

## **Feeling the trouble: comic politics in times of ecological crises**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the affective landscape of climate change, placing anger and sadness alongside the joy and wonder that can also arise in response to ecological crises. While anger often motivates political action, it can simultaneously hinder long-term engagement. Conversely, positive affects, such as those elicited through comedy, can enhance awareness and empower ecological care. Drawing on Bonnie Honig's discussion of genre, I argue for interpreting the affective terrain of climate change through the lens of comedy. By engaging with "comic encounters"—moments that reveal the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds—the paper suggests that comedy can serve as a vital political tool, promoting the engagement necessary for addressing ecological challenges. I highlight the importance of storytelling in shaping political action and offer three examples for how to make ecological care come alive: Aristophanes' *The Wasps*, South American Moche pots, and Koko, a gorilla with a unique sense of humor. The paper concludes by proposing that integrating comedic perspectives into environmental political theory can inspire new forms of resistance and collective empowerment.*

### **Introduction**

If there ever was a case of countervailing affects, climate change might be the one. Most obvious is the anger directed against politicians who ignore the many warnings from climate scientists around the world. "How dare you?" as Greta Thunberg asked at the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York: "you have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words."<sup>1</sup> Thunberg meant her remarks as a call for

action, and research has since shown that anger, indeed, is an important motivation for speaking up against political inaction.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, research has also shown that climate change can fuel anxiety and existential angst. A 2018 survey found that nearly three quarters of US citizens between the age of 18 and 34 have experienced a loss in emotional wellbeing due to news about climate change.<sup>3</sup> Other surveys from other parts of the world confirm this pattern<sup>4</sup> and point to "climate paralysis" as a likely consequence<sup>5</sup>: At the same time as anger motivates climate action, the cause of this anger (i.e., knowledge about climate change) has the potential to impede its ability to sustain long-term engagement. Even Thunberg, in her "how dare you" speech, acknowledges this double bind, noting how "sad[ness]" underpins hers and many other calls for action.

At the opposite end of the affective spectrum, climate change has also been proven to engender joy and wonder. A recent experiment conducted at the University of Colorado shows that laughter prompted by stand-up comedy is an effective way to generate awareness about climate change, leading to higher levels of efficacy, problem solving, and new knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Similar findings can be detected in research on climate activist communities in both the Global North and Global South.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as detailed by Anna Tsing in her groundbreaking book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*<sup>8</sup>, encounters with ecological deprivation, while devastating in their own right, can inspire new modes of listening and sensing, revealing a whole new world heretofore unseen by those perceiving it from a human-centered perspective. Tsing reports about one such encounter in connection with her research on the matsusake mushroom, which seemed to become extinct after the Chernobyl incident in 1989 but later started growing in Oregon's forests due to new forestry practices. A particularly crucial moment includes a Japanese scientist, who explains how a mushroom like the matsusake can spread across

continents. The story fills Tsing with joy and wonder: "*Mushrooms with genetically diverse spores! Mosaic bodies! Chemical sensing that creates communal effects! How strange and wonderful the world.*"<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, I propose to examine the anger and sadness expressed by Thunberg and others alongside the joy and wonder that climate change also provokes, engaging in what we, in the spirit of the work on genre and narrative by political theorists such as Bonnie Honig, could call "genre shifting".<sup>10</sup> Specifically, I suggest that we interpret the affective terrain prompted by climate change through the lens of comedy in order to both acknowledge the rage against political inaction in a time of ecological crises *and* generate affirmative modes of ecological care that can undo this inaction. This does not mean that the Thunberg-like anger is wrong, but rather that the underlying sense of disempowerment is likely to lose some of its grip once we place it alongside the kind of joyful and wondrous experiences that comedy enables. I readily acknowledge that comedy as a genre and as a phenomenon can take many forms, including nondemocratic ones.<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I focus on a form of comedy that explores the incongruities arising from the collision of different worlds—human *and* nonhuman, natural *and* artificial, organized *and* spontaneous. These collisions, along with the discursive and performative representations they inspire, form the basis of what I term "comic encounters", by which I mean moments that expose the audience, willingly or not, to the shared substance connecting these worlds in ways that are overlapping but not identical. My central argument is that such encounters can provide a fresh political and ethical perspective, capable of fostering the kind of care that the planet needs, and that climate activists, including Thunberg, have advocated for over two decades.

Before I proceed, let me say a few extra words about "genre shifting". The first impetus for engaging in this kind of work comes from the insight, prevalent in literary

studies and the humanities more generally, that genres not only structure modes of feeling and thinking, but also delimit the underlying conditions of agency, including how to resist or overcome a given impasse.<sup>12</sup> This link between affective experience, collective empowerment, and storytelling has long been front and center in the fields of education<sup>13</sup>, psychology<sup>14</sup>, and political theory<sup>15</sup>, and it has recently begun to inform discussions about climate change, alerting us to the power of storytelling in dealing with ecological crises. “It matters what stories tell stories,” as Donna Haraway so eloquently puts it in her discussion of care and kinship in a more-than-human world.<sup>16</sup> Haraway seems mostly interested in situating this insight in relation to the natural sciences, but her insights applies also to politics – political theory included – a point that Honig brings out in her discussion of genre and storytelling.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, while political theories about climate change tend to favor romance or tragedy as their go-to genre<sup>18</sup>, comedy remains an unexplored option.<sup>19</sup> My goal in this paper is to make a case for why this is a mistake, and why undoing the inaction highlighted by activists around the world implies changing the stories we tell about climate change.<sup>20</sup> As Haraway puts it: “We *must* change the story; the story *must* change.”<sup>21</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Haraway, the paper has three parts. The first part elaborates on how and why comedy is an appropriate genre for examining the affective terrain of climate change. The second part zeroes in on three comic encounters, each exemplifying how comedy can empower care for human/nonhuman-relations in times of crisis and uncertainty. The third part situates this potential in the relation to the anger and sadness felt by climate activists and discusses how “changing the story” (as suggested by Haraway) might imply a different way of doing politics. I conclude with a set of general remarks on how attention to comedy and comic encounters can inspire attention to genre in environmental political theory.

## **Climate change and its incongruities**

To appreciate how and why comedy might be an appropriate genre for examining the affective terrain of our current predicament, we first need to acknowledge the multiple ways in which one can tell the story of what climate change means and implies. As noted above, many stories often follow a romantic or tragic script that begins with climate change as anthropogenically caused and, in those cases where resolution is demanded, ends happily with new technologies (as in eco-modernism<sup>22</sup>) or political revolution (as in eco-Marxism<sup>23</sup>), or, in those cases where resolution is not possible, leads to militant pluralism (as in eco-agonism<sup>24</sup>) or moral defeatism, accepting the doomed fate of the human species (as in eco-dystopianism<sup>25</sup>). Alongside these stories, however, we also find another set of narratives, which break with the notion of climate change as either solvable or irredeemable and instead settle for a more undecided account in which climate change signifies a series of ambivalent, often incongruous shifts in human/nonhuman relations. As I argue below, it is in relation to these shifts that comedy can help not only analyze but also mobilize and redirect the affective terrain prompted by climate change.

An obvious example of a narrative that examines the incongruous shifts in human/nonhuman relations is Haraway's own stories about climate change. Contributing to ongoing debates about our current epoch, Haraway encourages us to pluralize human/nonhuman relations in order to both acknowledge the force of anthropogenic climate change *and* avoid the pitfall, so common in many other discourses<sup>26</sup>, of letting humans reign supreme. Haraway avoids the latter by introducing her own storytelling machine – the “Chthulucene” – which derives its name from a spider – the *Pimoida cthulhu* – whose name in turn resonates with the ancient Greek

*khthonios*, meaning “of the earth”.<sup>27</sup> Behind this material-semiotic play on words lies an ambition to highlight the interconnected but also open-ended character of the world’s becoming-together: its *symbiosis*. The Cthulucene is a shared condition, which feels unique to every agent. It is part human, part nonhuman (organic *and* inorganic). It prioritizes the many, often variegated entanglements that bind humans and nonhumans together, and it emphasizes how and why these entanglements do not form one single figure but instead prompt incongruous change, expressed through tentacular lines of movement and co-existence. The Cthulucene, as Haraway puts it, is a hotchpotch of “ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with...in precious times, in which the world is not yet finished and the sky has not fallen – yet.”<sup>28</sup>

Haraway is certainly not alone in narrating climate change as a cacophony of nonidentical shifts in human/nonhuman-relations. Tsing’s work, as already discussed, is another example. So is the work of Scott Gilbert, who draws on Lynn Margulis’ claim that the environment is part of the body, linking climate change to stories about more-than-human relations that have gotten out of tune and, therefore, are in need either repair or recalibration.<sup>29</sup> A similar storyline informs the work of Jane Bennett, whose account of what she calls “vibrant matter”<sup>30</sup> resonates with contemporary anthropology<sup>31</sup>, eco-literature<sup>32</sup>, and divergent forms of climate activism<sup>33</sup> (to mention a few!). Common to all these accounts is an attempt to simultaneously decenter the human, foregrounding (as Haraway does) the entanglements of humans and nonhumans, *and* interpret climate change, and the ecological deprivation that comes with it, as a rift or break – or, to use Haraway’s word, a “becoming-with” – that endangers the very conditions of life. While the latter entails a call for action, the former emphasizes how and why such action is always-already in the midst of becoming otherwise, subject to forces that no one can fully control.

What, if anything, is comedic about this? Apart from the laughter provoked by pronouncing a name as highbrowed as the “C-h-t-h-u-l-u-c-e-n-e”, the answer may not be immediately clear. Haraway does of course highlight “generative joy” as a precondition for changing the story about ecological crises, but her equally important concern for the “grief” prompted by “living and dying”<sup>34</sup> makes it less than obvious what such a joy could (or should) mean in the context of climate change. To get some traction, it may help to shift perspective and focus less on the substantial part of Haraway's stories and more on how she tells them, i.e., on the narrative structure and storytelling techniques that get the Chthulucene off the ground in the first place.

Haraway encourages us to do so by highlighting her own incongruities as crucial to retelling the story about human/nonhuman relations: “we need stories...that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, apart from the Chthulucene itself, which, as already noted, is a combination of two related but distinct names, the incongruities typically occur in the stories' shifts from microbiology and climate science over political economy, postcolonial theory, and STS to science fiction and Ancient Greek mythology (and back again). None of these shifts seems justifiable from a strictly logical point of view, and yet they not only highlight but also perform the very entanglements that the stories seek to unearth. Indeed, the Chthulucene's human/nonhuman-entanglements all come alive in and through the stories' narratological incongruities. Might this not be the source of generative joy? Might this not be what imbues Haraway's (and others') climate change stories with an element of comedy?

We can refine our response to these questions by broadening the definition of comedy and comic encounters presented in the introduction of this paper, i.e., as

representations of incongruity that pull the audience into a dynamic world of becoming and vitality. Three key insights emerge from this definition.<sup>36</sup> First, comic encounters arise when two related-but-distinct utterances are juxtaposed — such as when humans behave like nonhumans or when words sound alike but convey entirely different meanings. Second, comic encounters use the representation of these incongruities to uncover a shared world beneath the utterances, forming the foundation for their opposing yet interconnected differences. Third, comic encounters connect the laughter and joy sparked by the incongruities to a source of vitality that drives the coevolution of human and nonhuman life, transcending the purely mechanical or externally determined. The latter underscores comedy's *sine qua non* and highlights its essential role in sustaining and expanding the conditions of life for all. Indeed, as defined in this paper, comedy and comic encounters are not dependent on "happy endings" or irredeemable conflicts. Rather, they are ways of discovering joy in the myriad differences that Haraway and others emphasize as inherent to "living and dying," or "becoming-with."

A good way to appreciate these aspects of comedy and comic encounters is to look closer at what the literature commonly refers to as "Old Comedy", i.e., the kind of comedy that informed much of Ancient Greek culture and later would inspire the work of writers such as Rabelais, Nietzsche, and, I would argue, Haraway. Particularly interesting for our purposes is how, within Ancient Greek culture, comedy and comic encounters were not just part of the yearly theater festivals organized by city officials, but also played an important role in rituals outside the city walls that, often through the use of indecent language, mobilized laughter and hilarity to affirm and empower earthly regeneration.<sup>37</sup> Many of the rituals were explicitly incongruous in their way of trespassing the divide between human *and* nonhuman, culture *and* nature. Moreover,



the rituals and the laughter they produced were meant to connect the participants with the life-giving force of Dionysus, allowing ancient Greeks to experience themselves as part of an entangled, more expansive world in which categorical distinctions across modes of being do not apply. The rituals did so through images of "fertility", "agriculture", "sexual reproduction", and much more.<sup>38</sup> As Stephen Halliwell has shown, the result was an ambiguous feeling of community and belonging: "Greek ritual laughter... [was the] enactment of communal revivification through the bodily energies and psychological release of laughter."<sup>39</sup>

Resonating with Haraway's concern for the Chthulucene, it is comedy's attention to earthly regeneration and communal revivification, which makes it apt for both analyzing *and* redirecting the affective terrain prompted by climate change. Our discussion so far highlights two contributions as particularly important to the kind of comic encounters that this paper wishes to foreground. At the ontological level, comedy operates across and beneath the human/nonhuman-divide, using representations of incongruity to disclose a cacophony of multiplicities expressed in and through tentacular lines of movement and co-existence (to use Haraway's language). At the phenomenological-affective level, comedy infuses its subjects with the bodily energy needed to not only acknowledge the uncertainty associated with these multiplicities but also cultivate a care for the vitality they embody. Vitality (defined as the source of earthly regeneration and communal revivification) seems, as already suggested, to be the *sine qua non* of comedy; it is both the cause of comedy and what comedy itself aims to reproduce through related-yet-distinct utterances, images, encounters, and so on. Contrary to common belief, comedy therefore appears to have a comparative advantage relative to other ways of narrating the story of climate change. Its contributions help to relax the pitfall of human exceptionalism, and, as a genre, it allows us to pinpoint a way

beyond the feeling of disempowerment associated with climate anger and climate anxiety.

I hasten to say that none of this means that comedy, in the manner defined in this paper, invites us to treat climate change in a frivolous or otherwise lighthearted manner. To laugh *with* climate change is neither to deny its existence nor to minimize its negative effects on ecosystems and the possibility of life as such. Quite the contrary. By staging incongruous encounters beneath and across the human/nonhuman-divide, comedy encourages us to see climate change as a permanent problem that, on the one hand, has no final solution but, on the other hand, demands ongoing care in order to protect and expand the very conditions of life and earthly regeneration. How – and with what implications – this care comes about is the topic of the next section.

### **Feeling the trouble: affective care across the human/nonhuman-divide**

Let us begin by noting how care empowered by comedy resonates with the work begun by Joan Tronto and later extended and refined in relation to ecology by Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa.<sup>40</sup> Both Tronto and Puig de la Bellacasa work within the feminist tradition, highlighting the need to recognize gender and embodiment as crucial dimensions of justice. Like Tronto's care, care empowered by comedy seeks to sustain and improve well-being across social and political differences. Unlike Tronto's care, however, comedy's care extends, as we just saw, beyond the human/nonhuman divide and, therefore, is not dependent on the kind of "species"-thinking that Tronto emphasizes in her own work as well as in her work with Bernice Fisher.<sup>41</sup> The care that I seek to theorize is instead closer to the more-than-human approach taken by Puig de la Bellacasa.<sup>42</sup> According to Puig de la Bellacasa, care is an affective experience that traverses the human/nonhuman-divide without ever finding one final expression or

resolution. As she puts it, care is "vital in interweaving a web of life... [and it] suggests interdependency as the ontological state in which humans and countless other beings unavoidably live."<sup>43</sup>

In this section, I outline three exemplary vignettes to show how comedy can mobilize the kind of care that Puig de la Bellacasa highlights and that the previous section identified as a way to relax the disempowerment holding climate anger and climate anxiety together. While each of the three vignettes belongs to significantly different regimes of experience, stretching from Ancient Greece over precolonial Peru to contemporary California, with no particular chronology or line of progression implied, they all contribute to a clearer picture of how comedy can narrate encounters with the more-than-human in ways that express care for their underlying entanglements. The incongruity that some may feel from reading the three vignettes alongside each other is part and parcel of this picture: It serves as a meta-point about comedy's place in debates about affect and climate change. First, the three vignettes demonstrate the prevalence of comedy across cultures and historical periods. Second, they show how incongruous encounters can mobilize a feeling of vitality and becoming, which in turn can lead to care for life and earthly generation. Third, they foreground modes of listening and speaking that highlight the value of narrating the relation between humans and nonhumans without assuming a categorical separation between them.

#### *Vignette #1: Aristophanes' wasps*

My first vignette is Aristophanes' *The Wasps*, which premiered at the Lenaia festival in 422 BC as part of the Old Comedy-tradition that I briefly introduced in the previous section. Set against the backdrop of the Second Peloponnesian War and the warmongering General Cleon, who became leader of Athens after the death of Pericles

in 429BC, the play stands out for its exploration of human/nonhuman-relations alongside a political system marked by deadlock and lack of purpose.<sup>44</sup> Aristophanes elaborates on this situation by pitting Lovecleon – an older man supporting Cleon’s regime by serving as a juror – against his own son – Loathcleon – who rejects everything about his father’s (and, by extension, Cleon’s) ideology and lifestyle. The incongruities staged between the two characters help to clear the way for a politics of care, which goes beyond the human/nonhuman-divide that had begun informing much of Ancient Greek philosophy during the time of the play.<sup>45</sup> First, *The Wasps* minimizes human exceptionalism by presenting Lovecleon as both a “crow” hammering “pegs into the wall” and as a lost person “on all fours, scurrying about like a mouse.”<sup>46</sup> Second, the play attributes agency to the nonhuman, both as a general category and as a set of internally differentiated life forms. For example, when Lovecleon claims that the facts against his father “bark for themselves”<sup>47</sup>, the chorus responds by presenting itself as wasp-like beings: “sharp-tempered,” “cantankerous,” “resourceful” and, according to themselves, “a most virile breed and one that very substantially aided this city in battle.”<sup>48</sup>

While the play may seem limited to a particular time and context, we should not underestimate its potential for making ecological care come alive. As the classicist Mark Payne points out in his interpretation, Aristophanes’ depictions of the play’s main characters are meant to show how they belong to the same “substance”, whose structure and genealogy reflect the very entanglement of human and nonhuman life.<sup>49</sup> Payne goes on to emphasize that the entanglements do not assume strict identity between the parts but revolve around a process of cathexis (understood as affective investment), in which the very disclosure of a shared substance produces attachment to earthly regeneration.<sup>50</sup> Another way to express this is that the play’s ridicule and foul language lay the groundwork for uncovering a shared substance from which the bodily

energies necessary for ecological care can emerge. By exploring the ambiguities between "love" and "loath," and portraying animals that speak like humans (and vice-versal!), the play exposes the incongruities in both human interactions and human-nonhuman relationships. This exposure helps to challenge human superiority over nonhumans and opens for experimenting with alternative ways of "becoming-with," linking, as previously mentioned, the audience's laughter and joy with the vitality driving the coevolution of human and nonhuman life. The result, one could argue, is a laboratory for what ecological care could and should mean in a world of becoming: Through laughter and joy, the play inspires its audience to recognize the entanglements of human and nonhuman life, fostering a deeper connection to life itself.

#### *Vignette #2: Moche pots*

The meaning and implications of this attachment to life becomes clearer if we turn to the second vignette: the so-called sex joke pots produced by South American Moche artists during the first millennia A.D.<sup>51</sup> The pots depict a wide range of obscene acts and their design is so ingenious that the users – whether they want to or not – end up participating in the acts depicted. In the case of the drinking pots, the shape often resembles a female body with the hole doubling as the vulva from which liquids flow when placed at the right angle. In the case of the music pots, the long mouthpiece doubles as a phallus that requires blowing to produce sound.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, both types of pots draw their users into a world of sexual desires that provoke laughter – not just because of the vulgar or obscene connotations, but because the pots' incongruities initiate an entirely new set of experiences. The central issue is not whether the joke is on the pot, its users, or even its designer; what matters is how the very experience of incongruity reveals another world beneath categories like "human" and "nonhuman,"

"subject" and "object," drawing both the participants and the audience closer to the underlying power and vitality that give rise to these categories in the first place.

The attachment to this kind earthly regeneration and communal renewal offers a clear parallel to the kind of affective investment that *The Wasps* seeks to engender. In both cases, the comic encounter staged by the play or the pot emphasizes a connection with agentive forces that transcend the human/nonhuman-divide, underscoring the power that enables all things (human *and* nonhuman) to persist and to interact with one another – what Bennett and other new materialists call “thing-power”.<sup>53</sup> While thing-power, in the case of *The Wasps*, appears in an anthropomorphized manner (as humans acting and speaking as if they were nonhumans) it takes on a decidedly nonhuman form in the case of the Moche sex pots, disclosing the influence that material things such as ceramic pots can have on feelings and intentions. The disclosure helps to empower an affective investment in the entanglements of the world, which in turn entails a significantly different way of listening and speaking, one in which not only humans but also nonhumans communicate and, thereby, lay claim to care and well-being. First, the pots use surprise to disrupt their users' usual sense and perception, drawing them into unexpected or taboo situations (such as drinking from a vulva-shaped opening). Second, the pots act as vessels for stories and adventures in a more-than-human world, often adorned with surface designs where animals are anthropomorphized and humans possess supernatural traits, such as snake-shaped earspools and feline headdresses. To drink from the pot, one might say, is to engage in the processes "becoming-with" that are central to the comic encounters explored in this paper.

While there are no guarantees that this becoming-with will produce better outcomes than those we see in today's world of exploitation and domination, it is not

unreasonable to expect that it can animate and reenchant our encounters with the challenges we face, expanding the boundaries of what we consider life and earthly reproduction. A key reason for believing this lies in the self-perpetuating nature of comedy, which not only destabilizes existing categories of experience but also generates new ones. This dual movement resembles what Haraway, in her effort to connect the human/nonhuman-entanglements of the Chthulucene with an ethics of kinship, calls “response-ability”: “Relays, string figures, passing patterns back and forth, giving and receiving...*response-ability*; that is core to what I mean by staying with the trouble in serious multispecies worlds.”<sup>54</sup>

### *Vignette #3: Koko, the gorilla*

Our third and last vignette concerns Koko, who was a female western lowland gorilla that lived most of her life in Woodside, California. Koko is particularly known for having learned more than 2,000 words and 1,000 American sign-language signs.<sup>55</sup> Koko’s mastery of this vocabulary allowed her to communicate with her trainers, and she used it to play with different meanings of the same word. For example, when Koko was asked, “What can you think of that’s hard?” she signed, “rock” and “work.” And when she wanted to tease her trainers, she tied their shoelaces together and used sign language to suggest a “chase.”

Both examples demonstrate an acute sense of humor that many of Koko’s visitors came to appreciate. What is more, they remind us, contrary to what Descartes and many other modern philosophers have claimed for the past five hundred years or so, that the qualities we typically associate with human life also exist on the other side of the human/nonhuman-divide. This includes not only language, as Koko’s example would suggest, but also feelings, preferences, intentionality, and even consciousness.

The parallels are indeed so prevalent that another leading scholar in the field – Frans de Waal – concludes out that once “the apes break down the dam between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, the floodgates often open to include species after species.”<sup>56</sup> Not only does this conclusion resonate with the thing-power and the more-than-human world disclosed by the Moche pots; it underscores how plays like *The Wasps*, despite its anthropomorphic tendencies, can bring us closer to a shared substance beyond the human/nonhuman-divide, instilling an attachment to life itself. In all three cases, the incongruity presented by the comic encounter fosters an interest in protecting and caring for what exists beyond oneself. By emphasizing the similarities rather than the differences between humans and nonhumans, the very idea that one is more deserving than the other begins to unravel.

All this goes to show how comic encounters, like the ones detailed in the three vignettes above, can empower their audiences to practice the kind of care for the world that contemporary feminists such as Puig de la Bellacasa (and Haraway and Bennett) see as crucial for securing a sustainable future for all, humans *and* nonhumans. Highlighting the incongruities that appear when categories are mixed, the encounters do not simply lead to confusion and surprise but aim to mobilize a feeling of vitality and becoming, which in turn can lead to care for life and earthly generation. "Cathexis," "thing-power," and "response-ability" are elements in this process of narrative-affective experimentation. The process implies an alternative way of experiencing the world, which includes modes of listening and speaking that diverge from the hegemonic ways of interpellating the relationship between humans and nonhumans. As outlined in the previous section, these alternative modes of listening and speaking imbue comic encounters with a double-purpose. On the one hand, they serve to mobilize the bodily



energies needed to care for life and earthly generation. On the other hand, they also teach us how to listen for and engage with this vitality, highlighting the value of narrating the relationship between humans and nonhumans without assuming any categorical separation between them.

### **Comic politics in times of ecological crises**

Comedy's double purpose brings us back to where we started: the anger prompted by the failure to act against climate change as well as the anxiety and feeling of doomsday that may be produced by this inaction. Do comic encounters like the ones detailed above make any difference in this context? If yes, what are the implications for social critique and political mobilization?

Adding to the already sizable literature on why affects matter to politics<sup>57</sup>, including why listening and seeing can modify and/or amplify any given affective experience<sup>58</sup>, an answer to these questions requires a closer look at the relationship between so-called positive and negative affects. While the distinction between these affects – between, say, joy and sadness, laughter and anger – seems to imply two separate worlds, each defined by their own perspective on agency and power, it is more accurate to see them as internally divided energy-distributions where some pull in an empowering direction ("positive affects") and others in a disempowering direction ("negative affects").<sup>59</sup> The point of addressing the issue in this manner is not to erase the difference between negative and positive affects but to emphasize that none exist in pure form, i.e., without traces of something other than itself. Comic encounters like the ones discussed above are cases of such mixture, as they show how experiences of difference and conflict (and the anxiety that comes with it) mix with joyous affects. What is more, because positive and negative affects embody elements of each other,

they both have the potential to redirect their counterpart in ways that may seem surprising, even counterintuitive. Comedy does this by turning something that feels foreign and painful into an incongruity that discloses the shared substance subsisting beneath the human/nonhuman-divide. As we have seen, while there are no guarantees, the result is a likely to mobilize the bodily energies needed to care for life and earthly regeneration.

We can sharpen this insight by placing it alongside the work of Nicole Seymour, who, in a kindred discussion of ecology, affect, and comedy, proposes the term "irreverent ecocriticism" to show how and why comic encounters inspire new lines of engagement and mobilization. Inspired by examples similar to the ones I have detailed, irreverent ecocriticism focuses on the dispositions that underpin explicit arguments about climate change: "Ecocritics *feel differently* about our current position and moment:... instead of remaining serious in the face of self-doubt, ridicule, and broader ecological crisis, we embrace our sense of our own absurdity, our uncertainty, our humor, even our perversity."<sup>60</sup> Seymour is careful to distinguish this approach from "cynicism" and to highlight, together with queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam, how and why environmentalists should promote "alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic...nor...mired in nihilistic critical dead ends."<sup>61</sup> Seymour also insists that there is an inherent connection between ecology and comedy, as both focus more on "adaptation" and "diversity" and less on "necessity" and "transcending the impossible".<sup>62</sup> Both insights help to show how affects prompted by comic encounters can change the very outlook that accompanies the claims that scholars and activists make about climate change, offering a path from constraint to empowerment.<sup>63</sup>

Implicit in this comedy-infused approach to nourishing practices of ecological care is an effort to decenter and nuance the emphasis on anger as the driver of political

mobilization against climate change. The point is not to deny that anger can inspire progressive climate action, as exemplified by Greta Thunberg's interventions. Rather, the concern is that untempered anger has the potential to heighten feelings of anxiety and angst, which can (a) undermine the energy needed to sustain long-term engagement with climate change policies and (b) stifle the desire to experiment with new form of democracy and democratic participation, both crucial to the fight for a sustainable future for all. According to Baruch Spinoza, for example, anger can undermine care because it often entails a desire "to inflict injury on one whom we hate".<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Martha Nussbaum warns that although anger can be productive, it often limits social justice because "the idea of payback or retribution – in some form, however subtle – is a conceptual part" of it.<sup>65</sup> Even in accounts where anger is seen positively, there are significant concerns about its ability to sustain action in a democratically informed manner. Myisha Cherry, for instance, highlights that the anger expressed by Audre Lorde in her fight against colonialism is productive because it reflects a commitment to equality, allowing for what Lorde calls a "virtuous channeling of... power and energy."<sup>66</sup> However, Cherry also warns that this virtue can be misused to create a sense of superiority. As she explains, "In the context of Lordean rage, a person who participates in moral grandstanding uses rage to project a positive image of himself. He uses his rage for self-promotion, aiming to make himself look 'woke,' rather than aiming at defeating racism by publicly expressing outrage at it. A person can perform moral grandstanding in various ways, but let's call this type 'moral anger grandstanding.'"<sup>67</sup>

I detail these interventions to sharpen our focus on what comic politics in times of ecological crises might look like. Building on Seymour's concept of "irreverent ecocriticism", emphasizing the care expressed in comic encounters toward the

conditions of life and earthly regeneration, two characteristics stand out as particularly significant. First, comic politics views political mobilization as a process of infusing the normative indignation inherent in anger with positive affects like joy and laughter. This approach embraces the epistemological uncertainties that characterize debates about climate change while also empowering an agenda committed to sustainable ecological care across, and beyond, the human/nonhuman divide. Simply put, the goal is to reshape the affective landscape to prevent anxiety and anger from hindering the kind of becoming-with that Haraway and others emphasize in their narratives about climate change. Second, comic politics links this goal to support for democratic experimentation, which involves expanding opportunities for inclusion and participation. From the perspective of comic politics, these opportunities create a self-reinforcing cycle in which the energy and vitality inherent in ecological care empower democratic experimentation, ultimately protecting and enhancing practices of ecological care. Another way to say this is that instead of relying solely on a centralized authority— be it a national government, a wealthy company, or a supranational organization – the aim is to democratize climate change politics from the ground up. This means focusing on local communities and small-scale contexts where ecological depletion is most acutely felt and where the desire for sustainability is strongest. Evidence from other studies indicates that prioritizing these communities can empower citizen participation and foster new knowledge and shared solutions, which can then facilitate change in other areas as well.<sup>68</sup>

While this approach to democratic politics may resemble the kind of "speculative" thinking that Puig de la Bellacasa highlights in her discussion of care, indicating an orientation to social and political life that is possible but not always actual<sup>69</sup>, it is important not to dismiss its place in contemporary environmental politics.

As noted in the introduction of this paper, stand-up comedy is already a powerful tool to generate awareness and knowledge about climate change. Moreover, climate activists in both the Global North<sup>70</sup> and the Global South<sup>71</sup> emphasize that feelings of joy and laughter are important components in their attempts to empower nonviolent interventions, which interrupt the status quo while also including marginalized groups in the organization of eco-communities and transnational movements. In both cases, a comic politics such as the one explored in these pages can generate the affective energies needed to inspire a prefiguring of another, more sustainable world. As scholar and activist, Sarah Jaquette Ray, puts it in her account of how to counter climate anxiety: "We can find joy in manifesting the world we desire, not just outrage in opposing what we fear."<sup>72</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

As stated at the outset, the aim of this paper has been to show how shifting the genre of our climate change narratives—by bringing comedy to the forefront of the debate—can empower practices of ecological care that integrate anger and sadness with affirmative modes of critique and engagement. Such a genre shift is not merely about telling the story more effectively; it also concerns how experiences and encounters inform normative arguments about sustainability and political systems. As Honig emphasizes in her discussion of why genres matter for explanation and theorization: "The issue here is the normative import of our reading practices as political theorists and as citizens and residents of democratic regimes."<sup>73</sup> Building on Honig's insight, my goal in this paper has been to show, on the one hand, how comedy and comic encounters reveal the shared substance underlying the human/nonhuman divide, and, on the other, how engaging with this substance can unleash the affective energy needed to expand the

conditions of life, ensuring a sustainable future for all. Comedy is not the only genre capable of this, and, as noted earlier, not all forms of comedy lead to such outcomes. Still, by reorienting our reading practices, attuning our theories and interpretative strategies to the multiple ways in which comedy works across contexts, we open new possibilities for critical engagement, contributing to a more holistic understanding of ecological care.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For a transcript of the speech, see [Read climate activist Greta Thunberg's speech to the UN | PBS News](#) (accessed July 12, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> See Thea Gregersen, Gisle Andersen, and Endre Tvinnerum, "The strength and content of climate anger," *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 82 (2023).

<sup>3</sup> See [Nearly Three in Four Millennials Experience "Ecoanxiety" \(prnewswire.com\)](#), accessed July 12, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Pearson, "The rise of eco-anxiety: scientists wake up to mental-health toll of climate change," *Nature*, vol. 628, pp. 256 – 258 (2024).

<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Heeren, Camille Mouguiama-Daouda, and Alba Contreras, "On climate anxiety and the threat it may pose to daily life functioning and adaptation: a study among European and African French-speaking participants," *Climatic Change*, vol. 173, no. 15 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Maxwell Boykoff and Beth Osnes, "A Laughing matter? Confronting climate change through humor," *Political Geography*, vol. 68 (2019), pp. 154-163.

<sup>7</sup> See reference cited below in notes 70 – 72.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238 (italics in original).

<sup>10</sup> See in particular Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent overview, see *Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance*, edited by Krista B. R. Giaponne, Fred Francis and Iain MacKenzie (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

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<sup>12</sup> For a classical statement, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> Sara Miller and Lisa Pennycuff, "The power of story: Using storytelling to improve literacy learning," *Journal of Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives in Education* vol. 1, no. 1 (2008), pp. 36 – 43.

<sup>14</sup> Michele L. Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma, and the Construction of Meaning* (London: Open University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Jade Larissa Schiff, *Burdens of Responsibility: Narrative and the Cultivation of Responsiveness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, pp. 108 – 109.

<sup>18</sup> For an engagement with ecological crises from a tragic perspective, see William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), especially around p. 176

<sup>19</sup> For a recent exception, see Nicolai Skiveren, "Humor as Hope? On Critique and Affirmation in Ecological Parody and Satire," *Environmental Humanities* vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 441 – 459.

<sup>20</sup> For an intervention with similar ambitions, focusing on story-telling in communities in north and south India and south-east Australia, see Danielle Celermajer et al., "Climate imaginaries as praxis," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2024), pp. 1015-1033.

<sup>21</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 40 (italics in original).

<sup>22</sup> See John Asafu-Adjaye et al, "An Ecomodernist Manifesto" (2015). Accessible at: [https://: www.ecomodernism.org](https://www.ecomodernism.org)



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<sup>23</sup> See, inter alia, Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> See, inter alia, Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*.

<sup>25</sup> See, inter alia, Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of this pitfall in relation to both eco-modernism and eco-Marxism, see Mads Ejsing, "The Arrival of the Anthropocene in Social Theory: From Modernism and Marxism towards a New Materialism," *The Sociological Review*, vol. 71, no. 1 (2023), pp. 243 – 260.

<sup>27</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 31, 174 (n4).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Scott F. Gilbert, "Metaphors for a new body politic: Gaia as holobiont." In *A Book of the Body Politic: Connecting Biology, Politics and Social Theory*. Edited by Bruno Latour, Simon Schaffer, Pasquale Gagliardi. San Giorgio Dialogue 2017. Pp. 75 - 88.

<sup>30</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Cecilie Rubow, "The indoor People's Enchanted Ecologies," *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2022), pp. 475-493.

<sup>32</sup> Tobias Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2022), pp. 187 – 202.

<sup>33</sup> David Schlosberg and Luke Craven, *Sustainable Materialism: Environmental Movements and the Politics of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 31, 33, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 101. Inspired by Ursula Le Guin's notion of "carrier bag narratives", Haraway goes on to note: "Matter, mater, mutter make me – make us, that collective gathered in

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the narrative bag of the Chthulucene – stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth, strengthened by the freedom struggle for a postcolonial world on Le Guin’s planet of Athshea. It is time to return to the question of finding seeds for terraforming for a recuperating earthly world of difference..." (ibid., p. 121).

<sup>36</sup> For a previous statement of these insights, see XXXX

<sup>37</sup> The following is based on Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 204, 164, 207.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> For a helpful overview in relation to the issue discussed in this paper, see Stine Krøijer and Cecilie Rubow, "Introduction: Enchanted Ecologies and Ethics of Care," *Environmental Humanities*, vo. 14, no. 2 (2022), pp. 375 – 384.

<sup>41</sup> See Joan C. Tronto, "An Ethic of Care," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1998), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa develops her account of care in relation to science and technology as well as to permaculture and human-soil relations. See *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> For an overview, see *Aristophanes and Politics; New Studies*, edited by Ralph M. Rosen and Helene P. Foley (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> See, inter alia, Julia Kindt, *The Trojan Horse and Other Stories: Ten Ancient Creatures that Makes Us Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Aristophanes, *The Wasps*, trans. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 125 – 130, 139 – 140.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 919 – 920.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1076 – 1077, 1104 – 1112.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Payne, “Teknomajikality and the Humanimal in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*,” in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Aristophanes*, edited by Philip Walsh (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 134.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>51</sup> I owe my knowledge about the Moche sex pots to Mary Weismantel who has written eloquently and incisively about their place in precolonial history, emphasizing (amongst other things) their material agency as well as their comedic dimensions (see references cited below). To the best of my knowledge, there are no direct links, historically or otherwise, between the pots and Aristophanes’ comedy plays. If anything, we might read the parallels between them as sign of comedy’s ubiquity and its ability to travel across linguistic traditions as well as cultural and historical epochs.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of both types of pots, see Mary Weismantel, “Obstinate Things,” in *The Archeology of Colonialism: Intimate Encounters and Sexual Effects*, edited by Barbara L. Voss and Eleanor Conlin Casella (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Bennett defines thing-power as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle:” As such, it “figures materiality as protean flow of matter-energy and figures the thing as a relatively composed form of that flow.” Jane Bennett, “Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2004), pp. 351, 349.

<sup>54</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 12 (my italics).

<sup>55</sup> See Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, “Do Animals Have a Sense of Humor? New Evidence Suggest That All Mammals Have a Sense of Humor,” *Slate*, March 26, 2014.

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<sup>56</sup> Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), p. 69.

<sup>57</sup> For two statements of particular significance, see Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2004) and William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> See especially Romand Coles, "Moving Democracy: Industrial Areas Foundation Social Movements and the Political Arts of Listening, Travelling, and Tabling" *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 5 (2004), pp. 678 – 705.

<sup>59</sup> For a previous version of this argument, see Lars Tønder, *Tolerance: A Sensorial Orientation to Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 90 – 95.

<sup>60</sup> Nicole Seymour, "Toward an Irreverent Ecocriticism," *Journal of Ecocriticism*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2012), p. 57 (italics in original).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 63, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere I argue that this approach resembles the one Bruno Latour takes in his discussion of critique and what he calls "matter of concern". See XXXX

<sup>64</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), Part 3, Proposition 40, Corollary 2, Proof.

<sup>65</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> Audre Lorde cited in Myisha Cherry, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the cases discussed in Schlosberg and Craven, *Sustainable Materialism*.

<sup>69</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Pickard, Benjamin Bowman, and Dena Arya. "'We Are Radical in Our Kindness': The Political Socialisation, Motivations, Demands and Protest Actions of Young Environmental Activists in Britain," *Youth and Globalization*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2020), pp. 251 – 280.

<sup>71</sup> For example, Politically Awesh, "Climate Change in South Africa: How Bad Can It Be?" [Climate Change in South Africa: How Bad Can It Be? \(Part 1/3\) \(politicallyawesh.co.za\)](http://politicallyawesh.co.za) (accessed August 17, 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Sarah Jaquette Ray, *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, p. 112.