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Learning to feel at home in the Anthropocene:

From state of emergency to everyday experiments in California's historic drought

ABSTRACT

In the deserts of Southern California, a series of climate crises has disturbed the form and content of the ordinary. In this context of unfolding change, Californians are experimenting with the spaces, surfaces, objects, and infrastructures of their homes, harnessing the material elements of the house as a site not only of repetition and reproduction but also of reinvention. At times, these experiments in the ecologies of everyday life unleash a range of transformative effects on both self and world, accreting into instances of cosmological reconfiguration. Rather than analyze such experiments as practices of adaptation or recovery, we can better understand them as attempts to cultivate alternative ways of feeling at home in the Anthropocene. Such experiments take up the relations among aesthetics, ethics, and affect as their primary site of improvisation and innovation. [*aesthetics, ethics, affect, houses, lawns, toilets, infrastructure, drought, California*]

It was a depressing sight," laments James, an industrial lighting contractor and longtime resident of the Southern Californian desert.¹ It is April 2015. After a public workshop on drought-tolerant landscaping in the high desert town of Joshua Tree, I linger with James and his wife, Maddie, in the cool, air-conditioned interior of a local community center. Over a cup of coffee, the couple describe watching the bright green lawn of their suburban home gradually turn a parched, brittle brown—a casualty of the state's historic drought.

Although feeling compelled to act, they were unsure how. They considered replacing their turfgrass lawn with an artificial alternative, as many of their neighbors were doing. But at \$5 to \$20 per square foot, that option would stretch their budget well beyond its breaking point. Other neighbors were spray-painting their lawns a bright green. While a more affordable option, however, this would be only a temporary fix; most companies estimate that the paint job will last about six months. "Anyway," interjects Maddie, "that felt like putting a Band Aid on the problem without addressing its root cause." So about two years ago, the couple decided to replace their withering turfgrass lawn with a popular drought-tolerant alternative, *Dymondia margaretae*, a hardy flowering plant endemic to the Western Cape of South Africa.

"Less water, no mowing, easy call," explains James. But even the *Dymondia* struggled between Southern California's cool winter and hot summer. Disappointed by its performance, they decided to make yet another change to their front yard, replacing the *Dymondia* with a garden of rocks and plants, including mixed succulents

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like agave and aloe vera and “native” Southern Californian wildflowers like poppies and lilacs—the distinctive aesthetics of drought-tolerant landscaping. At first, both husband and wife were reluctant to let go of their turfgrass lawn. “It’s so engrained in our culture,” Maddie tells me. “To really be a home, a house should have a nice, big, green lawn out front.” But when the couple learned about a statewide rebate scheme to help pay for lawn replacement, they decided to take the leap. “Now I just love the way it looks,” says Maddie. “Granted,” she admits, “the impact on water consumption is negligible. But it’s a start. If everyone does their bit, we can get through this drought together—and whatever comes next.”

Across Southern California, climate change, drought, and a series of other disasters like dust storms, wildfires, and landslides have disturbed the form and content of the ordinary. In this context of unfolding change, James and Maddie are called on to reassess what is best for them and their home; the shape, texture, and color of their vision of the good life begin to shift. Taking place alongside a range of competing concerns, James and Maddie’s experiments in the ecologies of everyday life include at least some element of conscious moral reasoning. Perhaps more importantly, however, these experiments also involve practical acts of engagement with their suburban home’s material elements. While such experiments can involve a degree of risk, they can also generate moments of welcome serendipity. Routed through the substance of everyday life, they may also rub up against the inertia of the ordinary—its resistance to transformation—as manifested in the more or less immovable limits of one’s budget, the inelasticity of one’s habitus, and the constraints of the local climate. Constituting the grounds of possibility for everyday experimentation, then, the substance of everyday life also limits these experiments’ capacity to generate moments of meaningful and enduring change.

During 12 months’ fieldwork in the disaster-stricken deserts of Southern California, undertaken from July 2014 to June 2015, during the peak of the state’s historic drought, I examined how a group of relatively privileged, primarily Anglo-American desert residents tried to reformulate the relationship among their bodies, their homes, and their everyday lives in response to conditions of environmental instability. Such attempts constituted concrete instances of everyday experimentation that took up the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and affect as their primary site of improvisation and innovation. As will become clear, I use the term *affective* in its most capacious sense to signal the ability of human and nonhuman bodies to affect and be affected in ways that weave together the sensual and the moral, creating an example of what William Connolly (1999, 27) calls “visceral modes of appraisal”: the prerepresentational intensities from which “conscious thoughts, feelings, and discursive judgments draw part of their sustenance.”

Thus, Southern Californians’ everyday experiments might be best understood not as practices of adaptation or recovery in the face of disaster, but as experimental efforts to forge alternative ways of *feeling at home in the Anthropocene*—the new geological epoch of anthropogenic origins in which a changing global climate is increasingly fostering a sense of local environments acting out of bounds (Hastrup 2013). Efforts to forge alternative ways of feeling at home in the Anthropocene not only gesture toward the present and the future but also draw heavily on a highly sanitized version of California’s “pioneer” past—thereby raising questions about the constitution of the ordinary and its relation to issues of class, gender, and race, as well as to settler-colonial infrastructures of everyday feeling (McIntosh 2016; Rifkin 2014; Stoler 2016). In this way, everyday experimentation evokes the presence of both rupture and continuity within the material, practical, and political elements of ordinary life.

As anthropologists have long shown, houses work to connect their inhabitants to wider social and moral worlds (Morgan 1965). In the postwar period, two anthropological approaches to the home have proved especially influential. For Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977, 89) theory of practice, the house stands as the principal mechanism by which the “generative schemes” of social organization are first inculcated into collective forms of bodily comportment and then reproduced across subsequent generations—an idea that continues to hold much sway in the discipline (Buchli 2013, 145; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Beginning in the 1980s, scholars made consumption-oriented arguments for understanding the home as an external expression of its occupants’ internal character (Buchli 2013, 117–36; Miller 1987, 2009). Writing of 19th-century Britain, for example, Marilyn Strathern (1992, 103) shows how a preoccupation with homemaking and domestic decor among the emerging middle classes of the time rested on a logic of *inversion*—of turning the inside out—whereby “the internal (what is within persons) has been literalized as an interior (residential) space.” Thus one’s desires, dispositions, and vision of the good life are materialized in the aesthetic aspects of the home.

Whether centered on a preexisting social order or an individual’s internal character, these approaches emphasize what we might call the reproductive capacities of the house: its capacity to replicate or reinforce what already exists.² Such approaches leave little room for reinvention in the ecologies of everyday life. Rather than merely reproducing or expressing what already exists, efforts to cultivate new ways of feeling at home amid conditions of environmental instability call attention to how the materialities and affects of the home can be directed toward change of the self, the world, or both, albeit always in ways that are simultaneously enabled and constrained by broader relations of power and inequality. To call these everyday experiments “ecological” is simultaneously to emphasize

the Greek root of the term *ecology*—*oikos* (the family, the family's property, the house)—and to highlight the home as a site of human-nonhuman relations (Kaika 2005, 51–78). In this light, the house, its arrangements, and the practices it facilitates emerge as a kind of *experimental ecosystem*.

The phrase *experimental ecosystem* recalls the work of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (1994, 1997, 1998, 2010), a historian and philosopher of the biological sciences. Rheinberger (1998, 287–88) argues that, as the basic working unit of science, the experimental system “forces one to move by means of checking out, of groping, of *tâtonnement* [trial and error]. The development of such a system depends on eliciting differences without destroying its reproductive coherence. Together, this makes up its differential reproduction.” By “differential reproduction,” then, Rheinberger means the conjunction of two apparently competing qualities: (1) the ability to be replicated with high fidelity across space and time and (2) the tendency to engender unanticipated, surprising effects. The experimental system is not simply one or another technoscientific instrument, however; it is also the concatenation of practices and layers of implicit and explicit knowledge that together combine with the technoscientific apparatus to create a “little [pocket] of controlled chaos” (Lenoir 2010, xiv).³ While at first glance an unlikely candidate for such a system, the North American home can, through the routine and repetition of ordinary, everyday life, generate unexpected effects—thereby engaging in the overlapping operations of differential reproduction.

Locating the ordinary crisis: Beyond rupture and recovery

On April 1, 2015, California governor Jerry Brown addressed his constituency from a mountaintop. “Today we are standing on dry grass where there should be five feet of snow,” Brown declared. “This historic drought demands unprecedented action. Therefore, I’m issuing an executive order mandating substantial water reductions across our state. As Californians, we must pull together and save water in every way possible” (Office of the Governor of California 2015).

The location of Brown’s political performance was not coincidental. The otherwise unremarkable patch of parched, brittle grass high up in the Sierra Nevada is where the state conducts its annual snowpack survey, a public ritual of scientific measurement that in recent years had tracked the onset and intensification of a slow-motion catastrophe (Lochhead 2015). As California entered the fourth year of its historic drought, the 2015 survey had revealed an alarmingly low snowpack: only 5 percent of its historical average. Without its waters, there would be little lifeblood to sustain Southern California’s growing population and the Central Valley’s \$17 billion-a-year agricultural industry (Lakoff 2016, 237). In its absence, the snowpack had grown affectively dense as an object of not

only regional but also national and international concern: a powerful proxy for a changing global climate.

When I arrived in Southern California in June 2014, the drought was already being felt in myriad ways: vanishing rivers and lakes, fallowed farmland, surging unemployment rates, rising water bills and grocery costs, and withering lawns. Adding insult to injury, the region also struggled through its hottest summer on record in 2015—a worrying trend replicated across much of North America and beyond. Together, the drought, heat, and a bark beetle infestation killed over 100 million trees across the state, extending and intensifying the wildfire season while also contributing to soil erosion and the risk of dangerous dust storms and landslides. In turn, a cascading language of emergency and rupture entered even the most levelheaded assessments of the threat posed to Californians by the drought and climate change. “The Golden State may recover, but it won’t be the same place” (Egan 2015), announced one reporter, while another proclaimed a “relentless new reality whose dimensions are just beginning to come into view” (Lochhead 2015).

It was against the shifting contours of California’s convulsive physical landscape that Brown ordered the state’s first mandatory restrictions on urban water use, leading some pundits to announce a new era of climate austerity. In January 2014, Brown had declared a state of emergency to release much-needed relief funds and invest state officials with new powers and responsibilities to manage California’s water budget. In May 2016 an updated executive order made many of the temporary provisions permanent. “Californians stepped up during this drought and saved more water than ever before,” announced Brown. “But now we know that drought is becoming a regular occurrence and water conservation must become a part of our everyday life” (Office of the Governor of California 2016).

Taking place over three years, Brown’s response to the drought charts in especially clear terms the making of an *ordinary crisis*: what begins as a state of emergency gradually hardens into a permanent feature of everyday life. In politics, policy, and public culture, environmental crises most often figure as intermediary moments of chaos when the social order “collapses” in on itself, only to be “recovered” after the crisis has finished (Vigh 2008, 8). In situations of protracted or chronic crisis, however, this intermediary moment of chaos can transform from a self-contained event into a constitutive dimension of the social landscape—one to which people must recalibrate the material, practical, and ritual content of their everyday lives. As Lauren Berlant (2007, 2011) argues, however, reinventing everyday life amid conditions of “crisis ordinariness” is irreducibly indeterminate in its outcomes; while new rhythms of everyday being may precipitate into new forms of life that endure beyond the moment of their initial

improvisation, these new rhythms may just as easily persist for a moment before fading away.

Ordinary crises are not simply a context in which people imagine and articulate new forms and norms of life. Attending to the imbrication of the event and the everyday in relation to moments of conflict, civil unrest, and—less often—environmental crisis, scholars in social anthropology and allied disciplines have documented how the proliferation and intensification of claims to crisis, emergency, and exception function as a powerful modality of state power. For Giorgio Agamben (2005), for example, the “state of exception” in which laws are suspended and life is rendered bare has emerged in recent years not as a provisional measure of statecraft in times of emergency but as an ordinary, unexceptional paradigm of biopolitical governance. Similarly, Janet Roitman (2013, 66) shows how crisis has transformed from a decisive threshold into a protracted historical and experiential condition, the “unexamined point of departure . . . for the production of knowledge about what constitutes historical significance.” As such, crisis has emerged alongside (or perhaps “usurped”) God, Reason, or Truth as a “transcendental placeholder” (Roitman 2013, 94–95), which enables some forms of critique while foreclosing others. But crisis is not only a paradigm of biopolitical governance and a technology of historical meaning-making. As Joseph Masco (2016, S65) argues, it is also an “affect-generating idiom” that shapes collective attention and action in such a way as to articulate the limits of the political.

The invocation of crisis thus acts as a “counter-revolutionary force” (Masco 2016, S67) that stabilizes or intensifies an existing reality rather than interrogating or transforming that reality’s underlying conditions of possibility. Using the state’s drought to promote privatized practices of water conservation rather than question the structural workings of California’s public water works, Brown’s executive orders can indeed be seen as such a counter-revolutionary force. Although this approach is invaluable for its understanding of “crisis talk” (Masco 2016, S66) as an instrument of state power, its sweeping scale of social and historical analysis may fail to capture the little acts of experimentation and invention that often occur in conditions of chronic environmental instability and social uncertainty.

It is in this context of unequal resources that Californians across the social and economic spectrum are trying to reformulate the relationship among their bodies, homes, and everyday lives. Although not always couched in the scientific language of anthropogenic climate change—let alone “the Anthropocene”—California’s drought, wildfires, and landslides are nonetheless taking place within a cultural context of heightened attention to a capricious and sometimes convulsive physical landscape in which experiences of a volatile present become filtered through the prospect of further catastrophe. For example, Maddie, having lived through two other major droughts (in 1976–77

and 1987–92), remembers a collective confidence among her fellow Californians that things would soon return to “normal”; not so this time. Even the drought’s end in February 2016 did little to ameliorate the sense that the local environment was acting out of bounds.⁴

This sense of instability constitutes an everyday “ecology of fear” in which ecological expectations and realities become worryingly unhinged (Davis 1999; see also Das 2006, 9). For some, there prevails a combination of “enforced presentism” and “fantasy futurism” (Guyer 2007, 409). For others, however, the temporal middle ground of the “near future” emerges as a space of not only imagination but also intervention. In this regard, the ecology of fear in everyday life is also a site of hope, resolve, and action (Appadurai 2013; Miyazaki 2004). Such responses are not simply practices of “recovery,” which would suggest a return to some preexisting way of life (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999). Rather, they are attempts to forge alternative ways of feeling at home in the Anthropocene that take up the relationship among ethics, aesthetics, and affect as their primary site of innovation.

Lawn and dis/order

Philosopher Yuriko Saito (1998, 2007, 2017) reminds us that the relationship between people and the mundane materials of their lives is shaped by the “everyday aesthetics” that connect questions of propriety with experiences of pleasure, discomfort, and disgust. Unlike the great works of art housed in national museums, commonplace objects such as meals, gardens, and household interiors are rarely the targets of sustained contemplation. Instead, they stimulate taken-for-granted standards of sensual appraisal, direct the thrust of “moral-aesthetic judgments,” and in turn play a crucial if largely unspoken role in defining, debating, and enacting visions of the good life (Saito 2007, 205; Dawdy 2016, 16). Terry Eagleton (1990, 13) also locates the capacity for aesthetic judgments not only in extended moments of contemplation and deliberation but also firmly in the embodied aspects of everyday life (Buck-Morss 1992, 6; Connolly 1999, 27). Saito and Eagleton here emphasize the human body as a *substrate* of sense: that which is acted on by its physical environment. By contrast, experiments in the ecologies of everyday life involve the human body as itself an agent of “aesthetic practices” that attempts to “envision, manipulate, produce, and transform terrains of sensibility” (Elinoff 2016, 612).

In many quarters of North American public culture, the well-tended turfgrass lawn has become all but synonymous with a specific image of the suburban good life (Robbins 2007; Saito 1998, 110; Stewart 2007, 56). North Americans’ attachment to their lawns has deep roots (Jenkins 1994). Originally designed to connect suburban homes even as it separated them, the turfgrass lawn was intended

by early 19th-century landscape designers like Andrew Jackson Downing to mediate between competing bourgeois ideologies of individual self-sovereignty and white, middle-class community (Teysso 1999, 85). In the context of these persistent associations, everyday rituals of lawn care like mowing, weeding, watering, and other practices of aesthetic upkeep have been invested with an importance that is more than merely material; they present individuals with an opportunity to both cultivate and communicate a sense of themselves as orderly, productive citizens in a way that is inextricable from settler aesthetic sensibilities.

In California the drought has thrown the aesthetic, ethical, and affective aspects of the lawn into especially sharp relief, even as it also scrambles the prevailing aesthetics of good citizenship. As one interstate billboard puts it, for example, “Let It Go. Brown Is the New Green.” Antilawn sentiment has long simmered under the surface of urban and suburban public culture; yet the drought has undeniably catapulted such sentiment into mainstream thought and practice. “The idea of your nice little green grass getting lots of water every day,” urged Governor Brown, “that’s going to be a thing of the past” (Kaplan and Kirkpatrick 2015).

In trying to facilitate the transition from the turfgrass past to the drought-tolerant future, Brown’s administration launched a landmark “cash for grass” rebate program, which paid Californians by the foot to replace their turfgrass with more water-efficient alternatives. As a result, many thousands of Southern Californians are forgoing a staple of postwar suburban iconography in favor of a more varied set of yardscapes. Some I spoke with hired professional landscapers; others took on the job themselves. Either way, people are today cultivating different configurations of shape, texture, and color across the state. Accompanying these transformations is a lively culture of display, demonstration, and exchange in which people eagerly invite one another to tour their new yards, exchange anecdotes, offer advice, and swap seeds and plant cuttings. In doing so, they transform the private space of the yard into a “workshop of the possible” (Rheinberger 2010, 246) geared toward producing not only new ideas and rearticulated norms but also a shared sense of purpose and enthusiasm.

A friend of a friend, Jackie invites me to visit her home among the high-density gated communities, golf courses, artificial lakes, and verdant landscaping of Palm Springs, America’s self-proclaimed “desert oasis.” Nestled in the shadows of the snowcapped Mount San Jacinto, Palm Springs began life in the early 1900s as a sanatorium. By the late 1920s, however, health seekers had been replaced by those seeking pleasure, leisure, and their version of the good life (Culver 2010). Today, to say the name Palm Springs is to conjure a complex set of associations, ranging from health and wealth to exploitation and exclusion.⁵

Like James and Maddie, Jackie and her husband, George, have recently replaced their yard’s turfgrass lawn

with what Jackie calls “native landscaping,” a phrase that invokes a thorny politics of autochthony (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Their new garden includes a meandering channel of pebbles, a sprinkling of larger boulders, and a colorful array of pleasantly arranged evergreen trees, flowering bushes, and succulents like agave and yucca. Unlike James and Maddie, however, Jackie and George also opted for a 15-by-15-foot stretch of bright green artificial turf as their yard’s centerpiece. Jackie explains,

The lawn was just sucking up water. Our neighbors recently put in native landscaping, and we thought it looked good. But we have two dogs and needed a place for them to play. So we decided to put down a patch of artificial turf for the dogs and grandkids and put drought-tolerant landscaping all around that.

Jackie invites me to take off my shoes and socks and give it what she calls “the toe test.” “I bet you can’t feel the difference,” she says, continuing,

The dogs certainly can’t. The only thing I *would* change is the color: it’s too bright. At first I had the feeling that I should spray-paint all the plants to make them look as good as the lawn does.

If there hadn’t been a drought, I don’t think we would have gone for it. But there is, and we don’t know how long it will last—so this is just a humble way of doing our bit.

Clearly, the look and feel of her yard are important to Jackie. But so is the prospect of “doing her bit” in a time of environmental crisis. In this way, Jackie weaves both the aesthetic and the ethical into a single seamless account of her actions, situating her desire to do the right thing alongside the practical challenges of pleasing both her grandkids and pets.

By Jackie’s own admission, the couple is “well off”; their response to the drought is carried through with significant socioeconomic resources. By contrast, others have to make do with much less, revealing how questions of class, socioeconomic status, and other structural inequalities shape the form, content, meaning, and—perhaps most importantly—stakes of everyday ethical and aesthetic experiments.

After visiting Jackie, I drive about 30 miles northeast from Palm Springs to the town of Joshua Tree, watching as the low desert of the Coachella Valley transforms into the high desert of the Morongo Basin. By the time I arrive, the high-density gated development of “down below” has been replaced by a far less heavily populated environment. Joshua Tree emerged in the wake of the Small-Tract Homestead Act (1938), introduced by the federal government to incentivize the development of five-acre nonagricultural homesteads across the West (Stringfellow 2010). According to the Joshua Tree Chamber of Commerce (n.d.), the town’s population in 1941 was 49 people, occupying 22 buildings. By 1947 it had increased to 500 people,

occupying 144 buildings. Since then, the growth of the town has been tethered to the popularity of the Joshua Tree National Park, which attracts millions of visitors from across the world and acts as a critical economic engine for the area.

In the aftermath of the 2007–8 financial crisis, Joshua Tree resident Lorraine lost her job as a secretary. Her finances strained, she decided to supplement her weekly grocery shopping with homegrown vegetables while also swapping them with neighbors and friends for goat's milk and freshly laid eggs. "At first it was a way to save some money and give me something productive to do," Lorraine told me. As California's drought dragged on, however, what began out of necessity became a way of digging in and doing her part. Like many other people I interviewed, Lorraine preaches an ethic of hard work and self-sufficiency that she believes is fitting for life on the latest iteration of what she calls the North American "frontier"—a point to which I will return. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear about things *not* growing in the high desert," she tells me. "With a bit of know-how and a lot of hard work, things can do really well."

To help prevent water loss, Lorraine has dug her vegetable bed deep into the earth. She also uses fallen leaves, old newspapers, and compost as mulch, a layer of organic material applied directly to the surface of the soil to further reduce evaporation and help enhance the quality of the soil. "I've already seen an improvement," she says. In 2013, Lorraine even installed a makeshift rainwater-harvesting system, which captures rain from her rooftop, channels it into a 55-gallon barrel, and delivers it as a slow drip directly to the vegetables in her yard—although she admits she sometimes has to cheat with the garden hose.

As we tour her garden, Lorraine points out her basil, okra, peppers, eggplants, and kale—most of them thriving—and encourages me to navigate them by smell, touch, and taste. "These tomatoes didn't turn out so well," she says, picking a fruit from the plant. "See this leathery spot on the bottom here? That's called *blossom end rot*. Next season I'll try planting them earlier on in the spring and giving them more shade." Against the ordered spectacle of Jackie's yard, Lorraine's garden makes for a far more ramshackle scene—peppered with the discarded tools and piles of soil that signify it as a space of labor and productivity. Yet Lorraine's focus on the garden as a productive space does not preclude a concern with its aesthetic aspects. On the contrary, Lorraine is deeply invested in her garden's sensory dimensions, which function both as a source of pleasure and as a cluster of symptoms indicating the health and well-being of her produce; these symptoms are to be identified, interpreted, and then folded back into future iterations of experimental practice (or what Rheinberger [1994, 70–71] calls "continuing cycles of realization").

Although differing in significant ways, Jackie's yard and Lorraine's garden demonstrate that experiments in the

ecologies of everyday life, while not tacit and unthinking, take shape as projects of neither detached moral deliberation nor probing self-examination (Das 2012; Lambek 2010; Mattingly 2014). Rather, they constitute a practical act of engagement with the surfaces and spaces of the home, a practical act undertaken within the limits of certain social and material circumstances. These circumstances range from the properties of local soils to habits of domestic comfort, which may be cultivated and transformed but never entirely so. In turn, this raises a question: In situations of unfolding change, what are the limits of the ordinary as a platform for action? Moving from perhaps the most public to perhaps the most private area of the home, I pose this question in relation to another scene of everyday experimentation in drought-stricken Southern California: the toilet.

Excremental countercultures

It's a quiet Joshua Tree bar at 6 p.m. on a weekday. Two young men are playing pool, stepping outside at regular intervals for a cigarette. Others are watching basketball on the big screen. A group of campers from the nearby Joshua Tree National Park have sat down for hamburgers, fries, and cold beers. Huddled in a quiet corner, away from all the others, a dozen or so people listen intently to Danny, a desert resident and composting-toilet enthusiast, as he discusses very publicly the very intimate details of his private life. "Whether or not you know it," he says, "by law we have to put drinking water into our toilets, and by law we have to shit into that drinking water." With a wry smile, he adds, "When I learnt this, I became constipated for some time. I did not want to turn drinking water into dirty sewage. [. . .] But you'll be glad to know that, since using the composting toilet, I got rid of that constipation and I've been regular ever since."

Behind Danny, a large clipboard holds a piece of paper featuring two hand-drawn diagrams of the human nutrient cycle. One says "broken" and shows human excreta being carried off as "waste and pollution"; it's flanked by an image of a sad face. Next to it, the other diagram depicts a seamless cycle of "eat, excrete, compost, grow"; this diagram is marked "intact" and enclosed in a heart shape. Beside him sits a wooden cube with a plastic toilet seat built into it. There are many types of composting toilets, Danny informs his audience. "I'm a DIY kinda guy and generally short on money, so I have gone the cheap route and made my toilet from scrounged materials. But I recognize that the world is filled with all varieties of people, so it's important to find out what works best for you." With that, Danny sits on his makeshift toilet, explaining,

I don't flush with drinking water. Instead, I flush with sawdust. After this pail has filled up, I will replace it with another empty pail and let this one compost for

a full year. Once everything is safe, we put it in the garden. Now my waste is generating tasty fruit and vegetables, and I love that, because on a daily basis I'm reconnected to the nutrient cycle. There's no waste here like there is with a flush toilet because nothing is siphoned off. Everything is recycled back into the system to generate more joy and more resources.

Having finished his explanation, Danny walks over to a backpack, unzips it, and removes a glass jar. It's full of a brown, soil-like substance. With exaggerated gestures and a smiling face, he slowly unscrews the lid. "This is an example of the finished product," says Danny, handing the jar off to the members of his audience—all of whom have come to learn about the ins and outs of composting toilets. Slowly, the jam jar of thoroughly composted human excrement makes its way around the table. Some dip their crinkled noses toward the jar, sniffing gingerly. It's a rich, woody smell, not bad at all. Feeling emboldened by Danny's own confident performance, others even run the crumbly compost through their fingers. Smiling at each other politely yet awkwardly, still others hand the jar to their neighbor as quickly as possible.

As Danny's show-and-tell makes clear, composting toilets demand considerably more intimacy with one's own excreta than the modern flush toilet. Indeed, urban North America's public waste infrastructure has made separation from one's excreta the norm; most citizens have very few responsibilities when it comes to managing their own waste (Kawa 2016). While often celebrated as a considerable technological achievement, which it undoubtedly is, postwar mass plumbing has thus had a significant impact on contemporary cultures of sensation beyond its purely technical functioning (Hawkins 2006; Hawkins and Muecke 2003). In this way, the modern flush toilet, like the well-tended turf-grass lawn, is tightly bound in US public culture to notions of order, decency, and the unstable distinction between the public and private spheres (Laporte 2002).

Susan Leigh Star (1999) argues that infrastructures like municipal sanitation and water supply systems are invisible unless they break down (cf. Larkin 2013, 336). As California's drought drags on, however, a wide array of experiments to manipulate the otherwise hidden hydraulic infrastructures of everyday life are taking shape, revealing how it is not only "breakdown" that thrusts infrastructures into the limelight of collective contemplation. Many of these experiments focus on the imagined potential of the composting toilet to reformulate people's relationship to their own waste.⁶

As Danny explains, the basic premise of the composting toilet is simple. The toilets are not plugged into domestic freshwater supply or wastewater-removal systems. Instead of relying on water to remove waste, heat and aerobic microbes break it down in situ. To help facilitate this process, absorb liquid, and prevent unpleasant odors, the waste is usually mixed with an organic bulking agent such as straw,

sawdust, or peat moss. All geared toward this common goal, many different toilet types exist, each of which has its own cluster of affordances and promises. Danny's makeshift system is at one end of the spectrum. At the other end, expensive commercial composting toilets require relatively limited interaction with waste, automatically diverting the excreta to a processing container below the toilet bowl or in a subfloor space. Having recently installed a commercial composting toilet, 33-year-old Natasha tells me, "I'm a single mom and have just started dating again. I would like to invite people over for dinner, and so the hands-off nature of the toilet appealed to me when compared to some of the more *rustic models* I've seen."

Given the wide range of toilet types available, there prevails among composting-toilet users a vibrant culture of improvisation and information sharing. Even in the absence of a composting-toilet community, one is never alone; the internet is awash with reviews of systems, instructions for use and maintenance, and forums for troubleshooting. Using these online sources for advice—as many of my interlocutors did—often means releasing the details of one's excremental experiments into public space. A typical online thread begins as follows:

I'm new to composting toilets and have begun using a bucket toilet with dry sawdust as the organic material. Most of the time there is no smell, but sometimes there is. It's not exactly bad, but it's not exactly desirable either. I'm going to try to experiment with this and any help would be very welcome.

In response, users offer advice. Before long, a heated discussion breaks out over whether to include or exclude urine from the compost. Defending their positions, commenters often include thick descriptions of their successes or failures. One response encourages the originator of the thread to be more specific about the precise nature of the smell: "Bad smells are a sure sign of the compost going wrong. Each smell means something different. Alcoholic or fruity smells can mean too much starch or sugar, ammonia is a sign of too little carbon, and hydrogen sulfide is a sign of too little air." As with Lorraine's garden, the everyday aesthetics of composting toilets are important not solely as external expressions of an internal ethical self—of turning the inside out (Strathern 1992)—but also as a constellation of symptoms to be diagnosed, deciphered, and learned from.

In addition to increased intimacy with one's own excreta, then, composting toilets also require at least some knowledge of the composting process. For many of my interlocutors, this newfound intimacy and knowledge are critical components of the composting toilets' revolutionary potential, together providing the terrain on which people can forge alternative configurations of aesthetics, ethics, and affect. For example, one middle-aged woman tells me she found composting toilets revolting at first, but over time

she had learned to love the smell of her own compost: a life-giving substance. Half-jokingly, a young man describes how he feels a jolt of guilt at the sound of a flushing toilet. While again attesting to the importance of the smells, sounds, and other aesthetic aspects of the domestic sphere, these examples demonstrate that experiments in the ecologies of everyday life are not always guided by an ideological commitment to environmental well-being or a concerted project of self-cultivation, but, rather, by the act of making one's body available to be affected by the aesthetic properties and qualities of its own excreta.

If the human body constitutes one important space of reinvention, however, it can also limit the transformative potential of everyday experimentation. Raising questions about how different medicines affect the microbial processes in the toilets, for example, Danny tells me,

A friend of mine had a bucket system at her herb shop, which worked well for a while, but she stopped using it for a couple of reasons. [...] She's an herbalist who treats cancer patients, and apparently chemotherapy can be passed along [into the nutrient cycle]. She doesn't want to put radioactive waste in the compost.

Another man, Sam, says his long-term antibiotic regimen killed the microbes in his composting toilet and turned the compost anaerobic, releasing an intense rotten-egg smell into his home. After struggling with the smell for several weeks, he could bear it no more and returned to his flush toilet.

Set in motion by California's climate crises, experiments in the ecologies of everyday life can thus precipitate efforts to transform not only the world in which one lives but also the contours of the self. New domestic practices may engender new modes of appraisal, whether "visceral" or otherwise (Connolly 1999). At times, these efforts can encounter limits. For Sam, his medication rendered the practical demands of composting toilets difficult for him to fulfill. At other times, such efforts may unfold such that their transformative effects accrete, amplify, and self-escalate well beyond initial intentions. One's worldview might undergo a more or less radical reformulation. Perhaps paradoxically, it is through a close, pragmatic attention to the immediacies of the domestic sphere and the reproduction of the self over time that such cosmological reconfiguration can arise. In the context of the experimental ecosystem, repetition and difference are not alternative modalities of time and action; the former might help produce the latter (Rheinberger 1994, 1997, 1998, 2010).

Cosmological configurations: Rugged relationality

Peter was born and raised in Joshua Tree. At 18 years old, he moved with a childhood friend to Portland, Oregon. In

all, he lived there for nine years, working as a gardener and a chef. While living in Portland, he met his partner, Aurelia. When Aurelia became pregnant with their son, Oliver, the couple decided to return to Joshua Tree to be near Peter's parents, who had offered to help them buy their first house across the road from their own. As Aurelia tells me, "It was on a busy road. It was big, with a chain-link fence around the yard and brand-new carpet. It didn't need any love, so wasn't for us." Instead, Peter and Aurelia opted for a foreclosed and deteriorated property in a more remote part of Joshua Tree. Living out of a trailer parked on their land, they set about fixing it up. While Peter's overarching goal is not to go "off the grid" entirely, he does want to provide for as many of his family's needs as possible from within what he defines as the social and ecological borders of Joshua Tree.

From afar, Peter's home looks like most others in the area. Upon closer inspection, however, the house and yard have clearly been transformed. In two years, Peter has dug contours and depressions into the earth to help manage the flow of rainwater across his land; along these he has planted a row of pistachio trees. His rooftop is covered in solar panels. Like his friend Lorraine, Peter has installed a rainwater-harvesting system, as well as a more complicated "laundry to landscape" water-recycling system to pump gray water from the washing machine into their garden. As the geographer Maria Kaika (2005, 51–78) shows, the bourgeois home is designed to foster among its occupants a feeling of separation—inside from out, order from chaos, culture from nature, the private from the public—even as such a separation is belied by the actual infrastructural involvement of the home and broader world. By contrast, however, Peter's house has been fashioned to not only optimize but also render visible its participation in an external environment of both matter and energy.⁷

Peter's particular brand of everyday experimentation therefore does entail an explicit as well as a merely implicit normative dimension: the cycling of matter and energy should never be interrupted. The moral force of the unbroken cycle encompasses much more than the flow of organic material. As he explains, the need for bulking agents in composting toilets means that users must exploit other waste streams, thereby drawing actors into webs of exchange and intimacy. For their compost bulking agent, Peter and Aurelia get sawdust from a nearby wood shop owned and managed by Emmett, another Joshua Tree resident, with whom the couple later developed a close friendship. Here sounding a lot like Danny, Peter describes their relationship in terms of a set of overlapping flows:

If it wasn't for the composting toilet, I may never have met Emmett. Now we're great friends. I've also turned him on to composting toilets by sharing with him my experience and enthusiasm. So by recycling our

waste, we're also generating more joy and love in the community.

Importantly, Peter makes very little distinction in his account between what might meaningfully be called *the natural* or *the social* within the ecologies of everyday life; whether sawdust, nutrients, enthusiasm, or joy, the important thing is simply to flow. In this way, tending to the material needs of his composting toilet has set in motion a process by which Peter has come to reconceive of not only his home but also his community in terms of flows. Such a conception also extends to his body. Capturing this sentiment nicely, a framed tapestry hung in Peter and Aurelia's kitchen reads "We come from the earth, we return to the earth, and in between we garden." Sitting below it, Peter describes to me his vision of a good death: to die old and happy and to be buried on his land in a burlap bag with a mesquite sapling planted on top. He describes how, as his body decomposes, it will nourish the tree, which in turn will nourish the world around it, returning to the universe what he calls the "borrowed elements" of his own biophysical form.⁸

"Stocks and storages are an important part of any system," Peter tells me, "but any dynamic system, whether it's a garden or a community, is kept healthy and happy by the flows cycling in it." To underline his point, Peter often contrasts the "freeze-dried-food mentality" of many doomsday survivalists with his own way of thinking, which emphasizes the well-channeled flows of his home and garden. He is confident that in the case of a real apocalyptic event, he and his family would be the ones to fare better. He continues,

The desert is a harsh place to live. But it's also a great place to work with the elements. As the planet's climate changes, I believe it will become more and more important to share what we learn here with the rest of the world. We're the pioneers for a much hotter, drier climate to come.

Clearly, the choice of language here is not inconsequential; Peter's comments conjure an image of the future in which escalating climate crises will force people to return to the forms of localized self-sufficiency that he associates with California's "pioneer" past. While ostensibly contesting the conservative terms of North American survivalist culture, then, Peter's remarks nonetheless share many of that culture's assumptions—raising questions about the role of gender, race, and history in practices of everyday experimentation.

On the one hand, the interior spaces of the North American home are conventionally gendered as a private space of "women's work" geared toward reproducing biological life (Hayden 2002). By contrast, the practical, hands-on aspects of life on "the frontier" are more commonly marked in North American public culture as masculine (Turner 2008)—despite the actual social and material

contribution of women to frontier settlement (Jeffrey 1998)—and this association with masculinity has been given a new lease on life in postwar practices of DIY home improvement (Gelber 1997). By bringing together visions of rugged self-sufficiency with questions of domesticity and the reproduction of life, experiments in the ecologies of everyday life may offer a significant degree of flexibility and creativity with regard to gender norms, domestic space, and their relationship—perhaps even signaling a partial resignification of the home in times of social and environmental upheaval.⁹ To be clear, I am not arguing that such practices can erase or reverse structures of gender inequality that mark so much of everyday life in North America; experimentation is by its very definition indeterminate in its results (Berlant 2011; Rheinberger 1998). But it is not for nothing that these practices attracted both men and women with equal fervor. While drawing explicitly on romanticized frontier imagery, experiments in the ecologies of everyday life therefore did not seem to be dominated—at least in any straightforward sense—by desires to return to so-called traditional gender roles or family values (Schneider-Mayerson 2015, 129–49).

On the other hand, attempts to forge new ways of feeling at home also provided the means for the—often insidious—reinstantiation of regressive sociopolitical formations. The focus among these relatively privileged, primarily Anglo-American desert residents on practical challenges and technical fixes in response to conditions of environmental crisis can be said to work in multiple ways as a kind of everyday "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson 1990)—rearticulating questions of power and privilege as pragmatic matters of sheer survival; directing attention away from the severely racialized "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) of North American environmental injustice in favor of quasi-apocalyptic future scenarios; and legitimizing a withdrawal from the public sphere into the private space of the home. That my white interlocutors' passing references to *frontiers* and *pioneers* are for the most part unreflexive does not mean they were innocent. Quite the opposite. As scholars of settler colonialism show, these discourses participate in a form of "structural oblivion" (McIntosh 2016) and "settler common sense" (Rifkin 2014) that contributes to reproducing settler-colonial reality not only as a historical event or political structure but also as an infrastructure of everyday feeling (Stoler 2016; Wolfe 2006).

Conclusion: Making a home for the future

As elsewhere across the planet, a series of cascading environmental crises has converged on Southern California to create a sense of environmental catastrophe that is both acute and protracted. In this context of unfolding change, the ecologies of everyday life constitute a platform from which new assemblages of ethics, aesthetics, and everyday

practice can be articulated. Rather than merely reproducing or expressing what already exists, aesthetic aspects of the home can be marshaled as a kind of experimental ecosystem that generates moments of unexpected emergence from the otherwise habitual routine and repetition of ordinary, everyday life (Mattingly 2014; Rheinberger 1998). These responses attempt to cultivate alternative ways of feeling at home in the Anthropocene that reconfigure the relationship of the sensual and the ethical and thus create new forms of moral-aesthetic judgment.

According to Rheinberger, the foundational trait of the experimental system is its capacity for differential reproduction: the ability to be replicated with high fidelity across space and time, combined with the tendency to engender unanticipated, surprising effects (Rheinberger 1998, 292). As anthropologist Kim Fortun (2003, 186) explains, the experimental system “provides orientation, without determining where the system itself, or those that use it [will] go.” Along similar lines, experiments in the ecologies of everyday life can produce transformative effects that unfold across multiple registers and gather momentum even in the absence of a well-defined end point. About his own project of domestic adjustment, adaptation, and self-provisioning, Peter once said, “We can’t know what’s possible and what isn’t until we try. Who knows exactly what will happen.”

Social theories of creativity and change often posit the imagination as a domain out of which alternative worlds may emerge (Graeber 2011). In her ethnography of gay and lesbian activism in contemporary India, for example, Naisargi Dave (2012, 12) defines the project of what she calls “affective activism” as “the problematization of norms, the imaginative invention of new possibilities, and the attempted practice of new relational forms.” The logic is clear: imaginative invention precedes attempted practice. By contrast, the experimentation I have described inverts the order of the imaginative labors of inventing new possibilities and the practical labors of bringing these possibilities into being. Put differently, it is through different ways of doing everyday life that the body, the self, and the world can be imagined differently. In the communities of practice concerned with yards, toilets, and other spaces, the potential emerges for a politics that embraces the connection between living and nonliving things.¹⁰ In turn, everyday environmental ethics, which are conventionally framed in US public culture according to a logic of self-sacrifice (Maniates and Meyer 2010), are being re-realized as acts that extend and connect people rather than merely restricting or diminishing them.

Yet the question of *differential reproduction* invites a scrutiny not only of what is invented but also of what is reproduced, reinforced, or simply left behind in invention’s wake. Like the North American “peak oil” movement (Schneider-Mayerson 2015), the everyday experiments examined here reinventoriate libertarian ideals of the rugged

self-sufficiency of life on an imagined “frontier,” working to replace more interconnected modes of ecopolitical activism with the figure of the atomistic individual located in private space. In turn, these experiments cannot be understood other than within a settler-colonial context of violence and injustice, an unequal distribution of responsibilities, risks, and resources within the historical present, and the future as a “cultural fact” that is also unequally constituted and experienced (Appadurai 2013).

Replacing a lawn, tending to a vegetable garden, provisioning for oneself and one’s family, envisioning a beautiful home—none of these practices are necessarily either positive or negative in their social, political, or environmental implications. Nor do such practices have only one meaning. As Gillian Brown (1992, 9) notes, “No single system emerges in the operations of the domestic.” Rather, she continues, the home is “a working machinery . . . that has served and continues to serve many purposes.” To advocate alternative ways of feeling at home in the Anthropocene is therefore not to endorse the dislocation of social ills as personal burdens, nor is it to discount other modes of political activism. It is, rather, simply to hold open a space for a spirit of experimentation and invention within the ecologies of ordinary, everyday life.

Notes

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1. All research participants’ names are pseudonyms.
2. Though US historians, political theorists, and literary studies scholars have accused North American domestic ideologies of complicity in a broader “culture of sentiment” that reinforces conservative views on gender, race, class, and nation (Samuels 1992), feminist writers have also drawn attention to the home as a space of not only routine, repetition, and domination but also of innovation and resistance (Fraiman 2017; hooks 1991, 41–50).
3. In this way, the experimental system is “a generator of surprises” (Rheinberger 1998, 287) and “machine for making the future” (288). Among examples of an experimental system are model organisms like *Drosophila melanogaster*, and particular assemblages of scientific equipment and practice, like the polymerase chain reaction. Moving beyond the sites of scientific knowledge production, anthropologists have also taken up the notion of the “experimental system” in relation to culture and cultural analysis (Fischer 2007; Fortun 2003).
4. After years of drought, California was inundated with more than twice as much precipitation as “normal” from October 2016 to January 2017. Seemingly overnight, photos of empty reservoirs—a media staple during the drought—were replaced with images of landslides, sinkholes, and dams creaking under the weight of water. Scientists even coined a new phrase to describe the oscillation between such extremes: “precipitation whiplash” (Swain et al. 2018, 430).
5. For example, Palm Springs was founded on the partial displacement of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (Waldman 2006, 41), while nonwhites and “ethnic whites” (such as Jews) were excluded from its early 20th-century resorts (Culver 2010, 244).

Today, the city persists in no small part through the exploitation of Latina/o workers.

6. Generally speaking and here in particular, domestic infrastructures and architectures simultaneously reflect, reproduce, and reinforce legacies of social and racial injustice (Anand 2017; Appadurai 2013; Fennell 2015).

7. In his everyday experiments, Peter is guided by permaculture, a system of horticultural design principles that emulates the patterns and features observed in the “natural” world (Lockyer and Veteto 2013).

8. Peter is not alone in this vision: the so-called natural or green burial movement is gaining momentum in the United States and beyond, driven at least in part by environmental concerns (Clayden et al. 2014).

9. As some have noted, however, the burden of “being sustainable” tends to be shouldered more by women than by men (Gibson et al. 2011).

10. Zoe Todd (2016, 8) argues that an emergent ecological imaginary along such lines amounts to a Euro-American “discovery” of “what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia: *the climate is a common organizing force.*”

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