimicking the *still*ness of the breath that Santos Perez returns to throughout the poem. The mention of a cigarette troubles this, however, with its toxic chemicals and disease-inducing capabilities.[15] The implied presence of smoke here also adds a twinge of irony, as it could be tied to both cigarette and wildfire. The use

[15] It may worth considering the tobacco industry's notorious "playbook" to combat concrete evidence of cigarettes as carcinogenic in relation to the imagery Santos Perez uses. Many strategies deployed by the tobacco industry, such as disinformation and discrediting well-researched scientific evidence, have been taken up by climate deniers in recent decades. For more on the connections between the two, see *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (2010).

of "puncture," especially in reference to the "black" lungs of the speaker's grandfather, calls readers back to the fears of harm and violence that amass in previous lines and once again embodies these threats in a human context. Yoking together "denial" with "cancer" as potentially deadly illnesses highlights the harm Santos Perez sees in ignoring or even blatantly refuting the realities of climate change: if the metaphorical cancer of climate change denial proceeds unattended, the body of our planet faces destruction and death. With this hanging in the air, the poem shifts back to Santos Perez's daughter and her own illness. If she has difficulty breathing, an inhaler should help, the doctor suggests. Unspoken in this line is the question: if the earth struggles to breathe, what is the remedy?

Min Hyoung Song writes in his book *Climate Lyricism*,

> …I especially come to value the poetry that doesn't indulge in overly pretty language. This poetry labors to ground its readers in the mundane and refuses the epiphanic moment or a sudden turn at the end that promises insight. More often than not, the insight that's offered in such a turn is fleeing—a feel-good moment that's incompatible with a present that requires dwelling in feeling bad. Climate change needs a slower burn of attentiveness, a willingness to sit with discomfort that doesn't fit too neatly into narrative plots, a returning again and again to contemplation. (67)

"Rings of Fire" does just that: it stays with uncomfortable juxtapositions to keep the reader engaged and attentive, serving more as a collection of violent, haunting images than a narrative. While at first glance the final unrhymed couplets seem to serve as an "epiphanic moment," upon closer inspection there is no resolution or even much hope in these final lines (Song 67):

> But tonight we sing, "Happy Birthday," and blow
> out the candles together. Smoke trembles
>
> as if we all exhaled
> the same flammable wish. (25-28)

The sustained inhale and breathlessness that the rest of the poem creates is balanced by a final exhale, but it is not one of relief. Instead, the use of “flammable” here suggests the precarity of the wish, the sense that everything could go up in flames despite all best intentions. In the word “wish,” we hear a voiceless fricative that mimics the sound of the wind that carries wildfire smoke across borders and even oceans, adding another foreboding dimension to the poem’s uncertain conclusion. The potential for continued environmental and bodily harm hangs in the air, just as the speaker’s breath is released.

III. Reverence in Climate Lyric

In one chapter of her 2012 novel *Flight Behavior*, Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and poet Barbara Kingsolver unfolds a metaphor nearly identical to the one posed by Santos Perez in "Rings of Fire": comparing the planet's warming to a child's fever. Two thirds of the way through the novel, a character explains, "'Living systems are very sensitive to small changes, Dellarobia. Think of a child's temperature elevated by two degrees. Would you call it normal?'" (Kingsolver 279). He draws this analogy further, describing how a four-degree rise in global temperature would be enough to send Earth to the emergency room—if there were such a remedy.

Similar alarm bells ring out in Kingsolver's poem "Great Barrier," which opens with a fiery beginning: "The cathedral is burning." For 2019 readers of the poem, and most today, this would most likely immediately summon images of news reels of the famous Notre Dame cathedral engulfed in flames, the world holding its breath while watching through television and phone screens. The caesura immediately following splits the line in two, forcing readers to dwell a moment longer on this conflagration: "Absent flame or smoke, / stained glass explodes in silence" (2). Kingsolver immediately removes whatever images we have conjured up in our minds, transitioning to a description of what we soon discover is a dying coral reef. There is no cathedral, then, just the quiet (at least in Western perception), slow death of an ecosystem with the primary tension here created by the oxymoron of glass shattering without a sound.

The imagery-dense first stanza sets up the contrast that Kingsolver bases the rest of the poem around: the way that the world watched in horror as the Notre Dame cathedral burned yet seems ambivalent at best to the collapsing coral reefs in our oceans as a result of rapid climate change.

Absent flame or smoke,
stained glass explodes in silence, fractal scales
of angel damsel rainbow parrot. Charred beams
of blackened coral lie in heaps on the sacred floor,
white stones fallen from high places, spires collapsed
crushing sainted turtle and gargoyle octopus. (1-6)

Yes, the cathedral is an irreplaceable, centuries-old relic with immense religious and historical impact, but are coral reefs like Great Barrier Reef not also monuments of their own? Why should reefs that predate Notre Dame cathedral by hundreds of thousands of years be left to crumble? These questions form the through line of Kingsolver's argument, which she unfolds using vivid figurative language and arresting condemnations of the Western world's uplifting of cultural artifacts at the attentional expense of crucial ecosystems. Each description has an epithet-like quality, creating within a short lyric the sense of something bigger, almost a compressed epic. Such a scale makes sense; climate change is certainly an issue of enormous weight. Phrases like "sainted turtle" and "gargoyle octopus" juxtapose quintessential elements of the Notre Dame cathedral like statues, stained glass, and grotesques with living animals threatened by the Great Barrier Reef's crumbling.

The enjambment and caesura Kingsolver employs between the second and third line of the second stanza is particularly poignant:

Something there is in my kind that cannot love
a reef, a tundra, a plain stone breast of desert, ever
quite enough. A tree perhaps, once recomposed
as splendid furniture. A forest after the whole of it

is planed to posts and beams and raised to a heaven

of earnest construction in the name of Our Lady. (7-12)

Kingsolver singles out the word "ever," suggesting the possibility that "[her] kind," or humans, may lack the capacity to love something like a reef at all. She qualifies this condemnation with two simple words, "quite enough," both adding a sliver of hope and a sense of frustration that even what love humans may have for places like a tundra or a coral reef is not yet enough to combat the way we see them crumbling and fading at our own hands. We too often only see our environment as a place from which we can extract what we please or dump what we no longer need. We only love living things like trees when they serve us and our specific aesthetic goals, such as after being crafted into a table and chairs set or a gorgeous piece of architecture. "In the name of Our Lady" suggests, again, that if the felling of trees or destruction of natural spaces is in the name of praising figures like the Virgin Mary, then the ends justify the means. Kingsolver does not hesitate to confront Western cultural norms here, exposing these tendencies we know we have but often are not willing to openly admit. The word recomposed is also used pointedly here; Kingsolver could have used a more architectural or aesthetically minded word like "built" or "crafted," but she uses more biological language instead. Recomposed echoes decomposition, the fate of the titular coral reef if no action to protect it is taken.

All Paris stood on the bridges to watch her burning,

believing a thing this old, this large and beautiful

must be holy and cannot be lost. And coral temples

older than Charlemagne suffocate unattended,

bleach and bleed from the eye, the centered heart. (13-17)

The personification of the cathedral to "her" deepens the central point of irony that Kingsolver develops throughout the poem: the fact that we project importance and even humanity onto something inanimate like a cathedral but can't extend that same care to other living beings. Kingsolver doesn't hesitate to personify the Great Barrier Reef, however, referring to how it metaphorically bleeds from both its "eye" and "heart." Even the phrase "breast of desert" from the previous stanza attempts to bring descriptors of the human to the nonhuman world and implicitly interrogates why we so often uphold a division between the two when they are so tightly intertwined.

This perceived split, however, seems to make its way into the poem's title, which cleverly hints at the ways humans can block out environmental crises. The word "barrier" here could allude to the obstacles that hinder our exposure to issues like coral reef bleaching. The Great Barrier Reef is not disappearing in huge swaths overnight, nor is it something most humans see every day. As far as barriers, visibility is a primary one for the Great Barrier Reef. I'm also thinking of media coverage that focuses on immediate, explosive imagery like a cathedral on fire rather than the "slow violence" of coral reefs deteriorating (Nixon 3). As Nixon emphasizes, it is far easier for us to care or feel compelled to act when faced with crises that burst into existence, like terrorist attacks or violent hurricanes, but less so when it comes to issues that persist across larger temporalities: weeks, months, even decades. Our attention piques then falls alarmingly fast as time passes, heightened by the tendency for our culture to focus on whatever is new and exciting (or alarming) and conveniently forget about "old," ongoing challenges like climate change. In her title and throughout the poem, Kingsolver seems to be alluding to these "barriers" to attention or action that are unique to long-term catastrophes (which I encourage us to not hear as a paradoxical phrase) like climate change.

Religious imagery appears throughout "Great Barrier," from the rather obvious associations with the cathedral as a place of Christian worship to the more subtle references like "Our Lady," the Virgin Mary. And yet, as Kingsolver shows with her metaphorizing of the cathedral itself, these religious associations are multi-faceted, with the cathedral standing in for the Great Barrier Reef and Our Lady conjuring up thoughts not just of Jesus's earthly mother but Mother Nature. It also calls to mind the devotional lyric poets John Donne and George Herbert, whose work is often in direct conversation with Christianity and God. While Christianity has a contentious history with environmental relations, from justifications used for America's manifest destiny philosophy in the 1800s to the concerns put forth in Lynn White's seminal piece "The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis," there have been more recent pushes to integrate environmentalism and even climate activism into the Christian community (White). More recently, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical "Laudato si'" explicitly acknowledged climate change and humans' roles in causing it, calling upon Christians to remedy the harm that has been done and prevent future damage. Pope Francis opens the encyclical with the phrase from which the title is drawn, "Laudato si' mi Signore" or "Praise be to you, my Lord," referencing St. Francis of Assisi who calls the earth our "mother" and "sister." Pope Francis then writes,

> This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. (Francis)

It is this very sentiment that Kingsolver seems to be drawing upon in "Great Barrier." While she references Christianity frequently, she never explicitly privileges one belief system in her poem, but rather lifts up sentiments that readers of many backgrounds, Christian or not, can relate to.

At what seems to be the primary turning point of the poem, line 19, the speaker writes of a "great divide," very consciously echoing the poem's title.

> Lord of leaves and fishes, lead me across this great divide.
> Teach me how to love the sacred places, not as one
> devotes to One who made me in his image and is bound
> to love me back. I mean as a body loves its microbial skin,
> the worm its nape of loam, all secret otherness forgiven
>
> Love beyond anything I will ever make of it. (18-23)

The tone here becomes one of prayer. While Kingsolver never calls on God by name, the apostrophe she uses in first line of the fourth stanza invokes Jesus with a twist on a usual epithet. She replaces "Lord of loaves and fishes" with "Lord of *leaves* and fishes, " (emphasis added) a change that imagines Jesus as both a miracle worker and an environmental advocate. The next three lines eloquently present the speaker's plea for a change of heart in their relationship to the environment and illustrate Kingsolver's intent in writing the poem itself: "Teach me how to love the sacred places, not as one / devotes to One who made me in his image and is bound / to love me back. I mean as a body loves its microbial skin, / the worm its name of loam, all secret otherness forgiven" (19-22). Kingsolver's speaker does not want to value nature out of reverence of God's creation, but rather for the fact that all living things share so much in addition to the planet itself. There is no "otherness" inherent in the nonhuman, Kingsolver asserts, despite what we may be conditioned to believe. The final line, "Love beyond anything I will ever make of it,"

resolves to separate any notions of aesthetics or value or utility from the inherent worth of life on earth. Whether single tree or sprawling reef, formidable predator or the tiniest microbe, all life is interdependent, and to love ourselves as humans is to love all that is alive. Why adore a building when we cannot even properly revere the rest of God's creation, the life in and around us? Kingsolver asks.

The tone throughout Kingsolver's poem, as suggested by the religious iconography of the cathedral itself and allusions to Christian belief, is one of utmost reverence, a mode we see often in climate lyric poetry and environmental writing more generally. As Nicole Seymour writes in *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, the "sensibilities" we typically associate with environmentalism are "guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness, sanctimony, self-righteousness, and wonder…" (Seymour 4-5). It is worth noting that many of these qualities overlap with those found in religious thought, particularly Christianity, which Kingsolver consciously appeals to in "Great Barrier". Seymour focuses on the ways in which these traditional affective qualities within environmentalism may actually lead to more harm than good, and what she calls "bad environmentalism," or a healthy dose of dissidence in how we approach environmental thought, may be a needed shift to our thinking (Seymour 3). One contemporary poet who writes in this vein is Tommy Pico, whose book-length poem *Nature Poem* is the subject of the next section.

IV. "Bad" Environmentalism? Irony in the Climate Lyric Poem

While much climate lyric poetry draws on emotional strategies that we expect to encounter within the realm of climate literature, such as inspiring awe in readers and encouraging multispecies empathy, *Nature Poem* by Tommy Pico is a stark counterexample: an irreverent, social-media-inflected take on lyric environmental poetry that, as the title suggests, interrogates what it means to write a poem about nature. This book-length poem traverses much introspective ground, tracing the speaker's musings about nature, his lived experience as a Native American growing up on a reservation, and navigating being a young queer person in the United States. Pico describes his style of writing as conversational, noting in an interview that he did not have formal poetry training and so his poetry was "always whatever [he] wanted it to be" (Masters). He uses what some may see as a lack of experience or literary background to write innovative and free-flowing poems that read much like streams of consciousness and weave in and out of time and space. "That's just the way that I talk," Pico explains in the interview. "My entire writing process is me trying to approximate on the page a version of a conversation you might have with me" (Masters).

While I'm only drawing from parts of *Nature Poem*, the work itself as previously mentioned is book-length, versus the much more compressed lyric poems from Santos Perez and Kingsolver. Published in 2017, Pico's book is the oldest of the three poems I'm looking at, but still quite recent. It also is the least explicitly "climate change" poem I'm analyzing when it comes to its focus on the environment. Yet could one write a book titled *Nature Poem* that explores writing about the environment (among many other subjects) in 2017 *without* engaging with climate change? If so, I argue that Pico's book does not fall into that category. While the title of the book is *Nature Poem*, not "Climate" *Poem*, nature has been largely inseparable from

discussions around climate. Perhaps what makes Pico's poem such a unique but poignant climate lyric is the way that climate change lingers just beneath the surface of the entire piece, from nods to deforestation, toxic waste dumping, and rising temperatures. What separates *Nature Poem* from Santos Perez and Kingsolver's pieces, however, is its register: Pico's tone is decidedly disaffected, at least superficially, when it comes to the environment. *Nature Poem* is, in many ways, a poetic foil for the typical contemporary climate lyric poem. This is not to undermine the importance of these more "traditional" approaches to climate lyric, but rather to interrogate *why* some poets lean toward traditional modes of reverence and others reject such modes for tones that are much more ironic and even humorous—as well as what the effects of these choices look like. This unconventional tone and style of lyric that characterizes Pico's work demands close analysis and attention to detail, particularly to the ways in which it challenges the affective range of climate lyricism.

Pico's persona in his poetic tetralogy "Teebs," is adamant in his opposition to writing a nature poem, despite the book's title.[16] Teebs explains, "I can't write a nature poem / bc it's fodder for the noble savage / narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face, / I say to my audience" (Pico 2). He never describes exactly what this so-called nature poem would look like, instead using apophasis, a relative of irony, to write about what he does *not* want it to be. Pico, who belongs to the Kumeyaay Nation, is vocal both within and outside of his work about his opposition to the stereotype that all Native Americans have the same attitude toward the environment, one of kinship and mutual respect. Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* provides an excellent lens through which to understand the unconventional environmental discourse that Pico takes on in *Nature Poem*. Seymour defines "bad environmentalism" as "environmental thought

[16] *Nature Poem* is preceded by *IRL* and followed by *Junk* and *Feed*, all using the character Teebs as a primary persona.

that employs dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse" (Seymour 6). Irony and absurdity are at the forefront of the works Seymour engages with in her exploration of alternative environmental dispositions. Her reflections on irony in particular lend themselves to understanding Pico's work. She notes how, as Linda Hutcheon has written, irony has a "critical 'edge'" to it, with skepticism of authority being another central component (Seymour 12-13). The speaker in *Nature Poem*, Teebs, is no stranger to leveling criticism, both pointing fingers at the world around him and at himself. He frequently "edits" his own words as they make their way onto the page or contradicts earlier points as nearby as a few lines prior. For example, Pico writes, "The world is a bumble bee / in the sense that, *who cares?*" (Pico 12). The speaker eschews care as a mode of engaging with the environment, preferring detachment or even nihilism—at least at this point in the poem. Even so, implicit in asking "who cares" is the fact that Pico is writing this piece at all and included that line, and that he cared enough to work on this project at all.

The dominant affective mode in *Nature Poem* is irony, but Pico deftly uses other rhetorical gestures, such as hyperbole or understatement, to build up his counterstrategy to typical lyric ecopoetry.

> *My primary device is personification,* says Nature. *Do your associations consider my mercurial elements?*
>
> Nature is kind of over my head
>
> the speech sweeps inland is overtaking
>
> Nature keeps wanting to hang out, and I've been looking for an excuse to use the phrase "hackles of the night" but you can't always get what you want.
>
> Every date feels like the final date bc we we always find small ways of being

extremely rude to each other, like mosquito bites or deforestation

Like I think I'm in an abusive relationship w/nature (Pico 22)

A curious question arises in the first line of this excerpt: can nature personify itself? In the speaker's conversation with capital-n "Nature," Nature is explicitly self-referential here, if not a bit condescending. As I suggested earlier, ecopoets have long incorporated tactics like personification into their characterizations of nature, which Pico clearly alludes to here with thick irony. Nature describes personification while being personified itself and talking directly to the poem's speaker. The use of the word "mercurial" elevates the diction Nature uses in comparison to Teebs, whose words remain very colloquial and casual with abbreviations like "bc" or "w/."

In Teebs' understanding here, Nature is not so much a benevolent, loving figure like a mother, instead acts aloof and self-describes as a temperamental being. Pico playfully incorporates and puns on an idiom in the third line to underscore this perception: nature is both hard to grasp conceptually and is literally above his head. The personification goes a step further as Teebs describes Nature wanting to spend time together or go on dates, as one would with a romantic partner. However, "final date" is quite foreboding, ringing in this context with echoes of apocalypse due to the proximity of deforestation in the following line. The comparison of Teebs' relationship with nature to one that is abusive is also intriguing, and once again full of affective plays. Suggesting that deforestation is, like mosquito bites, a "small" way of "being extremely rude" is a great understatement; of course, mosquito bites are irritating and can carry deadly disease, but the yoking of bug bites to something as drastic as deforestation is laden with scathing humor and absurdity.

In the next section of the poem, Pico melds a flippant tone with an anecdote of his mother's reverence for nature.

> "When she ascends the mountains to pick acorn, my mother
> motherfucking waves at oak trees. Watching her stand there, her
> hands behind her back, rocking, grinning
> into the face of the bark—
>
> They are talking to each other.
>
> *I am nothing like that*, I say to my audience.
>
> I say, *I went to Sarah Lawrence College*
>
> *I make quinoa n shit*" (24)

While lines like "my mother motherfucking waves at oak trees" and "*I make quinoa n shit*" are unconventional within a genre that often indulges in self-consciously aesthetic language (despite Song's protestations against this trope in *Climate Lyricism*), Pico is doing something very intentional here. More formal words like "ascends" and even the drawing out of "*I am*" rather than using a contraction challenge the irreverent quips made around them. There's also a satisfying sonic dimension to the phrase "mother motherfucking waves" that cannot help but play into poetic tropes like repetition. Even the description of the speaker's mother interacting with the trees is beautifully crafted and delves into personification, culminating at the line, "They are talking to each other." He even legitimizes this by describing the bark of the tree as having a face. The speaker claiming he is "*nothing like*" his mother then, becomes deeply ironic and adds a twinge of humor. His mother's approach toward the oak trees resembles the approach Robin Wall Kimmerer takes when writing about nature from an Indigenous perspective in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, with all living beings on an equal plane, each being animate and capable of feeling. Pico rejects this approach, at least on the surface, moving through much of *Nature Poem* as he does in the above excerpt, both playing into stereotypes of lyric poetry and drastically subverting

them with cheeky word play and commentary (and even meta-commentary). Yet, Teebs must go to the mountain on some occasions with his mother to write about how she interacts with the trees. In that case, he is participating in the very thing he's mocking. Perhaps he realizes as he goes that he might buy into the perspective his mother takes toward nature, but he seems to try to convince himself otherwise by claiming he is "nothing like that"— but who is he saying it to? A real audience, or an imagined one? Again, the irony runs deep in Pico's words.

In an excerpt thick with bitterness from about halfway through the poem, Pico pokes fun at Romantic, pastoral lyric poems like those of Wordsworth or Dickinson. It almost takes the shape of a haiku, further mimicking a traditionally nature-oriented poetic form. Pico's colloquial tone undercuts the formalities often seen in the pastoral lyrics he references, a move he frequently engages in throughout this poem and others that keeps his work grounded and conversational.

Here is a short, peaceful, pastoral lyric:

Crappy water
Shoots thru purgatory creek
On its way to the Colorado River

My bad, says the EPA after accidentally dumping 3 million gallons of waste in the stream.

Fuck you too, says Nature. (54)

Teebs personifies the EPA and employs some degree of metonymy, with the EPA standing in for corrupt government bodies that often submit to the will of corporations and big industries over the good of the environment. Nature is also explicitly personified (tie to previous quote), but more than that, given a voice to talk back to the EPA. The use of expletives and informal language like "crappy" and "thru" epitomizes the flippant, frustrated approach that Pico's speaker takes when writing about the environment. Once again, irony prevails, as the EPA

should, in theory, be protecting streams but instead becomes complicit or even engaged in damaging them further.

Dwelling a moment on the mention of purgatory in the haiku-like stanza above, "Purgatory creek could suggest that the water is in a state of limbo, as purgatory in Catholic doctrine refers to the place where souls of sinners remain as they wait for spiritual purification. Unlike Kingsolver, who brings Christian themes and beliefs into her diction and imagery to suggest the need for a profound respect for the environment that is adjacent to a faith in God, Pico's speaker leans into the in-between spaces like purgatory to evoke the sense of stuck-ness that has come to be associated with environmental activism. Implicit in Pico's characterization of the EPA here is the echoes of oft-expressed resentment towards a government agency that purports to care for nature but in the same breath perpetuates harm.

Seymour's characterization of irony as a tool for leveling criticism when it comes to environmental discourse is especially salient in this section of the poem. The "abusive" relationship dynamic between humans and nature that Pico's speaker introduces in earlier passages returns in these lines as well—a vivid metaphor that, while anthropocentric, is a brilliant and affectively charged way to imagine humans' relationships to the environment. However, unlike in a toxic relationship, we as humans can't just leave nature; instead, we are tasked with repairing the bonds that unite us with our nonhuman counterparts.

This constant tension with nature, now notably lowercase in the following excerpt, comes to a strange anti-climax near the close of the poem, where Teebs' disdain for stereotypes of Indigenous relationships to nature plagues any underlying affinity he feels toward the hills, rivers, and bluffs he writes about:

> I swore to myself I would never write a nature
> poem. Let's be clear, I hate nature – hate its *guts*

I say to my audience. There is something smaller I say to myself:

I don't hate nature at all. (67)

Teebs follows this admission with several lines thick with personification that take on a more traditionally lyric form instead of his usual conversational tone, before kicking himself for such thoughts: "Fuck that. I recant. I slap myself" (67). The sharp caesura after the longer lines preceding and the return of expletives make Teebs's self-correction visceral. The antepenultimate page of the poem takes this inner turmoil further, with anxious anaphora of the phrase "What if" before once again collapsing into Teebs's frustration about his attempt to write a poem about nature that doesn't play into stereotypes of indigeneity. "It's hard to be anything / but a pessimist," Teebs concludes (74). Perhaps, however, this pessimism can coexist with more conventional modes of care.

Of works like Pico's that fall into the category of "bad environmentalism," Seymour writes,

> These works find nothing sacred—and, in fact, find sacredness to be part of the problem when it comes to environment and animals. They offer a different way to do politics, one that is both messy and pragmatic. And they thereby point to a deep and abiding ambivalence at the heart of our contemporary relationship to environment, one that many of us have been too ashamed, or too driven, or too beleaguered, to acknowledge. (232)

The messiness and pragmatism that Seymour describes is at the heart of *Nature Poem*, revealing another way forward when confronting issues like climate change, one that has the freedom to be brutally honest and provocative.

Conclusion

As Santos Perez, Kingsolver, and Pico illustrate, climate lyric poetry is far from a one-size-fits-all category. This subgenre is fertile ground for conversations about emotions like anxiety, questions about animacy, and understandings of care and the shapes it can take. Santos Perez points readers toward blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman to invite readers to care for the environment as we would our own sick child. At UVA's symposium, he said of lyric poetry, "I think [it] can powerfully articulate [these] interconnections and perhaps show us what an eco-consciousness can look like" (Santos Perez). In her poetry, Kingsolver turns to reverence and the divine, calling upon her audience to see nature as sacred because divine forces fashioned it, nudging us toward an attitude of love and respect for the environment. Pico subverts both of these strategies, looking instead to the bitter and harsh reality of climate change and sticking with the troublesome emotions it conjures up. In Chapter Three of *Climate Lyricism*, Song writes, "The goal of focusing on the everyday is not to make thinking about climate change tolerable, which would be its own kind of everyday denial, but to sustain an awareness of how terrible it is" (67). Pico does precisely this, holding readers close to the stickiness of environmental crises to prevent wavering attention. The work of these poets and so many others show us the immense capabilities within lyric poetry, from how meticulously lyric poems are crafted to the incorporation of tropes that this form has unique access to, like pathetic fallacy or invocation.

In a 2011 article titled "'An Attitude of Noticing': Mary Oliver's Ecological Ethic," Kirstin Hotelling Zona writes, "…Oliver's devotion to 'loving the world' is achieved primarily via acute attention and its spawn, awareness" (123). Mary Oliver, a renowned ecopoet, perhaps

epitomizes what it looks like for a poet to attend to nature, to diligently take time and effort to notice and be present amidst the human and nonhuman. Zona continues,

> To notice simultaneously the world's beauty and the nature of our noticing is to straddle the line between the observer and observed, self-abandon and actualization- that is, to feel the joy of provisional wholeness, that paradoxically coherent state of selflessness, because we glimpse the essential contiguity of being. (135)

Perhaps what lyric ecopoets and climate poets can teach us to lean into is not one specific affective mode or approach to care, but the habit of noticing, the imperative to keep looking and keep attending to issues like climate crisis that demand our focus. Beyond poetry, the strategies that poets like Santos Perez, Kingsolver, and Pico (as well as Oliver) implore us to witness the impacts of climate change, with the hope of spurring a desire to effect meaningful change.

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Appendix

"Rings of Fire" by Craig Santos Perez

Honolulu, Hawai'i

We host our daughter's first birthday party
during the hottest April in history.

Outside, my dad grills meat over charcoal;
inside, my mom steams rice and roasts

vegetables. They've traveled from California,
where drought carves trees into tinder—*"Paradise*

is burning." When our daughter's first fever spiked,
the doctor said, "It's a sign she's fighting infection."

Bloodshed surges with global temperatures,
which know no borders. "If her fever doesn't break,"

the doctor continued, "take her to the Emergency
Room." Airstrikes detonate hospitals

in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan . . .
"When she crowned," my wife said, "it felt like rings

of fire." Volcanoes erupt along Pacific fault lines;
sweltering heatwaves scorch Australia;

forests in Indonesia are razed for palm oil plantations—
their ashes flock, like ghost birds, to our distant

rib cages. Still, I crave an unfiltered cigarette,
even though I quit years ago, and my breath

no longer smells like my grandpa's overflowing ashtray—
his parched cough still punctures the black lungs

of cancer and denial. "If she struggles to breathe,"
the doctor advised, "give her an asthma inhaler."

But tonight we sing, "Happy Birthday," and blow
out the candles together. Smoke trembles

as if we all exhaled
the same flammable wish.

"Great Barrier" by Barbara Kingsolver

The cathedral is burning. Absent flame or smoke,
stained glass explodes in silence, fractal scales
of angel damsel rainbow parrot. Charred beams
of blackened coral lie in heaps on the sacred floor,
white stones fallen from high places, spires collapsed
crushing sainted turtle and gargoyle octopus.

Something there is in my kind that cannot love
a reef, a tundra, a plain stone breast of desert, ever
quite enough. A tree perhaps, once recomposed
as splendid furniture. A forest after the whole of it
is planed to posts and beams and raised to a heaven
of earnest construction in the name of Our Lady.

All Paris stood on the bridges to watch her burning,
believing a thing this old, this large and beautiful
must be holy and cannot be lost. And coral temples
older than Charlemagne suffocate unattended,
bleach and bleed from the eye, the centered heart.

Lord of leaves and fishes, lead me across this great divide.
Teach me how to love the sacred places, not as one
devotes to One who made me in his image and is bound
to love me back. I mean as a body loves its microbial skin,
the worm its nape of loam, all secret otherness forgiven.

Love beyond anything I will ever make of it.