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Rhetoric of body and mind in the 21st century

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Toxic affirmation: The Nordic Waste scandal and the political pitfalls of affirmative materialisms in rhetorical criticism

Toksyczna afirmacja: Skandal Nordic Waste i polityczne pułapki afirmatywnego materializmu w krytyce retorycznej

Abstract

In recent years, rhetorical scholars have turned to study the materiality of rhetoric as well as the rhetoricity of material, often introducing a posthumanist or anti-anthropocentric stance rejecting mind-body dualism(s), while often also turning to affirmative frameworks as an alternative to criticism. Introducing the Nordic Waste scandal in Denmark in 2023, we point to the risk of toxically affirming the perspective of environmentally harmful corporations in rhetoric centering materiality and affirmation.

W ostatnich latach badacze retoryki zwrócili się ku badaniu materialności retoryki, a także retoryczności materii, często wprowadzając posthumanistyczne lub antyantropocentryczne stanowisko odrzucające dualizm (dualizmy) umysł-ciało, a także zwracając się ku ramom afirmatywnym jako alternatywie dla krytyki. Przedstawiając skandal Nordic Waste w Danii w 2023 r., w artykule wskazano na ryzyko toksycznego powielania perspektyw promowanych przez korporacje szkodzące środowisku w obrębie retoryki skupiającej się na materialności i afirmacji.

Key words

toxic affirmation, new materialist rhetoric, mind-body dualism, Nordic Waste, rhetorical criticism
toksyczna afirmacja, nowa retoryka materialistyczna, dualizm umysł-ciało, Nordic Waste, krytyka retoryczna

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Toxic affirmation: The Nordic Waste scandal and the political pitfalls of affirmative materialisms in rhetorical criticism

1. Introduction

In December 2023, an environmental catastrophe was unfolding in the small town of Ølst in Randers municipality in Denmark. A stark acceleration of an ongoing landslide previously unknown to the public was starting to send 2 million tons of contaminated soil towards Ølst and its surrounding environment. The landslide was happening at the property of Nordic Waste, a company specialized in depositing toxically contaminated soil, owned by billionaire Torben Østergaard--Nielsen. Importing contaminated soil from places such as Norway, Nordic Waste stored it in an old clay pit in Ølst, but now, on the back of countless ignored warnings from specialists, the pit's content was threatening nature and the local community. A subsequent report from the National Geological Survey for Denmark and Greenland (GEUS) concluded that the toxic landslide was indeed a direct consequence of Nordic Waste's activities (Svennevig et al. 2024). The company filed for bankruptcy in January 2024, leaving Randers municipality with a clean-up task of hundreds of millions of Danish Kroner still ongoing at the time of writing and expected to continue for years to come.

As rhetorical critics, how should we best engage with such an event? Should we strive to perform ideological critiques of companies such as Nordic Waste and the system making them possible and thriving – recognizing "the existence of powerful vested interests benefitting from and consistently urging politics and technology that threatens life on this planet" (Wander 1983, 19)? Or should we consider the materiality of the contaminated soil, the billionaire Torben, the clay pit, and so on, as ontologically enmeshed and work from the perspective of a (new) material rhetoric that "affirms the joy of gathering together political strength" (Bost and Greene 2011, 443)? These meta-critical questions, we believe, strike at the heart of

this special issue on the rhetoric of body and mind. Has critique really run out of steam (Latour 2004), prompting the human and social sciences, including the field of rhetoric, to enter an ontologically driven quest for the other/more-than-human, or can concern for life on this planet arise from critique too?

In recent years, rhetorical scholars have turned to study the materiality of rhetoric as well as the rhetoricity of material, often introducing a posthumanist and/or anti-anthropocentric stance rejecting Cartesian mind-body dualism(s). A wide and wild range of theoretical positions from broader turns within the humanities in recent years has been thought together with rhetorical studies on this account: new materialisms, affirmative critique, posthumanist affect theory, and more. These frameworks prompt us to understand the Nordic Waste scandal as a more-than-human event where a cacophony of actors – the company, the contaminated soil, the clay pit, the community of Ølst, etc. – are ontologically entangled in the rhetorical event of the landslide. In this perspective, one might consider the toxic soil, with Jane Bennett, as "vibrant matter", which can be brought to attention as "thing-power [rising] from a pile of trash. Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2010, 6). We do not argue that this perspective cannot be used as an analytical framework as such, and we acknowledge it as an ethical stance (a focus on the coexistence with the more-than-human may provide ethical reasons for opposing extraction and/or pollution). However, we suggest that rhetorical critics invested in working towards sustainable futures ought to retain a perspective that critically engages power and capital in the crises of our time. The Nordic Waste scandal is well-suited as a prism through which to meta-critically assess the limitations of ontologically-driven affirmative analysis and criticism. We argue that investigating this contaminated landslide as an ontologically flat rhetorical event that calls for our scholarly affirmation will always risk amounting to what we polemically name *toxic affirmation*: Because of a focus on ontological flatness, appreciatory readings of rhetorical phenomena related to the climate and ecological catastrophe risk affirming the narratives of actors such as Nordic Waste denying or deflecting focus from their responsibility.

Importantly, the theoretical currents within the humanities and social sciences labeled the 'turn to affect', 'new materialism', and 'the affirmative turn' are not to be understood as any simultaneous or unified theoretical, methodological, or political movements. Equally, their contributions to rhetorical studies and rhetorical criticism are diverse and dispersed, and rhetoricians draw on them in a multitude of ways that cannot be reduced to a single, stable, and unified conceptual framework. However, we begin by sketching out two broad lines of influential theoretical interventions within rhetorical theory and its neighboring disciplines challenging

mind-body dualisms, namely scholarship that grapples with matter and affect. Complicating the picture further, there is a significant overlapping between these broad lines, and it is exactly within this overlap that we will often encounter the argument for an "affirmative politics [that] is not about an oppositional strategy" (Braidotti 2010, 53) since the ethical telos of critique is seen as grounded in connectivity rather than controversy.

Although it might disappoint readers adhering to such a constructive, connection-seeking programme for criticism, our aim is not to offer an alternative program for thinking about mind and body. Rather, we offer a critique of these broad tendencies in contemporary scholarship by way of pointing to what we see as potential pitfalls and blind spots. We ask: What does such a turn to the materiality of rhetoric allow us to do and see – and what might it steer us away from doing and seeing? We point to what we see as a risk of deradicalizing rhetoric in a time where the opposite is needed, using examples from recent scholarship to illustrate these political pitfalls. Ultimately, we find that new materialist and affirmative veins of rhetorical studies risk overlooking central political struggles and argue for the importance of keeping rhetorical criticism critical. Returning to the contaminated landslide in Ølst at the end of the article, we posit that such events do not call for affirmative attention to our mutuality with matter but for a rhetoric contributing to tackling the systemic injustices piling up the toxic waste in the interest of the few in the first place.

On January 19 2024, Østergaard Nielsen's USTC group issued a press release declaring their bankruptcy under the header: "Unusually tragic situation results in bankruptcy for Nordic Waste" ("USTC - Usædvanlig Tragisk Situation Resulterer i Konkurs for Nordic Waste" 2024).[1] Throughout this article, we introduce each section with a quote from this toxic message to provocatively highlight the way that Nordic Waste sought to eschew responsibility by deferring agency from themselves and their motivations onto other/more-than-human actors.

2. 'Mattering' rhetoric: Ontologically flattening the field

The natural disaster in Ølst is bigger than us […].

In the 1980s and '90's, debates within rhetorical scholarship on materialism were largely inaugurated with Michael C. McGee's (1982) challenge to traditional modes of rhetorical criticism. Arguing that the inclination towards examining great speeches by great men overlooks the diverse ways in which rhetorical processes unfold and influence material reality, McGee positioned himself as a rhetorical materialist, understanding rhetoric as

1. All translations from the original text in Danish into English are our own.

> a natural social phenomenon in the context of which symbolic claims are made on the behavior and/or belief of one or more persons, allegedly in the interest of such individuals, and with the strong presumption that such claims will cause meaningful change. (1982, 38)

The following debates on materialism and rhetoric thus largely grappled with the relations between symbolic interaction and societal change, as well as the legitimate object of rhetorical criticism (e.g. Cloud 1994; Greene 1998; Greene and Hayes 2012). For instance, Dana Cloud (1994) criticized McGee for ending up espousing an oxymoronic idealist materialism where material life is wholly constituted by signs and symbols. While also criticizing Raymie McKerrow's (1989) critical rhetoric for being relativist in terms of the materiality of society, Cloud polemically asserts that "if a bomb falls on civilians in Baghdad, and a critic is not present to see it, the bomb did still, in reality, fall" (Cloud 1994, 148; see also Cloud 2018; 2020).

These scholarly disputes on materialism and rhetoric exercised their influence in the latter part of the 20th century where they made their mark on contemporary rhetorical criticism, providing more nuanced ways of viewing the relations between language and symbols on the one hand and bodies, materiality, and the wider political context on the other. Ott and Dickinson (2019) have proposed a helpful distinction between this materialist legacy and the increasingly influential new materialist input to rhetorical theory: Critiques like Cloud's of idealist social constructivism blind to actual suffering has to do with *rhetorical materialism*, whereas the recent focus on the rhetorical agency of the non/more-than-human has to do with the *materiality of rhetoric*. The former does not necessarily oppose some degree of mind-body dualism (although never viewing them as opposed to one another), while the latter takes the dissolving of such dualisms as its starting point for understanding and critiquing rhetoric broadly. Thus, Ott and Dickinson's proposed redefinition of rhetoric: "Rhetoric is the capacity of the thing-symbol—via its aesthetic qualities and signifying practices—to generate affect and discourse, whose intertwined sensory and cognitive processing elicit presence and meaning effects in a particular space-time" (2019, 54).

Evident from this definition is the influence of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), object-oriented ontology (ooo), posthumanist accounts of affect and agency, and of course new materialist scholarship in the vein of thinkers such as Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and others. Ott and Dickinson's definition juxtaposes affect and discourse, the sensory and the cognitive, and, of course, the thing and the symbol, thus primarily aiming to *expand* notions about what rhetoric is rather than move the disciplinary terrain away from discourse and towards matter entirely. Still, this expansion starts from a rejection of what ooo scholar Timothy Morton (2017) has called "the Severing": "a foundational, traumatic fissure between, to

put it in stark Lacanian terms, *reality* (the human-correlated world) and *the real* (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere)" (Morton 2017, 13) resulting in "the walling off of human space from the symbiotic real" (Morton 2017, 23). We can say that Ott and Dickinson and other rhetoricians ascribing to similar notions of the materiality of rhetoric are all in some sense protesting "the Severing" of mind and body, of words and things, of humans and nature, in a sense that McGee, Cloud, and other scholars active in the discussions on rhetorical materialism are not fundamentally concerned with. In the words of Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle in their introduction to the seminal anthology *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, switching from an epistemology of representation to a "rhetorical ontology" where humans are not privileged rhetorical actors helps "move rhetoric beyond the familiar humanist triad of speaker-audience-purpose" (Barnett and Boyle 2017, 6).

What does such a turn to the materiality of rhetoric allow us to do and see – and what does it, inadvertently or not, steer us away from doing and seeing? We realize that we are wading into controversial territory here: There is no such thing as a unified 'materiality of rhetoric movement' within rhetorical scholarship – or, for that matter, beyond it – that we can point to directly. Although certainly related to one another, ANT, ooo, posthumanism, and new materialism are not the same and do not fall under some well-structured program. Their contributions to rhetorical studies and rhetorical criticism are diverse and dispersed, and rhetoricians draw on them in a multitude of ways that cannot be reduced to a single, stable, and unified conceptual framework. As Joshua Ewalt (2018) notes in a review essay on four more or less recent volumes on these subjects, such work varies in degrees of ontological flatness, degrees of the autonomy of objects, and degrees of their materiality. Still, one thing that is somewhat safe to say that such scholarship has in common is a radical rejection of Cartesian mind-body dualism that leads them to reject anthropocentrism, understood as a privileging of human subjectivity as the primary locus of epistemology and ethics, as well as human interests as primary to critical concerns. Thus, recent new materialist-inspired and consciously ecological approaches to rhetoric urge fellow scholars to avoid reproducing "the same anthropocentric logics that have almost always beleaguered efforts to see beyond humans' symbolic prowess" (Barnett 2021, 370). Such scholarship heavily problematizes "Descartes' call for clear and distinct discourse limits [in] which bodies can speak and be heard" in the context of material and ecological issues because "the Cartesian grid limits the expression of the undulating and curving land that does not discipline itself in such a way as to conform to an anthropogenic rectilinear grid" (Seegert 2014, 174–75). Some draw on the thinking of Martin Heidegger to resist the anthropogenic "view that problematically reinforces the

nature/culture binary" (Paliewicz 2023, 239) or so that we may learn to "dwell" in the Anthropocene and realize "that we are interconnected and interdependent even when we think we are not" (Barnett and Gore 2020, 43). In one of new materialism's most radical instantiations within rhetorical studies, Ehren Pflugfelder argues that rhetoric's disciplinary debates over Big and Small Rhetoric are unhelpful to the task of understanding material rhetoric. Instead, he proposes a "micro-rhetoric" investigating the persuasive processes among the non-human. Pflugfelder draws on ooo and ANT to argue that "the Cartesian distinction between subject and object no longer holds" (2015, 450) and proposes that we see rhetoric as "an ambient force that exists within material and symbolic ecologies where rhetoric is neither solely created by nor only important to humans" (2015, 449).

In conjunction with increased interest in opposing "the Severing" and engaging rhetorical studies from a position of anti-anthropocentrism, an increased interest in non-cognitivist frameworks to think the rhetoric of feeling and emotions – affect – has followed. Below, we offer a brief overview of some of these developments within rhetorical studies and the broader humanities.

3. 'Feeling' rhetoric: Affect and the affirmative turn

> *Since December, we have feared that we did not know the full extent of these natural forces, which unfortunately turned out to be correct. That it now results in a bankruptcy filing in Nordic Waste is a very unpleasant but unfortunately unavoidable decision that we all wished could be avoided. But there is no other way out.*

The points of difference within the broad field that we have described above are even more multiple and complex when bringing in the posthumanist and new materialist studies specifically concerned with bodies and affect. Thomas Rickert provides a good example of thinking the affective and material currents of contemporary humanities scholarship into an overarching framework for rhetoric:

> [R]hetoric must be understood as enmeshed with and within its surroundings, which amounts to saying that rhetoric is ontological, being emergent from and wedded to the world, to the world's being. Affect, or persuadability, already inheres, both materially and meaningfully, and is therefore prior to rhetoric. It is the condition of possibility for rhetoric's emergence. (2013, 159)

Rhetoricians' work with affect and emotion has happened in concert with a variety of neighboring disciplines (Zhang and Clark 2019) and is heavily influenced by the way the field has developed within cultural studies and the social sciences. The theoretical current within rhetorical studies (and the humanities and social sciences more broadly) often labeled the 'the affective turn' (Clough and Halley 2007) is

not to be understood as one simultaneous or unified theoretical or methodological movement. Rather, it represents a myriad of critical positions. Anu Koivunen (2015) divides affect theory into four general trends, while Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) point to a total of eight. However, we dare to venture further into these controversial territories because the anti-anthropocentrism and anti-Cartesianism inherent to new materialist scholarship dealing with the non--human are largely to be found in this more specific vein of work.

The affective turn has developed as a reaction to 'the linguistic turn' in the humanities and social sciences: a turning away from constructivist and poststructuralist thinking, or a turning back to the body and the materiality of things. Building on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi (2002) theorizes affect as different from emotion. Affect is understood here as autonomous, pre--discursive bodily intensities, while emotions are the linguistic interpretations of these bodily stimuli. Affect is intensity, and emotion is quality, two different systems that operate in parallel: Affect arises in the autonomic nervous system, and operates unstructured, unconsciously, and outside the norms of the social order, while emotions exist in relation to meaning formation, awareness, and verbal articulation. According to Massumi, contemporary cultural theory is characterized by predictability and fails to understand the role played by affect in communicative processes. Drawing on Massumi, rhetorician Jenny Rice (Edbauer 2004) argues that George W. Bush's persuasiveness and rhetorical efficacy are not to be understood as a result of persuasion or identification but as a matter of the transmission of affective intensity. Rice argues that we fail to fully understand the effects of political and cultural bodies "if our readings proceed only along the plane of signification" (Edbauer 2004, 1). According to Rice, as with Massumi, affect comes first: "Before we can *make sense*, we sense. Before we react cognitively, we respond affectively" (Edbauer 2004, 14). Rice, Massumi and others promoting a Deleuzian understanding of affect are offering a way of understanding how bodily stimuli and impulses are foundational to our conscious thought processes traditionally located in 'the mind'.

The turn to affect has also prompted scholars to think about how affect informs their scholarship, and in tandem with this turn to materiality and affect, scholars are turning to affirmative modes of engaging with problems as an alternative to criticism. Within this 'affirmative turn' poststructuralist scholarship is criticized for suffering from a theoretical and analytical 'paranoia' where knowledge takes the form of disclosure and analysis relies on "paranoid readings" (Sedgwick 2003a) seeking to unmask power structures at play in the object of analysis. Queer studies scholar Eve K. Sedgwick criticizes the paranoid position for shedding its affective motives and masquerading as truth, and for being tautological and blocking social change.

Sedgwick suggests an alternative analytical approach, reparative reading, that adopts a different affective strategy: Where the paranoid reading seeks to forestall pain, the *reparative reading* moves towards "a sustained seeking of pleasure" (2003, 137), and the critic must use her imagination to find enjoyment and sustenance where these qualities seem to be absent. It is precisely by virtue of its imaginativeness that reparative reading differs from paranoid readings by enabling change; reparative reading enables the critic to imagine what change might look like. Affect here becomes a way of sharpening our gaze on the terrain we study and discovering and prioritizing its 'texture': the qualitative experience of the social world and the embodied experience that has the ability to transform and transcend social oppression. Similarly, feminist new materialist Rosi Braidotti (2018) has called for an *affirmative feminism*. Braidotti reacts to what she sees as a problem with negativity within feminist theory and criticism, and she calls for "a more joyful and empowering concept of desire and for a political economy that foregrounds positivity, not gloom" (2018, 57). Like Sedgwick, Braidotti sees the motor of political change as "an affirmative force, not merely dialectical opposition" (2018, 223).

The above calls for joyful and reparative readings can be read as examples of an affirmative turn within queer and feminist studies (see also Muñoz 2019; Oleksiak and Alexander 2021; Tristano 2022). These calls are echoed in rhetorical studies promoting "pleasure and futurity" (Dehnert, Brouwer, and LeMaster 2022). Johnson warns that queer rhetoricians, "by nature of our pessimistic orientations, drown in critique" (Johnson 2022, 422). Instead, rhetorical scholarship must escape "paranoid readings that allow loud proclamations *against*, *against*, *against* normative structures" (Johnson 2022, 422-423) and reconsider material-discursive structures to move beyond "paranoid discursivity" (Johnson 2022, 423). In the following, we show how this affirmative approach is applied in the field of rhetoric dealing with ecological matters and point to potential pitfalls in combining a new materialist and affirmative perspective when studying events such as the landslide in Ølst.

4. The risk of toxic affirmation

> *The affairs in Ølst has illustrated that climate change is pervasive and that we do not have the necessary knowledge to predict its consequences. USTC pledges to donate 100 million Kroner to [a] future climate foundation already in 2024. Our ambitions are big and we will invite collaborators and other actors in the build-up. We must create a platform that can make a real difference.*

Above, we have sketched out some broad lines of theoretical interventions within rhetorical theory and its neighboring disciplines challenging mind-body dualisms: a theoretical perspective centering materially entangled ontologies as well as affective and affirmative turns. These lines intersect at many points, and they diverge in just as many. This article's aim is not to criticize the entire theoretical foundation underpinning this myriad of positions. Our aim is more modest: We point to what we see as potential pitfalls and blindspots emerging at the intersections of new materialism and affirmative orientations, here rubricated as toxic affirmation.

We recognize that we are not the first to point to potential issues of these tendencies within rhetorical studies. For instance, Pritha Prasad and Louis M. Maraj deliver a criticism of new materialist scholarship within rhetorical studies in terms of its tendency to "foster racism even sometimes under the guise of inclusive thinking or antiracism" (2022, 327), for instance in the erasure of the fact that there existed "a materialist, situated antiracist politics long before the new material turn" (2022, 341). Another challenge or nuance to new materialist scholarship comes from Caleb Cates, M. Lane Bruner, and Joseph T. Moss III (2018). Through an "ontical cartography", these scholars seek to accommodate different modes of material orientations in a Lacanian frame. Similarly to these and other critiques of new materialist and affirmative approaches, we point to some risks that we detect in rhetorical criticism that centers materiality and affirmation today as well as some possible risks of applying some of the theoretical frameworks sketched above in rhetorical scholarship concerned with the climate and ecological crisis.

A focus on matter, on recognizing and appreciating ontological flattening – "the position that all phenomena – human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic – have equal capacities to effect change, initiate and sustain encounters, resist forces, and ultimately shape the materialization of the world" (Ewalt 2018, 525–526) – comes with the potential cost of redirection from how powerful actors and structures prohibit that we may care for the biosphere. We wonder whether the concern with a radical challenge to the mind-body split – "the Severing" – in this context could lead to a hyperlocal focus on the specifics of matter and its interactions that defers the struggles of power structuring politics today. In other words, we see a risk of deradicalizing rhetoric in a time where the opposite is needed; we are ontologically entangled with nature, or we *are* nature, but should this entanglement be the center of rhetorical critical practice? Some examples from recent scholarship can illustrate these political pitfalls.

Joshua Trey Barnett is a prominent and intelligent voice in current discussions about the purposes and practices of environmental rhetoric. However, we see some downsides to the "rhetoric of coexistence" (Barnett 2021) that he advocates.

The crux of Barnett's argument for an ecocentric rhetoric is that "Only if the field of rhetoric embraces a genuinely ecological notion of rhetoric, and only if we collectively commit to addressing the ecological dimensions of our various objects of study, can we truly give back to the earth in ways that honor all that it has given, and continues to give, to us" (2021, 367). In order to take this turn within our field broadly, rhetoric should become "animated and suffused by the conviction that earthly coexistence is our most pressing task, a task for which human and more-than-human actors alike are responsible" (Barnett 2021, 367). Thus, as rhetorical critics, we must shed our wrongheaded anthropocentrism and "heed the concerns of the plants, animals, elements, and ecosystems with which we cohabit the earth and upon whom we depend not only for our existence but also for our work as rhetorical scholars" (Barnett 2021, 375). With co-author David Gore, Barnett (2020) draws on philosopher Martin Heidegger's notion of dwelling to suggest that we extend the coexistence rhetoric and learn to "dwell in the Anthropocene": "Dwelling, as we conceive it, consists of inhabitation, respect, care, preservation, safeguarding, letting the earth be what it is as earth, and of recognizing the wildness, the recalcitrance, and the wisdom of what precedes and exceeds the human" (Barnett and Gore 2020, 25-26). The authors write about living near the great Lake Superior in northern USA/southern Canada. They describe how the water itself is mysterious and enchanting, how the highway trailing the edge of the lake "makes it possible that we might appreciate, care for, and even take care of this vast body of water" (Barnett and Gore 2020, 29). They conclude: "Thinking is the labor and the gift that replenishes us as we learn and strive, again and again without end, to dwell peacefully on earth in the Anthropocene" (Barnett and Gore 2020, 43). Although encounters with the more-than-human can be humbling and fulfilling, we are skeptical as to what rhetorical-critical affordances such a focus generates. Starting from the scholar's experience with the landscape is, in a sense, starting from the other direction of the conflicts of the Anthropocene, where large corporations and state actors in the global fossil capitalist economy are responsible for vast biospheric destruction. We wonder how we might address this line of conflict through an ecological rhetoric of coexistence and dwelling that honors and appreciates the way a highway brings human beings into contact with a lake that is being eroded by fossil capitalism and ecological destructive enterprises.

Another recent rhetorical-critical article informed by both Heideggerian nature philosophy and new materialism is Nicholas Paliewicz's "Thinking Like a Copper Mine: An Ecological Approach to Corporate Ethos and Prosōpon" from 2023. Paliewicz is here concerned with corporate rhetoric in the Anthropocene (the current geological epoch characterized by human activity affecting earth systems), specifically large mining corporations like the Bingham Canyon Mine in Utah.

Using Heidegger's thinking on ontology and technology alongside an essay from Aldo Leopold, Paliewicz views large copper mines' removal of mountains for extractive purposes as a kind of challenge to our being-in-the-world and asserts that the politics of the Anthropocene should be considered through a more-than--human lens that accords personhood to mining corporations. Such corporations are then considered "worldly posthuman rhetorical actors with which we are deeply entangled" (Paliewicz 2023, 232). Rhetorical critics – ourselves extractors because we extract meaning from texts – must learn to think like copper mines, "but also like coal, uranium, borax, lithium, cobalt, and all other natural resources that are part of our land community" (Paliewicz 2023, 241) in order to address the climate and environmental crisis borne out of anthropogenic extractivism. In this ecological approach to corporate rhetoric, then, the ontological flattening implies that mines, corporations, natural resources, and rhetorical critics must be investigated on equal footing as connected in a mutual project of extraction giving form to presences and absences on an inevitably shared Earth: "In the Anthropocene, humanity has moved beyond itself through corporate alliances that have fused agencies in ways that thrive off the death drive of humanity. In the Anthropocene, the [Bingham Canyon Mine] is our lot" (Paliewicz 2023, 243). We fear that this critical vision for thinking about rhetoric and environmentally damaging corporations has trouble aiding struggles against such corporate practices, since the very tangible economic interests at play become muted in the analysis and criticism. We will happily concede that a focus on the coexistence with the more-than-human may provide *ethical reasons* for opposing extraction and/or pollution, but as a critical *practice* for actually opposing corporations such as Rio Tinto (as in Paliewicz' article) or Nordic Waste (as in ours) and the system that is geared towards their prosperity we find such a focus wanting on its own.[2] Here, ideology criticism, although perhaps not as *en vogue* as in the past, provides a more direct route to what is at stake in climate and environmental justice struggles.

These issues arise even more clearly in scholarship applying new materialist perspectives to propose affirmative approaches to critique. For instance, in an article in the forum "Revisiting the Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Studies" in the Western Journal of Communication, Matthew Bost and Ronald Walter Greene (2011) defend the notion of "Affirming Rhetorical Materialism", inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, and Massumi in the manner described earlier in this article.

2. Paliewicz has contributed immensely to climate and environmental rhetoric for many years. For instance, he has astutely noted how the climate crisis presents a long-overdue challenge to stale norms of deliberative democracy: "If radical democratic action is the objective of climate advocacy, then dissensus and force are seemingly necessary components of social change, at least within the context of the global climate change," and further that "[g]iven the gravity of climate change inaction … rhetorical and argumentation critics must attend to the possibilities of dissensus and force" (Paliewicz 2019, 109). In our view, this is a much more promising approach to criticism in the climate and ecological crisis than a retreat into Heideggerian thinking about the ontological status of objects.

They argue that ideology critique is "limited in its purview and critical usefulness because of its tendency to isolate itself in the plane of linguistic mediation" (Bost and Green 2011, 442). Instead, what we need is an "immanent materialism" that "is affirmative because it adsorbs or assembles affects, tendencies, and forces of change as its critical tools" (Bost and Green 2011, 443). Drawing on Braidotti, Bost, and Greene celebrate the affirmative approach to political problems: "A material rhetoric 'adsorbed' by the virtual and actual affirms the joy of gathering together political strength" (Bost and Green 2011, 443). Thus, rhetorical studies must in their view be concerned not with freeing themselves from harmful power structures but instead work within powerful governance and the affective excesses produced there on both virtual and actual planes of social organization: "An immanent politics […] asks which systemic components are most strategically susceptible to intervention and attempts to ask how those systems might be other than they are – a specific possibility for a difference in action with the potential to snowball and alter the current system" (Bost and Green 2011, 443).

How might we affirmatively engage in an immanent materialist critique of the Nordic Waste scandal? Again, we argue that even though we might be able to do so, it is not what is first and foremost needed in such crisis situations. To us, the call to be affirmative too closely echoes political elites' im- or explicit pleas of working incrementally within the status quo if we want to be taken seriously; it echoes an all too common distribution of political legitimacy that can only recognize 'constructive' approaches as worth listening to. However, we do not want to work with the Nordic Waste owners and affirm their attempted penance of establishing a voluntary climate foundation worth a fraction of the actual clean-up costs. We want to oppose and eventually dismantle this exact privilege. Overall, we find that new materialist and affirmative veins of rhetorical studies, although of course not inherently bound to status quo politics, risk overlooking central political struggles, thus toxically affirming the conditions for a politics where "catastrophe is bigger than us [the corporation profiting from environmental pollution]" and should essentially be worked out from within the same climate governance structure that Nordic Waste is happy to put 100 million Kroner into to "make a real difference". In other words, toxic affirmation arises first and foremost in the form of critical frameworks mirroring corporate justifications for pollution and other calamities, however inadvertently.

5. Conclusion: The point of critique

> *The current situation is far more severe than anyone could have imagined, and the task of cleaning up is far larger than what Nordic Waste or USTC can handle.*

Our purpose in this article has not been merely to 'be negative'. We oppose the division into 'good' (progressive, pleasurable, forward) and 'bad' (unpleasant, backward) emotions implied in the affirmative imperative urging us to read with and for positive, productive, affirmative affects like joy and pleasure while abandoning affects such as paranoia and gloom. This can be read as a reinforcement of the division between 'positive' and 'negative' affects that feminist scholars (including Sedgwick herself in her earlier work on shame), have worked to deconstruct, showing how 'negative' feelings such as shame, depression, and anger hold political potentials while 'positive' counterparts such as happiness or optimism can be alienating or partake in the upholding of oppressive systems (see e.g. Cvetkovich 2012; Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2010b; Sedgwick and Frank 1995). According to Sara Ahmed, it is "the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear" (Ahmed 2010a, 50). As Ahmed reminds the optimistically inclined 'reparative' or 'affirmative' scholar, critique is not some nihilistic endpoint that shuts down the possibility of progress or meaningful conversations; it "gets us somewhere" (2010a, 50).

We welcome criticism of prevailing notions of mind-body splits and the harm such severing has caused. While it has not been our aim to offer an alternative program for thinking about mind and body, we have presented a critique of some broad but increasingly pervasive tendencies in contemporary scholarship by way of pointing to what we see as potential pitfalls and blind spots. Building on previous criticism of these theoretical currents within rhetoric and the humanities more broadly (see e.g. Prasad and Maraj 2022; Ahmed 2010a; Hemmings 2005; Malm 2018), our purpose in this article has been to point to some risks that we detect in rhetorical criticism that centers materiality and affirmation today as well as some possible risks of applying these theoretical frameworks in rhetorical scholarship concerned with the climate and ecological crisis. Overall, we have argued that new materialist and affirmative veins of rhetorical studies risk overlooking central political struggles and highlighted the importance of keeping rhetorical criticism critical.

It is of course not the case that new materialist and affirmative-oriented scholarship is ethically moot. As we already noted, they work from explicitly ethical frameworks such as coexistence (Barnett and Gore 2020). They too point to political pitfalls: "If we continue to think of things exclusively in terms of language, appearance, or representation – as epistemological objects – we will likely go on believing that human beings alone determine the scope and possibilities of rhetoric and that humans, as a consequence, are the only true legislators of nature" (Barnett and Boyle 2017, 4). The danger of human exceptionality is a real one, especially

in the climate and ecological crisis. But we would then ask: In identifying the legislators of nature in events such as the Nordic Waste scandal, how helpful is it to view rain, soil, and toxic chemicals as co-constitutors of the rhetorical event of the contaminated landslide? The billionaires profiting immensely from filling clay pits with toxic soil seem to us to be the first and foremost marks for criticism. These actors wield very human power (although not control) over nature within capitalism. They would simply agree, as we have shown in the quotes from the bankruptcy press release, that the more-than-human are primary to understanding the event, affirming the "tragedy" to be remedied by a climate foundation worth so much less than the actual cost of cleaning up. As Nancy Fraser's (2023) recent work makes clear, the violation of planetary boundaries, the economic and care crises, and the neocolonial exploitation of the Global South are driven self-destructively by capitalism. Thus, we sense a systematic urgency that "old(er)" materialisms are perhaps better equipped to respond to: in critiquing ideological underpinnings of environmental politics and its disasters, we can dissent to current regimes, opening the possibility for something else. In the end, our ambition is simply to contribute to this special issue with a plea for scholars and students of rhetoric to be critically attentive to the political pitfalls of starting rhetorical criticism of rhetorical events related to the climate and ecological crisis from a focus on flat ontology and affirmation, lest we toxically affirm the material interests of the few.

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