“It’s 3:23 in the morning and I’m awake.” A man sits up on the side of his bed with his head in his hands, running his fingers through his thick brown hair in frustration, and we as the viewers get the sense that he is being haunted by some unseen force. The eerie sounds of Icelandic rock band Sigur Rós front man José playing guitar strings with a rosined cello bow evoke the creaks and groans of calving glaciers. The scene shifts to the twinkling lights of the Golden Gate Bridge in the San Francisco night sky, and the man is now up and dressed, soberly staring unblinkingly at us. He explains: “I’m awake because my great-great-grandchildren won’t let me sleep.” Images of children playing on merry-go-rounds and swinging on swings sequence one after another. “My great-great-grandchildren ask me in dreams,” he continues, “what did you do while the planet was plundered? What did you do when the earth was unraveling?” Images flash of power plants, polluted skies, melting arctic ice, seals searching in vain for land, sea birds blackened in crude oil, choked highways, burning oil fields, and bomber jets headed off to war in what appears to be the Middle East. The great-great-grandchildren’s questions fill the man’s head and are unrelenting. They want to know of him, “Surely you did something as the seasons started failing? As the mammals, reptiles, and birds were all dying?” The children press further and demand, “Did you fill the streets with protest when democracy was stolen?” Their final question hangs heavy in the air as a haunting refrain of accusation: “What did you do once you knew?”

How many of us imagine that we might adequately answer that weighty last question one day by responding, “Well, I made sure to shop for the right stuff. I bought green products, I shopped organic, I supported green capitalism, purchased ecologically mindful cell phone apps, a nice recycled beverage container, a hybrid vehicle, and generally consumed my way to helping solve global climate change and save the earth.” Would this satisfy the specters of our future offspring who wish
to hold us morally accountable for the state of the earth they have inherited? And yet, much of the environmental messaging we encounter on a daily basis through marketing, advertising, and mediated popular culture is simplistically reassuring and absolving. Shop for the right stuff, and it will all be okay.

The voiceover in the video recounted above, which was created by Bay Area–based spoken-word poet and filmmaker Drew Dellinger, features an excerpt from his longer poem, “Hieroglyphic Stairway,” drawn from his award-winning book of environmentally themed poetry, *Love Letter to the Milky Way*. Dellinger, who also holds a PhD in philosophy and religion, jolts us awake from the complacent fantasy that we can sit back, make minimal changes, and it will all be okay. His video intervenes in these reassurances, telling a different story—one of late-night hauntings and the horror of deep regret as we are called on the carpet by our suffering descendants for failing to act when we might have. Dellinger’s video goes on to show hopeful images of protests filling the streets, of student activists braving pepper spray and police, and of arts and culture leading the way to a vibrant and sustaining ecological human culture. But the haunting question hovers, “What did you do once you knew?” What is it going to take to ensure we never face the haunting questions this video conjures? Consumer culture sets our minds at ease that individual acts of environmental virtue will do the trick. Dellinger’s answer is broader ranging and calls for more—more imagination, more collaboration, more connection, and more coordinated acts of conscious collective social transformation. Borrowing a phrase from the work of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., the final words of the video appear as striking white letters glowing against a black screen: “Planetize the movement.”

Piety, Virtue, and Saving the Planet

“Eco-friendly,” “green,” “environmentally sustainable,” “ecologically mindful,” “earth-conscious,” “environmentally responsible,” “planet-friendly,” “eco-smart,” and even “eco-elegant” are just some of the sobriquets used in popular parlance and consumer marketing to signal products, services, acts, behaviors, or lifestyles associated with the practice of a kind of environmental virtue, or “ecopiety.” Piety, a complex
social, civic, philosophical, and religious designation, is classically considered to be a virtue associated with the practice of appropriate duties or obligations. The Greek term “eusebeia” (“εὐσέβεια”) connotes reverence and respect in engaging in right behavior or service that pleases the gods. In the ancient world, the Roman ideal of pietas was associated with “dutifulness to parents, homeland, and emperor,” and with maintaining good relations with the gods—acts that if performed well were often credited for Roman empiric success. The proper performance and practice of pietas, in Roman terms, also suggestively correlated with the maintenance of order in the universe and the sustaining of the world. Some scholarship on religion in the ancient world has probed the complex sociopolitical and economic transactional value of pietas in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean “ideological marketplace.” This book explores the marketing, representation, and popular mediation of environmental piety in our own contemporary “ideological marketplace,” its contested cultural meanings, and its complex transactional value in the lives of North American consumers.

“Ecopiety” is a shorthand term I use to refer to contemporary practices of environmental (or “green”) virtue, through daily, voluntary works of duty and obligation—from recycling drink containers and reducing packaging to taking shorter showers and purchasing green products. Practices of ecopiety evoke an idyllic harmonial model of proper relations cultivated between humans and the more-than-human earth. Much of the language used in the mediasphere to motivate practices of ecopiety speaks of “doing our part,” “saving the earth,” “shopping for change,” “buying green,” “going green,” “practicing earth care,” and “becoming more sustainable”—with exhortations often promising at the same time that “every little act,” no matter how seemingly insignificant, “all adds up.” Works of popular culture and environmental marketing campaigns are rife with messages that reassure publics that personal, individual, private acts of ecopiety are efficacious remedies to address an overwhelming array of environmental ailments, if only everyone would virtuously do his or her bit.

Like so many other aspects of contemporary social and political activism, stories of ecopiety and how to practice it reflect and perpetuate the logics of global capitalism and market ideology. As marketed in the contemporary US context, the devotional practice of ecopiety most
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often requires the performance of a correlative “consumopiety,” or acts of “virtuous consumption.” This book is highly attentive to correspondences drawn between ecopiety and consumopiety and probes in depth what role media and culture play in their making. As media scholars Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser point out in their research on the mediation of commodity activism, “within contemporary culture it is utterly unsurprising to participate in social activism by buying something.”

Ecopiety thus thrives, this book argues, within the hospitable conditions of a depoliticized marketplace environmentalism and mediasphere that generate story after story of privatized, small-scale, voluntary, individualized acts of “green virtue” as being utterly adequate to dealing with our monumental planetary challenges. Whether circulated via the adscape, reality television, popular books, films, games, or social media, these stories explicitly or implicitly promise publics that the practice of an individualized, consumer-based ecopiety holds the key to making things on earth right again. In so doing, these stories market an imagined moral economy, in which tiny acts of voluntary personal piety, such as recycling a coffee cup, or purchasing a green consumer item, can be exchanged as an offset to justify the continuance of current consumption patterns and volume. No need to make any fundamental structural changes, implement public policy or legislation, or enforce stricter, much less existing, regulations. The trick is simply for the consumer to buy the right things, the eco-piously green things—to engage in individual simple acts to save the earth—and all will be well.

Plato’s dialogue Euthyphro presents a number of contested meanings of “piety,” but many of these reference acts or works associated with caring for the gods, performing devotional sacrifice and service to them, and doing what is right by honoring and pleasing them. Having the gods actually agree with one another as to what they love, and to achieve consensus as to what is pleasing to them, turns out to be a moving target. The figure of Socrates in Plato’s dialogue implicates an absolute definition of piety as being broadly disputed. Ecopiety, as represented in and through contemporary popular culture, is about cultivating a proper and respectful relationship, an ecologically responsible connection, between individual citizen consumers and the more-than-human earth, but on whose terms and by whose definition is similarly a moving target. Performing the right kind of devotional service is key to the notion
of ecopiety, and green consumer marketing is quick to offer a template for which acts are most pleasing and pious, virtuous, and efficacious. Engendering what is arguably an unmarked “Protestant ethos of capitalist individualism,” green consumer marketing proclaims that each citizen-consumer is empowered to effect the healing and restoration of the planet directly through the swipe of a personal credit card. All this “priesthood of all credit-card holders” needs to do is “shop our way to a better world.”

Piety as a concept is complicated, means different things in different cultural contexts, and can be both personal, individual, and private, as well as collective, public, and communal. It can be ascetic, ecstatic, or both. Though they do so with different approaches and in different geographic contexts, anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s Politics of Piety and sociologist Rachel Rinaldo’s Mobilizing Piety both investigate Islamic women’s piety in relationship to feminist theories and do so focusing on piety as devout religious practice in everyday life. In her study of transnational devotion to the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, Elaine Peña, too, sees piety as something fundamentally practiced and performed. Peña emphasizes that, from an early age, her elders taught her that piety “is not something talked about, it is something you do.”

Within the milieu of contemporary global capitalist culture, or what a number of critics now name in geologic temporal terms, “the Capitalocene,” doing ecopiety, to a large extent, has become a devotional practice performed within the “sacred buyosphere.” Writing about American consumer culture, design and culture critic Thomas Hine has identified the “buyosphere,” the sphere of purchase, as simultaneously a set of physical and virtual spaces, as well as a state of mind. Hine asserts that, today, we come to know ourselves through our acts of consumption within this mystical realm of promise. Practices of ecopiety take up the promises of the “sacred buyosphere” and extend them to the promised restoration of the planet, one organic-cotton-sweater or electric-hybrid-vehicle purchase at a time.

In archiving and analyzing sightings of ecopiety, as observed mostly in and through North American consumer marketing and mediated popular culture, this book argues that fundamentally individualized, free-market, privatized, voluntary approaches—promoted as addressing the monumental environmental challenges facing us—are not simply
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inadequate to the task but in some cases are counterproductive in the worst possible ways. Ecopiety, as marketed, is both too dourly restrictive in some ways and grossly facile in others. It simultaneously asks too much and expects too little, making pious actions taken on behalf of the environment grim, unappealing, onerous duties or obligations, on one hand, while they constitute superficial, perfunctory modes of practice that are by and large insignificant in terms of scale and scope of impact, on the other. In studying the concurrent dynamics of both too strict and too lenient jointly at work within certain religious institutions, sociologist Laurence Iannaccone famously labeled this combination the “worst-of-both-worlds position.” Messaging ecopiety as fun, playful, hip, sexy, and appealing, while also making it more rigorous, potent, systemic, policy linked, and effectual, is challenging but not impossible, as certain ecopiety sightings in this book illustrate. The contradictions and tensions between ideals and practices of ecopiety are explored in each chapter of this book, which also considers proposed alternatives, challenges, and creative cultural paths into the future, as conjured by various media works, practices, and narratives.

Since this book appears in a series on Religion and Social Transformation, readers may legitimately wish to know what notions, stories, practices, and the marketing of ecopiety and/or consumopiety have to do with religion. Religion appears in this book as it does in my other work on religion, media, and consumption—not as a solid, circumscribed, institutional, organized entity but more as (to borrow a phrase from author Anne Lamott) “the water at the edge of things.” Depending on context, contours, and conditions, this “water” shapes what cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls our “life-worlds,” how we know them, and how we make sense of them. Religion, like language, is a fluid representational medium and set of dynamic sociocultural practices in which contextually defined meanings are produced and exchanged according to a variety of vested interests. Fluid semantic, rhetorical, and historically inherited themes, stories, symbols, sensibilities, moral codes, and conceptual currents from a variety of systems/streams of knowing and ways of being in the world flow both at the edges of, and subterraneously underneath, the processes and practices that frequently get labeled as “culture,” or as “not religion.”
This water at the edge of and flowing underneath things both sculpts and is sculpted by its areas of contact—lapping at and remaking the edges, flowing under and eroding what we often assume to be terra firma, carving channels and rivulets, making deposits, sweeping materials along, and carrying all sorts of sediments that we may not explicitly be aware of or immediately recognize. “Piety” and “devotion” are themselves religiously inflected terms, and ecopiety may indeed be practiced by religiously devout persons as an extension of self-identified religious commitments to God/gods, nature, Creation, a love of humanity, an observed monistic sacred unity of all things, and so forth. As a more broadly cultural phenomenon, however, and as a celebrated demonstration of civic virtue, practices of ecopiety and their mediated popular representations challenge artless binaries drawn between religion and secular culture, or between religion and not religion, as conventionally socially identified.

Representations of ecopiety in a variety of popular cultural forms tap into a media maelstrom of values and meanings: the logics of a global consumer capitalist economy; the popular production of environmental (green) virtue as a commodity; ideals of piety, impiety, and their practice; and conceptions of personhood and identity defined by “sovereign individualism”; and yet also ideals of collective civic engagement. That is, in the sphere of ecopiety, all is not simply opportunistic consumer marketing, depoliticized marketplace environmentalism, and late capitalism’s digestion of all things that would challenge its ubiquity and dominance. Even as this book teases out the all-absorbing economic forces of peristalsis that would digest ecopiety, regurgitate it, and market it as a product, it also spotlights how media making, especially grassroots and DIY media making, imperfectly but potently crafts moral interventions. These intervening stories, images, and performances consciously pursue a turn toward a more just, sustainable, compassionate, and even joyful future for human/planetary relations.

The intent of morally engaged environmental media interventions and their makers can be to edge humans in different existential directions by providing a kind of rhythm and set of community movements with which to align. Sometimes eco-pious media interventions are contradictory, and more often than not they are messy and experimental.
Nonetheless, they contribute to emergent social energetics that can shift already existent and even entrenched social energetics. Climate change philosopher Roy Scranton characterizes social energetics as involving “how bodies harvest, produce, organize, and distribute energy,” which in turn “determines how power flows, shaping political arrangements.”

To visualize this phenomenon, Scranton uses the analogy of honeybees doing storied “hive dances.” To create a livable, compassionate, and more sustainable Anthropocene—the age, already upon us according to Scranton, in which humans have become the defining agent affecting life systems on the planet—he argues that we need new ideas, myths, stories, and visions of who “we” are that change our relationship to our world. We need a “new way of thinking our collective existence.”

Communities of honeybees, explains Scranton, send out a series of scouts to figure out their next destination—that is, how the hive should get from point A to point B. The scouts then return from their explorations and dance becomes the medium by which they communicate or tell the story of various options and directional plans to the rest of the hive. Different scouts dance various options or visions for the future, and each scout’s dance itself composes a story of how to get there. These multiple dances engage in contrapuntal motion, at once distinct from one another and moving in different directions, and yet danced parallel to each other, and simultaneously. Bees start aligning themselves with one dance or direction, based upon the scouts’ communications, and eventually one dance story receives more critical mass of those aligning with it than another.

Media making, systems, practices, uses, and designs all have a critical role to play as directional agents in the social energetics of our storied human “hive dances” into earth’s future. Media are how we do these dances. Examining the dynamics of representation, resistance, power, control, intervention, and cooption of stories, symbols, expressions, and practices related to ecopiety provides pivotal insights into our agential ongoing media “hive dances” at a time of environmental crisis.

Sightings of Ecopiety in Practice

This book explores the conflicting and yet often symbiotic narrative relationship between representations of ecopiety and consumopiety through a series of environmentally themed media case studies or sightings
drawn from popular culture. It argues that rather than functioning as a mere hegemonic delivery system for dominant cultural narratives, mediated popular culture performs a crucial role in dynamics of environmental moral engagement and processes of civic social transformation. Porous and adaptive, especially as it is remixed, repurposed, and shared through the tools and technologies of participatory digital new media and social networking, mediated popular culture has become a prime location for contemporary moral/civic engagement and public debate. Prime examples of this can be seen in Henry Jenkins’s analysis of activist political protest actions that strategically deploy many of the thematic tropes, symbolic resources, and aesthetics of resistance drawn from film franchises such as *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter*, *Avatar*, and *The Hunger Games*.31

Jenkins and his Civic Imagination Project research team at the University of Southern California have documented the “appropriation and remixing” of popular culture among two hundred youth social activists, “including the use of Superman as an ‘illegal alien’ by the [undocumented youth] Dreamer movement.”32 In 2018, Jenkins and the team turned their attention to Marvel Comics’ *Black Panther* as a catalyst for civic engagement. “Before we can build a better world, we need to imagine what one looks like,” asserted Jenkins, pointing out that “*Black Panther*’s fictional [African city of] Wakanda provides a vivid contrast to the poverty and hopelessness depicted in Oakland [California] in the film’s opening and closing scenes.”33

Germane to *Ecopiety’s* examination of popular culture and its engagement with environmental themes are the ways in which *Black Panther*’s depictions of the ecotopian city of Wakanda present not a model of individual ecopiety but one of collective societal public investment in green infrastructure and planning. The film’s rendering of Wakanda has in turn sparked policy and planning discussions online among engineers for sustainability, urban policy wonks, and green city planners—all discussing what it would take to construct a Wakanda, or at least the fictional city’s high-tech transportation system, in the United States.34 What it would take is a reorientation of environmental messaging away from the notion that every tiny act counts and toward an unapologetic emphasis on broad-scale policy enactments and serious public investment. Imaginative planners and engineers in the United States looking for models could easily
study Germany’s successful and subsidized Energiewende program and public transportation system, or Copenhagen’s real-life urban cycling infrastructure—both discussed later in this book. But the visually rich ecotopian scenes of vibrantly green Wakanda and, more importantly, the compelling narrative that drives our experience of sustainability in *Black Panther* are what truly engage public imagination. It is in the realm of mediated popular culture that a complex and contested moral discourse of ecological citizenship, green civic engagement, ecopiety, ecopolicy, and their envisioned impact on our planetary future, emerges.  

Popular narratives delivered through storied media can intervene, disrupt, and agitate. They can reveal new angles through which to view our world in expansive ways. At the same time, the wave-like contracting muscles of capitalist commodification and assimilation are powerful in their alimentary propulsion of narratives in a particular direction. Media theorists such as Nick Couldry are correct to point to the repressive power dynamics involved in the political economies of new media.  

Active modes of storying and *restorying* the world are always vulnerable to the swallowing forces of directional assimilation that ingest resistant voices and activist narratives of social change. Neutralizing such resistance can be effectively achieved by channeling it toward pacifying consumer actions within a depoliticized marketplace. The ways in which some counternarratives resist market-driven logics and defy directional forces, however, speak not only to the social function of popular culture but arguably to the role it can play in shaping the kind of world in which we might live. Pivotal to the dynamics of both resistance and assimilation (and it is imperative that we pay critical attention to both in their simultaneity), the digital world of communication is squarely at the center of this larger story of global transformation and its narrative outcomes.  

This book focuses primarily on the North American cultural landscape, but in a globalized world, these borders are increasingly artificial, if not misleading, especially when one is studying the circulation of media content. In turn, this book crosses borders: geographical, technological, as well as disciplinary. Informed by study, research, scholarly formation, and teaching in multiple fields (religious studies, media studies, and environmental studies), I acknowledge what media and cultural studies scholar Michael Pickering refers to as “the need to negotiate the limitation of academic specialisms when investigating the multiple con-
vergences and flows in cultures of modernity.”38 Boundary-crossing convergences and flows can thus be found in each of this book’s chapters.

The first chapter introduces the reader to a number of theoretical tools and analytical lenses for understanding ecopiety and consumopiety, defining more closely the meaning and use of those terms in this book and their relationship to one another. In this chapter, I also explain the concept of what I call in shorthand “restorying the earth”—the ongoing processes of mediated moral engagement in recrafting or remaking stories of earth and our place in it in an age of environmental crisis. Two conflicting but inexorably related stories take center stage in this discussion: (1) what economist David Korten calls the “sacred money and markets” story; and (2) what Korten identifies as the “sacred life and living earth” story.39 We will explore why tracking these stories through mediated popular culture in particular provides an effective approach to getting at the kind of agential cultural work in which they are involved. This chapter also engages theories of media intervention, considering how media interventions become moral interventions in popular narratives of ecopiety. This theoretical discussion in turn plays upon therapeutic uses of the term “intervention” in popular discourse in order to think through associations between practices of environmental virtue and notions of addiction and recovery.

Chapter 2, entitled “Fifty Shades of Green,” attends to the role played by “moral offsets” and what social psychologists term “moral self-licensing” in intertwined stories of ecopiety and consumopiety in the not totally unrelated realms of both popular erotic fiction and corporate public relations messaging. Reading across platforms, this chapter teases out various portrayals of environmental sin and virtue, juxtaposing the corporate public relations practice of greenwashing with the eco-pious storying of CEO and philanthropist protagonist Christian Grey in the popular mass-market romance Fifty Shades of Grey. As critics/activists use social media to organize and voice objections both to the corporate practice of public relations greenwashing and to the romanticized representations of abusive power in Fifty Shades, these protesters wield digital technologies as tools of narrative interruption and contestation. Their citizen interventions and transformative works of media offer insight into the participatory dynamics of what I argue is an emergent environmental economy of virtue as mediated through popular culture.
Chapter 3 explores Toyota Corporation’s hybrid automobile, the Prius, as a consumer icon of green virtue, charting media representations that portray the Prius in the US market as a vehicle of **ecopiety** as practiced through acts of **consumopiety**. This chapter sharply contrasts eco-pious cultural readings of the Prius with ones that are intensely hostile and resistant. Drawing insight from moral foundations theory and theorizing its relevance to political disparities among environmental attitudes, this chapter’s media analysis of the Prius provides an opening into the complex incongruities between media encoding and media decoding. As messages about the Prius as icon of environmental piety get filtered through different power dimensions of class, gender, sexuality, and race, oppositional narrative decodings give rise to the new and fascinating subgenre of pornography called “pollution porn.” These works of pollution porn constitute seemingly unlikely, but nonetheless operative, class-based media interventions into a dominant environmental discourse often perceived to be elitist, self-righteous, and smug.40

Chapter 4, “Green Is the New Black,” delves into more entanglements of ecopiety and consumopiety in the narratives of green capitalism as found in the world of mobile-device carbon sin-tracking software applications, reality TV programs, and popular fashion manuals. Each of these products models and markets an ideal of a depoliticized, individualized, privatized, stylish, consumer-based environmental practice that reinscribes the virtues of capitalist consumption as an effective solution to pressing environmental problems. These messages championing individualized ecopiety either explicitly eschew or more subtly obscure and distract from collective solutions to environmental crisis that entail organizing for broad policy initiatives, increased government regulation, and substantial public funding to address environmental problems.41 This chapter, however, explores two sides of the same coin and their respective merits. On one side is Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s sharp critique of an American media and culture industry that has a vested interest in promoting small, individual, private acts as wholly suitable and sufficient responses to address broader social problems. On the other side is an examination of how moral modeling gets actively challenged in the digital mediasphere through works of media prosumership and via critical fans and viewers engaging in “public spheres of the imagination.”42 To absorb fully the contested multiplicities of pop-
ular moral engagement in environmental issues and their functions variously as both obstacles and catalysts to social transformation, this chapter argues that we need to take cognizance of both of these sides, leaving neither ignored nor dismissed. What is more, at a time of environmental crisis, functionality and utility of theoretical tools to get critical work done take priority, even when placed in unconventional combination, and outweigh hereditary loyalties to particular schools or to the orthodoxy of ideological silos.

Chapter 5 explores conflicting expressions of ecopiety and consumopiety as worked out in and through the contemporary remixing and remaking of vampire narratives for an age of environmental crisis. Today’s socially conscious, self-identified “vegetarian vampires” virtuously subsist on synthetic blood replacement or on animal blood and are analogous to humans who for ethical reasons abstain from consuming animals. This self-restraint in the face of powerful supernatural desire makes ecopiety surprisingly hot and sexy when practiced by its vampire ecovirtuosi. In this chapter, I tease out how, as one reads across these popular narratives of piously abstaining vampires, a moral sensibility emerges that equates the deep, monstrous desire to consume and deplete the earth’s resources with the vampire’s voracious hunger to consume and drain the life of its host. Intermingled with messages of virtuous environmental temperance, however, vampire media franchises market endless tie-in consumer products to enthralled fans, in turn whetting a voracious appetite to consume. These counterpoints of pious consumer restraint and yet enthusiastic fan participation in vampire narratives via the virtues of consumer capitalism, ironically and strategically, tap into and feed off one of America’s most powerful consumer demographics: teenagers. Fans engage environmental virtues through popular cultural texts such as The Vampire Diaries (The CW, 2009–2017), the Twilight film saga series (2008–2012), Dracula (NBC series, 2013–2014), and True Blood (HBO, 2008–2014). In so doing, they explore moral and ethical subjects in communal online discussions, strategically and purposefully invoking the iconic image of the green or vegetarian vampire in blogs, Twitter feeds, and other forms of shared digital media to discuss and debate monstrous environmental threats, such as global climate change. Fans’ online comments, commentaries, and cultural creations (memes, jokes, videos, visual cultural productions, etc.) suggest a hun-
ger for more meaningful participation and involvement in their favorite vampire story worlds. I approach their participatory work in vampire fan culture using archival methodologies and engage their commentaries through discourse and content analysis. Fan practices of online interactive cultural analysis and debate, as well as fans’ material consumption, implicate both ecopiety and consumopiety as being bundled together with what media theorist Nick Couldry explores as “the social process enacted through the varieties of media-related practices.”

Chapter 6 analyzes the online marketing and media representations of green burials and eco-funerals. As the market for green burial grows, conflict ensues between green burial movement advocates and messages of consumopiety promoted by eco-friendly funerary product corporate marketers. Whereas green burial movement activists stress that the most eco-friendly products are the ones you don’t buy, marketers swallow this message and co-opt movement ideals of eco-piously giving back to the earth through eco-pious purchases. Ecopiety in turn becomes the basis for more and more elaborate lines of imported and expensive “green” consumer products. Green burial activists concertedly build bridges between personal green burial planning and collective civic engagement to effect policy making. Mega marketers, by contrast, portray the virtuous purchase of eco-friendly funerary goods as an end in itself. In both marketing and funeral practices on the ground, the bodies of eco-pious corpses have a story to tell about humans’ relationship to stuff and to their own mortality in an age of environmental crisis. “The body,” observes media theorist John Durham Peters, “is the most basic of all media, and the richest with meaning.” With this understanding of the body in mind, this chapter examines corpses as media that signify and are signified in contested ways. Beyond merely identifying the relentless influence of capitalist logics and forces of assimilation, this chapter makes a concerted analytical pivot. That is, it probes what kind of potential green burial practices might hold for prompting Americans to face their own mortality as they begin restorying death in more positive ways that could in turn induce limits on death-denying consumption.

Chapter 7 is a tale of two environmental organizations that each deploy popular short-form media as tools to engage younger cohorts, moving them from environmental ideals into environmental action. While both organizations’ media making challenges the consumer capitalist
myth of disposability, they intervene in this myth with very different priorities and environmental urgencies in mind. The first organization’s orientation is largely biocentric and uses endangered-species tattooing to extend the moral sphere of who “counts” to include vulnerable and threatened nonhuman populations. The second organization’s mission is squarely human-focused, attending to environmental justice issues and the plight of poisoned minority communities that have been morally excluded from what we explore in the chapter as the “sphere of justice.”

Too often low-income urban minority neighborhoods are rendered by corporate, industrial, and city planning interests as expendable or “sacrifice” populations. Mediations of ecopiety, suffering, and sacrifice infuse the skin media of tattooing and the storied media messaging of green hip hop music, respectively, as each medium is used strategically to make a case for greater moral inclusion of those vulnerable, invisible, and left out.

The first half of the chapter takes a close look at the practice of endangered-species environmental tattooing, the consumption of these images through digital media sharing, and the use of skin media for activist goals. As rituals of sacred ordeal, identity, protection, devotion, and self-discipline, environmental tattoos epidermally testify to the uninitiated about what it means to embody (literally) a moral commitment to practicing green virtue. I analyze these storied tattoos in contrapuntal relationship to the commercial corporate storying of bodies, in which companies employ body branding as a marketing tool. Corporately branded bodies are used as paid human billboards. This economy of branded bodies (referred to as “skinvertising”) somewhat ironically has created a space for environmental activists to use ink and skin to bear witness to such transgressions as habitat destruction and species endangerment, while extolling the virtues of veganism, bicycling, anti-consumption, and renewable energy technologies. Environmental tattoos, of which endangered-species tattooing is a subset, subversively insert messages of ecopiety and environmental virtue into a corporate-message-dominated mediasphere.

The second half of chapter 7 focuses on urban environmental justice concerns and the use of green hip hop also as a tool of media resistance. Suffering is a major theme in green hip hop and eco-rap rhymes, but in contrast to the pain and suffering self-imposed by tattoo activ-
ists, the suffering attended to in green hip hop is imposed by external sources. This section of the chapter looks at the way the moral narrative interventions of eco-rap artists, through the genre of green hip hop, are deeply involved in the cultural work of extending the sphere of justice to include human populations dismissed as disposable or expendable. In this context, hip hop lyrics, videos, circulated online poetry, and visual cultural aesthetics become activist tools to witness against the devastating economic and environmental health conditions perpetuated by environmental racism. Hip hop media also become prophetic tools to craft a more sustainable future for low-income minority communities and, by extension, the planet. This chapter explores what kind of restorying hip hop artists are doing in the growing genre of eco-rap and how their prophetic stories of a great future, in concert with proposed communal solutions for getting there, sharply contest many of the standard images associated with the environmental movement. The prophetic visions of eco-rappers reveal a distinctive and broader vision of environmental values, the moral community, priorities, and practices from those that primarily dominate national discourse. Rather than fixating on individual acts of consumopiety, eco-rappers call for collective moral engagement, structural change, grassroots activism (“people power”), and a new living economy based upon inclusivity rather than exclusion, extraction, and exploitation. Finally, this chapter argues that the mediated differences in biocentric approaches by endangered-species tattoo activists, on one hand, and the human-focused efforts of eco-justice urban activists, on the other, have much insight to offer us into what has been called the “eco-divide” between predominantly white and minority communities.

The book’s concluding chapter focuses on storied visions of the future, examining the speculative storying of earth’s fate embedded in space-exploration company SpaceX’s marketing of Mars colonization, contrasting it with the earth-reinhabiting storied play enacted in environmentally themed alternate reality gaming. Both of these mediations of the future—planetary and extra-planetary—situate environmental action, not in a framework of grim duty or obligation but in the inviting sphere of play and delight, though with vastly different frameworks, goals, and outcomes in mind. This final chapter argues that ecoplay, as an inviting conduit into the work of ecopolicy, provides a far more effec-
tive strategic approach than ecopiety for moving environmental ideals into substantive action. With such an approach in mind, this chapter makes the case that delight, not duty, will prove to be a compelling motivator for catalyzing social change as we experiment with more life-sustaining ways to live into the future.

Rescripting the Future

Endemic to the cultural work of restorying the earth are fundamental questions that redefine our world and our place in it: “Who are we? Where are we going? Can we even agree on who ‘we’ includes?” And finally, “What are we to do?” Conflicting narrative responses to these questions take up the challenge of renegotiating the borders and boundaries of “us,” not just as members of nations, or self-identified communities, but as planetary denizens. The “art of world making” and its remaking is a profoundly prophetic one, and one that is intensely mediated. Using phrasing very similar to Elaine Peña’s descriptor of piety as “something you do,” Nick Couldry reminds us that “media are something we do.” Both are practiced, performed, enacted, and engaged. The realm of mediated popular culture can act as both a powerful mirror and an engine for moral engagement, as once again, we tell our stories, and they in turn tell us. As this book demonstrates, both of these dynamics—reflective and generative—are at work in the ongoing vibrant processes of remaking our world and rescripting the future.