Eco-Animation: Expanding the World of Environmental Animation

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ABSTRACT

Animation holds a powerful ability to transport viewers to magical worlds as well as reveal aspects about the world around us that cannot be captured by live-action cinema or even expressed through words. An ecocritical look into cartoons has begun to unfold within the field of what has been called "enviro-toons," which examines specifically cartoons with obvious environmental messages as themes. I propose a new term, "eco-animation," which can open the field even further to examine other forms of animation beyond cartoons as well as ecological issues that might be layered beneath narratives that aren't overtly environmental. This project examines popular animated examples such as the films *Rango, Epic, The Croods,* the videogame *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag,* and the popular culture icons the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. These texts open the door for eco-animation to reveal further the power of animation to convey layered ecological messages and issues to a large audience.

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I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of my committee: Professor Slovic, Professor James, and Professor Banks. Thank you for your guidance which went well beyond just this thesis project and helped me throughout my last two academic years. It was Professor Banks's film class that inspired me to pursue my interests in film as a literary text. Professor Slovic's ecocritical class pushed me further and helped guide me into exploring enviro-toons and establishing the concept of eco-animation. Professor James' Caribbean course opened my eyes to not only new genres and authors, but also to the amazing history of a unique place and helped me push eco-animation into new territory.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my father, Charles Andrew Whealy. He showed me that hard work was a reward in itself and to never take anything for granted. His strength and willpower to overcome great adversity has been inspirational and has helped me achieve more than I ever thought was possible. As one of the greatest storytellers I have ever known, he will be missed, but I will make sure that his stories are not forgotten.

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CHAPTER 1: EXPANDING THE WORLD OF ENVIRO-TOONS

Until recently, film theory had been premised on the assumption that the live-action cinematographic "recording of reality" was the essence, or at least the default option of cinema. Film required a photographic process—the mechanical recording of images through the registration of reflected light onto a photosensitive chemical surface. But the digital revolution has thrown this assumption into question to the point that some now maintain the opposite: that animation, or the graphic manipulation of images, is now the default option of cinematic media, and that the mimetic representation of reality is, at best, the exception that proves the new rule. Some have claimed that mimetic representation is in its death throes and that the era of cinema—moving images captured on film emulsion and projected onto two-dimensional, rectangle screens in front of large audiences—is over. Others argue that it is merely film that is coming to its end; cinema, the *kinematic* or moving arts, will continue in new forms.

-Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (329)

I recently watched Ang Lee's heavily animated adaptation of Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* (2012). At one point in the film, the main character, Piscine, sits in a half-tarp-covered 30-person survival boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, sharing it with an orangutan and a broken-legged zebra. It is tragic, but as a viewer there is no sense of danger, until the hyena comes out from underneath the tarp-covered area of the boat. It almost instantly goes for the lamed zebra and then it was on to the orangutan. To most viewers this is a moment of deep sorrow, until a Bengal tiger leaps out from under the tarp covered area and swiftly ends the life of the hyena. The sense of relief is clear and yet we must question why this emotional development is felt. Why did instant disgust run through me when I saw the hyena? Why is the tiger's killing so much more acceptable than that of a hyena? Why was my heart broken when the orangutan gave its final gaze into the camera and death was certain? Most of us do not have any relationship to these animals beyond zoos and the television. There are obvious cinematic effects that play into our responses: the sounds, the human-like gaze of the orangutan, the helplessness of the zebra, and the fact that the hyena's killing was unnecessary. When I caught sight of the hyena my

only experience with hyenas came forth and played heavily on my opinion of it, that experience being the evil and twisted actions of Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed from Disney's *The Lion King* (1994).

All of this made me question how I have established my relationships with nature and the other animals and insects that I share the planet with. The forming of perception and understanding of other beings and objects is complex and unfolds over a lifetime, and we cannot help but be heavily influenced by the cultures we are exposed to. One cultural element that almost all individuals are familiar with is cartoons. Cartoons hold a unique place in Western culture as they serve purposes of both entertainment and education for the youth. Most individuals have very little experience and interaction with animals and nature. I have never owned a cat or bird, but I have seen and bonded with their anthropomorphized versions, Sylvester and Tweety Bird, which have shaped my perception of those animals. Animation has evolved and has been encouraged to be a multi-accessible form of entertainment that plays to adults just as much to the children viewers. Often the dialogue and visual elements are layered in ways that allow the children to enjoy the simplistic slapstick humor while the more complicated, layered dialogue is intended for the adults. Animation deserves closer examination because viewing cartoons as a child, and even as an adult, shapes our understanding and perception of nature, animals, and environmental issues. Every aspect of animation, from its images to its sounds, is constructed by humans and is a representation of what we perceive our world to be. What separates animation from live-action cinema—an ever-blurring line as computer-generated imagery continues to intertwine with live-action—is the accessibility of real world objects. For example, when a tree or dog is needed on set, live-action

filmmakers go and find a tree or a dog. Filmmakers working in animation are forced to calculate and evaluate what a "tree" or "dog" should look like in the world they are creating, making sure the object aligns itself with the audience's expectations of that world. This essentially limitless representation is extremely powerful, making animation an increasingly important aspect of our culture that deserves further exploration. It is important to look into the role animation plays in multi-billion dollar industries of film, television cartoons, and videogames to establish a firm understanding of how the world around us is being represented and re-presented to us as viewers and consumers of animation.

Introduction to Ecocinema and Enviro-toons

Ecocinema—also known as ecocritical film studies, green film studies, ecomedia, ecocinecriticism, and various other terms that are used to look at the relationship between film and the environment—is an ever-growing field. As Adrian Ivakhiv claims, "film and visual media are among the growth industries for ecocriticism, and for 'green cultural studies' more broadly" (Garrard 144). These studies have significantly progressed since Jhan Hochman's *Green Cultural Studies* (1998), Gregg Mitmman's highly influential book *Reel Nature* (1999), and David Ingram's *Green Screen* (2000). Over the last couple of years dozens of books and anthologies have been published covering the many aspects of film and its relation to ecology and the environment. Yet, one aspect of film that has just begun to be explored is animation. Many books and anthologies have included them briefly, but only a couple have dedicated themselves completely to the medium. Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann's *That's All Folks? (2011)* and Deidre Pike's *Enviro-toons (2012)* have laid a solid foundation for the discipline, but there is plenty of room for

growth. Both books use the term *enviro-toons*, which has often been credited to cultural critic Jaime Weinmann (Pike 12). For Murray and Heumann "enviro-toons are animated shorts or feature films that address environmental concerns" ("Folks" 2). This definition serves well for speaking about environmentally focused cartoons as it places the words environment and cartoon in relation to each other. However, the term is very specific and can easily be misused, as seen in the applications of Murray and Heumann and Pike. In an era where CGI dominates most large-budget films, another term should be used so as to include more variety within the world of animation. Pike explores this rise of animation outside of traditional cartoons:

> Animation's reach now extends far beyond the world of Saturday morning cartoons. Nearly all of the top twenty-five box-office blockbuster films to date were made employing the digital animation toll of computer-generated imagery. An increasing number of films, like *Avatar*, qualify as animation in the definition used by the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences for award purposes. The term *animation* is applied to the process of making a film frame-by-frame, most often done nowadays through the use of computer-generated imagery. (21)

Animation now dominates almost all large films and cartoons are no longer created for a small audience of children. The age of digital animation has opened up the genre to a large audience where animated features can make millions and sometimes even billions of dollars at the box office. Of the top twenty highest-grossing films three are entirely animated—*Toy Story 3* (2010), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Despicable Me 2* (2013)—and *all* twenty use CGI on some level with most being heavily dependent on it, such as *Avatar* (2009) and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) (Box Office Mojo). This heavily alters the way

films are made, the amount of money invested in them, and the target audience. This shift can result in a change in messaging, plot, and dialogue, so as to capture the attention of both the young and old. For the purpose of inclusiveness and expansion, I propose the term *eco-animation*, allowing for a future broadening of the field and an accurate term to accompany it. Eco-animation can include CGI found in live-action films, as well as animation in videogames and other digital formats, in a manner far more accurate than the term *enviro-toons*. In *That's All Folks?*, Murray and Heumann describe enviro-toons as "animated shorts and feature films with ecology at their center—ask an audience to re-perceive everyday issues, themes, and knowledge related to differing phases of the American environmental movement: human ecology, organismic ecology, economic ecology, and chaotic ecology" (2). Even within their own definition of enviro-toons the focus is beyond the environment and focused on ecology. The issue with enviro-toons is that it leaves out animation that does not fall into "animated shorts or feature films" and those films that do not put "ecology at the center." There are many other forms of animation and animation without an ecological focus that deserve attention for their layered messages being presented beyond the center of the centralized storyline.

Taking Eco-animation Beyond Environmentally Focused Films

The majority of ecocritical analyses of animation have been focused on films that directly deal with an environmental issue or the portrayal of animals. There is an absence of analytical work on films that lack direct environmental messages, but still capture and represent the natural and manufactured world. In *That's All Folks?*, Murray and Heumann briefly touch upon this in an essay entitled "The UPA and the Environment: A Modernist Look at Urban Nature," which explores an animation studio from the 1940s through the

1970s. This studio, United Productions of America, "drew its stance on ecology from its technology driven modernist perspective" and was known for its minimalist animation ("Folks" 79). As Murray and Heumann state, "UPA emphasized this minimalist aesthetic rather than narrative and conveyed its political stance in the same way abstract modern art communicates its message—through visual symbol and metaphor" ("Folks" 84). Murray and Heumann reference the studio's well known films *Gay Purr-ee, Rooty Toot Toot, Gerald McBoing Boing,* and *1001 Arabian Nights.* These films connect the human and nonhuman world, as well as the pastoral and urban. *Gay Purr-ee* "highlights a pastoral nature that contrasts with the ugliness of urban space" ("Folks" 84). In *Rooty Toot Toot* exhibits the "narrative and thematic grounding point of the innocence of pastoral nature as superior to a corrupt urban space riddled by the rooty-toot-toot of weapons" ("Folks" 85). Eco-animation needs to continue focusing on analytical work that goes beyond only environmentally focused films and look into binaries such as the representation of the pastoral and urban settings as Murray and Heumann have briefly done.

There are numerous influential cartoons that take place in the urban environment that lack a direct environmental message, but remain influential in shaping our perception of space and place. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*¸ which has enthralled viewers since the 1980s, depicts the streets of New York City as dirty and dangerous, but more importantly it explores the underground landscape of the city. The underground is an often-overlooked setting, but is nonetheless an environment with people, animals, and waste. In Murray and Heumann's essay "Reconstructing Underground Urban Space in *Dark Days*," they analyze Mark Singer's documentary, *Dark Days*, which explores the tunnels of New York City and the people that reside there. They ask, what happens "when

humans not only enter this technologically driven underworld but also reconstruct, domesticate, and humanize it as a space to escape from the savage city above them?" ("Ecology 57). Similar questions can be applied to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and a comparison can be made by analyzing the world of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in relation to *Dark Days*; this is done in Chapter 4. There is much more to be explored in the realm of eco-animation than simply environmentally focused cartoons, but it requires us to dig a little deeper and think outside of a specific discipline.

The Interdisciplinarity of Eco-Animation

The focus of literary studies is increasingly moving away from written texts and is being applied to new mediums, such as film. As Pike claims, "ecocritics and scholars seem increasingly less allergic to popular culture texts. A study of these widely experienced and easily accessible narratives is, by necessity, an interdisciplinary project that pulls together strands of theories, ideas, and practices" (17). Ecocinema is almost by nature interdisciplinary as all groups are exposed to messages from film and animation. As a result, many factions have taken interest in ecocinema, which has lead to a discipline with many groups providing input, often by referencing work that is done outside their field. For instance, Murray and Heumann collaboratively work together from different fields of study as Murray comes from the English department and Heumann from the Communications Studies department at Eastern Illinois University. Pike describes *Enviro-toons* as aiming to "invoke critical insights across disciplines and decades from literary and media ecologists, ecocritics, ecofeminists, rhetoricians, social commentarians, film theorists, anarchists, poets, and bloggers" (14). She specifically references "McLuhan's taking of medium's temperature, Meeker's discussions of tragic and comic discourse

modes, and Bakhtin's delineations of monologic and dialogic texts" to make her argument on how animation conveys environmental messages (16). As the field continues to grow others will be able to rely on the texts written about ecocinema. However, the field has been built on interdisciplinarity and will likely—and hopefully—continue to reach beyond the use of only ecocinema and film theory texts. The following chapters reach into multiple fields of study and draw from varying perspectives to provide well-rounded interdisciplinary arguments.

Moving Beyond Saturday Morning Cartoons

The debate over whether or not television and cartoons are good or bad for children began almost immediately after the television established itself in living rooms. Gregg Mitman's chapter "Domesticating Nature on the Television Set" from his book *Reel Nature* reflects on how far the world of animation has come since the days of Saturday morning cartoons with a target audience of children. He analyzes the 1950s TV show *Zoo Parade* as well as the 1960s show *Wild Kingdom*, and explores the reception and concerns that parents 50 years ago had regarding animation. Regarding the 1950s and television entertainment, Mitman claims:

> Educators, psychologists, and sociologists optimistically endorsed television as a new medium that would not only bring the family together, but also offer educational enrichment in the lives of children. Such optimism was tempered by critics who viewed children as helpless victims of television, and implicated it in the corruption and debasement of the moral values and tastes of American youth. (135)

This argument sounds all too familiar as parental groups continue to dispute in favor of and against television and the appeal of animation. A 1954 U.S. Senate Subcommittee focused on the rise of juvenile delinquency found that "70 percent of adults questioned in a nationwide Gallup survey placed part of the blame on excessive violence and lust portrayed in comic books and television and radio crime programs" (135). Mitman also compares 1950s views on childhood to the time period's view on nature, stating that "like pristine nature, childhood, conceived as a time of innocence, offered a place of grace from the horrific acts of destruction and degenerative influences wrought by modern civilization. Both were hallowed spaced in American society that needed to be preserved" (135). This link between entertainment and nature in the 1950s and 1960s also represents a shift in the accessibility to nature. Mittman refers to nature as being "an exclusive playground patronized by the elite and upper middle class" which had then been "appropriated by corporate America and mass culture" (153). This relationship between humans and nature, including animals, was represented on television and in cartoons, which lead to a lucrative market in pet keeping and tourism (153). The argument that children are "helpless victims to television" might be excessive, but parents are still highly concerned with the messages being sent via TV and especially cartoons.

Showalter's Three Stages and Ivakhiv's Fourth

Adrian Ivakhiv claims in his essay "Teaching Ecocriticism and Cinema" that ecocriticism and ecocinema have been shaped by Cheryll Glotfelty's adaptation of Elaine Showalter's "three stages in development of feminist criticism" (Garrard 144). These three stages are: examination of 'images of nature,' the 'literary tradition' stage, and the 'theoretical' stage. He argues that ecocinema has mostly focused on the first two stages

and has analyzed ‘images and representation’ and examined genres and individual films (145). Ivakhiv claims that what has remained largely undeveloped is the third, ‘theoretical’ phase, though this has been changing recently. There is arguably, according to Ivakhiv, a fourth phase, one in which the theorization of ecological issues in relation to a given medium turns back on itself so as to place the very medium into question (145). Ivakhiv argues that film is much different than the literary medium because the production process is much more complex and there are numerous “ecological costs” in creating a film: “Thinking about films ecocritically involves not only examining representations of nature, or of human-nature relations, *within* films; it must also involve examining the film medium itself, including the production, distribution and consumption of films and the by-products generated at each step of the cycle” (145).

Within the same year that Ivakhiv published his essay, *The Cinematic Footprint* by Nadia Bozak was published. Her book covers much of the fourth phase that Ivakhiv mentions and, as Bozak states, is “concerned with issues of production and representation” (Bozak 12). The book encapsulates those arguments that the fourth phase tries to answer. Bozak is able to bring forth the reality that filmmaking is much more than a camera capturing actors; the process is immense and complicated, and the end product is filled with messages and arguments. Even as we move forward into a digital age that seems to use no physical elements, there is a physical world required. A digital film may not require a DVD, but it still requires a physical storage device. Furthermore, it is the most commonly used platform to spread messages. “The image—cinematic, photographic, digital, or analog—is not only materially and economically inseparable from the biophysical environment, it is the environmental movement’s primary pedagogical and

propagandistic tool" (Bozak 3). In the process of conveying messages and educating viewers, images have taken center stage as one of the most influential mediums to work with, a reality that is perhaps one of the most important aspects of ecocinema.

Ivakhiv's and Bozak's arguments can easily be applied to animation. The "ecological cost" in animation has been significantly reduced since the introduction of digital animation. The days of hand-drawn, inked, and painted cells are almost obsolete. The ecological impact of having to ship the cells across the world to painting studios in South Korea and Japan are no longer prominent. One could argue that the introduction of digital animation has been an immense step in the reduction of the ecological cost of production. However, animation is much more than just creating slides on a computer. A great deal of money is spent on film research to create the most accurate animation possible. Companies like Pixar send animators around the world to capture the way the natural environment looks in person. Also, in many cases, animators use motion capture technology that requires an array of technological devices and special stages for the motion actors to act on. The resulting film is more of a spectacle with a significant draw at the theatres and beyond.

The "Buy" Products of Animated Films

Although arguments against the production of animation might have dwindled due to the introduction of the digital process, there still remains a huge ecological impact in the "by-products" of cartoons. Claire Malloy's essay "Nature Writes the Screenplays: Commercial Wildlife Films and Ecological Entertainment" investigates the industry behind filmmaking. She discusses the branding of Disney and their efforts to be seen as an environmentally friendly corporation. Disney has faced harsh criticism for their portrayal

of animals and nature in their films as well as their amusement parks. In response to this they released a corporate responsibility report in 2008, which stated that "the company's environmental policy focused on five key areas: water and energy conservation; greenhouse gas emissions reduction; waste minimization; ecosystem conservation; and a commitment to 'engage and inspire' stakeholders to 'make positive impacts on the environment' by 'integrating environmental messages into products, guest experiences and media platforms worldwide'" (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 176). This policy reflects the consumers' demands for film companies to make morally sound decisions on how they create films and the messages they send to audiences.

Disney's production of products includes a long list of toys, house wares, school supplies and more based on their films. Lynne Dickson Bruckner's "Bambi and Finding Nemo: A Sense of Wonder in the Wonderful World of Disney?" is an intriguing essay that not only serves as a fine example of eco-animation comparative work, but also as an insight on the direct and indirect ecological costs of the film industry. The film *Finding Nemo (2003)* makes a clear argument against the capturing of tropical fish and as Bruckner argues "at least some of the public has learned that 95 percent of tropical fish are captured in the wild" (Willoquet-Maricondi 201). The public education surrounding the release of the film was due in part to the work of environmental groups, such as the Ocean Futures Society.

The film's positive impact through messaging led to ironic results. Citing Marsha Walton, Bruckner claims that "while both the Humane Society of the United States and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) praised the film 'for its message of freedom and respect for animals,' *Finding Nemo* boosted business in pet stores"

(Willoquet-Maricondi 200-201). Viewers of the film walked away from the film feeling a desire of stewardship or a strong emotional connection to the characters to the point that they wanted to replicate it in their own lives. They did not understand the complexity of the tropical fish trade and its environmental impact, nor the importance of being an informed viewer. Attempting to be an informed viewer, and therefore an informed consumer, can be difficult, especially since the cartoon market often includes purchasing the by-products for children. Bruckner states: "While social awareness has probably increased, Disney consumers have long been trained to buy the vast array of products that accompany its films … the purchasing habits (and illusions) of Disney viewers extend beyond the official product line … children who have grown up under Disney's tutelage far too often want their animated animal characters brought to life and are disappointed by the real animal" (202). Animated features have had this result before and have led to animals being abandoned once the novelty wears off and children realize that pet ownership is not the experience that they saw on the television screen.

There is an immense commercial world in the animation industry that exists beyond the film itself. In regards to animated films, parents must be concerned not only with the message of the film, but with the company's social actions during the production process of the film as well as the by-products they are releasing along the film. Bruckner's conclusion further delves into Ivakhiv's claim that films have by-products:

> It may not be difficult to explain to a five-year old why a stuffed Nemo might just be a better option than buying a live one, especially given post-*Finding Nemo* exposés on tropical fish trade. Disney would certainly remain happy if we choose to purchase the *Finding Nemo* 16-inch Crush Plush Doll, and any other member of

> the cast of the film. But then, we will also have to consider what the plush dolls are made of, the labor conditions under which they are produced, and whether they can be recycled. Either way, the tension between our own consumerist and environmentalist drives will continue. (Willoquet-Maricondi 202)

This issue that Bruckner is referencing could be one of the next stages of eco-animation. There is much to be divulged about the cartoon toy business and its environmental impact.

Individuals Saving the Planet in 90 Minutes

Environmentally focused films are tasked with conveying a message and a solution in an entertaining yet educational way. In the world of animation, the battle of good versus evil is solved within twenty to ninety minutes, and often by an individual or small community, whereas the world outside and its environmental issues takes place over a much longer period and requires great participation. This longer period, much like the slow violence Rob Nixon discusses in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, is much harder to capture and use to engage an audience. More often than not people are watching animated features for entertainment. Even if they enjoy learning from the film, entertainment takes precedence. It is incredibly difficult to entertain an audience with the slow unfolding reality of climate change or oil spills. As Pike states, "U.S. audiences become impatient with narratives that move too slowly. It's all about speed" (18).

The other aspect of animation as entertainment, other than speed, is that of participation in creating social change. There are two dominant views on how films approach complex social issues, such as the environment. Ingram cites the Marxist critics Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner and their argument that "the political problems raised

by the construction of heroism and villainy in melodrama are matched…by the tendency for Hollywood movies to formulate social and political problems as conflicts between individuals" (4). Standing in opposition to this view is Richard Slotkin, who, as Ingram states, "argues that the construction of social conflicts in individual terms does *not* necessarily individualize power relations. Instead, he points out that the relationship between individual character types in a work of popular fiction can stand for complex, systemic power relationships" (Ingram 4). Slotkin's position seems to be more helpful and the one that can have a larger impact. Instead of viewing the individualization as an oversimplification, the characters can be explored and analyzed to uncover the possible issues they represent. This is the focus of eco-animation.

Outline and Conclusion

The goal of this project is to expand upon enviro-toons and open new doorways to be explored by future scholars on environmental messages and issues found in animation. Each chapter represents one more possibility for others to expand on this ripe field. There are numerous approaches that can be taken in the effort to further explore this new field of research, including looking into messages layered beneath overtly environmental messages in animation, looking at other forms of animation such as videogames, and bringing new voices from other genres of literature and other fields into the ecocriticism conversation. Each chapter is an attempt at doing just this.

Chapter 1, "Looking Beyond Water Rights: Environmental Issues in *Rango*" is an analytical essay that looks beyond the obvious message of water rights that the central storyline centers itself on in Gore Verbinksi's 2011 computer animated film *Rango.* There are numerous secondary messages being made as the story unravels. Among these many

messages is the placement of human-made garbage reused by the anthropomorphized animals. This message, along with the many others, opens questions of how animation portrays human waste, how it misrepresents serious issues of littering, our process of throwing things away, and its impact on the world of animals and nature.

Chapter 2, "Making History and Exploiting the Caribbean: A Post-Colonial Ecocritical Examination of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*," looks into a different world of animation —videogames. It uses post-colonial theory to explore the world of videogame animation and the virtual Caribbean world found in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. This chapter focuses on issues of history-"making" and those in the position to write it as well as issues of environmental exploitation and the misrepresentation of nature as an abundant and limitless resource.

Chapter 3, "Bringing Humans Down to Size: Animation's Power to Enter the Ecosublime and Restructure the Human-Nonhuman Binary," is an interdisciplinary approach to examining animation's ability to resize humans in their relationship with nature. It uses the animated films *The Croods*, *Epic*, and *Ferngully* to explore this issue as well as the Hudson River School paintings to examine how the human-nonhuman relationship has been represented and how it has evolved.

Chapter 4, "Subterranean Homesick Ooze: Constructing the Urban Underground and Violence against the Nonhuman in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*," puts the documentary *Dark Days* and the animated series *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* into conversation with each other. It uses Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann's analysis of *Dark Days* and the issue of urban wilderness and "civilizing the underground" to show

that the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* represents the underground as a safe, White, suburban space while the above ground space remains wild, dangerous, and violent.

These chapters are just a drop in the bucket of possibilities for eco-animation. It is the goal of this project to continue and further the arguments already made by the likes of Robin L. Murray, Joseph K. Heumann, and Deidre M. Pike. Murray and Heumann published their book *That's All Folks?* in 2011 and in the following year Pike conversed with that book when she published *Enviro-toons* and ended her book with a seven-word paragraph, "That's all, folks. Let the transformation begin" (Pike 175). It is my hope that my project proves that the transformation has begun and to show, "That's not all folks, not even close."

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CHAPTER 1: LOOKING BEYOND WATER RIGHTS: ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN *RANGO*

Applying scholarly approaches to animated texts is more than a frivolous exercise; it's one that benefits an understanding of how environmental realities might be represented in profound and useful ways for a wide, engaged audience.

-Diedre Pike, *Enviro-toons: Green Themes in Animated Cinema and Television* (21)

The 2011 Nickelodeon animated film *Rango* is a classic western tale of a hero's journey to self-discovery. The film is part of a new age of animation that looks to capture an audience of all ages. It is heavily influenced by classic western films, which can be seen in its subtle references. Murray, Huemann, and many film critics have noted that it is "an obvious homage to *Chinatown*," the 1974 Roman Polanski film, as both films focus on water (*Eco-Corral* xi). As of this time there has not been an in-depth ecocritical analysis of the film, though Murray and Huemann acknowledge its relation to classic westerns in the "Preface and Acknowledgement" section of their newest book, *Gunfight at Eco-Corral.* While *Rango*'s blatant environmental theme of water usage makes it an enviro-toon case study, there are many sub-plots and subtle messages that can be further explored using the focus of eco-animation.

The film is unique because it appeals to two audiences—the animation and slapstick humor appeal to child viewers while the quick-witted, complex dialogue appeals to the adults. Both of these aspects, visual and dialogue, reveal that the film represents the desert as a habitable place only through alteration and human engineering. It also sends the message that there is not a place that is independent from human influence. As the film works through issues of land ownership, development, water rights, natural habitats, and humankind's relationship to nature, it becomes quite contradictory to its own message.

Even as it denounces and defeats progress and development, it offers a solution that is dependent on progress and development.

The Unlikely Hero from the West

The opening scene of *Rango* reveals the main character, an unnamed chameleon, in a terrarium placed in the back of a car traveling down a Mojave Desert highway. This artificial environment plays an important role in establishing the character of Rango and where he comes from. Rango is a pet who is kept captive in a small 25 gallon glass tank, which serves as a representation of the manufactured world that we inhabit ourselves. There is a picture of a natural landscape on the back of his tank, he has a swimming pool, a fake palm tree, half of a Barbie doll, and a friend, Mr. Tim, an orange plastic wind-up fish. Through this scene we learn the characteristics and personality of Rango, the average American. He is an educated, articulate, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing, anthropomorphized chameleon, a reflection of his knowledge obtained from being raised by humans. He is an ill equipped outsider to the habitat where his species naturally resides. As one of the singing owls who narrates the story later says, "Here in the Mojave Desert animals have had millions of years to adapt to the harsh environment, but the lizard? He is going to die." It sends the message that there is a big difference between a pet chameleon and a wild one. As the opening scene works to a close his tank is thrown from the car and into a hero's journey through the desert.

Nature is Dangerous and Dirty

From the very moment Rango is thrown from the moving car, water and the harsh desert environment become the focus of the film. His swimming water instantly dries up on the hot pavement of the road. The harsh sun beams down as he pours the last drop of

water left onto his tongue only to have it sizzle and evaporate. This world which Rango has been thrown into is harsh and dangerous. The first character he meets is an armadillo version of Don Quixote named Roadkill, who has been run over and split in half trying to cross the road. This dangerous road serves as the intersection between nature and civilization. The film will later reveal that on the other side is Las Vegas, but Roadkill sends him the other direction, towards the animal town of Dirt. What arises in the next five minutes of the film is the introduction of the natural world, which is filled with danger and waste.

Rango walks across the seemingly desolate desert in search of Dirt, but soon encounters a hawk. As the bird swoops down to snatch him, he is able to evade the hawk by first hiding in a rusted tin can, which the bird gets stuck on its head, and secondly by crawling into an old glass Coke bottle that sits next to a used car tire. After eluding the bird, Rango finds refuge for the night in a culvert, which shows his inability to understand how to survive without a man made structure. In a later scene, Rango must again avoid the grasp of the hawk by hiding in an old vending machine.

The presence of garbage in the desert blurs the lines between natural landscape and human waste, a theme that continues throughout the film. Rango makes it to the town of Dirt, where most of the rest of the film takes place. Dirt is a typical Western genre film town that is also a hybrid of natural objects and manmade garbage, which is cleverly used for humor. It has a bathroom that is an old empty Pepto-Bismol bottle, a gas can serves as the town's water tower, and a five gallon water cooler jug is used to store water, the town's currency, in the bank. This hybrid world sends a message that garbage is part of the

natural world, which is an accurate reflection on the condition of the planet. This goes against Ingram's argument on how Hollywood reflects the natural landscape:

> The cinematic construction of natural landscape as pristine is based on an aesthetics of exclusion, that omits from landscape images all signs of human intervention in nature, such as roads, buildings, walls, machinery, telegraph wires and litter….Nature tends to be shown only at its pristine best, a tourist gaze from which what is undesirable or ugly is omitted. (Ingram 26)

Almost anywhere you go, even into the middle of the Mojave Desert, you are bound to find garbage. Unlike most representations of the natural landscape *Rango* reflects a place where "human intervention" has clearly left its mark. The film includes "roads, buildings, walls, machinery, telegraph wires and litter" as it encroaches in a town that has the setting of being 150 years in the past, but is in the modern era. Desert land is often viewed as a wasteland and it gets treated that way. However, it is the relationship that the animals have with the garbage that sends a complicated message.

The animals are shown as being able to work with the garbage because in their world the garbage is part of the natural world. To children this could send the message that animals not only have the ability to live productively with garbage, but that they rely on it. A responsible viewer should inform children that animals do, in fact, have to live with the consequences of human waste, but it is not humorous like the movie suggests.

Understanding your Bioregion

The film pursues an interesting angle in representing the relationship that the citizens of Dirt have with water. Water is the currency of the town and the citizens of Dirt gather every Wednesday and do a choreographed dance before going on a journey just

outside of town to a water spigot. The citizens each carry a water bottle and sing a tune as they walk to the spigot. The tone of this scene is deliberately religious. When two town workers lift up the circular turn handle the design has a cross in it. The citizens praise it and wish for it to bring water. When the spigot is turned on only a drop of mud comes out and lands on Rango. The townspeople turn violent and want the death of Rango and blame him. Their relationship with water is very mystical and superstitious. As silly as this scene seems the relationship that the characters have with water is much like the average human.

We are greatly disconnected from understanding where or how we get water, and most of our other resources. We turn on our faucet and water comes out. We do not think about where the nearest aquifer is, how water gets to and from a water tower, or how it is purified. We may not have a worshipping relationship with our sinks and water fountains, but if we were to lose access with it we might have very similar feelings as the townspeople of Dirt.

There is a scene later in the film that once again addresses the disconnection between humans and water. A posse is put together to go underground and find the bandits who stole the last of the town's water. A tunnel leads to a large underground opening and a discussion gets started by members of the posse. Waffles asks, "What is this place?" to which Miss Beans responds, "It's an aquifer." He turns to another character, Buford, and asks, "What's an aquifer?" and Buford responds hesitantly yet confidently, "Well, it's for aqua." This dialogue reveals just how disconnected the characters are from understanding how and where they get water. The film does not have an educational tone, yet it is moments like these that children viewers can ask about and adult viewers can reflect on

and perhaps investigate their relationship with water. It provides a great opportunity for a conversation to be started on the local resources that they consume and the impact their use has on it. In *The Bioregional Imagination* the editor's claim that bioregionalism has influential power over identity and that "our local bioregion…rather than, or at least supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity" (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster 4). The characters of *Rango* are a great reflection of this as the town is made up of cats, possums, lizards, etc. Their identity is shaped by their bioregion and their relationship with water much more so than their species or other factors.

The Bad Business of Land Development

The Mayor of Dirt is a representation of corrupt government and large land developers, which the film clearly attacks. He buys up all the land and controls the water of the town so as to control the citizens. David Ingram, in his book *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema,* argues that there are two major villains to the environment: the hunter and the businessman. As Ingram states, "The second recurrent villain in the environmental movie is the representative of big business: the property developer, oil tycoon or nuclear plant manager" (3). The Mayor is a combination of big business, property developer, and even oil tycoon, as the town's relationship to water often parallels the oil business. The water lines eerily resemble oil and gas pipelines more than water lines. However, the film contradicts itself with the resolution to the film and remains unclear and undefined.

There is no moral message of water conservation with which to wrap up the story. Rango uses water that was diverted from a waterline that ran to Las Vegas to flood the town and defeat the evil mayor and his plans for development. The solution to all the evil

was dependent on human technology and land development, the exact evil the characters were fighting. Also, much of the town is destroyed in this process as the water shoots up from the ground and tears down buildings. Dirt is literally washed away with water. The town rejoices and dances and swims in the streets, but the future remains unclear. The viewer is left wondering if they will "progress" now that they have what seems to be unlimited water.

At first look most would claim that *Rango* is an environmental film with a clear water conservation message. However, on closer examination the film never denounces water consumption, but rather, has a clear anti-development stance. To the Mayor land development is equal to progress and as he tells Rango early on in the film, "[c]ontrol the water and you control everything." In a scene that starts to reveal the Mayor's secret plans he gives a speech to Rango about progress and development. He says, "I was here before the highway split this great valley. I watched the march of progress and I learned a thing or two." His motivations are never fully explained, but he has clearly been influenced by what he has seen from the human development of Las Vegas. He is consumed with a desire to leave the historical west, a place that he is in complete control of, and create a new modern world. It reflects the blind ambition that exists in development and raises the question of what should be built and why. As he tells one of his henchmen, "[i]t's a new west, Jake. We ain't got no room for gunslingers anymore. We're businessmen now." The film presents a direct attack on the modern business world. To be a modern bad guy is to be a businessman.

Conclusion: Beyond the Watering Hole

Everyone walks away from a film with differing perspectives on the message of the movie, a fact that is often overlooked. In watching animated features views are going to vary greatly as children take away certain messages and adults take away others. A quick look at *Rango* and viewers see a movie about water, but along the way there are numerous messages, some inaccurate and others great conversation starters. Watching an animated film can be a great conversation starter for both children and adults on how to understand our relationship with the environment.

Rango has an obvious water theme and could be labeled an enviro-toon, but an eco-animation analysis of the film reveals layers beyond the environmentally focused aspects of the film to uncover other messages being conveyed. There are numerous directions eco-animation can take in the future. Possible work could be done with urban environments, comparing cartoons from different time periods, cross-cultural comparisons, cartoons with no apparent environmental concerns, or even animation beyond cartoons such as videogames. Eco-animation work is important and cartoons will continue to persuade and shape our views on nature, animals, and environmental issues.

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CHAPTER 2: MAKING HISTORY AND EXPLOITING THE CARIBBEAN: A POST-COLONIAL ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION OF *ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG*

The emerging field of video game theory is itself a convergence of a wide variety of approaches including film and television theory, semiotics, performance theory, game studies, literary theory, computer science, theories of hypertexts, cybertext, interactivity, identity, postmodernism, ludology, media theory, narratology, aesthetics and art theory, psychology, theories of simulacra, and others.

-Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader* (Introduction, 1).

The work of Deidre Pike in *Enviro-toons* as well as the collaborative work of Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann in their book *That's All Folks?* have set the foundation for ecocriticism to explore the creative works of animation. However, their work has only scratched the surface of this specific field as both books focus strictly on cartoons with obvious and clear environmental themes. Just as "enviro-toons" spawned out of eco-cinema, another branch needs to spring forth from enviro-toons. I believe this new concept can fall under the term "eco-animation," which allows all forms of animation, beyond cartoons, to be explored, as well as animation that might not have a blatant environmental message. This approach has been done in other areas of ecocriticism such as Scott Knickerbocker's analysis of poetry in his book *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, which goes beyond looking at only nature-oriented poetry. This paper is an attempt to continue this non-blatant approach as I look into a different form of animation—videogames—as well as look at post-colonial environmental issues that are layered beneath a narrative that is not clearly concerned with the environment. This essay not only expands beyond the lens of enviro-toons, but also works to expand on the world of video game theory. Video game theory is rooted in interdisciplinarity and as Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, editors of *The Video Game*

Theory Reader, point out, video game theory is "a convergence of a wide variety of approaches" (Introduction, 1). This paper adds to Wolf and Perron's long list of theoretical lenses with post-colonial, ecocritical, and Caribbean literary theory.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag is the most recent release from videogame developer Ubisoft and is the fourth installment of the Assassin's Creed franchise. The series focuses on the ability of employees of a fictionalized version of Ubisoft, Abstergo Entertainment, to relive historical events via memory that is encoded on human DNA. The game as a whole reaffirms Edward Said's argument against the issues of master-texts of history. The game profits from the master-text Caribbean history of slavery, colonialism, and exploitation of the land. However, at the edges of the main narrative, the text destabilizes itself as a reaffirming text and is haunted by alternative histories that continuously challenge the main narrative. These alternative histories align with Edouard Glissant's argument against a master-narrative. The actions of the Abstergo corporation to change and edit history to fit the master-text history they have created allows the game to be self-aware of this issue. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, as a whole, upholds the master-text, but there are moments of slippage—when the text is self-aware, dialogue between characters expose alternative histories, and the sheer presence and elaborated role of black characters. These moments reveal that the game, as a text, is aware of its participation in creating master-text history of exploiting the natural resources of the Caribbean and, through this participation, challenges itself.

Creating a Caribbean Master-Text

Assassin's Creed uses a unique storytelling structure that allows the text to be aware of its reaffirmation of how history is made. Unlike most video game story structures

that place the player directly into the storyline as another person, *Assassin's Creed* places players into the game as themselves, creating a double-layered narrative. On the first level, the player is a new employee at Abstergo Entertainment hired to explore the memory. The second level has the player enter the world of Edward Kenway, a fictional pirate from the early eighteenth-century Caribbean, as his memory, or history, encoded on his DNA. The goal of the employee is to explore and record the Eurocentric memories of Edward, which will then be edited and pieced together to fit the master-text of the time period and sold to the public. Almost the entire game takes place on the secondary level, within the eighteenth-century Caribbean, but there is a fraction that remains on the first level, in the "current real world," which allows the game to critique its own regurgitation of the time period as a place of "rum, plunder, and women" (Black Flag). This stereotyped version of the Caribbean aligns with Europe's relationship with the Orient, as argued by Said's in *Orientalism*. Said claims that, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). Numerous aspects of Said's argument of the Occident and the Orient can be applied to the Caribbean, often with little adjustment. The description of the Orient as a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, remarkable experiences" to this day remains a stereotype of the Caribbean. It has been manipulated into an exotic vacation destination for the Occident to visit. His claim that the "Orient was almost a European invention" can be taken a step further with the Caribbean. In relation to the Caribbean it could be argued that it *was* a European invention. The Occident and Orient independently developed and perspectives were drawn encounters of the two cultures. The Caribbean is much more complicated as its

development and perspectives are intricately intertwined with the Occident. As colonizers destroyed native populations and replaced them with African slaves, and later Indian indentured servants, their native culture was forcibly repressed and became connected to the will of the colonizer. This continues to be the case when analyzing *Assassin's Creed*. The game was created by Ubisoft Montreal and they have continued to *create* and reaffirm the Caribbean and its Eurocentric history. Said's description of the Orient as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, remarkable experiences" could easily be used as a marketing tagline for the videogame.

The "creation" of history is a complicated and hierarchical process that works to put forth a specific version of history. *Assassin's Creed* clearly does this as it continues to push forth a Eurocentric narrative from the main English protagonist, Edward. Margaret Heady explains this complicated process of creating history:

> Rather than being an accurate or complete representation of historical fact, it is a kind of fictional narrative in which ideologies of the present interact with those of the past in order to produce a historical "novel" whose story encompasses both a point of origin and a progression, explicit or implicit, toward an eventual goal. (Heady 14)

Assassin's Creed's unique self-aware narrative structure allows players to see this complicated process. The game uses the fictional modern world company Abstergo to show how they base their history off of European memories of the eighteenth century Caribbean. The memories collected from European DNA have already narrowed the possible history to a dominant European perspective. The game reveals a corporation's economic "ideologies" that direct what will become history and the power behind these

decisions. They are looking to create a marketable product version of history that has a "point of origin" and "a progression," all of which is directed to a clear "eventual goal."

The game not only upholds a perception of place, but also of history and memory. In Nick Nesbitt's book *Voicing Memory* the author explores historical experience and its link to imperialism. Nesbitt describes historical experience as a "global phenomenon" that is "historical, political, cultural, and theoretical contradiction (Nesbitt xi-xii). There are numerous moments at the edge of *Assassin's Creed's* narrative that reveal the self-aware critique of history-making as political and cultural. One of these occurs at the first layer of the game when the player, as the employee, meets Abstergo's Chief Creative Officer, Olivier Garneau. The dialogue between the characters presents the power structure behind historical master-texts. As Olivier states, "So I reviewed some of your data. Pretty raw stuff. Obviously, we need to scrub off some of the dirt to make it family-friendly. Maybe give Edward a voice like James Bond or something. More of a ladies man" (Black Flag). Popular culture texts have clear outside influences as they are pressured by production companies to meet demands of financial markets, which is seen here with this dialogue. This self-aware moment reveals these influences' impact on the fictional development within the game, as well the impact on *Assassin's Creed*. This dialogue from Olivier can be seen as a self-aware moment where Abstergo Entertainment is a stand-in for the real company, Ubisoft, to attack this outside cultural influence. Olivier's comments on changing the voice of Edward is directly linked to Ubisoft's decision to return to a white main protagonist after consumer's reacted harshly to the use of a half Native American protagonist in the previous *Assassin's Creed* installment, *Assassin's Creed III.* The use of a stereotyped voice and behavior of a Native American left many players calling him

"unlikable" and "unbearable" (Amazon). The narrative framing of two stories allows for the text to critique moments like these and address issues it wouldn't be able to if it were only set within the eighteenth century.

Workplace memos sent to the player on the first level of the narrative of the text also play a vital role in revealing the games' motives of making history. Employees are told to capture "only the exciting parts." In a work orientation memo, employees are informed about the process of extracting memories from DNA: "The Animus is a device that renders genetic memories in three dimensions. It's a window to the past that allows you to experience history, but not change it. That happens later, in editing" (Black Flag). This is an essential aspect of upholding and reaffirming master-texts. Employees, and the players who control them, are not allowed to deviate from the history that has been written and if they do, they become "desynchronized" from their Animus device, essentially dying, and have to start over from where they last aligned with the master-text history. Any information that is recovered that doesn't suit the motives or desires of Abstergo and the history they want to write is simply edited or altered to fit. Said argues that, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). This process of dominating is present through the actions and statements of the fictional company Abstergo Entertainment, which is a clear stand-in for the real company Ubisoft. Abstergo is working to create a stereotyped Eurocentric virtual experience of the Caribbean, which is exactly what Ubisoft has done.

Immersing Yourself in the Exploitation of the Caribbean

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag is an extremely immersive game that leaves the player losing a sense of actual place. The layering of two narrative locations in time and space of a modern workplace on the first level and the eighteenth century Caribbean on the second level allow the self-aware texts to bring to light this feeling. The *Assassin's Creed* player is placed within the first person perspective of the employee of Abstergo; however, once the player enters a workstation, the Animus, he/she quickly forgets that he/she is an employee and takes on the positioning of the Caribbean protagonist, Edward. The player always has the power to exit the Animus and enter back into the "real world" and explore the Abstergo office building, but there is very little motive to do so and the player remains immersed within the landscape of the eighteenth-century Caribbean. However, throughout the main narrative the player is forced out of the machine so the real world storyline can unfold and align with what is taking place in the eighteenth century. At these moments of forced removal the player is jerked back into reality that he/she isn't actually in the eighteenth century Caribbean, he/she is at a computer screen. This moment of realization is the exact same experience of someone who is playing *Assassin's Creed*.

Diedre Pike, in her book *Enviro-toons,* applies Marshal McLuhan's concept of mediums holding temperature to the film *Avatar* (2009), which applies to this experience:

> Because of its richly detailed visual environment, *Avatar*, is a hot, hypnotic medium. Some viewers described walking out of the theater feeling as if they were still in a trance. A hot medium, McLuhan argues, leaves little room for audience participation. Humans sit in theaters, encountering a carefully-stitched-together narrative presentation of an unreal reality. The audience is presented with

> messages that turn out to be readerly and epic, a valorized account of the ultimate tragic hero who must leave his human body behind but keeps the indomitable and privileged human spirit and personality. (143)

This description of *Avatar's* impact on the viewer applies to the impact *Assassin's Creed* has on the gamer. The game is visually stunning and almost every review of the game, good or bad, points out the stunning visuals of the eighteenth-century landscape. As Chris Carter, Reviews Director of Destructoid, an online reviews site, states, "sailing about looking at the gorgeous vistas and shores of *Assassin's Creed IV* while your crew sang endearing shanties was something special" (Carter). Gamers are entranced by the beautiful scenery as they sail across the vast seas of the Caribbean. Just as viewers felt like they were in a "trance" after they left the theatre, so do gamers as they take a break from their explorations. Speaking from personal experience in playing the game, after a long session of playing I was left in a hypnotic rhythm even after I had turned off the TV. After spending hours on a ship with the rhythmic moves of the waves splashing against the ship rocking it up and down, that feeling stayed with me. In a very abstract sense, the world around me was layered in Caribbean oceanic rhythms as the walls of my house seemed to move up and down.

McLuhan claims that there is "little room for audience participation," and this holds true with videogames. An argument could be made that gaming involves audience participation, but that participation is so minimal in the sense that most of the time the player forgets he/she is playing and the game forces him/her within the confines of the narrative. Even in a game like *Assassin's Creed* that claims to be an "open world," it still holds heavy restrictions. Just as the protagonist leaves "his human body behind" so do the

players of *Assassin' Creed*, but twice, once to enter the first person perspective of an Abstergo employee, and once more to become Edward, pirate of the eighteenth-century Caribbean.

The *Assassin's Creed* franchise holds itself up to having a certain level of historical accuracy. Each of the four games starts with a disclaimer, "Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction as designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs" (Ubisoft). The historically accurate aspects of the narrative come through the interactions of the fictional protagonist, Edward, with historical figures like Bartholomew "Black Bart" Roberts, Benjamin Hornigold, "Calico" Jack Rackham, Anne Bonny, Mary Read, Charles Vane, and many others. The extent of historical accuracy is limited to very basic aspects of major events of these individuals' lives and deaths.

Using the Abstergo workstation, the Animus, the player immerses him/herself into an environmentally-focused history of the eighteenth century Caribbean. The storyline surrounds different groups trying to conquer and dominate the Caribbean through the control of a trade system that is dependent on land and human exploitation. The dominating history of this time period of exploitation of the Caribbean is upheld by the game. The goal of the game is to destroy the colonist's vessels through ship warfare, destroy their forts and infrastructures, and steal from plantation owners. On the surface these goals seem to represent an effort to defeat colonialism. However, all of these efforts are clearly dependent on colonialism. Without the colonial presence there would be no ships to destroy and plunder for rum and sugar. Without slavery and the plantation system there would be no money and other goods to steal from the plantations. The actions of the

protagonist are upholding the system and the actual goal of the game is no heroic effort to defeat colonialism, but to become a colonial power and conquer the Caribbean.

There are aspects of the game that sit at the edge of the narrative, but are played up in marketing terms, as major selling points for the game. It is advertised as an "open-world" for players to explore at their own will, which has already been shown to skew from the truth. Perhaps the biggest flaw within this "open-world" is found in the parts of the game that take place within the forests of the Caribbean. The majority of the game takes place on the ship or in the cities and towns of the Caribbean. Players can jump roof to roof, hide in buildings and bushes, and explore almost every inch of them. However, once players are placed in the forest the world becomes anything, but open. You are forced to dirt paths and can deviate, compared to the cities, only a small fraction. Nature remains there for scenery and can't be explored at great length. Michael Springer and Peter N. Googin explore this trend in videogames in their essay "Digital Cities: Rhetorics of Place in Environmental Video Games" and state that "Like the scrolling background for animated cartoons, the natural environmental places and spaces for games typically serve as a backdrop for game play or as obstacles that must be avoided, 'beaten,' or destroyed" (Springer and Googin 112). The edge and limit of the game is most apparent with nature remaining inaccessible, but still very much there for exploitation.

The goods that the player is able to acquire through stealing and plundering only mark one aspect of the game that represents the Caribbean as a place to exploit. The forests and seas contain endless amounts of animals to be hunted, skinned and gutted, and sold, traded, or used to upgrade weapons. Players can hunt for monkeys, crocodiles, deer, iguanas, jaguars, ocelots, rabbits, flamingos, seagulls, crows, hutia, and wild pigs, as well

as harpoon sharks and whales. As with most games, the land is represented as possessing an endless amount of resources. As Springer and Googin explain, "[n]ature is depicted in most massively multiplayer online games as an inexhaustible dispenser of resources. This reinforces a demonstrably false yet frequently held belief about our real-world relationship with the environment" (Springer and Googin 122).

The game addresses certain aspects of the flaws behind the pursuits of the protagonist to gain a reputation of glory through plunder. However, it always does so in a very indirect way that avoids acknowledging the irony of a game and story that proclaims freedom while the accomplishments of the characters remain dependent on slavery and environmental exploitation. Dialogue between the main protagonist, Edward, and his quartermaster, Adewale, an escaped Trinidadian slave, reveals this irony. In the main narrative Edward is looking to confront a man involved in the slave trade, Lawrence Prince, and states, "[w]e're looking for slave ships. Any that work for the Royal African Company." Adewale responds, "[y]ou don't mean to traffic human cargo now do you?" Defensively Edward exclaims, "[n]o. Jesus Adie. You know me better than that" (Black Flag). This delusional moment reveals multiple aspects about the level of exploitation the game is willing to allow. The game addresses the issue of slavery in minimal fashion and barely breaks ground into acknowledging the issue on any critical level. The game only uses slavery, both directly and indirectly, to allow for the game-playing experience of collecting rum and sugar. Edward will do almost anything—kill thousands of people, destroy ships, steal—but he would never get directly involved in the slave trade. The real issue with this is that he is heavily involved in the slave trade because any gain of goods is dependent on slavery.

The game indirectly depends on the use of slavery and puts it on the backburner so the narrative can continue forward. Towards the end of the narrative, however, the game does become critical of the lifestyle of the exploiting pirate. Shortly after the conversation between Edward and Adewale about the slave trade, Edward finds and kills the man he was looking for, slave trader Lawrence Prince. A moment that initially makes Edward look like a conqueror of evil slavery quickly becomes one that reveals the flaws in his motives. As he stands over the dying Lawrence Prince, who thinks Edward has killed him for moral reasoning against slavery, Edward refutes this idea by stating, "[y]ou mistake my motive. I'm only after a bit of coin." Prince responds with his dying breath, "[a]s was I. As was I" (Black Flag). This becomes a revelatory moment, which the game builds on.

Edward goes on to kill off anyone who stands in his way, be it slave traders, fellow pirates, or former friends. This destroys his life as those around him leave or die, often by his hands. He begins to see the destruction that he has created and has a heartfelt discussion with Adewale about his life decisions. Adewale says, "[t]o fight beside a man so driven by personal gain and glory is a hard thing Edward. And I have come to feel that the Assassins and their creed are on a more honorable course. Have I been unfair?" Edward responds, "[n]o. For years I have been rushing around taking whatever I fancied. With riches, but no wiser. When I look around and look at the course I've run there is not a man or woman that I loved left standing beside me" (Black Flag). This narrative moment makes an effort to adjust the text into one that fights against colonialism and exploitation, as the story comes to an end with Edward doing a list of things to right his wrongs. However, this is instantly dissolved once the credits for the game roll after the main narrative is finished. The game is not over with the end of the narrative; it isn't even close.

The narrative accounts for only forty percent of the gameplay. The remaining sixty percent is wrapped up in more independent missions that involve destroying more ships and forts and stealing from more plantations. The game is not over until you have conquered literally the entire Caribbean and acquired all the required historical footage for Abstergo's goal of history making.

Roles of Black Characters

One of the most surprising aspects of the main narrative of *Assassin's Creed* is the presence and roles of black characters. In a narrative that is roughly twenty hours long only two black characters are directly involved and given a voice in the text. The streets of the towns, the decks of the ships, and the fields of the plantations have black characters, but they remain voiceless and serve as scenery rather than historical figures. The text continues to push a history where the enslaved are not only voiceless, but hold no history. Even the two black characters reaffirm this as they only gain a voice once they have escaped slavery and entered into a meaningful direct relation to the Eurocentric history of Edward.

The most prominent black character is Adewale. His parents were Ogoni, but he was born into enslavement in Yoruba Trinidad, escaped, and throughout the narrative becomes close with the main protagonist Edward and eventually becomes his quartermaster. The presence of Adewale allows the text to do a number of things, as he is used as a stand-in for a large voiceless population. At one point in the narrative Adewale and Edward sail across the Caribbean and discuss what they will do with the riches they earn from plundering ships and plantations, which allows the text to address a uniquely Caribbean issue of a new population of transplanted individuals. Edward asks Adewale if

he would return to Africa to be "prince among men" to which Adewale responds, "I can't return to a place I have never been. I was born in Trinidad. Slave from my first breath." Edward responds, "[w]ouldn't you feel more at home, more welcomed there?" Adewale cleverly responds, "[w]ould you feel more at home in Paris?" Edward is left with only being able to respond "[f]air point" (Black Flag). This dialogue represents the start of a development that would go on to shape the complex issue of Caribbean identity. This moment captures a very important historical moment for Caribbean identity as individuals attempted to cope with having ancestors and culture from another part of the world they've never seen and living in a place they have no roots. This moment begins to answer, if only briefly, the questions that reside behind Caribbean identify.

Margaret Heady asks in her book *Marvelous Journeys: Routes of Identity in the Caribbean Novel,* "[h]ow can one feel at home in a land whose recorded history began with exterminations of indigenous populations leading in turn to the abuses of slavery?" (Heady 12). This question still remains to be answered definitively. The game attempts to answer it by placing Adewale on a pirate ship, the Jackdaw, and having him claim it as his only home. As he states, "[w]ith this skin and this voice where can I go in the world and feel at ease? This country here is my best chance. This country of Jackdaw." This moment isn't just a modern romanticized moment that places modern ideas of racial acceptance onto a historical time period of racial inequality and tension. As author Colin Woodard states, "[r]unaway slaves migrated to the pirate republic in significant numbers, as word spread of the pirates attacking slave ships and initiating many aboard to participate as equal members of their crews. At the height of the Golden Age, it was not unusual for escaped slaves to account for a quarter or more of a pirate vessel's crew, and several

mulattos rose to become full-fledged pirate captains" (Woodard 3). The game accurately provides a historical moment where a sense of place could be found on the seas of the Caribbean by runaway slaves and more importantly away from the land of the Caribbean.

The only other black character to be given a voice is an escaped slave named Anto, whose presence haunts the main narrative and master text. Anto is a West African who was sold into slavery, but escaped and established a Maroon community near Kingston. Anto's presence in the game is much like the Maroon communities' presence in the eighteenth-century, which haunted the plantation owners and colonial powers of the time. As Shireen K. Lewis explains, colonial texts typically represent the Maroon as, "the slave who fled the plantation to create his or her own community in the hills and who returned to the plantation from time to time to steal, destroy property, or recruit other slaves" (Lewis 78). Glissant argues against this representation of Maroon communities and especially takes issue with the colonizer representing the Maroon as a "vulgar bandit," and "assassin," and an "ordinary bandit" (qtd. in Lewis 78). Glissant argues that the Maroon is "the only true popular hero in the Caribbean" (qtd. in Lewis 78). *Assassin's Creed* upholds and continues the colonizing representation of the Maroon as a bandit. The clearest, and ironic, example of this is that the Maroon Anto is the leader of a group of assassins, the exact term that Glissant takes issue with, in Kingston Jamaica.

The presence of Anto and Adewale serves as a representation of an enormous population, but they can only haunt the text rather than disrupt or dismantle the master-texts. As escaped slaves Anto and Adewale cannot represent the large black population that remains enslaved. Lewis uses Glissant's argument against "History" with a capital "H" to explain how "History" of the Caribbean has been erased. As Lewis states, "In the

Caribbean, collective historical consciousness has undergone shock, contradiction, and discontinuity which originated with the brutal rupture of the slave trade. Collective memory has been erased—a nonhistory exists—because of the fragmented nature of Caribbean history and of the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb this discontinuity" (Lewis 77). Anto and Adewale only gain a history and voice once they enter into the European construction of "History," which is captured through the Eurocentric narrative of the game's English protagonist Edward. The population that remains enslaved remains part of the "nonhistory."

As the main narrative unfolds, the protagonist, Edward, sneaks through plantations and steals from them. This stealth aspect of the game is built upon having to go unnoticed and if you are seen by guards they will sound an alarm. However, the slaves are given no agency to do the same. If Edward is seen by them they do not speak or acknowledge his presence. Even if he bumps into them they do not respond. They remain a voiceless subaltern that upholds a master-text of history, and their presence is merely for creating the Caribbean scenery of a plantation. Margaret Heady insightfully sheds light on the "historical process" and the silencing of voices:

> The result of this historical process is that the voices of the vanquished and their interpretation of events too often remain outside the scope of history. In the Caribbean, this meant that virtually all historical discourse prior to the twentieth century posited the European as the defining subject and the non-European as the object of observation and evaluation. Through slavery, genocide and cultural isolation, native and African voices were systematically repressed and their contributions to history ignored. (Heady 14)

Assassin's Creed is in a unique position as a videogame text to shed light on this development. It almost lands on the level of satire when as a player you cannot interact with the slaves. The Eurocentric history that created a voiceless population, through repression, is so severed and missing from the historical record it can only be presented in fractured form through modern Caribbean writers. As Nesbitt argues, Caribbean writers have responded to the colonial force that erased "communal memory" by "constructing a series of aesthetic sites that recover historical facticity while cultivating fragile individual, subjective experience" (Nesbitt xiv). The "communal memory" is anything but complete and still remains largely lost to the repressive history of the Caribbean. The inability for the slaves to have agency or a voice not only continues to uphold the fringe existence of them within history it also marks the impact this has created. As Nesbitt argues historical awareness was, "lost amid the repressive violence of slavery, the plantation system, and the colonial control of historical discourse" (Nesbitt xiv). Their voice and existence has been repressed for so long and on such a large scale that the slaves within the videogame have been stripped of a voice and agency. It represents an inability for the videogame developers to creatively give back the voice and agency they once had and shows the developers position of upholding the inaccurate history they continue to create.

Conclusion: Making Money through Making History

The global market for video games brought in $67 billion in 2012 and is expected to grow to $87 billion by 2017 (Gaudiosi). Said describes the hegemony of cultural forms in stating that, "[i]n any society not totalitarian…certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any

understanding of cultural life in the industrial West" (Said 7). Video games have become a dominant cultural form and behind this is a power structure responsible for shaping and influencing perceptions.

Assassin's Creed is a popular cultural text that at times critically addresses issues of race, greed, and exploitation, but the overall goals to exploit and conquer the Caribbean overshadow these moments. The representation of the Caribbean as an inexhaustible resource could have larger cultural impacts on perceptions and attitudes. Springer and Googin use *World of Warcraft* as an example of natural resource exploitation. In that game players are able to hunt, mine, and fish for sources with a game design to "provide a limitless number of these items." Springer and Googin describe the larger impact of the situation as still unknown, but provide possible outcomes:

> The effect this rhetoric of consumption has on players—if the rhetoric has an impact at all—is unknown. Some scholars have even suggested that conspicuous consumption in a virtual locale will reduce the compulsion to do the same in the real world (Bainbridge). Or perhaps this conspicuous consumption will provide new spaces for power dynamics to develop without eliminating the same problematic behavior in the real world. These new spaces and places of conspicuous consumption might simply reinforce the sense of urgency to consume. (Springer and Googin 122)

The outcomes may remain unknown, but the possibility of psychological perspective changes remains a very plausible possibility. Popular texts deserve consideration for analysis for their obvious culture shaping as well as their not so obvious environmental messages.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag is unique in that it creates an almost unnecessary secondary textual level that has little to do with the actual gameplay so that it can call attention to the power structure behind history making and its cultural influence in the gaming industry. However, this move to reveal the structures behind culture and history making is overshadowed by the dominant narrative of exploiting the Caribbean. In the end the game upholds the master-texts and depends upon and profits from the history of Colonialism, slavery, the plantation system, and environmental exploitation.

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CHAPTER 3: BRINGING HUMANS DOWN TO SIZE: ANIMATION'S POWER TO ENTER THE ECOSUBLIME AND RESTRUCTURE THE HUMAN-NONHUMAN BINARY

There is no corner of human endeavor and human thought that escapes the tentacles of size.

-John Tyler Bonner, *Why Size Matters: From Bacteria to Blue Whales* (151)

Animation has long held the power to visualize anything a person could imagine. As the world of computer graphics continues to grow, this power has spread out into the larger world of cinema. The power of animation allows for unique storytelling that goes beyond the restraints of the physical world. In ecocritical terms this has allowed animation to explore the binary of the human and nonhuman and the issues that arise from it. The films *The Croods* (2012), *Epic* (2012), and *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) expose viewers to one common theme: nature is larger than human, which challenges the everyday thinking that humans have progressed to a position that overshadows nature. In repositioning nature to be larger than human these films explore ecological issues of scale and the ecosublime, as well as challenge the harmonious relationship between man and nature. These issues have existed long before modern animation and can be traced back to the nineteenth century art movement of the Hudson River School of painting. These artists and the images they captured mark a monumental moment when the modern ideals and perceptions of nature began to shift the balance of its position over human.

The Hudson River School of Painting: The Beginning of the Modern Shift

By basic description, the Hudson River School paintings are large landscape paintings with nature as the focus. However, humans are almost always to be found within the picture, albeit a very small presence, in some form: picnicking, hiking, boating, or

returning home from hunting. The Hudson River School was America's first collective group of landscape artists that started in the 1820s and faded during the 1870s and 1880s as artists turned to other subjects for contemplation, such as the urban landscape. The school included painters such as Washington Allston, Samuel F.B. Morse, Thomas Cole, and Asher B. Durand, and writers Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper (Howat 27). Most of the artists focused on the East Cost, but in the 1860s and 1870s German painter Albert Bierstadt moved west and "chose to explore and depict the scenic wonders of the American West on a truly epic scale…the West was big and Bierstadt painted it gigantic" (Howat 47).

The Hudson River School movement can be linked to the modern world of environmental animation through their common goal: to capture nature through images. However, both movements are products of their cultural time periods, reflected in the different ways each represents the relationship between human and nature. James Biddle, President of The National Trust for Historic Preservation, harshly critiques this development:

> The respect for nature shown by these painters was characteristic of the nineteenth century. Life had for the first time become comfortable enough for men to regard the wild landscape of the American continent as beautiful rather than threatening…. Today man has lost the reverence for wilderness that pervaded so much of nineteenth-century thought. Seeking to subdue nature rather than conserve her, man has succeeded in putting his mark on even the most inaccessible reaches of the continent. The wild river valley which gave its name to the first truly native American school of painting has itself fallen victim to his onslaught. Its vistas

> marred, its mountainside raped, its very waters clogged with filth, the majestic Hudson limps along to the sea. (Howat 15-16)

As Biddle points out, it was in the nineteenth century that humans were able to make the power shift in the binary of human and nonhuman to one that evolved into the commonly held perspectives of today. In this transition nature loses its power of being "threatening" and is now seen as something "beautiful," which led to the idealistic capture, and in the end, commoditization by the Hudson River School art movement. This marks a moment when humans could harmoniously exist within the larger presence of nature. Although the paintings might present a natural world that has been tamed, with a clear human presence in each painting, it still clearly positions nature as being larger than humans, especially Bierstadt's paintings of the West. This position is clearly established by posing the human characters or their houses in a way that almost hides them amongst the enormous presence of nature. However, these paintings still mark the beginning of a shift away from this perception as they present the human and nonhuman relationship as one that is harmonious and one that shows nature as something *for* humans.

The most common thread within the Hudson River School is the focus of nature and landscape, but with the slight presence of humans. Jasper Francis Cropsey's *Autumn on the Hudson River* is a fine example of this—it depicts a setting sun behind clouds with the river, trees, and rock formations dominating from foreground to background. Barely visible are two men sitting in nature, enjoying this moment. The humans in this collection of paintings are often depicted as enjoying moments in nature, their backs to the painting's viewer as they enjoy picnics, hiking, and other leisurely activities of the nineteenth century. Even if human characters are not in the scene their presence is still felt by the

inclusion of boats, tents, houses, cabins, or livestock. *Autumn on the Hudson River* also follows the trend of attempting to capture the sublime. In this massive 60 x 108-inch painting, Cropsey captures an American autumn that was hard for others to comprehend. As John K. Howat explains of Cropsey and his visit to London, "Cropsey celebrated in this grandiose composition the overwhelming spectacle of an American autumn, which was so hard for the English viewer to comprehend…. In order to satisfy the incredulous English of the accuracy of his color, Cropsey showed real autumn leaves from the Hudson to settle any argument" (Howat 144).

Jasper Francis Cropsey's *Autumn on the Hudson River*

Biddle describes the Hudson River painters as "pantheists who thought that nature was shaped only by God and therefore fraught with high and holy meaning" (Howat 16). This view is no longer most commonly held because as humans have increased their impact on nature it has become clear that man has shaped it. The "high and holy meaning" of nature has diminished from something to hold as sublime to something to be controlled

and commodified. While, as Biddle states, nature lost its position of being "threatening" to the society and culture of the time, it can be said that since then, and particularly throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, nature has gone from threatening to threatened. The film *Ferngully,* for example, clearly makes this claim in its obvious message against deforestation.

The fall of the Hudson River School came in the 1860s and 1870s as the art world looked for a new object of inspiration, which was paralleled by the changing culture after the American Civil War. This shift in culture occurred, "[f]ollowing the upheavals of the Civil War, the American landscape school began to fragment…. No longer unified in their belief that landscapes could serve as visual metaphors for national unity and well-being, the various painters began seeking different artistic goals and strategies" (Gifford, Avery, Kelly 16). It seems to be a fitting end that the harmonious relationship depicted in the Hudson River School between man and nature came to an end with the country's most violent war. Something drastically changed within the attitudes and minds of man with this violent event.

Entering the Ecosublime: Resizing in *Ferngully* and *Epic*

Resizing the main protagonist in *Ferngully* and *Epic* as well as increasing the size of nature in *The Croods* allows for the reestablishment of nature over humans, as similarly captured within the Hudson River School paintings. However, unlike the harmonious relationship that is depicted in the Hudson River paintings, there exists a major conflict, in varying forms, in the three films. The heart of these conflicts occur through the resizing of the protagonist, which allows for humans to experience the sublime found in nature, which has slowly eroded since the eighteenth century and can be seen in the decline of the

Hudson River School. The commodified images of nature, which led to various cultural changes including humans' eventual overexposure to nature, flipped the power structure of nature as being larger than humans to humans being larger than nature. These animated films allow viewers to once again experience the subliminality of nature that has been lost.

Lee Rozelle's foundational look at the ecosublime relationship between the human and nonhuman in his book *Ecosublime* sets forth a solid foundation for examining the animated films *Ferngully*, *Epic*, and *The Croods*. Rozelle creates a foundation from which to look into this relationship while exploring the value and influence of popular culture texts. The Hudson River School painters also fit within this discussion as they attempted to capture the sublime presence of nature. The painters viewed the Hudson's beauty as a "special gift of god" and these "painters, awed by the "divine architecture" they beheld in the mountains, hollows, and waters of its valley, chose to convey what God had said to them through these media of the "sublime subject" in terms of canvas and paint" (Howat 23). Applying the arguments of Rozelle and the concept of ecosublime decenters this perception of the painters. As stated, nature is given the placement of "sublime subject," however, Rozelle argues that the ecosublime is found not in nature or in the human, but a place in between both, beyond language.

Rozelle argues that there must be a link between the nature and human binary that is outside of culture. Many argue that nature is a cultural construction so any relationship that humans have with nature will always remain within this human-established structure. Rozelle uses the situation and positioning of a human being at the moment of being bitten by a snake to paint the possibility of something beyond the human-established structure. Rozelle argues that there must be a level of understanding of this primal moment that goes

beyond language and culture. Rozelle explains that there are words associated with the situation such as "snake," "venom," "hospital," or "death," but that "something *must* precede our cultural understanding of the snake" (Rozelle 2). He believes this to be ecosublime, which sits beyond our cultural construction of language.

The films *Ferngully* and *Epic* work with the ecosublime in strikingly similar fashions, but argue very different environmental messages. The film *Ferngully* is an example of animation's power to reposition the protagonist into a smaller world to explore and uncover the impact of modern world development while making a meaningful critique of deforestation. The obvious environmental message of deforestation in *Ferngully* has already been thoroughly investigated by David Ingram in his book *Green Screen* (2000) and Deidre Pike in her book *Enviro-toons* (2012). However, neither of them focuses on the resizing of the main protagonist, Zac Young, which allows for the narrative to unfold.

In Ferngully, the protagonist, Zac, is a young city man who works for a logging company that is in the process of cutting down a massive amount of forest. When a tree begins to fall towards him, a fairy named Crysta uses magic to shrink him down, allowing him to survive the falling tree. Once Zac enters the world of the fairies he goes on an adventure of both self and environmental discovery to realize that changes need to be made. The call to action remains very vague and, as Deidre Pike points out, the concluding message that Zac tells his logging coworkers is, "[g]uys, things have gotta change" (Pike 142).

By being reduced in size, Zac is able to enter the ecosublime. His journey, as well as the journeys of the protagonists in *Epic* and *The Croods*, exemplifies the process of experiencing the ecosublime. Rozelle summarizes Christine L. Oravec's description of

experiencing the sublime to claim that "the sublime transports literary figures from an apprehension of the natural world to a fear of its greatness and finally a newly acquired identification with that "world," this ancient concept can prove useful to green literary and cultural study from the context of our current environmental crisis" (Rozelle 3).

The ecosublime, as represented in *Ferngully*, is meant to expose viewers to a world beyond a human-centric perception. It sends a message that there is a magical world beyond our own to be found in the forest, and that it is worth preserving. The conflict of this film is dependent on an unbalanced relationship between human and nonhuman as the villain, Hexxus, is a slimy cloud of pollution that feeds off the human machines. Two major aspects of the film clearly show the presence and impact of humans within the human vs. nonhuman binary: the film's villain is made of smog and oil, making him dependent on human pollution, and the massive deforestation is being caused by human consumption. The film *Epic* works beyond this binary and uses resizing to open up the viewer to a world that decenters the human viewer as influencer of nature.

The opening narration of the film *Epic* comes from the main protagonist, Mary Katherine, as images of the lush forest behind her father's house are shown:

> Somebody told me once that if you stand still in the forest long enough you'll see signs of a hidden struggle raging between forces of life and decay. That the survival of the forest itself depends on the outcome and that the good guys need all the help they can get. And that if you don't believe it, take a close look. And if you still don't, look closer. (*Epic*)

This opening dialogue presents an almost identical battle between life and decay that *Ferngully* explored twenty years earlier, and there are an incredible amount of similarities

throughout the film—both films have a secret hidden world beyond the perception of humans, the protagonist is shrunk down to enter this world, the "good guys" are those who represent nature, life, and growth while the "bad guys" represent death and decay, there is a magical elder who holds the power to make things grow, along with many others plot pieces that directly line up. However, the most significant difference between the two films is that in *Ferngully* the death and decay is enabled by the decisions of humans. In *Epic* humans are removed from the equation and hold no direct link to death and decay. It is a story of a human entering the ecosublime world, which sits *between* human and nonhuman, of the natural developments in ecosystems.

Epic's awareness that ecosystems need balance and that life cannot be separated from death is presented to the viewers through the motives of the villain Mandrake. He is the leader of a civilization of rot and decay called the Boggans. In dialogue between him and his son he states his anger towards balance: "The Leafmen think they can keep us contained, surround our beautiful island of rot with their hideous green forest. All in the name of balance. I'm sick of balance. No matter how much of the forest we destroy the queen grows it with one wave of her hand." This dialogue helps balance the opening narration and helps explain that the "hidden struggle raging between forces of life and decay" is not one that would ever be won, but a continuous battle that maintains balance. This goes beyond *Ferngully*'s message, which works beyond the position that death is independent of life and humans are involved directly in the death of the environment.

The role of the humans within the battle of life and death is minimized. Mary Katherine's purpose isn't really to directly help so much as it is a passive journey, whereas the survival of the forest in *Ferngully* is directly dependent on Zac's actions and changed

perception. However, both are required to accept that there is a world beyond the human-centric one they believe to only exist. Unlike *Ferngully*'s theme of environmental preservation, the main environmental theme of *Epic* is connectedness. It uses clichés like "[j]ust because you can't see it doesn't mean it doesn't exist" to break down the human-centric perspective of nature. This is captured by miniature civilization, the Leafmen, and their "Leafmen's Code" as stated by the hero of the film, Ronin. The Leafmen's code, Ronin states is, "[m]any leaves, one tree…We're all individuals but we're still connected. It's what we live by." The world of the Leafmen exists between nature and human and it is their purpose to make sure this connectedness is preserved. The human protagonist, Mary Katherine, is thrown into this connected world feeling disconnected. Throughout the film she continuously questions her purpose and states that the battle has nothing to do with her. When the queen of the forest dies and gives Mary Katherine the responsibility of preserving the forest, the queen tells her that "[j]ust because you don't see the connections doesn't mean they don't exist." The moral of the film is that everything is connected, even humans, even if it is beyond our perception.

The story of *Epic* begins with the protagonist Mary Katherine being forced to move in with her scientifically obsessed father who lost his job as well as his marriage because he spends all of his time searching for the world that Mary Katherine eventually enters. Her father explains this place as being a small culture that is the "engine" of the ecosystem. He further explains that this world is beyond the natural human perception. He states, "[t]hey just move too fast, like insects. Didn't you ever wonder why it was so hard to swat a fly? My theory is they're actually living faster. Like in a different dimension. So, no matter how fast we think we are to them we're just big and dumb and slow." His

hypothesis decenters humans as experiencing one true reality and it later proves to be correct once Mary Katherine enters this other world that's inhabited by a population of Leafmen.

The film *Epic* is about both time and space, whereas *Ferngully* is only about space. The population of Leafmen exists not only on a smaller level, but at a different speed and concept of time. It decenters the human-centric concepts of time and space. When Mary Katherine is in the world of the Leafmen the humans and other animals movements and speech are presented in slow motion and are laughable. One of the Leafmen describes humans as being "Stompers." He describes to Mary Katherine what Stompers are, which matches the hypothesis Mary Katherine's father had early in the film. "[m]ost Stompers just come and go, but this guy's relentless…Like us, but big and dumb and slow always stomping on things, Stompers." The film isn't trying to push forward an environmental message the way *Ferngully* does, it is simply trying to reveal to viewers that there is a world beyond ours, an ecosublime.

The film works with the binary of human and nonhuman to not only show different possible perspectives, but also the fragility of the power structure of human dominating nonhuman. Soon after Mary Katherine has been resized and nature has been given a dominating presence she falls into a hole, which would have been previously seen as tiny but to her newly shrunken self is now enormous. The Leafmen that she befriends, Nod, fearfully tells her to not move. Behind Mary Katherine red fiery eyes appear and daunting music plays. Out of the shadows comes a "cute little mouse" to which Mary Katherine responds in baby talk directly to the mouse, "[o]h it's a mouse! Hi, mousie! I was gonna scare it away." Nod responds terrified "[w]hat are you doing?" Mary Katherine continues

in her childish voice, "[l]ook at its little hands and its little whiskers. Oh!" As this dialogue unfolds she pets the mouse and it responds like a cat, but suddenly, and to her surprise, the mouse stands up, the music changes, and it transforms into an animal that no longer purrs like a cat, but viciously growls and grunts and threatens to attack her. This moment in the film is a realization that the power balance between human and nature has shifted and that concepts of the nonhuman are based on perspective. A little mouse is only harmless to a human. Our views are not the complete definition of an object—they are only perspectives, not concrete realities of existence. In this scene the mouse doesn't transform in any physical way; the cute mouse is exactly the same as the terrifying mouse, only our perception of it has changed, based on our relational size to it. This challenges the human-centric perspective of the nonhuman world and reveals an entirely different possible perspective on the nonhuman. From this point on the film plays with this new realization as Mary Katherine struggles in this new daunting world where previous perspectives of the nonhuman are exposed as not being a concrete reality. Just like Zac in *Ferngully,* the story depends on her confronting these moments and experiencing Oravec's three steps of encountering the sublime. As quoted by Rozelle, Oravec states:

> The three stages were, first, apprehension, in which the individual subject encounters an object larger and greater than the self; second, awe, oppression, or even depression—in some versions fear or potential fear—in which the individual recognizes the relative greatness of the object and the relative weakness or limits of the self; and their, exaltation, in which the individual is conceptually or physically enlarged as the greatness of the object is realized and the individual identifies with the greatness. (2-3)

All of these stages occur within this scene and within the larger structure of the story. Mary Katherine encounters the mouse first with apprehension, then with "awe," quickly followed by fear as she "recognizes the relative greatness of the object," being the mouse, "and the relative weakness or limits of the self." Mary Katherine as well as Zac in *Ferngully* only become "physically enlarged" once they have finished their journey and can identify "with the greatness." This "greatness" is the existence of a civilization working beyond the human-centric concepts of the nonhuman.

The Croods: Visualizing the Ecosublime and Dominating Nature

The Croods is a visually stunning piece of animation that uses familiarity, not reality, to take viewers on a journey of, quite literally, epic proportions. *Epic* uses realistic animation, which gives viewers a sense that what they are seeing could actually occur within our "real" world. *The Croods* takes a much different approach. The animation is highly "cartoonish," but creates a much more stunning experience for viewers, which is essential to the story. Much like *Ice Age: Continental Drift* (2012) and *The Land Before Time* (1988), *The Croods* uses prehistoric characters on a journey to a Garden of Eden while environmental change, in the form of shifting tectonic plates, chases them down. In *Ice Age* they head for the land bridge, *The Land Before Time* the Great Valley, and in *The Croods* they head towards a mountain they refer to literally and metaphorically as Tomorrow.

Epic and *The Croods* use different animation style to explore the ecosublime.

The Croods is the story of a family of cavemen who live in a harsh desert environment. They spend almost the entirety of their time inside their cave afraid of everything outside of it. As the early narration of the protagonist, Eep, states, "[m]ost days we spend in our cave, in the dark. Night after night, day after day." She describes their world as "harsh and hostile" and that they have lost all their neighbors who were killed by a mammoth, a snake, mosquitoes, and the common cold. The story's message evolves throughout the film and argues for innovation over tradition as well as evolves from nature over human to human over nature. The father, Grugg, has established a set of rules that has kept the family alive, but not living. Among them are, "[n]ever not be afraid, darkness brings death, anything new is bad, curiosity is bad, and going out at night is bad." As Eep claims, "[b]asically, anything fun is bad." Grugg has a number of life lesson stories, and all of them end the same, with death. The basics can be seen in his first story, which tells the tale of Krispy the Bear:

> A long time ago, this little bear was alive. She was alive because she listened to her father and lived her life in routine and darkness and terror. So, she was happy. But Krispy had one terrible problem. She was filled with…curiosity. And one day, while she was in a tree the curious little bear wanted to climb to the top and no

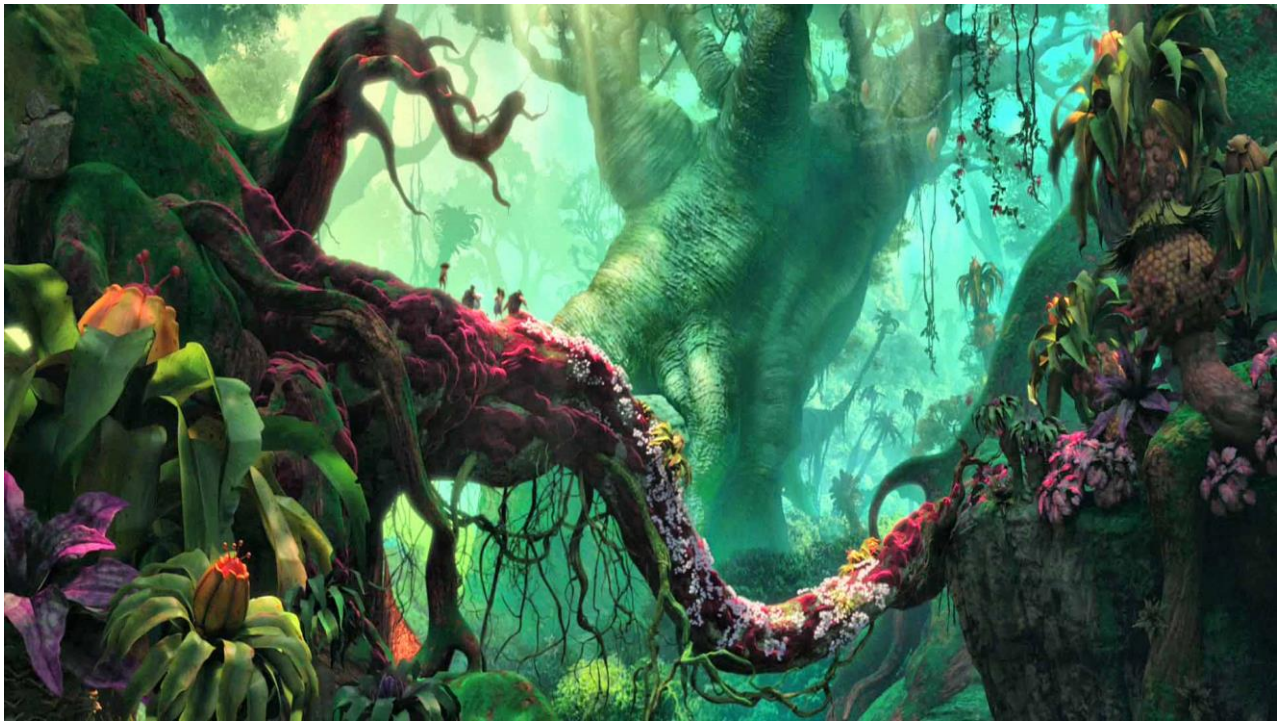
> sooner than she had climbed to the top she saw something new and died! (*The Croods)*

This all changes with the introduction of an outsider named Guy. He quickly comes to represent *Homo sapiens* and the Croods represent *Homo neanderthalensis.* He is an outsider to the family who brings forth an endless list of new and modern ideas such as fire, pets, shoes, pants, animal traps, and most important, the ability to innovate.

The family is forced to move when an earthquake destroys their desert cave, which reveals a beautiful lush world full of color that had existed just beyond their cave. It's a sublime moment, which the family meets with fear. They are chased off a cliff and fall into a new colorful world. Even though the family has not "shrunk," the way the characters do in *Ferngully* and *Epic*, they fall into an enormous new world where nature has been increased in size with trees a thousand feet tall and animals ten times the size that they would actually have been, leaving the family lost in a jungle environment where the nonhuman remains dominant. Many shots of the family are highly reminiscent of the Hudson River School paintings as the family's relational size to nature is small. As the story unfolds, Guy teaches the family new skills and nature begins to be less threatening. Throughout the course of the story the scale increasingly tilts in favor of humans, as they adjust from being threatened by nature to learning to subdue it.

The film depends upon using a fictional version of the nonhuman. It is full of stunning hybrid plants and animals to create a sense of awe, but also uses familiarity. The experience of the viewer seeing all new creatures that are shocking and sublime is an artistic move to transpose the feelings that the characters of the film would have experienced. They are cavemen who have only seen the desert and spent the majority of

their lives inside a dark cave. Now they are on a journey through the jungle and all new landscapes. A realist version of the historical past with accurate plants and animals would leave the viewer seeing what has already been seen and no sense of awe or experience of the ecosublime. *Ferngully* and *Epic* metaphorically transplant the characters into the ecosublime while *The Croods* does it metaphorically as well as visually.



A scene from *The Croods* as the family enters into the ecosublime. It holds many similarities to The Hudson River School paintings.

The film's climax occurs when they reach Tomorrow, but just as they arrive the continent splits and they are left on their current continent, which represents the old traditional way that will inevitably lead to death. The new continent represents tomorrow, innovation, and a conquering of nature. As Grugg claims, "[n]o more dark. No more caves. No more hiding." This marks the moment for the family, and especially the traditional father, of completing the three steps of experiencing the sublime. They have all worked beyond "awe" and "fear." This moment is followed by the ultimate moment of balance shifting towards human over nature when the villain animal, Macawnivore, which

has been chasing and hunting the family the entire film, befriends the father and is domesticated. In a moment that reflects Noah's Ark, the father, who is left behind on the old continent in order to save his family, creates a flying vessel to cross the continental gap. He loads his vessel full of all of the animals that were introduced throughout the story and saves them. This leaves the transition complete as the Crood family has acquired the main elements that have led to human control over the nonhuman and the film concludes with the family living on a lush tropical beach. The story ends with the narration from the protagonist restating her claims from the start of the film, but in an altered form. As Eep states, "[o]ur world is still plenty harsh and hostile, but now we know the Croods will make it. Because we changed the rules. The ones that kept us in the dark." As this is stated the family rides on the backs of animals they once feared, now domesticated, and off into the sunset carrying spears prepared for a hunt. They are no longer in fear of the nonhuman world, hiding in a cave. They control the animals and dominate nature, which leads to security and prosperity.

Conclusion: Ecosublime Animation

The art of the Hudson River School and the art and storytelling of modern animation have allowed artists to explore the binary and relationship of the human and nonhuman. In examining these works it can be seen that there has been a common trend to convey the ecosublime as well as restructure the hierarchy between the human and nonhuman. The Hudson River School paintings mark a shift when nature lost its "terror" and became something to experience, capture, and for many, sell for profit. The transition to the modern perception that nature exists for humans to control has developed beyond the Hudson River School's position of a "gift from God" and the existence of a harmonious

relationship. The modern animated films *Ferngully*, *Epic,* and *The Croods* reveal the varying, conflicting, and often violent relationships that humans have developed with the nonhuman and that these relationships and perceptions are fragile and weak. Whether it be through a Hudson River Painting where the first hand experience of nature is captured, the civilizations in *Ferngully* and *Epic* that sit *between* the binary of nature and human, or the amazing hybrid animation of *The Croods,* there are experiences that exist beyond our language and perception. What these artworks clearly convey is that there is a fragile perception of the hierarchy between the human and nonhuman, and more interestingly, they explore something that resides beyond this binary—the ecosublime.

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CHAPTER 4: SUBTERRANEAN HOMESICK OOZE: CONSTRUCTING THE URBAN UNDERGROUND AND VIOLENCE AGAINST THE NONHUMAN IN THE *TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES*

I choose the plants, I pull the weeds, I harvest the crops. We divide the world into subjects and objects, and here in the garden, as in nature generally, we humans are the subjects.

-Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (xiv)

Urban space presents ecocritics a great opportunity to challenge the binary of nature and civilization. It is often viewed that nature is found beyond the city limits and can only be found in the countryside, but this is far from the truth. Urban space breaks down and challenges the simplistic binary of nature and civilization and between the cracks of concrete and lights a unique presence of nature exists. Urban space has been investigated by numerous ecocritics as can be seen in the anthology *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* edited by Michael Bennett and David W. Teague. Just as the pastures and mountain ranges have been explored, a collection of writers tackle urban space through nature writing and ecofeminism; they challenge common held notions of urban space as the binary to nature by exploring city parks and arguing for an "urban wilderness." Arguments from ecocinema and enviro-toons have also been explored like Andrew Light's essay "Boys in the Woods: Urban Wilderness in American Cinema" and Murray and Heumann's chapter "The UPA and the Environment: A Modernist Look at Urban Space," from their book *That's All Folks*. Eco-animation can continue to push forward on the arguments started by other ecocritics. Two aspects of animation that have yet to be explored are the portrayal of urban underground and violence against the nonhuman. Murray and Heumann have a chapter, "Reconstructing Underground Urban Space in *Dark Days*," in their book *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge,*

which examines urban space as portrayed in the documentary *Dark Days*. The backbone of their argument of a civilized underground urban space that serves as a retreat from the wild above-ground urban space can be applied beyond this single documentary and applied to animation. The violence against the nonhuman that has been critiqued by both Human-Animal Studies and Human-Plant Studies can also be explored and applied to the cartoon series the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

***Dark Days*: Domesticating the Underground**

Murray and Heumann's chapter entitled "Reconstructing Underground Urban Space in *Dark Days*" provides an in-depth look at the *Dark Days* (2000), a Marc Singer documentary, which explores the lives of homeless individuals who have taken to the underground tunnels of New York City to live. Using film and storytelling techniques Murray and Heumann analyze how Singer shot and edited the film to tell a compelling story about urban space. Using visual anthropologist Karl Heider's criteria for ethnographic filmmaking and Andrew Ross's concept of *mainstream environmentalism*, Murray and Heumann make a compelling argument about the construction and perception of urban space. They argue that Singer uses film and editing techniques to create a story that shows the underground as a civilized space where the subjects of the film retreat to escape the chaos of the city. The city is portrayed as a wilderness that the subjects must go into to forage for goods in order to survive and come back to the underground to have a safe and communal life. As Murray and Heumann state, "Currently, writers, filmmakers, and other purveyors of pop culture seem to be constructing the inner city landscape in terms of seeing the inner city as a wilderness that must either be tamed or escaped. Its inhabitants seem like savages—dehumanized (and inferior) natives from whom "white

suburbanites" must separate" (67). The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* has been one of these "purveyors of pop culture" for the last 30 years and has influenced the perception of urban space, both above and underground.

Underground Urban Space in Animation

Urban underground space has been explored by numerous filmmakers and authors and most portray it in a very similar style: dark, desolate, slimy, and filled with human waste. As Murray and Heumann point out, the underground has gained a status of modern mythology and they question the outcome of the introduction of humans to this mythological space:

> In modern mythology, the underground has served as the site of technological progress where excavation produces not only the means of production—coal and oil, for example—but also the foundation for the urban infrastructure—sewage and water systems, railways, gas, and lines for electricity, telegraphs and telephones. What, then, happens when humans not only enter this technologically driven underworld but also reconstruct, domesticate, and humanize it as a space to escape from the savage city above them? (57)

Underground "civilizations" exist well beyond mythology and have been documented beyond just Singer's documentary. Jennifer Toth's book *The Mole People* became a best-seller; although facts have been challenged and many claim it's an exaggerated portrayal, nevertheless, it helped bring to light the actual existence of homeless populations taking to the underground to live. According to Murray and Heumann, people have been living underneath the streets of New York City since, "the arrival of the Hudson River Railroad in the mid-1850s" (57). Cinema and literature have depended on the mythology of

mutated underground residents, as is the case in the film *The Mole People* (1956), H.G. Well's *The Time Machine* (which includes an underground civilization called the Morlocks), *Futurama* (1999-2013), and perhaps the most famous representation from the last 30 years, the popular culture icons the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, from their roots as a comic book parody of the most popular comic books of the time period in 1984, have grown over the last 30 years into a franchise that has included numerous comic books, three cartoons series, endless merchandise, videogames, and three live-action films, with a fourth coming in 2014. They have influenced millions of viewers with their cool teen attitudes while providing a specific perspective of urban underground space.

The portrayal of both above and underground space in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2012) most recent animated series from Nickelodeon aligns with Marc Singer's documentary *Dark Days* in numerous ways. The common message being made by both *Dark Days* and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is that the above-ground urban space is wild and violent. In both cases the characters find a reconstructed suburban refuge underground away from the chaos of the aboveground urban space of New York City. Both recreate middle-class lifestyles and as Murray and Heumann claim, *Darks Days* presents viewers with an underground with "little houses that have become homes with domestic comforts like electric lights, hot plates, and coffee pots, all in a reconstructed urban underground space left by Amtrak" (Murray and Heumann 58). Some of the subjects in the film even go so far as to have domesticated pets.

The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* offer a very similar representation of the underground and provides a mirror to modern white suburban teenage culture. The main

characters: Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and Michelangelo (named after Renaissance painters) all have the demeanor, behavior, and speaking styles of middle-class suburban white teenage boys and enjoy similar activities. As Adrian J. Ivakhiv points out, "Ecocritics have critiqued Disney portrayals of nature for presenting a sentimentalized and distorted view of animal lives and ecological realities and for projecting middle-class American values—or, in some interpretations, racist, classist, and hierarchic or even neo-monarchist values—onto the natural world" (216). These arguments can be pushed beyond just Disney animation and "the natural world" to animation in general and urban space. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* project beyond American values to the point that they design storylines that reflect typical teenage boy issues as is the case in the episode "Mickey Gets Shellacne." In this episode Mickey, the littlest of the group, feels insecure about being the "runt" of the turtles and puts toxic waste on himself, thinking it will mutate him more and make him even cooler, but it gives him "shellacne." The episode turns into a story of dealing with insecurities and every teenager's worst nightmare, acne. The underground space where all of this occurs is a suburban child's dream space where there are videogames, skateboarding, television, popular culture posters, arcade games, and lots of pizza.

Heumann and Murray use Karl Heider's "criteria for ethnographic filmmaking" to dissect the film techniques that Singer used to convey certain messages and they can also be applied to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. One of Heider's claims is that ethnographic films can "reflect the romanticism of the period" (62). Using this criterion, Heumann and Murray claim that, "*Dark Days* suggests that the U.S. middle-class values highlighted in this film rests on…'romanticism,' a foundation of the American dream"

(62). If films have the power to show romanticism of the time period it becomes clear what those values are, as seen in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, which, like *Dark Days*, are the middle-class values, but more specifically suburban white values of pizza and videogames.

The Safety of the Civilized Underground and the Urban Wilderness

The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* represent suburban white culture within both the representation of the space they live as well as in the characters themselves. It is a civilized, modern, safe, and fun space for the characters to hangout and almost no violence occurs there, apart from teenage brotherly hazing. Almost all of the violence between them and villains occurs above ground and in the streets of New York City and if it does occur underground it is far and away from home. The underground almost always remains safe with very few invasions to disrupt the peace of the reconstructed, secure, suburban space.

In contrast to the safe and brightly lit underground home of the turtles exist a dark and dangerous above ground representation of the streets of New York City. Murray and Heumann argue that Singer represents the above-ground city as "devoid of human activity" when the homeless go there to forage for discarded goods to be sold for money. Much like *Dark Days* the city, in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, is portrayed as desolate, "devoid" of other humans, filled with graffiti, dumpsters, leafless trees, and crawling with gangs that the turtles must fight. Both construct the above-ground as "wilderness" and present the underground as a place where "domestic life flourishes" (59). In the case of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* the city is never shown in daylight, only at night with an eerie bright star filled sky and alleyways with steam coming from sewer pipes.

Hybridity and Defeating the Non-Human

The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* are built on a foundation of hybridity. They became who they are after being covered with toxic ooze, known as mutagen. The current Nickelodeon series depends on hybridity to create non-human villains for the turtles to fight. Almost all of the villains in the rebooted 2012 series are created from mutagen that turns humans into hybrid beasts. Dogpound is a half-man and half-dog villain, Fishface is a villain who was once a Brazilian street gang member turned into a fish that wears a robotic exoskeleton, Snakeweed was a man turned into a 12-foot-tall plant monster, and many more that follow the same pattern of man turning into a monstrous hybrid of something plant or animal based. This allows the turtles to commit violence on individuals that have lost their dominating human element and therefore allows them to commit violence on them. The violence committed against these villains can be linked to Noel Sturgeon's argument that the villains of the show are anti-environmentalist:

> In television shows such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987-1993) and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993-1996), even though the heroes were not specially environmentalists, the evil in the world was anti-environmentalist. The Turtles' mutation was the result of a toxic poisoning of some kind, and the Power Rangers fought against figures such as Ivan Ooze, who planned to cover the globe with mucky stuff very like toxic waste. (107-08)

In the show almost all evil is born out of, or at least enhanced, by toxic waste, with the turtles being the lone exception. Many of the individuals who become mutated villains often sit in between good and evil, but once they are altered by toxic waste they are no

longer capable of being good on any level. The turtles remain the only mutated creatures that keep their "good" human nature.

Human to human combat almost never occurs, even as the turtles stand in as a clear representation for humans they rarely fight humans and when they do there is a very clear limit on what violence is allowed to occur. However, the show has found a way around this television rule restraint that allows them to commit even further violence to the non-human. They depend on hybridity in order to commit violent acts towards nonhumans. As Ivakhiv points out, "[w]ith their speaking animals and monstrous hybrids, the animation and horror genres, in divergent ways, specialize in a kind of "animorphism" that blurs boundaries between humans and living or lifelike non-humans" (Ivakhiv 8). The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* use this blurring of boundaries to use "lifelike non-humans" in order to get around the restraint that television guidelines place into children's animated shows.

Human to human violence might be rare in the show, but there is no shortage of carnage to be viewed. Beyond creating villains that are hybrids of animals or plants the show goes further by using technology and robots to dehumanize the enemy further. Violence against the hybrid animal-plant or plant-animal is often restrained to punching, kicking, and hits from non-sharp objects. Each turtle has his own weapon of choice: Leonardo has katana swords, Donatello uses a bo staff, Raphael carries two sharp sai, and Michelangelo has nunchucks. For Donatello and Michelangelo committing violence with their weapons is easy to represent because they are blunt objects that can hit characters, but for Leonardo and Raphael, who carry sharp weapons, using their weapons is difficult because they cannot actually stab a human with their weapons in a Nickelodeon cartoon. There is, however, a higher level of violence that can be committed towards a plant-human

hybrid than can be done to the animal-human hybrid. In the episode "Rise of the Turtles, Part 1" a villain is mutated into a 12-foot-tall plant monster named Snakeweed. In this episode the turtles defeat him by electrocuting him until he is nothing more than a burnt corpse. This level of violence doesn't occur to characters such as Dogpound, a dog-human hybrid who is highly anthropomorphized. This hierarchy of human, then animal, and lastly plant is a long held human-centric positioning that is starting to be challenged.

In his article, "Passive Flora? Reconsidering Nature's Agency through Human-Plant Studies (HPS)," John Charles Ryan introduces a new field of literary studies, Human-Plant Studies (HPS). His concept of HPS is built out of the more solidified field of Human-Animal Studies (HAS) and extends it beyond animals to plants. Ryan uses the commonly used definition of HAS as a field that addresses the "lack of scholarly attention given to nonhuman animals and to the relationships between human and nonhuman" (qtd. in Ryan 112). Ryan uses this definition to explain HPS as, "[e]xtending the HAS precedent, human-plant studies (HPS) would redress the lack of scholarly focus given to plant intelligences, as well as secular or sacred human-plant interactions" (112). Applying the HPS framework to the turtles reveals the long held hierarchy of human, then animal, and finally plant. Ryan challenges "anthropocentric and zoocentric assumption—that plants cannot bear agency because they do not have brains," but it is the anthropocentric and zoocentric positioning of plants that the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* use in order to have villains the turtles can harm (104). This hierarchy has been pinpointed and critiqued by the field of plant neurobiology.

Plant neurobiology is a field of study highly critical of the anthropocentric and zoocentric position that plants are placed. In his *New Yorker* article, "The Intelligent Plant:

Scientists Debate a New Way of Understanding Flora," author Michael Pollan explores the numerous views of plants from the scientific community. In this article, he examines plant neurobiology and explains that it is a new field, "aimed at understanding how plants perceive their circumstances and respond to environmental input in an integrated fashion" (qtd. in Pollan 3). Pollan explains that the advocates for plant neurobiology, "believe that we must stop regarding plants as passive objects—the mute, immobile furniture of our world—and begin to treat them as protagonists in their own dramas, highly skilled in the ways in contending in nature" (3). This might sound radical, but the core of this argument is not about positioning plants on the same level of humans or even animals, as Pollan points out one scientist claimed, "no interest in making plants into little animals", and there's no purpose in calling them "demi-animals" (18). Most scientist supporting a new perspective simply want to establish a new understanding that plants are much more capable than the current anthropocentric and zoocentric views. As Pollan points out none of the scientist he interviewed believed that plants have, "telekinetic powers or feel emotion. Nor does anyone believe that we will locate a walnut-shaped organ somewhere in plants which processes sensory data and directs behavior" (3). The turtles remain dependent on the anthropocentric and zoocentric positioning of plants in order to commit violence against the hybrid plant-human hybrids. A shift in the hierarchy of plants would dismantle the shows ability to commit such levels of violence against these villains. However, there are still limits, within the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* when it comes to harming even human-plant villains, as seen with Snakeweed. Even after he was electrocuted and burned the episode ended with showing his heart start beating again and he returned in future episodes. This is not the case for electronic based nonhuman villains.

The villainous world of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is made up of the animal-human and plant-human hybrid villains as well as a teenage girl named Karai, Shredder, the Foot Clan, and a brain shaped alien race called the Kraang. The turtles almost never fight Shredder, a human, and when they fight Karai it is hand to hand or weapon to weapon fighting that never leaves her hurt. However, the turtles fight the Kraang and Foot Clan with a large range of violence that depends on how far the villain is removed from their "humanness." This varies because the Kraang are just brain shaped and sized aliens that depend on placing themselves in the stomach area of two types of robots. The first type is a CIA agent looking cyborg that wears a black suit, looking much like Agent Smith from *The Matrix* (1999). These robots are often kicked around, but extreme violence rarely occurs against them and when it does it is followed with a clear sign that they are robots, such as an arm being cut off reveals wires and electrical sparks. However, there is another Kraang robot that is human shaped, but is all metal, looking much like the skinless version the T-800 robot from *The Terminator* (1984). With their non-humanness clear and dominate these Kraang robots suffer unfiltered violence as they are chopped and stabbed to pieces and decapitated by Leonardo and Raphael.

The other group of villains are the Foot Clan, a group of human ninjas referred to individually as a Foot Soldier and lead by the Shredder. They are humans, but are dressed all in black, from head to toe, with almost all of their human features removed they are often beaten up by the turtles, but are never brutally injured. However, in the episode "Target: April O'Neil" a new type of clan member is introduced, a Foot Bot. Being dressed head to toe in black they look exactly the same as the Foot Soldier, yet are said to be "robots," but there is no real difference between them and the human Foot Soldier

members. However, they are categorized as non-human and the same violence that is committed against the robot looking Kraang occurs to the Foot Bots. In this particular episode, Casey Jones, the hockey playing teenage side kick to the turtles, uses his hockey stick to decapitate a Foot Bot and shoot his head into a hockey net.

From left to right: human foot clan, footbot, Kraang robot, and Kraang cyborg

Conclusion: Popular Culture's Mirror

The environmental and ecological messages and perspectives found in animation go well beyond the obvious messages placed blatantly in the main narratives. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is an example of a show that took clear stances on toxic waste, but along the way established perspectives on urban space both above and below ground as well as reaffirmed hierarchy of the human and nonhuman. The use of environmental messages, according to Sturgeon, can be traced back to the post-cold war era as she states, "[i]n a post-cold war context, environmentalism became a new moral framework for children's popular culture" (Sturgeon 103). The list is extensive with early 1990s shows like the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Captain Planet* (1990-1993), and *Ferngully: That Last Rainforest* (1992).

This trend has grown extensively with animated television shows and feature films continuing to push obvious environmental messages in the twenty-first century such as *The*

Simpsons Movie (2007) and *Wall-E* (2008). However, there remains and even larger amount of animated films and television shows that use environmental messages layered beneath narratives that do not make environmental stances, but indirectly pursue narratives intertwined with environmental themes. In *Toy Story 3* (2010) a large chunk of the film turns towards a strong message about consumerism culture and throw-away society and in *Up* (2009) the film challenges hunting practices as well as scientific research on animals, as David Whitley states, "*Up* (2009) also explores animal rights and human responsibilities in relation to prehistoric creatures that have survived in a strangely isolated habitat, locked away from human interaction until rediscovered by rival explorers" (Whitley 166). These films might not be taking direct stances like *Ferngully* or *Wall-E,* but they are nevertheless shaping perspectives on the issues they use as subplots. The same can be said about the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and their perspective shaping of urban space and violence against the non-human.

The ever-expanding reach of animation to shape perspectives needs to be analyzed and understood in order for viewers to comprehend the impact it is having on them. It is one of the first media that children are extensively exposed to and it has developed into a medium that continues to influence individuals through even adulthood. Cinema and literature in general are mirrors to the society they are born out of and as Heider claims can even expose what that culture romanticizes. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is an excellent example of the numerous ways that a popular culture text, in its pursuit to gain popularity and viewership, molds itself to the demands and desires of the audience. It is from this process that the text becomes the mirror, as it reflects the topics and subjects that interest the viewers. In doing so it becomes clear that the mythological underground

continues to have mutated residents, but those residents reflect the middle-class desires of the time period. It also becomes very clear that it is within this time period that we continue to uphold a rigid hierarchy between the human and nonhuman. The nonhuman remains an object to be destroyed and the human remains the subject to do the destroying.

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CONCLUSION: ANALYZING ANIMATION BEYOND ACADEMIA

If the moving image can be drawn or painted or photographed frame by frame, or even drawn directly onto film frames, with no need for it to be found in the "real world" first, what is to stop it from doing anything we might imagine it doing?

-Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (214)

In Adrian Ivakhiv's essay "Teaching Ecocriticism and Cinema" he outlines how a course on ecocinema can be taught. He has been teaching a course entitled Ecopolitics and the Cinema at the University of Vermont since 2005. The course has evolved over the years from an open-to-the-public course to a traditional 3-credit course. The course focuses on "ways of seeing," process-relational perspective, and film's impact on culture: "With its focus on worldly activities as relational processes, the course pays close attention to the processes by which viewers make sense of films and to those by which film images and meanings filter into the broader culture over time" (Garrard 152). These same goals can be adapted and applied to eco-animation. What makes film and perhaps to an even larger extent animation such a ripe text to evaluate is that its cultural reach is very extensive. Animation continues to grow in the film industry as almost all large budget films have become dependent on it for visual effects. Computer animated films have become a juggernaut within themselves at the box office and the video game market continues to expand. Each of these forms of animation take the physical world and reshape and reproduce them in digital formats. With each animated representation of person, place, or thing it shapes viewers' understanding of it as well as their relationship to it.

Teaching viewers how to be insightful of what they are watching should be part of the effort that eco-animation, ecocinema, and ecocriticism strive to accomplish. The discourse can use film and animation to reach a broader audience with the goal of reaching

beyond the halls of academia and into the daily lives of individuals. It can look into texts that are not blatantly sending an environmental message, as well as look into other forms of animation beyond shorts and feature length films—such as videogame animation—to analyze what messages are being delivered. A lot of our perspectives, relationships, and understandings of the world are not established in the classroom, but on our couches in our living rooms and from the seats of movie theaters. However, many viewers remain unaware of the impact that cinema and animation has on them as consumers of environmental messages from the production studios, especially messages in sub-plots. As Ivakhiv states, "movie audiences have become not so much ecologically conscious as enthralled by a certain kind of *representations* of nature: nature as a visual spectacle and as a place of beauty and recreation of human visitors—nature, in other words, as *out there*, separate from the mundane lives of city dwellers" (Ivakhiv 114). Eco-animation should strive to spread a message that will help viewers be insightful citizens and informed consumers who can challenge these representations and become more ecologically conscious.

Animation holds the powerful ability to take viewers to magical worlds that often cannot be captured by live-action cinema. Before CGI, live-action cinema was the only cinematic form to be able to do this, but with the increased abilities of CGI the world of animation and live-action have blurred. Not only can cinema, and especially animation, show us fictional worlds it can also explore and expose aspects of the actual world around us. Ivakhiv points out that "[t]he use of film to reveal what happens *in nature* that cannot otherwise be *naturally observed* by humans goes back to the origins of cinematic media" (199). He then uses the example of "Sallie Gardner at a Gallop," a precursor to cinema,

which was 24 continuous photos of a horse galloping, taken by Eadweard Muybridge in 1878, which proved all four hooves of a horse come off the ground at the same time during a gallop. Animation continues to push this concept of revealing "what happens *in nature* that cannot otherwise be *naturally observed* by humans" as CGI in big budget films continue to make interpretations of what nature is, such as with Pandora in *Avatar*. Limits continue to be removed as animations ability to recreate the "real world" around us improves and viewers forget that what they see is an interpretation, a representation, of nature. The power for animation to recreate the world through interpretation and representation allows viewers to experience, view, and challenge aspects of their preconceived ideas of nature. Animation can make a compelling and engaging story out of the issues that surround us and our relationship with the nonhuman world around us.

The film *Rango* can point out, although in flawed form, that the litter we create may exit from our daily immediate world, but remains within the world at large and may not directly impact us, but impacts the lives of the nonhuman. In these moments where we laugh at a Pepto-Bismol bottle used as a bathroom, as is the case in *Rango*, we can laugh during the film, but perhaps later look at it a little closer and examine the real world issue of trash and its impact on the nonhuman.

Films like *Epic* and *The Croods* it allows viewers to question the hierarchy of the human and nonhuman as wells as our humancentric positioning of ourselves over nature. Animation allows for the repositioning of this structure in ways that is hard to verbalize, but makes sense when it is visualized. It may be hard for humans to express an interest or concern in the nonhuman world around us, especially the extremely small members of the nonhuman, but this mentality of lacking concern has a ripple effect that impacts our

attitude towards the nonhuman world as a whole. An excellent example of the impact of our attitudes towards the nonhuman is reflected in the way that the nonhuman is treated in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. The hierarchy of human over nonhuman in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and violence toward the nonhuman increase as villains become more nonhuman than human. It moves along a hierarchy that is based on a humancentric view that the more closely a human can relate to the nonhuman object, the less violence that can be done to it. The human villains are rarely injured, the human-animal hybrid villains are beat up, the human-plant villains are electrocuted and burned but not killed, and robots, depending on their likeness to humans, have results that range from losing an arm to being decapitated and having their heads shot into a hockey net.

The impact of all of this is hard to gauge and plenty of questions remain to be explored and hopefully answered. If ecocriticism's goal is to use literature to not only reveal how nature is represented, but to also start a meaningful conversation that could lead to change in our perspectives, attitudes, and treatment of the nonhuman, which is often argued to be the case, then animation, as a text, is a great choice to use in starting a conversation. Animated films, television shows, and videogames are texts that a large populous is familiar with and if large scale meaningful change is to occur then it will take these common texts in order to achieve these goals. Basing his argument on D.N. Rodowick, Ivakhiv states, "Rodowick notes that while digital cinema retains much of the viewerly and representational impetus that predated it, it gives rise to new potentialities that we, novelty seekers, are bound to pursue…profound openings that have yet to be followed to their limits" (Ivakhiv 331). Eco-animation should help viewers push their understandings of these new potentialities. Ivakhiv's use of "we novelty seekers" is a call

to academics to investigate these new developments in film, but animation's role in persuading viewers of certain perceptions is far too critical to leave to just the world of academia. To use Ivakhiv's own world, cinema is a "world-making enterprise" and "there are many ways in which we might work with cinema to remake the world" 334). The call to action might arise from academia, but it will take far more than just the "novelty seekers"—it will take the enormous general population, who consume animation, to remake the world.

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