Queer Apocalyptics

Rhetorics of Disidentification for the End of the World

Introduction: *Lexicosm -or- Queer Apocalyptics in one word*

Ennui

I was talking with my friend Colleen after they had just finished Simone De Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*. They excitedly wanted to share with me what they learned about the word *ennui*. Colleen explained how this word, *ennui*, underwent a linguistic shift after the French Revolution. Their new, historical understanding was that *ennui* wasn't just about general dissatisfaction, but became a dissatisfaction with how, even after a revolution, the world was still the same. *Ennui* was born out of the working class's reality that their war against the bourgeoisie changed nothing, so what was the point?

I think of the futurous *ennui*. I started writing down these ideas weeks before the USA's presidential election, brimming with anticipatory dissatisfaction. I could precall whatever revolution is to come changing nothing. This historical understanding resonating through present world-ending realities towards potential futures captures the goal of my writing in a single word. The queer apocalyptic lexicosm, *ennui*, captures the *always already* and *always will-be* of a future orientation built off of incomplete endings and unsteady beginnings. It is this temporally unbound *ennui* that prompts the question: *How do we do rhetorical work when we feel like the world is ending?*

A potential answer which I explore here is: we say it has already ended.

Witnessing the end of the world is a very *tired* thing. Tired in that it seems that people are always doing it. I feel robbed of my uniqueness for thinking that the world is ending, just like everyone *else* is.

> Windows down, scream along
>
> To some America first rap country song
>
> A slaughterhouse, an outlet mall
>
> Slot machines, fear of God
>
>   …
>
> The billboard said the end is near
>
> I turned around, there was nothing there
>
> Yeah, I guess the end is here (Bridgers)

I include lyrics from Phoebe Bridgers' "I Know the End" not just as a recent indie folk iteration of an eye toward the apocalyptic, but as a representative poetic rendering of how the apocalyptic haunts the everyday; pop country music imbued with threatening American nationalism, late-capitalist shadows of butchery and Christmas shopping blurred together, prophetic billboards affirming *The End is Near*. By engaging with the specific sights on a highway drive, tying loose threads together into threats, an anxiety builds from the deceptive, seemingly-unified world-ending message. This persuasive pastiche is "a form of responsivity and response," (Rai et al. 2) pointing the listener towards new orientations through extrahuman means. The material circumstances of Bridger's apocalypse coagulate to create a temporally unreal situation, as organic as it is contrived. The amplification of objects, language, and the feelings it stirs brings the poetic into ambient, ecological understandings of rhetoric (Rai et al. 8).

Engaging in this anxious perspective is an act of both empathetic rhetoric and catharsis. There is a *pathos* oriented towards powerlessness, a washing-over feeling to it, a surrendering to affective reality. To begin rhetorical work at this kind of moment, the exploded, personal beginning, requires intimacy (Restaino 5). By adopting an epistemology of intimacy, *rhetoric*-ing the apocalyptic becomes a thought-bending process, "collapsed walls between the personal, the academic, and the analytic," (5). This queer, blood-rushing, guts-gushing appeal to our relationships to an ending world seems to knock us off our temporal, generic, rational tracks and into new territory. After all, what is genre to the apocalypse?

Queer apocalyptics is built on the legitimacy of affective thinking and being. A felt reality is an already-occurring one, even if it does not have a secular, material home. By materially imagining affective realities, we are caught living the possible and impossible through anxious prescience. This future-sight-as-evidence is the first thread pulling the apocalyptic towards the uneventful. Instead of imposing eventful criteria, we can queer our understanding of potential moments by assigning (un)eventful attributes in our imaginings. Through "surfing" binarism, (Dadas 65) temporal (im)possibility becomes part of the rhetorical toolbelt. This queering of the Derridian event/unevent binary lets us view the apocalypse as both/either "radically singular" (Ballif 245) and "mundane" (Hallenbeck 22). This deescalation of the apocalypse lets The End be incomplete and, therefore, infinitely repeatable. (Un)eventing The End embraces the non-normative historical thinking Ballif asks of Derridian event-writing, seen where she writes: "the event resists the impulses of 'normative historical thinking' and, thereby, provocatively invites the historiographer to likewise challenge normalizing histories by writing the event as event" (244). In bringing this non-normative thinking to the (un)event, the futurous apocalypse is mundane. By queering the historical present — the apocalyptic *always already* —

we construct a simultaneous futurous present. The moment of observation and rhetorical evaluation is as stuck in the past as it is reaching toward the future, despite standing in one place. This historical+futurous present, I argue, is the temporally-unbound unevent which serves as the origin for queer apocalyptic future-writing.

Queer apocalyptic writing requires a densely constructed network that serves as a present origin from which one can observe, imagine, and understand the seemingly inifite pasts and futures the expand from the uneventful apocalypse. This use of "origin" is an appropriation of Foucault's work in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Where Foucault critiques the metaphysical "origin" as the place of historic truth, (140) I reposition the origin as the uneventful apocalypse in the historical+futurous present. From this historical+futurous present origin, we can doubly participate in Foucault's genealogical histories; the risky, subjectless, self-contradictory genealogical past (Foucault 163) redoubles at the pinching place of the present origin into an equally risky, subjectless, self-contradictory genealogical future. This pinching place — the apocalyptic origin — is defined not by a moment in time but by a dense network of presentist articulations.

The image I've constructed so far resembles that of a dying star, emitting two beams of energy in opposite directions as its mass collapses in on itself. We've discussed these beams — the pasts and futures — but the dense, dying star at the center is still unexplained. This core is a temporal-material network of posthuman objects of study. A network is assembled through a version of Hallenbeck's feminist-materialist methodology, using Actor Network Theory to observe both the human and nonhuman in their kairotic expressions of mundanity (18). However, where Hallenebeck calls for a seemingly-ceaseless collection of primary materials (22), I return to the dying star to define how queer apocalyptics' collection ends. In place of Charmaz' concept

of saturation ("no new information found") (689), I offer *collapsation*. Collapsation occurs when the mass of the material network and its silences and articulations (because they *both* have mass, as well) begin to slowly, then rapidly contract in on the center of rhetorical focus. It is the pressurizing of these articulations and the rhetorical explosions that occur as they bump into each other that force the personal, academic, and analytic gaze to follow resonant energies out through pasts and futures, spewing from the infinitely-dense apocalyptic origin.

Temporal Disidentification: *Out of the Bunker and into the Field*

The morning after the world ends, where will you go for breakfast?

Will you drive, or walk?

Who will you see on your way there?

How will you pay for it?

After the apocalypse, what material and human conditions will you find yourself in?

An inevitable experience for those living through the uneventful apocalypse is encountering people for whom the world has not ended *yet*; At your first last meal, you will discuss very different things from the family seated next to you. This reality dissonance is the grounding which reminds us that temporal relativity is subject to hegemony, particularly where minoritized and non-white, non-Western ways of being are concerned. Queer, of color, Indigenous, disabled, and other minoritized epistemologies are constantly negotiating how their experience of time is just *different* (Dinshaw et al. 187; Jaffe; Robinson 57). This is all to say: temporal disedentification is already built into non-normative, non-white, non-Western ways of being.

The implementation of queer apocalyptics begins with temporal disidentification. It is a participation *in* and *through* time, a mode of being that "neither opts to assimilate with such a structure nor strictly opposes it" (Muñoz 11). This split orientation (*in*/*through*) pushes, pulls, and intersects the apocalyptic field(s) relative to itself/each other. This field(s) — "the nexus where rhetoric is produced, where it is enacted, where it circulates, and, consequently, where it is audienced" (McKinnon et al. 4) — is as real as it is affective as it is queer as it is imaginary. It is always grounded in the material and reaching toward queer possiblities. Possibilities, the queer apocalyptic fields, possess memory, knowledge, *ethos* in a way similar to the quasi-autobiographical field Cintron advocates for (8). These knowledges and subtle autobiographies sing the bowl rhetorical, resonating in/through the material enmeshments we construct and giving sound and soul to the unbound genealogies of queer apocalyptics. Through this constant "shuffling back and forth between reception and production" (Muñoz 25) fields, epistemologies, subjects belong to the historical+futurous present. One field is passing through every apocalyptic possibility and every apocalyptic past, and is forever intersecting with the neat, normative temporality of the family at the table next to you. By specifying queer apocalyptics' fraught relationship with the normative, I highlight how this "rhetorical string theory" can, and *must*, align itself with the interests of counterstory (Martinez 405), critical listening positionality (Robinson 11), and other radically inclusive practices. The two examples given highlight the experiential knowledge of people of color and the need for observational methods that seek to collaborate rather than subsume difference, respectively. It is this working "on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz 25), in this case, time, that pushes queer apocalyptics into a historical+futurous present which is forever witnessing fields phasing through other queer apocalyptic fields.

Queer apocalyptics is a rhetorical mode of participation and invention. It is a methodology that lets us step *past* the normative, the unsustainable, that which has adapted towards systems of harm and destruction, and move *toward* equally-expansive, oppositely-impacting futures. By disjointing the present, by invoking the *always already*-ness of incomplete apocalypse, by surrendering to the affective and material, we invert the genealogical roots of the historical+futurous present into futurous branches, mirroring form and logic but doubling realities. This future-oriented disidentification expands as far as the scholar, the human, the field can imagine.

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