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KARA THOMPSON

Traffic Stops, Stopping Traffic: Race and Climate Change in the Age of Automobility

In September 2016, nine activists chained themselves together on a runway of London City Airport with a sign that read “Climate Crisis is a Racist Crisis.” Black Lives Matter UK activists claimed responsibility in a series of tweets that linked climate change to structural forms of oppression, including: “7/10 of the countries most affected by climate change are in sub-Saharan Africa” and “At London City Airport a small elite is able to fly, in 2016 alone 3176 migrants have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean #Shutdown.” Their action grounded airplanes and 9000 passengers at the airport for several hours. They were arrested and charged with “obstructing a person engaged in lawful activity,” to which they all pled guilty. Nevertheless, all were granted a “conditional discharge” and faced no immediate punishment for their actions.

Eight of the nine protesters were white, all were relatively middle-class, and most had already engaged in direct actions for issues related to climate change, extractive industries, and/or fair wages. A few had prior convictions. District Judge Elizabeth Roscoe scolded the group for the disruption of air traffic flow, and for the seriousness of trespassing in a secure and bounded landscape, such as an airport tarmac. But she also reframed their actions as sincere and well-intentioned. As she handed down sentences that effectively protected and upheld white sincerity and benevolence, Judge Roscoe explained that she did not see the links among Black Lives Matter (a movement she attributes only to the United States), an airport in London, and climate change.¹

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Scholars and activists who take up the racialized contours of climate change offer widespread evidence that effects of global warming disproportionately affect people of color and others in structurally oppressed positions because of class, geographic location, and citizenship status.² Climate refugees or environmental migrants must leave their homes because gradual or sudden changes to the environment—sea-level rise, drought, and water scarcity—have made life at home unlivable. The actions on the tarmac at London City Airport attempted to draw out these connections by disrupting the flow of air traffic, by targeting a form of global transportation. And this *particular* group's actions also elicit questions, debates, and ethics about identity and appropriation, subjectivity and the environment, race and ecology. While they set out to argue that “the climate crisis is a racist crisis,” their identities and actions are historically bound to white paternalism and patronage: the sense that “nature” belongs to, and thus needs to be protected by, the white middle-class, or to practices that manage to supplant voices of the very people they purport to defend.

The direct action on the airport tarmac and the subsequent decision by the district judge not to criminalize the actions draw our attention to the intricate historical, geopolitical, and economic relations of race and ecology. This essay picks up on these complex interrelations to argue that racism is an environmental crisis that demands an engagement with, an attentiveness to, histories of white supremacy and appropriation. I confront two of the most pressing crises of our moment, in which the automobile rests at the center: climate change, and police killing African Americans. Automobile emissions account for nearly one-fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions in the United States; every gallon of gasoline burned emits 24 pounds of carbon dioxide and other gasses that contribute to global warming, which endangers us all (UCS). The car has also become a unique site of risk for African Americans: *Driving while black* refers to the “routine traffic stop”—for a broken taillight, a missing or expired license, or failure to signal—that too often leads to searches, serious injury, incarceration, and death.

Racism and climate change are genealogical and scalar. They belong to the procession of anthropogenic histories premised on white supremacy over black and brown bodies and nonhuman worlds, *and* on making these two at times indistinguishable. I draw on black feminist theory, African American cultural theory, critical Indigenous theory, and studies of environmental racism, which foreground the convergences and assemblages of racism, sexism, and environmental destruction that bear out Western taxonomies of the human.³ To pursue the death, assault, and incarceration of black and brown people by

way of an automobile, a semi-privatized form of transportation, is to exercise and uphold the very political and economic structures that founded a nation on genocide, dispossession, enslavement, and the designation of humans as property. Racism and climate change are scarlar because their magnitudes are undeniably perilous, and despite ample evidence, some continue to deny their existence, or their life-altering and traumatic effects. To deny climate change, or to persist with the very technologies and industries that have *already* created economic, ecological, political, and humanitarian crises in the Global South, is to extend the damaging reach of global neoliberalism, which was ushered into existence by the transatlantic slave trade and settler colonialism. To deny that police disproportionately pursue black and brown drivers, or to assert that so-called “routine traffic stops” are necessary for public safety—even when they entail shooting and killing drivers or passengers—is to nurture the ongoing criminalization of black and brown people, especially African American men.⁴

The car is a culprit, a witness, and an instigator of climate change *and* racialized police brutality. I use the car, traffic, and the freeway ecologies to show how climate change and police brutality persist in these genealogical relations, *and* how one is expressed through another. I argue that to get at these very real and present forms of racialized and ecological violence, we need to examine the productive work of metaphor, specifically as it plays out in a fabulously unrealistic narrative, Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel *Tropic of Orange* (1997). My analysis narrows a rather sprawling and productively convoluted novel to its scenes of a traffic jam in Los Angeles. *Tropic of Orange*, and a literary imagination more generally, have the potential to transport and mobilize by way of turning our attention to what seems implausible and unreal.⁵ They make productive use of metaphor to show how two things, seemingly distant and unrelated, cohere.

This essay also builds on a genealogy of literary criticism that attends to questions such as: Who gets to claim the structures of feeling bound to “nature” or the environment? Who gets unrestricted access to nature? Who *is* nature? In his study of race and nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance, Paul Outka argues the “longstanding, often normative, whiteness of ecocriticism” and the “harder fought anthropocentrism in critical race studies that inverted the terrible historical legacy of making people of color signify the natural” have historically run parallel scholarly/critical tracks, despite their multiple intersections and potential coalitions (3). In a related project, Jeffrey Myers shows how “rampant racism and massive environmental destruction” converge in the second half of the nineteenth century (3). Constructions and privileges of whiteness, which only

become crystallized through the subjugation of non-white races and ethnicities, are rooted in and contribute to the same kind of anthropocentric paradigms that led to the near-extinction of American bison, the extermination of wolves, and industrial logging, to give a few examples. Myers and Outka each track racial and ecological meeting points in major literary texts from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and in so doing, they contribute to a compelling archive of recent works that redress a tendency in ecological theory and environmental justice scholarship to ignore or remain silent about race.⁶ They each find these forms of convergence and redress in literary texts by both Euro-American and African American writers.

Kimberly Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* focuses more exclusively on African American writers whose work engages ecology, implicitly or directly, even (or especially) as she acknowledges immediately that for "as long as Africans have been Americans, they have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature" (1). And Jennifer C. James' rich term *ecomelancholia* captures perhaps an even more complex and nuanced relationship that African Americans may have with the natural world. Twenty-first century black writers, scholars, and activists, as she argues, have suggested that African Americans' collective memory of enslavement and racial violence can "engender an empathetic response to environmental destruction" (164). But this comportment must contend with what she calls its "ecophobic double: that the legacies of trauma and injustice have attenuated African Americans' connection to nature" (164). Each of these authors takes up the important work of examining expressions of racism and nature in literature and other forms of cultural production.⁷ They show how racism and white supremacy construct the very concepts of nature, property, and the human, and then how these constructions—many of which endure as forms of collective and personal trauma—play out in attachments to and disidentifications with "nature." I now turn to a text that offers a methodology for getting at these complex structures of feeling, as well as the political and economic structures that ensure global temperatures will continue to rise, and state-sanctioned violence against racialized subjects will endure.

Nearly twenty years after its publication, *Tropic of Orange* still offers its readers multiple ways of thinking through the world of the present in the throes—the symptoms and fallouts—of neoliberalism, globalization, global warming *and* their connections to border-making and policing, and other forms of racialized violence. By cohering one of its central crises to a spectacular traffic jam, Yamashita conjures an ecology bound up with, and beholden to, racism, militarized violence, and climate change. The novel is organized both spatially and temporally—

each chapter advances a day of the week while sections within the chapters demarcate specific spaces in Los Angeles. The characters move through various racial and class borders of LA; they cross the US–Mexico border until it moves north and Mexico enfolds Los Angeles.

Readers already acquainted with this book will remember the novel's momentum, the ways in which Yamashita manages to converge and jam narratives into its pages. The novel concerns mobility and propulsion, borders, oranges, traffic jams, smuggling, homelessness, climate change, globalization, trade policy, capitalism and consumption, the traffic in body parts, and Los Angeles and its cars, freeways, and traffic jams. It makes provocations about mobilities and transfer points, movement across time (days, weeks, centuries) and spaces (national, hemispheric, geological). In the constant movement of characters from one space to another, which then gets refracted through a steady form shift in point-of-view, the reader gets a sense of accretion and a vast, hyper network in formation. Magic and the imagination provide the transport, rather than the automobile, because cars are stuck in a traffic jam that lasts six days, from Tuesday to Sunday. And across these days, in the long hours of a jam, whole economies and ecologies shift: Commuters abandon their cars, and cars become temporary homes and shelters for homeless who live under the freeway.

It goes something like this: On Tuesday morning, during the early morning commute at the downtown interchange, two men in a Porsche peel oranges and exchange ideas for a storyboard as they drive north toward Hollywood. Then they collide with a semi pulling 40,000 pounds of liquid propane, and quite suddenly, across ten lanes of traffic, hundreds of cars pile on one another, "in an almost endless jam of shrieking notes" (55). Media, including "cellular phones" and television, become a site for a more pervasive form of witnessing after the accident. The narrator speculates that someone might have caught it all on video because there is "always someone out there catching unsightly things on video" (55). Mobility is (also) virtual and prosthetic.

The accident occurs on Tuesday, so by Saturday, the freeway has transformed into something well beyond itself. For example, it's now a stage for a call-in radio show, *The Car Show* on KPFK, and the *NewsNow* van, caught in the traffic jam, reports from its static location in real time. There are at least four different perspectives from which we view the accident and ensuing jam: an unnamed narrator who fills in details about the initial accident as well as the two subsequent collisions (another semi-truck with "just ten thousand gallons of sloshing gasoline" and yet another semi that had 33,000 pounds of meat on board); the *NewsNow* van and helicopter that offer both live coverage and an aerial view of the jam; Buzzworm, a "[b]ig black seven-foot dude, Vietnam

vet, an Afro shirt with palm trees painted all over it, dreds, pager and Walkman belted to the waist" (27) who's also a self-appointed social worker and watches over some of LA's most subjugated citizens, including drug addicts and those who live under freeway overpasses and in tent cities; and Manzanar, who stands *on* freeway overpasses in order to "choreograph" the traffic. Every day, Manzanar waves a baton to the symphonies of traffic—he seems to be able to measure the traffic as it flows and, quite possibly, to predict or affect the traffic flow.

Cause and effect get blurred in Manzanar's choreographies, but in any case, he is the maestro of traffic, he understands its complex ecologies: "Manzanar knew the frustration of the ordinary motorist wedged between trucks—the nauseous flush of diesel exhaust and interrupted visibility—but he also understood the nature of the truck beast, whose purpose was to transport the great products of civilization" (120). These products include everything from icons of consumerism, like Coca-Cola and "this fall's fashions," to turbines, concrete, and garbage—an entire life cycle of consumption. All these goods move from "here and there, back and forth, from the harbor to the train station to the highway to the warehouse to the airport to the docking station to the factory to the dump site" (120). Multiple forms of transportation enable the movements—as in the mobilities *and* choreographies—of products from their origins elsewhere to their final resting places in the landfill landscapes. Transportation, in other words, enables ecological disasters and decay, from the "nauseous flush of diesel exhaust," to accidents and traffic jams, to the pileup of waste.

Manzanar imagines he's some kind of recycler, but of the city's residue sounds, rather than its wasted objects. His choreographies are synesthetic. He sees everything in layers and creates symphonies from these sedimentary formations: the geology of L.A., its artesian rivers, the fault lines, natural gas lines, sewage, electric currents, telephone cables, computer networks, and even the human-made divisions on the surface from "the distribution of wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies" (57). His visual and audible cartographies make no ontological distinctions between class and climate change; and these convergences and amalgamations signify best in traffic.

Manzanar's visions remind us of how the terms *ecology*, *environment*, and *climate* have come to signify broadly in contexts other than those having to do with the materiality of what we might call (of course, tentatively so) "nature" or the "natural" world—that is, of flora and fauna and their interrelations, or of rising global temperatures as the result of greenhouse gas emissions. But the power of his visions and traffic choreographies resides in his relationship to metaphor. His symphony, *The Hour of the Trucks*, analogizes the "beastly size of semis, garbage

trucks, moving vans, and concrete mixers to the largest monsters of the animal kingdom—living and extinct, all rumbling ponderously along the freeway” (119). Here Yamashita employs metaphor—the trucks that rumble down the freeway are large monsters—and yet the metaphor also manages to be real: Trucks and other forms of freeway transportation belong to a nonhuman ecology, and to death and extinction, because they run on fossil fuels.

Manzanar sees the far-reach of places and times he has never been, the billions of years that have all come to this, to human civilization that “covered everything in layers, generations of building upon building upon building the residue, burial sites, and garbage that defined people after people for centuries” (170). Each time the narrative shifts to Manzanar’s traffic-jam symphony, the focus and perception shift to his visions of geological layers and disastrous teleologies, from the shifting of tectonic plates to the rapid accumulation of garbage: a disastrous accretion that leads to the cessation of automobility and the disruption of global economic, social, and political order.

Through Manzanar, *Tropic of Orange* offers its most productive argument for conceiving racism as an environmental crisis. The novel manages to get at these real and present crises by way of the seemingly unimaginable, the improbable, and unrealistic. In turn, it twists the unreal back into reality. The very title of the novel and the ways that its metaphorical contours play out in the narrative offer another compelling example of this real/unreal dialectic. *Tropic of Orange* is so named because of an orange that grows out of season on a tree in Mazatlán, Mexico. The orange should not have emerged when it did, when everything else was dead or dormant, but the “rains came sooner this year.” “What do they call it?” mused Doña Maria. ‘Global warming. Yes, that’s it.’ Rafaela had seen it herself. The tree had been fooled, and little pimples of budding flowers began to burst through the branches” (11). But everything else eventually gave in to a sudden dry spell, except for this one orange. And from this orange, a thin thread grows; it stretches and expands, and eventually remakes the border between Mexico and the United States by moving everything, including millions of people, north.

The tree was planted precisely to mark the Tropic of Cancer, a symbolic act, since this is a line made only by the sun overhead, not a border enforced by nations. The anomalous orange out of season signifies an aberration in climate, in the natural order of things, in the way the novel too thrusts the ordinary and everyday—the mundane tedium of a commute, most notably—into an extraordinary, border-shifting event. It moves two borders, both of which are, in their own ways, imagined—one made by the sun, the other by treaty and trade. But this fantastical event also has a direct, palpable, resonance in the ecological

and social now, since climate change will displace millions of people in the Global South and parts of the Global North. Christian Parenti argues that the geographies between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer lie in what he calls the *Tropic of Chaos*, a “belt of economically and politically battered postcolonial states girding the planet’s mid-latitudes. In this band, around the tropics, climate change is beginning to hit hard” (9). Columbia University’s Center for International Earth Science information Network projects that 700 million climate refugees will be displaced by 2050.⁸

Yamashita imagines the border-shifting event not in narrowly ecological terms, but under the leadership of another central character, Arcangel/El Gran Mojado, who, like Manzanar, is not bound to realism (especially not human-defined timelines). However, his travels and visions *are* quite real and correspond to real, historical events.⁹

Arcangel becomes the keeper of the orange that moves borders, and it turns out to be the last remaining orange in the world.¹⁰ Oranges reside at the center of the novel’s many crises: the out-of-season orange that grows the thread that moves the hemisphere, and the orange peels in the Porsche. Oranges also become illicit transport vehicles. While the LAPD is focused on “readyin’ up to catch any homeless wantin’ to flee the canyon,” drug traffickers use oranges to smuggle cocaine across the border (139). And everyone *but* the homeless is caught up in orange and OJ trafficking: “You mighta thought it was only gangs or druggies or the mafia going after them, but it was everybody, like it was a lottery. Housewives and yuppies, environmentalists and meat-eaters, hapkido masters and white guys in dreds with Nirvana T-shirts—all going for the spiked oranges” (140). Everyone *but* the people being surveilled by police—in the time and space of the novel, that is African Americans in South Central LA whose communities were displaced and fractured by the freeway systems, and whose geographies were stages for direct actions inspired by the police brutality against Rodney King in 1991—are bound up in the spiked oranges.¹¹

But the police are too busy monitoring the abandoned cars on the freeway that have turned into temporary homes, sites for urban gardens, and the coalescing of another kind of community order. Manzanar sees the traffic jam as the “greatest used car dealership” (121) because as he conducts, he watches the dense communities that are otherwise invisible to the fast-moving freeway public descend into the jam and begin to occupy the abandoned cars. “Men, women, and children, their dogs and even cats, bedding and caches of cans and bottles in great green garbage sacks and shopping carts moved into public view . . .” (121). They first inhabit the vans and campers, then the “gas guzzlers” like Cadillacs and Buicks, then to the boxy and spacious cars like Volvos and Mercedes.

Compact cars are more popular than sports cars, like Porsches, Corvettes, and Jaguars. The convertibles are occupied by children. Such occupations offer a humorous nod to automobile taxonomies—what they're really worth when not a method of transport. In mere minutes, life reorganizes itself. Trucks that carried food, furniture, and Perrier are unloaded and the goods handed out to the new freeway occupants.

Lest we begin to think of this scene as the hour of utopian dispersion, the narrator reminds that it was all still "quite a mess." The new occupants still use the cars as sites for energy—engines idle while the fuel still exists, and plumes of smoke fill the air. The cars are still cars and the semis go up in flames. While the homeless flock to cars, the owners of the cars watch on television or from the edges of the freeway canyon; the spectacle leads to the "usual questions of police protection, insurance coverage, and acts of God" (122). Average citizens watch with ambivalent feelings—anger and sympathy—and everyone recalls the last time they watched a memorable event unfold on the freeway, that is, when another OJ moved illicitly. Five days after Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman were murdered, O.J. Simpson led Los Angeles police on a car chase from the Artesia Freeway (Highway 91) to the 405 North. Since then, the narrator informs us, white Broncos have become very popular. The "CHP and Triple-A together reported at least a dozen instances of white Broncos drive to some finality: E on the gas tank, over a Malibu cliff, to Terminal Island, etc." (123). The list covers multiple contexts and degrees of severity, from running out of gas, an "accident" (intentional or otherwise) that sends the Bronco over a Malibu cliff, to Terminal Island, an 11-kilometer, largely artificial island near San Pedro and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach that sustains multiple industries, forms of transportations, and ecologies, including a federal prison for men and shipping containers full of global capital. After the early 1900s, Terminal Island became a site for a Ford automobile manufacturing plant, fisheries, and canneries. As industry on the island grew, it was also home for multiethnic, working-class communities. Japanese Americans established the island's fishing industry, and before WWII, as many as 3000 people lived there (Pulido et al.).

But only two days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the community was forced off the island because of its proximity to national defense industries (Pulido et al. 185).¹² Most were ultimately sent to the Manzanar incarceration camp, or "war relocation camp," for Japanese Americans in the Owens Valley near Independence, CA. Over 100,000 Nikkei were detained at Manzanar during WWII. We know our Manzanar was there too: "For a moment, he saw his childhood in the desert between Lone Pine and Independence, the stubble of manzanita and the snow-covered Sierras against azure skies" (170). He also remembers his loves, a grandchild he was fond of, and his practice.

He had been a surgeon who, one day, walked out on his own terms. And since then, or at least for as long as anyone else in the novel knows, he has been a homeless conductor on the Los Angeles freeways.

Again, through the figure of Manzanar—an ostensibly forgettable or even ungrivable subject because of his status as homeless and mentally ill (as bystanders might presume, given his daily freeway choreographies)—Yamashita manages an environmentalism that calls forth the interrelations of Japanese American prison camps and the congestions of Los Angeles freeways, or O.J. Simpson's slow car chase and the complex history of Terminal Island. The car, in this case the white Ford Bronco, makes these vast historical, geographical, and political travels possible. The "white Ford Bronco" is a vehicle, real and metaphor. And metaphors are made of vehicles that carry us to meaning.¹³ The novel twists and turns tenor and vehicle, music and car, real and metaphor.

Tropic of Orange never allows its readers to abandon such economies of scale. Each perspective or vantage point, however small, contains or assimilates vast landscapes, times, and spaces. On the surface, Manzanar stands on freeway overpasses, "under the raging sun" with a "disheveled shock of white hair, a face both of anguish and incredible peace." His arms reach and caress "the air for the sound and rhythms of . . . of what?" (46). The answer turns out to extend well beyond the freeway asphalt and idling cars: to lifecycles of production and consumption, to animals living and extinct, incarceration camps, LA's homeless population, to billions of years ago.

The cars stalled on the Harbor Freeway in *Tropic of Orange* call the boundaries of property, and therefore of privacy and publics, into question. One of the occupants makes clear that his time with the car is only temporary, but he decides to make some improvements until, or even in anticipation of, the owner's return: "I consider my occupation of this vehicle a short-term one. I'm just borrowing it. But I want the man or woman who owns it to know I've made considerable home improvements. Washed it good. Waxed it. Spiffed up the insides. There's not a speck of dirt. Made it downright homey inside" (217). These statements shift between a vision of the car as *car* and the car as *home*—it is washed and waxed but also homey with an arrangement of California poppies (which grow so well along freeways), a bible, and a decorative hanky over the steering wheel. This temporary resident prepares the car for a scene of hospitality, the reception of guests or maybe the owner.

Cars have long confused the binary of public and private: Can we do anything we want in a car because it's our private property? Unlike most homes, cars are mobile and, therefore, introduce a certain kind of danger to the public sphere. Sarah A. Seo shows us how, since Ford's mass production of the Model T, courts have debated and negotiated the limits of

an automobile's privacy. In accordance with the Fourth Amendment, which guarantees the "right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures," judges have consistently ruled that automobiles are not quite private property because they are regulated by the state.¹⁴ As Seo reasons, the logic of the court is somewhat tautological because it deploys a Constitutional amendment that concerns a right to privacy in order to argue that the automobile is actually *public* property.

The determination that cars are public property also undercuts the notion of what many of have termed *automobility*, or the increased freedom that cars and other forms of personal transportation make possible. As Jeremy Packer explains, *automobility* has also come to refer to the automatic nature of mobility—increasingly cars are attached to technology and divorced from physicality. And automobility can also mean increased singularity and insularity: "The individual, partially because of increases in mobility, was seen as being less dependent upon others, locale, or even time" (293n4). From their very inception, automobiles became sites for the projection of desires that have little to do with transportation.¹⁵ That is, we could say so many things *about* cars—how they run, their style, comfort level, fuel efficiency, how they contribute to global warming, why we need alternatives to cars—but cars are also signifiers for things well beyond their own forms, their use-value and capacities.

Cars keep tenets of American exceptionalism, including *freedom* and *mobility*, ever-present. They allow their drivers to express class position, community relation or affiliation. Cars made "white flight" to the suburbs possible, thereby transforming space in racially, gendered, and classed ways. But cars also provided a more private form of transportation for African Americans in the south during the era of Jim Crow legislation. If they could afford a car, they could avoid the segregation of public spaces, including buses, trolleys, and trains. But of course, even then, drivers had to stay on the move because most service stations and rest areas would not have allowed them to use the restroom; or they would have had to search for a safe place to stay, or for a restaurant that didn't refuse service.¹⁶

Certain cars are signifiers of racialized communities, and thus contribute to a sense of collective identity within those communities, as well as a sign of, or desire for, cultural segregation from those outside the community. Consider the lowrider, a staple of Chicano and Mexican communities in East LA and *Nuevomexicanos* in northern New Mexico. Jeremy Packer singles out the Cadillac as one example of automotive culture that both signifies a kind of social/class mobility, and is also a car that marks a driver as black or brown. He reads this trope through Ralph Ellison's *Cadillac Flambé* and various blaxploitation films to show



Figure 1. O.J. Simpson’s slow car chase on Los Angeles freeways in 1994.

how these productions present the Cadillac as a sign of success, and of criminality, gangsterism, and excess. As he argues: “One means of denying the benefits typically associated with class advancement is to call into question the legitimacy of that advancement” (195). So even though Cadillacs are a sign of mobility for African Americans, white cultural productions *and* disciplinary formations (such as the police) use the Cadillac as a form to legitimate racial profiling.¹⁷

Cars reveal something unique about any given cultural moment — its tensions and vibrations, the state of its political economy, or its technologies of subjugation. From America’s investments in the automobile, we come to know something about the contours and characteristics of this country’s global economies: financial, cultural, and environmental or ecological. For instance, the nascent driverless car, or the “autonomous car,” as some prefer, presents itself a suitable technology of neoliberalism: It will amass fortunes in the billions to a few; it allows a singular driver to become a passenger, thereby freeing that person up to do other things and remain productive; and it simultaneously and paradoxically proliferates desires for privacy while it functions by way of tracking our every move.¹⁸ The car is our witness to an increasingly privatized space that ensures additional insularity for those with racial and class privilege, while it paradoxically exposes those without. An upper-class white driver may feel good, *sincere*, about his decision to purchase a Tesla. He may also entrust his wealth to the very banks that finance pipelines and fracking. And he may drive, undetected, with a broken taillight.

The symbols at the center of these two images (see [figs 1 and 2](#)) invite the viewer to push play and engage with a moving image.

In one, we see the blur of a road and the stretched and distorted shadow of a white SUV. We might presume the truck is in motion. In the second image, the perspective shifts to a car’s interior; someone with a black wristwatch points a gun into the car. The gun suggests the



Figure 2. Office Jeronimo Yanez points his gun into Philando Castile's car. Castile's girlfriend Diamond Reynolds captures it all on Facebook Live.

subjects in the car have been made still—told to “freeze,” or perhaps they are already immobilized by a shot, or four.

The first image might be recognizable for its singularity, for the unexpected and spectacular ninety minutes in July 1994 that captured the attention of a television viewing audience. Ninety-five million people tuned in to O.J. Simpson evade arrest. It pre-empted Friday night television, including the fifth game of the NBA championship. Seven helicopters leased by local television stations followed the pursuit and broadcast the coverage, live, nationwide. As one viewer watching from a bar in Queens, NY put it, “This was the most compelling television It was cool, like the movie *The Fugitive* in real life” (Hernandez). But to watch the archival footage is to be reminded of how slow and calm the event actually was. A compilation of the live footage from network and local television reveals itself as a managed collage: the white Ford Bronco drives on the freeway at a steady 65 mph pace, sometimes slowing to 40 mph.¹⁹ A band of police cars follows, but with enough distance that much of the time, the viewer sees only the Bronco and a few passing cars on the adjacent freeway track, on their evening commute. One of the reporters remarks at the lack of traffic, which is highly unusual on a Friday evening; only later does it become clear to all, reporters and viewers alike, that the California Highway Patrol blocked freeway entrances. And at those entrances, crowds gathered—maybe to catch a glimpse of the white Ford Bronco, or to display publicly their support of the “The Juice.” Some chanted, as if transported back in time to O.J. as running back for the Buffalo Bills or San Francisco 49ers, “The Juice is loose! Go! Go! Go!”²⁰

The second image comes from a video that lasts only two minutes and thirty-eight seconds. But in that compressed time, the viewer learns of all that has just happened: that Philando Castile has just been shot four times by a police officer whose gun is still pointed at Castile

as he dies in the driver's seat of his car; that his fiancée Diamond Reynolds has to film this horrific scene in front of her with Facebook Live because she already knows that she needs to prove what has just happened. She knows that she must repeat the facts of her witnessing, and her daughter's witnessing, or else her testimony will be called into question. Reynolds employs the medium of Facebook Live to verify and validate her narration.

I haven't watched this video; there are arguments to be made for doing so, and for not doing so, for sharing the video as widely as possible in order to expose—in the most grueling detail—the truth of everyday brutalities that police inflict on black and brown bodies, or for refusing to share and participate in the spectacle or public display of state-sanctioned violence, and the deaths of black men. But whatever decision one makes, the events that led up to Castile's murder are knowable because, unlike the event on the LA freeway in 1994, Castile's murder could not be characterized as “highly unusual,” nor the reporting as “hearsay” (two words frequently used in the voice-overs in the white Ford Bronco video).²¹ The exact number of black men and women killed by police per year is difficult to obtain because law enforcement agencies likely fail to report all police shootings and death by other forms of police violence.²² But as the *Mapping Police Violence* site indicates, police killed at least 346 African Americans in the United States in 2015.²³

By the time Philando Castile's mother Valerie arrived at the hospital, her son was already dead, and she wasn't allowed to see his body. From the white Bronco, Simpson used his cellular phone to speak to the police; he told them to “back off” and that he wanted to go to his mother's house. He spoke with police while A.C. Cowlings, Simpson's friend, former teammate, and the registered owner of the Bronco, drove the 91 to the 405. The term *cellular phone* may strike today's viewer as somehow a bit awkward or formal; we would perhaps be more surprised if the driver or passenger *didn't* have a phone. And the phone with video capacity, especially the smartphone, has become a necessary object for the contingencies of encounter, for turning the gaze back onto the police—this, of course, Diamond Reynolds knew at a visceral level. Jeronimo Yanez, the officer who shot Castile multiple times, offers a distressed justification to Reynolds as Castile dies in front of them: “I told him not to reach for it. I told him to get his hand off it.” As Castile reached for his license, and not for the gun—the presence of which he had already disclosed, and for which he had a permit—he was shot four times inside his own car. Officers pulled Castile over, they say, because his taillight was out.

In her historical analysis of traffic stops and searches, Seo shows how as early as the 1920s, but certainly by the 1940s, cars were one of the most common settings for an individual to have a direct encounter with the police, especially given the ubiquity of the automobile in American landscapes. Cars have been, and continue to be, a primary site for the development of “police discretion,” or the power police have to make case-by-case decisions about whether or not to pursue police procedure: to pull someone over in the first place (for speeding, a broken taillight, expired tags); to issue a ticket; to search the car, and so on. She puts it this starkly: The “police’s discretionary authority metastasized from the regulation of the automobile” (1621).

These two videos, even the stills I have included here, offer two radically different narratives of two black men in their cars, pursued by police—two events mediated by media, including live video, a mobile phone, and the automobile. In Simpson’s case, the car mobilizes: Even though it stops the flow of the evening commute, on a Friday no less, the scene is characterized by mobility, where freeways and cardinal direction fill the distance and time of the pursuit. Castile’s apparent “broken taillight”—which itself had already achieved the status of a trope, a figuration that signals an imaginary state of existence (when is the taillight actually broken, or when is a white person ever stopped for such a thing?) at the center of racial profiling—becomes the catalyst for his death.

I have argued that *Tropic of Orange* makes productive use of metaphor and the fabulist ecologies in order to make present, and resonant, real ecological crises such as climate change and racialized violence. The close of the novel confirms that automobile habitation is only temporary, and not just because of the nature of class, race, and property ownership, but also because bullets and helicopters throw everything into deadly chaos—the National Guard, or the US military, or the militarized police force moves in. Buzzworm rescues Emi, who’s part of the *NewsNow* crew and takes a bullet—she’s also the girlfriend of another main character Gabriel, and, it turns out, Manzanar’s granddaughter.²⁴ “There she was, the *NewsNow* producer sunning herself on the *NewsNow* van. There was the shot and Buzzworm heroically scrambling up to pull her off the roof. The camera swung wildly looking for the direction of the shot” (250). Our perspective is one of watching the footage on television. But the camera only catches the first shot that sets off a “barrage with a horrible urgency” (250). As Buzzworm tries to navigate Emi through the traffic, he sees helicopters, a cloud of rainbow smoke, strafing machine guns, and multiple explosions (249). We never learn the origin of the shot, but soon the military, “in jungle camouflage,” makes its move down the canyon. And once again, *Tropic of Orange* appropriates and implicates media: Buzzworm notices that

the live monitor is too busy repeating the image of Emi taking a singular and fatal bullet, so the public will only remember her death, and not the mass killing of homeless people in their cars. The novel reminds us how cars are always something beyond themselves, and that the media used in relation to cars provide entertainment, become tools for surveillance, *and* for witnessing.²⁵

To stop traffic or disrupt transportation routes draws great attention because the effects of a jam, diversion, grounding, or cancellation ripple and widen quickly. To stall cars on a freeway or force passengers to miss their connections is to disrupt whole ecologies—the circuits and networks of our global economy that rely on the very forms of transportation that cause global temperatures to rise. There is a reason that Black Lives Matter activists stop traffic, especially automobile traffic on freeways.²⁶ I have argued that racism and climate change are both ecological crises, and that they persist and proliferate alongside accumulating evidence: the verifiable data that the earth is warming, or the countless videos captured with cell phones or dash cams that police shoot (and harass and assault) African Americans during traffic stops. The scale of climate change, the inexorable costs of global warming, and the ongoing, permissive violence against African Americans come into focus when we can look at the automobile and see past its glossy veneer, when we can push beyond the ecological differences between the electric car and the SUV, and realize that either one could be the stage for a brutal death. Who is the *we* of climate change? Of police shootings and traffic stops? Who stops traffic to draw attention to the crises of our age?

NOTES

1. Quoted in *The Telegraph* among many other prominent UK and US media sources on September 14, 2016. See also Grierson, Hume and Halasz.

2. See Godfrey, Parenti, Pilkey, McAdam, and Schuldt and Pearson.

3. Especially Carby, Collins, Spillers, Weheliye, Wynter.

4. A process that began with emancipation.

5. In her own analysis of *Tropic of Orange*, Julie Sze contends: “Literature offers a new way of looking at environmental justice, through visual images and metaphors, not solely through the prism of statistics. This new way of looking references the ‘real’ problems of communities struggling against environmental racism, and is simultaneously liberated from providing a strictly documentary account of the contemporary world” (163).

6. Myers puts it simply: An “ecocriticism that does not account for racism or include in its vision of a sustainable human relationship to the land the many perspectives on the nonhuman world that different cultures afford is

necessarily incomplete" (7). See his pp. 6–7 for a list of exceptions to the stated oversights and lacunae in ecocriticism, to which I will add recent Indigenous feminist scholars and critical geographers Todd, Zahara and Hird, and Sarah Hunt.

7. See also Smith's foundational study of African American environmental thought.

8. As reported in Parenti, 7.

9. Like Manzanar, Arcangel envisions multiple timescapes and ecologies: *He could see all 2,000 miles of the frontier/stretched across from Tijuana on the Pacific, its straight edge cutting through the Río Colorado, against the sharp edge of Arizona and the unnatural angle of Nuevo México/sliding along Rio Grand/tenderly caressing the supple bottom of Texas to the end of its tail/on the Gulf of México.* His visions outline the territories annexed in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe, and later he also claims to inhabit an even longer durée of colonial history, asserting he is over 500 years old. He is Cristobal Colón (197–98).

10. His identification with Cristobal Colón crystallizes his association with the orange, given that it was introduced to North American ecologies by Spanish colonization, perhaps even by Columbus' 1493 onslaught.

11. And of course, the 1990s was a decade of the "war on drugs" afterglow—of President Nixon's rhetorical "war on drugs" and President Reagan's very real "war on drugs," his administration's method for directly criminalizing migrants and African Americans in the borderlands and urban ecologies.

12. During WWII, the island itself became a key site for national defense.

13. I am indebted to Kathryn Bond Stockton's work for helping me think through the materiality of metaphor.

14. Seo cites Justice Scalia's negligence in *United States v. Jones* (2012). Scalia reasoned that the government needed a warrant to attach a GPS tracking device to the defendant's Jeep because "an automobile is 'private property,' [but] he overlooked the line of cases where the weight of authority concluded that cars were public property for Fourth Amendment purposes" (n. 15, 1620).

15. Among many other histories of the automobile, Wolfgang Sachs makes this argument. See also Kay, Thoms, Casey, Lackey, Primeau, Foster, and McShane.

16. The "Negro Motorist Green Book" (1949), a travel guide for African Americans that promised to help drivers avoid many difficulties and "embarrassments," is available for download at the University of Michigan's "Automobile in American Life and Society" site. http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Race/R_Casestudy/Negro_motorist_green_bk.htm. See here also Sugrue's essay for more about the use-value of automobiles in the Jim Crow south.

17. Packer puts it simply: The "automobile functions as a positive means of black empowerment while also providing a sight line for police and citizen indignation" (193).

18. Though a study from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory announced that the autonomous self-driving electric cab could emit from 87% to

94% fewer emissions per mile than a conventional gasoline car (Greenblatt and Saxena), the lower emission rates may be no match for the electricity and natural gas that will be extracted and fracked in order to make the cars go, autonomously.

19. The montage I refer to here is viewable at *The Huffington Post*, “Here’s What You Might Not Remember About O.J. Simpson’s Police Chase” Feb. 9, 2016.

20. B. Drummond Ayres Jr., “Disbelieving Crowd Cheers the Juice” *New York Times*, June 19, 1994.

21. At one point after several seconds of near silence, only the muffled sound of a helicopter tracking the Bronco, Larry King says, “no report on anything, other than the police keeping a clear distance behind. There’s no rule-book on this, because it hasn’t happened.” And yet, the week after I finished this essay, Terence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott were shot and killed in the same week by police—both were African American men, and in each case, their cars provided the necessary space or reference point for their deaths.

22. In 2014, Congress passed the Death in Custody Reporting Act of 2013, which mandates that states that receive federal criminal justice assistance grants report all deaths that occur in law enforcement custody. But previous versions of this act have yet to yield comprehensive data, and implementation will be slow. See Gross and Schatz.

23. See <http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/> for comprehensive and up-to-date data on police violence across the United States. Also “From Ferguson to Baton Rouge: Deaths of Black Men and Women at the Hands of Police” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-police-deaths-20160707-snap-htmlstory.html>.

24. Emi, a fascinating and complex character who deserves much more attention, particularly for her critiques of neoliberal multiculturalism, is named after the real-life Frank Seishi Emi. Emi was born in Los Angeles and became one of the leaders of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee, a Nikkei-led resistance against the performances of patriotism that were ubiquitous in Japanese American incarceration camps. Chambers-Letson, 119–31.

25. It was “amateur videotape” that caught four LAPD officers beating Rodney King in 1991. The officers were acquitted because jurors were not convinced that an eighty-one-second videotape captured the entire story. The same helicopter technology that brought coverage of the “Juice on the loose” also captured, and broadcast, the beating of Reginald Denny, a white man, in 1992 during the LA “riots” set off, finally, by King’s beating and the officers’ acquittal. Denny was pulled from his truck at the corner of Florence and Normandie in South Central LA in 1992. In a 2002 interview on NBC, Denny describes how moved he was by the 27,000 get-well cards he received; he also asserts the need for police and law enforcement accountability and that people “seem to forget it was black folks that saved my life.” The 2002 interview was reposted in 2012 here: <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Reginald-Denny-Looks-Back-on-the-LA-Riots--149165165.html>. For a comprehensive study of the use of media and visual screening of the LA “race riots,” see Darnell Hunt.

26. There are countless examples of this method employed by Black Lives Matter direct actions, including after the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile in July 2016, and coordinated actions in LA, Chicago, San Francisco, and Minneapolis in December 2015 to draw attention to police brutality during the height of holiday-shopping traffic.

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