



**Anti-capitalism matters!
A radical creative engagement
with the landscapes of materiality
to enact climate justice**

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The climate crisis is a crisis of capitalism. Mitigating the former cannot happen without admonishing the latter; they are intricately linked. Anti-capitalism, then, *needs* an awareness of how climate breakdown has come about, and part of that requires understanding how our relationship with the materiality of the landscapes around us. Centuries of capitalism have driven an ideological wedge between us and the planet we inhabit: it has narrated the landscape as merely something to consume. To counter this ideological motivation of capitalist desire, is to engender what I call “transmaterialism”; a creative mindset that levels out the human and nonhuman landscapes, and builds an anti-capitalism rooted in an ecological sensibility that can help us fight climate catastrophe.

Capitalism’s materialism

But before detailing transmaterialism, it is worth understanding the current critiques of capitalism’s ideology materialism. And to do so, it is worth revisiting the work of the curator and Marxist scholar Joshua Simon. In his influential book *Neomaterialism* (Simon, 2013), he argued that the debt-riddled neoliberal capitalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has commodified absolutely *everything*. It has stripped all objects of any ownership we as individuals or as a collective have over them, and imbued them with pure capitalist relations. Because of the explosion of consumer debt from the 1970s onwards (further catalyzed by the 2008 financial crash), many of the material things that we think we “own” are in fact our owners. Mortgages, cars, things bought on credit cards: they are owned not by us, but by the financial debt economy, and they are “at risk if we fail to keep up repayments”. At the same

time, branding has overtaken the material function of objects (a pair of Nike trainers are Nike first, and trainers second). And even within the art world, contemporary art has dematerialized the very essence of creative practice; what constitutes art becomes a question of the gaze, rather than the materials used. With the preponderance of so-called “freeports” cropping up all over the world, which house massive collections of priceless art pieces purely for the tax avoidance purposes of the super-rich, art has become completely financialised. All this leads Simon to argue that capitalism has reinvented the object, the product and “thingness” altogether, and replaced it with “the commodity”.

The commodity has replaced any other form of “objecthood” such as product, thing, artefact and even the state of being an object itself. For example, a smartphone can be thought of as an *object* insofar as it relates to the sentient subject who uses, observes, abhors or admires it; it can be thought of as a *product* that has been created by child laborer’s in the Congo and overworked-to-the-point-of-suicide Chinese workers in Foxconn; it can be thought of as a *thing* or mere vessel which mutes its immediate presence in the world and sucks in alternative digital communications, contexts and meaning from all around. It could even be an *artefact* if put in another context beyond its telecommunications function, such as the art world, museum or archive. But Simon would see it and everything else as a commodity, which encompasses all of the above. To call a smartphone a thing, a product, an artefact or an object is to “cleanse the commodity of the chains of its birth”, and hence it *is* a commodity, as is, according to Simon, everything else in this world including the land, the air, practice, the cosmos, sovereignty, peace, you, me — everything.

Simon is expatiating on what he calls a *neomaterialism*, the all-pervasiveness that a Marxist reading of commodity fetishism attributes to *all* the materiality of the landscape. In other words, the capitalist realism of the twenty-first century has cast all material on the planet and beyond as exchangeable, commercial and therefore profitable.

This is the materialism that capitalism purveys. It is the reduction of the material landscape — including human materiality — to a plane of consistency that creates a marketplace. Moreover, capitalism’s mechanisms attempt to order materiality, to give it this single use that predicates predictability and abstract use once extracted (Bennett, 2008; Hodder, 2012; Mould, 2019). Entire industries are based on this: coal is for burning, crops are for eating, cattle are for slaughtering and precious metals are for mining. This translates into objects that, when produced via the capitalist machinery, have a single use and, that use once served, are discarded.



Image 1. Centuries of capitalism have driven an ideological wedge between us and the planet we inhabit: it has narrated the landscape as merely something to consume. In the image Salvation Mountain at Slab City created by Leonard Knight.

Furthermore, in discussing the inadequacies of the Anthropocene as a language of transformation to a better world, the (wonderfully titled) inhuman geographer Kathryn Yusoff argues that “An engagement with materiality is... a source of communion with the formation of a collective, in which materiality is a site of political struggle and solidarity, rather than a constraint or brake to the political possibilities of life.” (Yusoff, 2018: p. 270). Yusoff’s work here is important to think of in relation to Simon’s because it actually *presupposes* the capitalist stratification of the commonality of land and its transformation into single capitalist units of consumption. She argues that the land, and the layers of what she calls “geologic commons” embedded within it, are already imbued with inequalities that have yet to be revealed. The mining of fossil fuels, for example, is the process by which the human and the inhuman are delineated. This is done not only through the designation of nonhuman life that is to be converted into material for human consumption, but also throughout history. The industry has always marshalled which human and nonhuman bodies are expendable (e.g. slave laborers, indigenous communities, oceanic life) in their conversion into consumable objects (and hence which bodies are considered “inhuman” (see also Gilmore, 2018 and Bhattacharyya, 2018).

So, building on these Marxist traditions of the commodity, there is a scholarship of creative materiality that sees the capitalism of the An-

thropocene as an extractive machine, one that dominantly and violently dictates which nonhuman life is to be sacrificed on the altar of profitability, and which is not (yet). The conversion of sedimented dead organisms from millions of years ago into oil renders them subordinate to the needs of the consuming human; the life of the Amazon rainforest that is destroyed to make way for cattle grazing or palm oil plantations is deemed not worthy. Capitalism therefore dictates *in real time* what is human and nonhuman. It continually defines what is human — to be a consuming, economically active, laboring, surveilled, non-racialized and obedient body — and what is nonhuman — a simple resource to maintain that which it deems human.

From neo- to transmaterialism

But within an anti-capitalism of the commons, the material landscape is a site of political struggle, not something to be wielded for the purposes of building capitalist societies. The struggle of materiality is real, and plays out before our very eyes, but too often this struggle is never articulated as such. Hurricane Katrina, for example, caused far more damage to the Black population of New Orleans than the white — denoting that there are different forms of “exposure” to the commons of the material land already latent in existing societies. Sites of indigenous conflict with the state — such as the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota oil pipeline in 2016 — are political eruptions in materiality that highlight the unequal agency and political “vibrancy” of the nonhuman.

To bring an anti-capitalist and planetary commons into view, it is vital that the capitalist narration of materiality be resisted. Not only that: there needs to be a creative and ethical submission to the political vibrancy of material, and the deep connections that we have as humans with the material landscape around us.

Rather than an Anthropocenic *neomaterialism* being thrust upon us by a capitalist class that seeks to extract and destroy ever-further reaches of the planet’s materiality, a *transmaterialism* can resist this. It involves the reconceptualization of materiality away from it as subservient to the consumption patterns that capitalism requires, and instead as an equal plane of life that exists relationally with us as humans. It is the levelling up and dissipation of the human/nonhuman dichotomy that currently puts humans atop our surrounding nonhuman material. It is to *transcend* this material dualism, to be transmaterial. The prefix “trans” here is a deliberate usage, because of its transcendental qualities, but also because of the struggles of the transgender community. To be “trans” in this in-

stance is to be between the two binary genders, either transitioning from one to the other, or in a settled gendered identity between the two. The transgender identity hence problematizes the traditional gender duality and opens up new ways of engaging with human identity, and frees people from the oppressive enclosure such binary thinking can sometimes have. I use the term “transmaterialism”, then, in part in solidarity with the oppressed trans community, but also as I am aiming for similar emancipation-from-duality potentials.

Hence, transmaterialism acts counter to neomaterialism, in a more creative way, by being an ethical commitment to levelling up the human/nonhuman divide so as to open up spaces of justice for those things *and* people deemed by capitalism to be on the nonhuman side of that dualism. There are a number of examples of how to actualize the ways in which transmaterialism can be practiced to enliven a planetary commons (including the philosophies of veganism, hacker spaces, and the Right to Repair), but I wish to focus on just one that I have researched in depth of late, eco-squats.

Collective Transmateriality: Eco-squatting

To understand the lineage of contemporary eco-squats, such as Grow Heathrow near London, Can Masdeu in Barcelona, Christiania in Copenhagen and many others around the world, a brief historical analysis is needed, starting in the seventeenth century in England. The Diggers, were an important group in the conceptual foundations of the commons. They believed in the commonality between humans and the land that fed them. Drawing on his own reading of Biblical teaching (something which was more prominent because of the advent of the printing press) rather than that of the clergy, which often preached subjugation to the monarchy, Gerrard Winstanley believed that everyone was created equal, and therefore had fair use of the land that God had provided. With a relatively small band of followers, he began digging up the untouched land near Weybridge in southeast England to grow corn, peas, carrots and other produce. This was then distributed to whoever needed it. For about a year or so they were able to stave off the army and the lawmakers before they were violently evicted; not, however, before they went on to create other groups, notably the Levellers, who were more radical in their practice. Foregrounding many of the democratic ideals that were to follow centuries later, the Levellers were drawn more from army personnel, and went on to create a list of demands that have characterized, to some extent at least, what we now see as parliamentary democracy (Benn, 1976).

But at the root of the Levellers' demands and the Diggers' praxis was that the land was common and should be shared with everyone, rich or poor. To rebel against the monarchy and the dogmatic teachings of the church so forcefully was a radical step at the time. But while the Leveller movement was eventually quashed by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, their ideology still enlivens anarchist and anti-capitalist movements today.

The Levellers' creation of a "commune" that provided all that life needed is a model we see today. Even with the humble urban allotment, there is a sense of tending the land, distributing the food via local mutual aid networks (indeed, during the coronavirus lockdown, allotment-grown produce was a major source of food for those unable to get to, or deliveries from, the supermarkets), and a tendency to reuse and readapt objects before recycling them via institutional systems. As well as allotments, there are many less official (often illegal) eco-squats around the world.

These truly creative places such as Grow Heathrow or Christiania are first and foremost squats, in that they were created by a group of people looking to inhabit a plot of land which they did not own, and use it to open up more socially just and equitable spaces (Mould, 2015). These eco-squats embody the anarchist mindset of the squatting movement more generally. The anarchist tradition has been built upon the rejection of *any* form of societal organization – *anarchy*, without any form of archy, be that monarchy, patriarchy or indeed speciarchy. Far from the mainstream political view espoused by the elite (and failing presidents), anarchism is not total chaos and the absence of order. It is the desire to organize society free from any centralized or powerful control. Providing needs and meeting wants within a community of people without giving up rights, surplus or control to an externalized power is the central tenet of anarchism; and to do so actually requires a great deal of ordering, communication, deliberation and debate. Anarchism, then, is significantly more likely to be found in discussions of how to run a community garden than it is in throwing a Molotov cocktail at riot police (Springer, 2014). As an ideology, anarchism defenestrates any need for a political elite that govern us so as to exploit us; that is perhaps why political leaders are so scared of it.

This anarchist desire for the horizontalization of society extends to nonhuman and material matter. And so, within these eco-squats, there is a levelling of the human and the nonhuman via very different ways of living. Take the Grow Heathrow squat, for example. It initially started out as a campaign against building a third runway at Europe's busiest airport in 2010, but has grown into an anarchist community that provides a window onto how the ethics of a transmaterialist landscape can be real-



Image 2. Grow Heathrow has grown into an anarchist community that provides a window onto how the ethics of a transmaterialist landscape can be realized.

ized. Within the squat, all electricity is generated via renewable sources. There is a wind turbine, itself built out of reused materials, and a number of solar panels. All food consumed at the site is grown there, with a strict vegan diet. The community have their own apothecary for herbal medicines, they reuse and recycle every bit of waste (including human waste, which is transformed into fertilizer within six months), and even power washing machines via bicycles linked up to the machine's drum with a rubber band. And while it may seem trivial, if you have ever had to pedal your way through a standard washing machine cycle, you'll get a *much* better understanding of how much energy is needed to simply wash clothes. It gives you a more embodied knowledge of the energy that we take out of the ground just to clean your daily clothes load in a machine. Also, Grow Heathrow operates a policy that the small number of living quarters they have there (up to twenty people) are offered to those in most need because of their rejection from mainstream society, and will often prioritize the trans and homeless community.

This does not mean, however, that these eco-squats can be heralded and pedestalled as the politically anarchist vanguards of an ethical transmateriality. Clearly, they are dynamic, debated, contested and living sites and struggle to maintain the purity of anarchist life permanently and uniformly. Grow Heathrow itself is not immune to such contestation, and to fetishize its clear emancipatory potentials would be to place too heavy a

burden on it as a model of transmateriality. But conversely, these sites do offer a way to show that an ethical commitment to transmateriality can, indeed must, stretch beyond individual lifestyle choices.

Planetary Transmaterialism

How can this be done? We can see glimpses of this even on the scale of national parliamentary politics. In 2010, Bolivia passed the Law of Mother Earth, which sees the “natural” landscape as the “collective subject of public interest” and as such having equal rights with humans within legal frameworks (Tola, 2018). This had repercussions more recently when, in October 2020, the socialist party Movimiento al Socialismo was voted into government, much to the ire of the billionaire Tesla owner Elon Musk, who was allegedly behind a coup in order to control the country’s lithium deposits. And in New Zealand in 2017, Parliament passed a law that saw the Te Awa Tupua River obtain the same legal rights as a person, something that the local Maori tribe had been insisting upon for centuries. In 2019, Mount Taranaki also gained the same legal rights. These are instances of a rejection of a capitalist *neomaterialism* and a levelling up of the human and the nonhuman with the laws of the state apparatus. This signals that if the political will is powerfully present, then a transmateriality can easily be achieved nationally, even within the confines of parliamentary democracy.

A planetary commons thrives upon the commoning practice of constantly evolving the protocols of justice and equality that are needed to evade capitalist co-option and the violence of accumulation by dispossession. Grow Heathrow and the other eco-squats around the world, despite the “dilution” in some sense of their ethical transmateriality, can transfer that ethical practice to other parts of the world, if the political will is there to do so – as has been shown in Bolivia and New Zealand. Eco-squats can provide the means by which we can engage in a deeper connection with the material landscape, and they show, often in very practical ways but also in intangible ethical ways, how this can be done.

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