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## **A Film of Many Colors : Neoliberalism, Capitalism, and Climate Change in Rango**

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## ABSTRACT

Although largely ignored by ecocritics, Gore Verbinski's *Rango* is undeniably a valuable film in the debates about climate change. It follows the story of a chameleon who accidentally falls out of his owner's car and travels to Dirt, a town populated by anthropomorphized animals in the Mojave Desert suffering from a drought caused by neoliberal water privatization. Through various filmmaking techniques, such as the use of mise-en-scene, character design, and narrative style, Verbinski exposes the detrimental impacts the artificial water shortage and various other capitalist endeavors have caused to the desert environment. In doing so, I argue that he not only exposes the inherently contradictory interplay between progress, profits, and the destruction of the ecological world, but also encourages viewers to critique the goal of individual profit embedded in the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism. After noting the role of capitalism and consumerism on the landscape, both of the film and in general, I will then consider how these systems have shaped our understanding of and relationship to the natural world. The overriding desire for individual wealth has produced a conception of the natural, nonhuman world defined by mastery and commodification. Verbinski's film, however, works to subvert these attitudes by acknowledging the interdependence between humans and nonhumans and begins to argue for a more sustainable future.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

A Film of Many Colors: Neoliberalism, Capitalism, and Climate Change in *Rango*

by

Sierra Javras

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

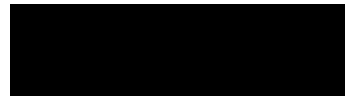
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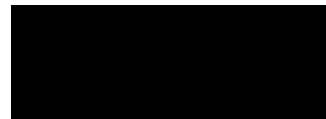
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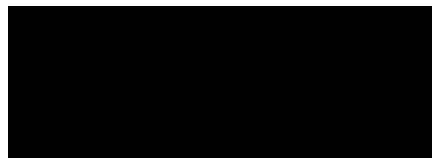
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A FILM OF MANY COLORS: NEOLIBERALISM, CAPITALISM, AND CLIMATE  
CHANGE IN *RANGO*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

SIERRA JAVRAS

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Montclair, NJ

May 2021

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## Introduction

In 2011, Paramount Pictures and Nickelodeon Movies released director Gore Verbinski's first animated feature *Rango*. The film follows the adventures of an eccentric actor chameleon who accidentally falls out of his owner's car and lands in Dirt, a town populated by anthropomorphized animals in the Mojave Desert suffering from a water shortage. Rango, voiced by Johnny Depp, soon finds himself role-playing in the position of Dirt's new sheriff and is faced with the unexpected responsibility of bringing water back to the town despite facing dangerous enemies and a corrupt mayor. As his investigation of the water crisis continues, he discovers that the drought afflicting Dirt was not caused by natural climatic conditions, but was instead artificially induced by water privatization, a practice rooted within the policies and ideologies of neoliberal capitalism.

The polluted and impoverished reality both Dirt and the Mojave are forced to succumb to when faced with this capitalist exploitation are captured through the intricately disfigured desert animals and gritty, unfiltered landscape, both of which abandon the conventional visual style of cute characters and picturesque settings found in most mainstream animated films. With its main storyline and central setting inspired by Roman Polański's *Chinatown* and the California / Nevada water wars, *Rango* places consumerism, capitalism, and the extensive droughts plaguing the western United States as the backdrop of its plot. This causes it to further depart from other animated films that, while perhaps touching on issues of climate change, do not go nearly as in depth into the crisis as *Rango* does. Although it has gone largely unnoticed by ecocritics, *Rango* is undeniably a film dealing with climate change and the dominating forces contributing to it and is especially pertinent given our position in what has been considered the current Anthropocene era.



Coined by Paul Crutzen, the term Anthropocene “emphasize[s] the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” and insists that “mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years to come” (qtd. in Davies 43). It also holds humans accountable for their destructive role in the global climate crisis and works to reevaluate humankind’s position within the larger ecosphere, specifically in relation to how we interact with the nonhuman living and nonliving entities we exist side by side with. As Jeremy Davies smartly points out in his book *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, the Anthropocene provides “an opportunity to think about human and nonhuman power relations simultaneously” (58). It allows us to reconsider our relationship with and other elements of the environment and recognize that we are ultimately a mutual party in the same endangered ecosphere.

*Rango* is therefore particularly important because it engages with both sides of this argument and begins to examine these relationships. Verbinski maintains that “Animation’s not a genre. It’s a technique for telling a story”; thus, he uses the platform of animation to decenter viewers from their position as consumerist agents by telling nature’s side of the story (“*Rango* (2011)” 00:02:04-00:02:07). Although humans are mostly absent from the film, traces of their actions linger in the background of the mise-en-scene and subtext of the plot and are fused into the lives of the desert animals both physically and ideologically, working to create an inextricable link between the human world outside the desert and the natural world within.

By recognizing these techniques along with various other filmmaking strategies, this paper will explore how Verbinski highlights the destructive effects capitalist ideologies and endeavors have caused to the desert environment. Because capitalism is one way to account for the central role humans are considered to play in the Anthropocene and for the environmental degradation the new epoch works to recognize, the film encourages us to critique the idea of

individual profit inherent in our capitalist economic system and reestablish our ecological ties to the nonhuman world in a way that will help shape a more sustainable future.

### **Part 1: Destruction of Nature by Neoliberal Capitalistic Society**

From the very beginning of the film, Verbinski points to the authoritative role humans assume over the natural world and how this attitude has transformed the environment. In doing so, he aligns himself with the Anthropocentric insight that human action is the predominant force contributing to climate change and environmental destruction, human action that has been shaped by the various ideals inherent in our consumerist, capitalistic society.

The film opens with an establishing shot of Rango's face as he engages in various voice exercises to prepare himself for the play he is about to put on. Although establishing shots function to locate the audience in a particular place and indicate where the subsequent action will occur, here we are only provided with a backdrop of a picturesque sky that eventually cuts to a floor of rocks and loose palm leaves. We are given no specific location, but Verbinski makes it seem as though we are, in the very least, someplace outdoors. It is only as the sequence continues that this initial impression quickly dissolves.

The clouds in the sky are completely still and uniform, the pebbles are all the same shape, size, and color, the palm tree is glossy and perfectly constructed, and two vertical lines are just barely discernible in the two opposite corners of the frame. We are not outside at all but are instead confined to the space within the four walls of Rango's terrarium as it sits atop a pile of luggage in the open trunk of a car. While chameleons are typically found in deserts and rainforests, Rango is displaced from his natural environment and has likely never set foot in it at all. We later find out that he is unable to fully camouflage or change color, a unique biological trait in chameleons used as a defense mechanism against danger, which indicates that he has

spent his entire life in captivity and has never needed to utilize this ability. Verbinski therefore purposely withholds Rango's location in order to signal this initial dislocation—not only is the audience disoriented due to the narrative dislocation, but Rango himself exists in a geographically unfamiliar environment as well. Even if he was to be released into his natural habitat, this, too, would be unfamiliar terrain since he is an isolated, sheltered house pet without the knowledge or capability to survive outdoors. And when he does eventually see the world outside his four walls, it is, as we will see later in this paper, not much different than the one he begins in.

Not only does Rango reside in an artificial simulation of the natural world, but all of the accompanying objects in this space are manufactured items. Rango acts alongside the torso of a Barbie doll and an orange windup fish, both mass produced toys; he wields a plastic cocktail sword, a disposable cup decoration; the water in his tank likely came from a water bottle or travelled through a complex network of manmade pipes to be later released from a tap. A cricket, the only other recognizable form of biological life, lies dead adrift in the mote of water, suggesting that it does not belong and cannot survive in this space that, besides Rango, is completely devoid of life and lacking in natural elements.

By opening the film this way, Verbinski situates us in a completely commodified, manufactured world. That is to say, everything, even Rango, has been purchased. As Jane Batkin writes, “American identity has long been associated with the particular need to consume” (157). People are driven by consumption and the accumulation of wealth, both material and monetary, and are defined by their relationship to the market. Because consumers are so accustomed to buying and owning, in a capitalistic society taking an animal from its natural habitat and confining it to an artificial one for our own purposes is a normalized concept and has become so

prevalent that very little, if not nothing, in the natural world is safe from the market. This example of Rango's introduction is, arguably, only an isolated instance. This is one family who has purchased one chameleon, so how harmful can this really be on the larger scale? How much can this single act actually alter or damage the ecosystem at large?

The short answer is that it can't, not really and at least not in this context, because this type of human activity works on the individual, household level. One person cannot create such devastating effects on the environment or act as a catalyst for climate change. They are just one tiny fraction of the ecosystem and one small thread in the infinite web that comprises the world. Instead, it is the gradual accumulation of people and actions over many years and the seemingly imperceptible, delayed destruction this accumulation produces that has inevitably contributed to what Rob Nixon refers to as the phenomenon of slow violence.

When we typically think of violence, Nixon explains, we think of "an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility" (2). In the individual violent action, the cause and effect are easily discernible and occur within a brief lapse of time, whether it be seconds or even as long as a few years, allowing it to be more comfortably understood and easily tracked. The violence that can take hundreds, even thousands of years to emerge and lacks a distinct root is the one that is much less recognizable and harder to comprehend, making it particularly dangerous because its effects remain largely invisible until it is, for the most part, too late to fix them. But this is also one type of human activity that critics about the Anthropocene seek to expose.

The problem then becomes how to represent and make people aware of this slow violence that so often goes undetected or ignored. This feat is especially difficult in our fast paced, digital world dominated by action cinema, speedy technology, media with its prolific turnover rate of

news stories, and a general short-term relationship with history and the past, all of which produce “a state of perpetual distraction” (Nixon 12). But this difficulty can also be attributed to our capitalist society organized around the cycle of consumption and the constant purchasing of consumer pleasures that fail to consider the larger, long-term consequences these transactions produce.

Verbinski provides one method of tackling this type of storytelling, one that relies on the use of vivid, detailed mise-en-scene in relation to the Western genre. *Rango* does feature theatrical fight sequences and numerous chase scenes as is typical in most action-adventure films, most notably the canyon chase scene and final duel with Rattlesnake Jake, but it also presents a quieter, subtler violence being waged on the film’s main setting. While *Rango* is a film about animals diegetically told by animals, Verbinski uses the landscape to represent and imply the invisible human activity that, although physically removed from the desert environment, is constantly present and operating from the background.

For example, after falling from his owner’s trunk and briefly conversing with an armadillo named Roadkill and voiced by Alfred Molina, Rango begins his journey through the desert in search of Dirt. The film depicts the desert conditions and emphasizes the natural setting with intense sunlight and a dry, desolate landscape. What is surprising, however, is the rusted aluminum can Rango suddenly runs into when fleeing from a hawk, one that points to signs of a destructive human presence.

Hoping to snatch Rango, the hawk jams its head into the can and begins chaotically squawking and flailing about trying to dislodge it, only to resume chasing Rango regardless of its obstructed vision. While this struggle is depicted partly for comedic effect, it also reveals the disturbing reality of the current conditions of our environment. Recalling the well-known images

of plastic straws lodged in the noses of sea turtles and soda can rings suffocating birds, here is another instance of animals falling victim to human trash.

While the can eventually falls off after the hawk crashes into a cactus, traces of litter continue to appear more frequently and in larger concentrations. We see a glass soda bottle discarded next to a lone tire; Rango spends the night in a momentarily dormant water pipe fitted into the side of a small rock ledge. Dirt itself has been constructed almost entirely out of garbage: houses made of chair legs and scrap metal, a desert bird with a prosthetic leg made from what appears to be a wiffle ball and plastic piping, a Porta Potty fashioned out of an old Pepto Bismol bottle, and the list goes on. Their world is so infused with garbage to the point where not only is their town made of it, but the animals themselves are, too with their various limbs constructed out of trash. It has claimed such an expected, fixed, and permanent presence in their environment that they have no choice but to find ways to assimilate it into their lives.<sup>1</sup>

*Rango* is, ultimately, an example of the Western genre, and typically when we think of Westerns we think of the wild, picturesque landscapes many of the stories are set in. Will Wright emphasizes the “central significance of the land” in Western films, noting the “vast deserts and empty skies” and the “noble mountains and forests” that are often captured in sweeping wide shots and put on display for visual and thematic purposes (12). This emphasis on land can be largely attributed to the myths undergirding westward expansion, which presented the American West as an uninhabited land to be explored and settled. This unknown, potentially dangerous environment or, as Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki put it, “the vague yet inexorable allure of a wild, untouched land, of terrain laden with golden opportunities,” became a key component of American culture and the Western genre specifically, regardless of its distortion of the historical reality (1). People were intrigued by the idea of unchartered territory and the

prospects of wealth and the genre allowed them to rewrite history in this way by presenting the land of the American West as a territory to be conquered. In fact, the central ideology of the Western genre lies on the binary between civilization and wilderness (Kitses ch. 1). Films often feature human characters navigating through the rugged, dominating elements of the natural world that constantly threaten them in their attempts to tame and explore it.

*Rango*, then, presents a very different type of landscape. On first viewing, these differences may easily go overlooked since at this point the sight of litter scattered across highways and parking lots is not all that unfamiliar. But it is important to note that the Mojave Desert is not a highway or parking lot and that it is being presented in the context of a Western film. In other words, this is not a wild, picturesque, unclaimed landscape bursting with potential—this is a landscape that has already been settled,<sup>2</sup> exploited, and pillaged and holds very little opportunity besides water, a point that will be discussed later. How, then, does this help represent the damage caused by slow violence?

Verbinski and his team of animators could have easily constructed a landscape that adheres to the Western tropes and could have presented a town where the buildings are made of actual wood rather than scraps. Instead, the film exhibits the effects of slow violence because it accounts for the change the environment has undergone over the last several decades due to what Nixon refers to as slow violence's "delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). When speaking about directors of Westerns and how they portray violence, Alan Lovell writes, "If they posed questions about violence, they posed at the same time questions about America," which is to say that films and their various subject matters are highly influenced by and reflective of the social contexts and cultures of their time (167). In the time from the mid twentieth century when Westerns were at their peak to 2011 when *Rango* was released, the

representation of the landscape becomes dramatically different because the land itself is dramatically different. The film pairs *Rango* with these classical Westerns to reveal just how perverse the commercial products and litter we are so accustomed to have become and the extent to which the binary between civilization and wilderness has altered—it is no longer the wilderness that threatens civilization, but is civilization that threatens the wilderness.

Perhaps more destructive than the allocation of waste and effects of slow violence, however, are the capitalist ideologies constantly reinforcing them that are initially symbolized in the film by the long expanse of road Verbinski depicts slicing through what he frames as the center of the landscape. The highway is immediately defined by violence and danger. It is the place where Rango is ripped from the safety of his terrarium, where the armadillo is hit by the speeding car of Rango's owners, and where freightliners barrel down oblivious to their surroundings. It is also the means by which waste is transported into the natural landscape, accounting for how a bottle of Coca Cola makes its way across the country to supermarket shelves in Nevada only to be bought, drunk, discarded out of a car window or loosened from the back of a garbage truck, and eventually discovered in the desert. But, even beyond the garbage, there is the road itself—which invokes the road as an ideological construct serving the principles of neoliberal capitalism.

When discussing Westerns, Lindsey Collins explains that “Trains and railroads created the material conditions of possibility for the ‘discovery’ and symbolic burdening of the West” (90). Although referring to the railway system, Collins's point can be easily shifted to roads and highways which have a very similar function. On the one hand, roads ease the transport of goods and create a more interconnected society, but on the other hand, roads also expand the scope of market transactions which inevitably fuels society's fixation on material wealth. David Harvey



explains that the neoliberal logic “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions,” and this is accomplished by pursuing technology that will shorten the time and space of market exchanges (3). Roads are therefore part of an invasive structure that penetrates, disrupts, and burdens the desert by not only making it vulnerable to outside materials, but also by forcibly opening it up as an idle space to be seized upon and integrated into the commercial world.

With its dry, barren landscape, the desert does not initially appear to hold much opportunity. However, the economic opportunity the desert does afford is, ironically, dependent on water and includes massive waterworks. The Mojave houses Lake Mead, one of the largest water reservoirs in the world, as well as several massive, ancient aquifers hidden beneath its surface. Water is, after all, the most vital aspect of all life and is therefore one of the most powerful, important, and profitable commodities, especially in places as sweltering and parched as the western United States. As the Mayor of Dirt accurately and bluntly declares, “You control the water and you control everything,” a statement that both points to the inherent value of water and simultaneously establishes it as an entity to be monopolized for political and economic gain, an idea that largely conforms to the ideologies of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism holds that anything shared or publicly owned will not be maximized in terms of its value due to the limitations and restraints governmental regulations place on the market, such as taxes or price controls. In order to free the market and maximize the potential profits to be gained from market transactions, neoliberalism therefore calls for the privatization of public goods, here being water.

Though *Rango* appears to reference earlier time periods through its Western echoes as well as the contemporary neoliberal era, the critique of our enduring economic system is a key lens through which to understand the film. Wright explains that classical Westerns often situate

the good guy / bad guy opposition in terms of economic motivation. He writes, “The good people want the land to build a society with families, churches, schools, law, and business” while “the villains want the land and its resources for personal gain,” much like Rango and the Mayor, respectively (140). Given the commercial products the town is built with, Verbinski retains the tropes of the classical Western in relation to Dirt while casting it as a contemporary town, in which the dynamic between hero and villain struggling over economic control is understood as operating within the context of modern neoliberal capitalism.

By examining the Mayor’s role more closely, his framing as a neoliberal figure becomes clearer. A desert tortoise voiced by Ned Beatty and modelled after *Chinatown*’s main antagonist and businessman Noah Cross, the Mayor has a simple plan: by privatizing the water, he will turn the surrounding land into a dry wasteland, purchase it from the townspeople at a low price, and build his own modern city on top of it, thereby eradicating the desert and pushing out the life forms occupying it. As both landowning entrepreneur and mayor, the Mayor plays the double role of businessman and government official and embodies the two collaborating forces at the heart of neoliberal policy making. While this doubling could be Verbinski’s way of simplifying the narrative and keeping the conflict contained within a limited number of characters, it also works to dramatize the corrupt nature of neoliberalism—he has the ability to deregulate his own business practices and is perhaps even more corrupt since his actions are left entirely unchecked, at least until Rango and his team of townspeople begin their investigation of the water shortage.

In his efforts to privatize, the Mayor abandons his town, the people, and his inner circle of loyal cronies in favor of his own success and self-interest, therefore embracing neoliberal individualism. As Margaret Thatcher famously and controversially asserted, there is “no such thing as society, only individual men and women”; the doctrine suggested, Harvey adds, that

“All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism” (23). While America has long valued the individual and the acquisition of personal wealth, neoliberalism has radically shifted attention away from the common man to the success of elitist classes and big businesses, so much so that the Mayor willingly and greedily sacrifices his town. He prizes the wealth he will gain from privatized water over social wellbeing and carelessly watches as the other animals struggle to survive. The townspeople, family of moles living on the outskirts of Dirt, and Mayor’s inner circle all battle against each other for water while the Mayor overlooks the town from elevated spaces. This blocking symbolizes his exclusive knowledge regarding the water shortage, establishes him as a separate entity untouched by the struggles of the townspeople, and provides him with the ideal vantage point to pitilessly observe the squalid conditions he has forced upon Dirt, all while he has the luxury of retreating into his spacious, shaded office fitted with quality furniture, decor, and, of course, a private stock of fresh water. In short, he has the wealth to be insulated from the disadvantages of and difficulties resulting from privatization.

These sharp spatial and material contrasts highlight the unequal distribution of wealth and resources caused by neoliberal policies, but they also and perhaps more importantly reveal the inherent contradictions embedded in neoliberal ideology, namely the problematic tradeoff between individual wealth and collective wellbeing. Contrasting with the lavish space associated with the Mayor and complementing the bleak conditions of Dirt, Verbinski provides various scenes of the areas of desert lying outside the town. During their search for the water, for example, Rango and the townspeople travel through an extremely vast and seemingly endless aquifer that is not only completely dry but is also fitted with a system of metal pipes. Similarly, in perhaps one of the most harrowing scenes of the film, Rango reunites with the armadillo on

the other side of the road that he initially failed to cross in the film's opening. They walk past a half buried boat, prompting the armadillo to regrettably explain that "Many years ago this entire valley was covered in *agua*. Now, only one question remains," to which Rango replies "Where did it go?" This question is soon answered by a shot of another stretching pipeline, this time one that leads into the city of Las Vegas. While Rango stands observing the city in the foreground, the rest of the extreme longshot is dominated by the imposing spread of skyscrapers and streets. The still is intercut with pans of towering buildings, close-ups of sprinkler systems carelessly spurting water over a sweeping golf course, and the ominous distant rumblings of city life. What was once part of the desert is now a commercial, modernized urban development, in which all traces of preexisting desert life that covered the area have been entirely wiped out.

While the Mayor's wealth separates and insulates him from the deterioration of Dirt, he is so blinded by and focused on his immediate success that he fails to realize that the water is much bigger than just him and his town. He believes he owns and controls it, but in reality the water belongs to the humans and various water companies implementing the water pumping systems, in which he unknowingly submits himself to the systematized process of climate change. By activating the emergency shut-off valve and preventing water from entering Dirt, he simultaneously cuts water off from the desert as a whole, water that will simply be redirected to the residents of Las Vegas. The Mayor therefore not only contributes to the water pumping efforts that have already dried out extensive parts of the desert, but in doing so aids in the destruction of the desert as a whole. Yet this same desert is, after all, his natural habitat and home; in the long run, he will suffer the same unfortunate fate as those in Dirt. The city he builds is paired in a transitional counter shot with the backdrop of Las Vegas, suggesting that its construction will continue to fuel the reach of urbanization and wipe out the desert ecosystem.

Any wealth he does acquire will be useless since there will be no land left for him or the other desert inhabitants to occupy and survive in. The figure of the Mayor therefore points to the social and environmental dangers neoliberalism ignores in its valorization of privatization and self-interest over social needs; but, of course, it can also be read as a reference to the ongoing history of water pumping in the Mojave.

The fictional narrative of the Mayor's effort to capitalize on and privatize water reflects real conflicts over water ownership that continue to take place. Over the last few decades and continuing today, several states have negotiated to secure rights over the large aquifer discovered under the Mojave. As droughts continue to afflict the western United States, the aquifer has been viewed as another potential source along with Lake Mead to quench the parched, drying cities of California and Nevada. Redistributing water initially seems like a plausible way to alleviate the hardships of drought on residents, but dangers arise when over allocation causes the water level to permanently diminish. The rapid depletion of water means the bodies of water cannot replenish themselves with rainwater and mountain runoff, as in the case of Lake Mead which continues to be pumped at a rate beyond reparability. Not only is the water running out, but the desert ecosystem is consequently slowly crumbling as the water it relies so heavily on disappears, similar to the situation in *Dirt*. This would become even more problematic if Cadiz Inc, a private company operating in California, runs the pumping project.<sup>3</sup> To privatize the water would be to fall into the same neoliberal trap as the Mayor. Any form of moderation and long term conservation would inevitably be sacrificed for immediate consumption and individual profit regardless of the potential future consequences this will have, both in terms of the desert and in terms of ourselves running out of water.

The daunting scenes of the empty lake and aquifer Verbinski portrays therefore not only

represent the water that has already dried up, but also provide implications for the future if water continues to be relentlessly taken from the desert. Donna Haraway notes the disturbing reality of contemporary capitalism, emphasizing how “our enslavement to Progress and its evil twin, Modernization” has “sap[ped] our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds, both those that exist precariously now. . . and those we need to bring into being in alliance with other critters, for still possible recuperating pasts, presents, and futures” (50). Like the Mayor, we are too distracted by wealth and consumption to realize that we are slowly eradicating the desert and, by extension, the wider ecosystem, one that we are also members of.

This critique is largely aimed at corporations engaging in destructive neoliberal practices who wave off environmental damage in the name of profits; but it also includes, at least to some extent, the larger system generated by capitalism that shapes the average consumer. Consumers are also concerned with accumulating wealth, whether monetary or in the form of material possessions and, unlike corporations, they generally remain ignorant of the environmental threats capitalism produces. Rango’s owners purchase Rango regardless of the fact that this continues to fuel animal displacement, and the people of Las Vegas most likely do not think about where their water comes from or the impact it has on the desert. That is to say, the individualism inherent in neoliberal capitalism has been bred in both businesses and buyers, causing us to put aside the needs of the environment for our own. This is, ultimately, the contradiction that the film narrates—how narrow privatized pursuits lead us to destroy our own world.

Haraway’s point therefore forces us to realize that it is not about the individual anymore and cannot be about the individual anymore. The human and natural worlds are inseparable; this individualistic way of thinking has to be shifted—we have to consider our place alongside these other worlds not as separate entities existing side by side, but as collaborating, integrated, and

interdependent forces. Only by recognizing the dangers of the neoliberal trap and reevaluating our connections to the natural world can we begin to slow and prevent both their demise and our own.

## **Part 2: Reshaping Attitudes Toward Nature and Nonhuman Life**

Haraway's comment regarding the incapacity to care for other worlds seems to be responding to the misconception that humans and nature are and exist as separate entities. To view the natural world as distinct and other than ourselves causes us to adopt similar attitudes toward it that we so often do when interacting with those deemed different than us—that of mastery, disposability, and indifference. However, as explained in the previous pages, the film is aware that this separation is indeed a misconception—it acknowledges the interconnection between humans and nonhumans through its various depictions of the implied invisible human hand that has significantly influenced the desert environment, whether through the integration of litter within the landscape or through the water that connects the animal realm with the human city.

That being said, there are several instances when the film constructs a visual image of separation. Humans are only present on the road and in Las Vegas, with the exception being the Spirit of the West. Even when they appear on the same plane, such as when Rango appears in the car, this split is retained, as Rango is delegated to the isolated space of the trunk away from his human owners. In the shot of Las Vegas, the line separating the desert from the golf course is clearly visible, although this is a tentative barrier, tentative is not in the sense of merging human and nonhuman life but rather in terms of the barrier's potential extension. The domineering appearance of the city's grid stretching into the distance and the encroaching border of the golf course curving out into the dry land allow us to imagine how the line will creep further and

further into the Mojave as the city continues to expand. And when the city expands, the humans and animals will not then cohabitate, but one will replace and do away with the other.

While these depictions of boundaries seem to contradict the inherent interconnection between the human and nonhuman worlds, it is important to clarify that they do not deny the interrelationship. Instead, we can view these shots as creating a visual contrast between the active, industrialized human populated space and the barren, stretching desert landscape, a contrast that works not to craft a separation, but to comment on the tendency and desire to view the desert as “natural.” Natural is, of course, a highly contested and subjective word, but here I simply mean it in relation to nature and the nonhuman environment.<sup>4</sup> Designating the desert as natural accurately recognizes the structural differences between the human and nonhuman worlds, whether we view this difference socially, geographically, culturally, and so on, but it is ultimately problematic because it establishes a relationship between humans and nonhumans based on an objectification of the natural world that inevitably leads to unequal power relations between the two.

When asking her students to brainstorm what the word nature means to them, Noël Sturgeon contends that it is “rare to encounter notions of nature as urban, as community, as constructed in interaction with humans, as autonomous agent, or as self” (24). This point can be paired with Davies’s explanation of how “complex ecologies have been dispersed and simplified in order to tame them into servicing the extractive demands of international capital” (201). In both cases, the natural world is situated as a passive entity while humans are designated with the privilege of a dominant, active status. Nature is considered a resource to be used for capitalist interests, which casts it as inferior and disposable to the human world and casts the abuse of nature as imperative to human life. In doing so, nature and the nonhumans residing in it are



stripped of their agency as living beings and their status as mutual contributors to the ecological world.

Initially, the film seems to play into this overriding dynamic by presenting nature in a similar way. Rango does not have the ability to stop the events that are unexpectedly afflicted on him in the film's opening sequence, and the animals in *Dirt* have no control over their own land and no means of preventing humans from pillaging it—they are neither active nor do they have the ability to be effectively reactive. Even further, the film opens with the subtle correlation between Rango and the manufactured objects in his terrarium. There are, it seems, very little commonalities between Rango and these objects besides their shared space and, if you will, their similar physical sizes. He is living, they are inert; he is an animal, they are toys; and so on. He does, in these ways, stand apart from them and exerts a certain level of agency since he is the only living thing in this space, directs the objects' movements, and has the freedom to move around and act. However, this agency is limited since he is contained within this restrictive space and is completely stifled in relation to his human owners. He is left entirely to their discretion and, up until his entrance into *Dirt*, every aspect of his life is controlled by them.

To place him alongside these material objects in the terrarium, and even to place his terrarium alongside the luggage in the trunk, more closely aligns him with their status as manufactured items. Rango does not just simply play with these objects or even recognize them as play toys, but converses with them, refers to them by specific names, and interacts with them as though they are his companions. He maintains a certain mutuality with them, one that works to emphasize the commodified status his owners perceive him through—both Rango and these objects are viewed by humans simply as things. He is no longer acknowledged as a unique living creature, but is instead a pet store good that has been bred for the sole purpose of being bought

and sold. If he falls out of the car, his owners can easily purchase a new chameleon just like they would any other commodity. And this, of course, translates to the desert environment as well, which is only valued for its stocks of water rather than for its dynamic ecosystem and vast array of wildlife.

What this process of commodification ultimately does is breed an attitude of disposability of and disregard for nonhuman life. When Rango's owners hit the armadillo and send Rango spiraling out of the window, they do not pull over to see what they hit or ensure that Rango is still secured in the car. They simply continue driving oblivious to the two animals they harmed and the debris they left behind, which adds to the waste already covering the land. Once on the road, Rango is relentlessly tossed over and under trucks, splattered with mud, and lands on the windshield of a convertible whose two occupants carelessly flick him off with their windshield wipers.<sup>5</sup> In each instance, there is very minimal concern for the world outside the doors of the human figures' cars. The people of Las Vegas are similarly indifferent to the life already existing in the desert and are willing to replace it with more golf courses, buildings, and roads, using the water and land to fuel their desires even though an entire world struggles to survive beside them. The natural world is entirely dismissed and willingly sacrificed and, being on the receiving end of the human activity, is further stripped of its autonomy.

The film therefore suggests that the lack of care for other worlds that Haraway mentions is born not from maintaining a separation between them, but by constructing an interconnection that is unequal and prevents the possibility of forming and recognizing a relationship based on reciprocity. While there are, of course, many organizations and households working toward conservation efforts and environmental justice, the careless and destructive component of capitalist society is the overwhelming attitude the film draws our attention to because it is one

that defines our economic system. It is this dominating view of the natural world as a disposable resource that situates it as a subdued and easily manipulatable entity and that in turn only encourages humans to continue their harmful acts since there are minimal checks to prevent them from doing so, whether in terms of nature's passivity or in terms of the lenient neoliberal capitalist system. One way we can begin to change this system and the damage it generates is to alter and reshape the ways we understand the natural world, and Verbinski considers this reexamination from the very start of the film.

While critiquing the performances of his artificial companions, Rango suddenly turns to the palm tree and asks, "What's that, Victor? My character's undefined?" He is, it seems, referring to the role he plays in his theater production, but this question operates on another level as well. Rango *is*, in a sense, undefined. He exists as a defamiliarized entity, a living animal yet perceived material commodity at the same time. He slowly walks toward the glass wall of his terrarium and stares into the camera before asking the daunting question "Who am I?" which can also translate to "What am I?" It is a rhetorical question posed to himself, yet given his proximity to and direct eye contact with the camera, it is also a question posed to the audience. Who is Rango, and how are we supposed to understand him as a nonhuman animal in relation to ourselves as humans and consumers? Verbinski explores this question in many subtle and obvious ways that accumulate over the course of the film, so that the animals and landscape of *Dirt* appear not as passive victims or commodities, but as agents and significant beings.

One way Verbinski accomplishes this reexamination is through his style of narration. While the backdrop of clouds Rango is introduced with locates us in a world of artificiality, it also functions to locate us in Rango's mind. Clouds are emblematic of daydreaming and the imagination, and the numerous close-up shots the background is paired with isolate and draw

attention to his head, both of which signal that the story is being told from his point of view. However, the film is not just focalized through Rango. There are mariachi owls narrating major plot points, isolated shots of minor and supporting characters that provide insight into their emotions, and conversations between characters that Rango does not witness himself. In other words, we are not just experiencing Rango's point of view, but are immersed within the perspective of nature itself—we are privy to their experiences as exploited animals and are able to witness the world through their eyes. Nonhuman nature is given a voice and its story of destruction is brought to the forefront while humans are shifted almost entirely to the background either as passing figures or implied forces, challenging the Anthropocentric idea of human centrality. We are, in this way, decentered from ourselves, and our human-centric mindset is disrupted as we participate with and become part of the society lying on the other side of our commercial world.

Focusing on Rango's mind and nature's perspective constructs the natural world as conscious, but pairing these techniques with the anthropomorphic quality of the characters themselves forces us to recognize them as conscious *beings*. Verbinski's characters are extremely detailed and gritty and closely resemble the wide array of desert animals they are modeled after.<sup>6</sup> Character designers Mark "Crash" McCreery, Jim Burkett, Eugene Yelchin, and David Shannon spent an extensive amount of time drawing, redrawing, and collaborating on the characters' appearances in order to capture their liveliness and distinct animal identities and characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach, to borrow from Davies, "maximize[s] the countervailing presence of plural, diverse, and polycentric ecosystems" in opposition to the degradation of the natural world as a tamed resource or "uniform blob" (201, 8). The animals are provided and presented with the uniqueness Rango is denied when viewed within the framing of a common pet

store good, allowing them to be recognized for their individuality rather than their capitalist usefulness.

Yet there is also an explicit humanlike quality about them. They walk on two legs, talk, wear clothing, live in houses, and at one point Rango even refers to them as “real people.” While on the surface this seems to take away from the dynamic qualities and plurality associated with the natural world by constructing them as more human, it instead retains these characteristics while aligning the animals with human capabilities. Humans are considered superior to other beings because of their presumed higher intelligence and active decision making, both of which the natural world is considered to lack in comparison. However, the animals of *Dirt* do not lack the ability to think, respond, and act—they are highly organized, live in a structured, although impoverished, town, and, as we will see, actively respond to and retaliate against the environmental threats around them. Presenting these capabilities within the familiar, humanlike context of a town therefore allows us to better understand and grasp their enduring autonomous behavior. We are made aware of them as a comprehensive self, placing them on a more mutual level with humans that no longer justifies their objectification and exploitation.

While there are other major animated films exploring aspects of climate change, they are rarely presented in this way.<sup>8</sup> *The Lorax*, for example, borrows from Dr. Seuss’s range of imaginative, fictitious characters and blends together a cast of creatures, animals, and humans to comment on deforestation through a pedagogical approach. *WALL-E*, a film exposing the dangers of overconsumption and technology, is presented through both robots and humans and does not feature animals at all. While films like *Over the Hedge* and *Happy Feet* are largely told through animal characters as in *Rango*, the themes of environmental change and capitalist destruction are only hinted at rather than form the overriding premises of the films, and the

interconnection between humans and nonhumans is much less emphasized or pertinent to the narrative. For *Rango* to be presented as explicitly environmental, animal centered, and as a platform to reveal the natural world's consciousness makes it especially crucial. The animals in these films are recognized as just that: animals—different, other, and inferior to humans. *Rango*, however, provides nature with a personhood that dismantles the commoditized identity imposed upon it by humans. This is not to suggest that nonhuman nature requires human qualities to be considered on more equal terms with humans, but instead emphasizes the extent to which *Rango* presents nonhuman nature as a comprehensive being.

Not only does the film present nature as a conscious being in these various ways, but it also establishes a nature that fights back rather than one that idly waits to be seized upon for money making opportunities. Rango enlists the help of the townspeople, family of moles, and even the Mayor's number one crony Rattlesnake Jake to aid in his plan to restore water, all of whom originally succumbed to the neoliberal impulse of individual interest by competing against each other for water rather than against the Mayor himself. They turn off the emergency shut off valve leading to Las Vegas, break down the pipes in the aquifer, and dispose of the Mayor, destroying the manmade structures that threaten their land and reclaiming the water that was pitilessly taken from them. They effectively combat the capitalist efforts that oppressed them and resist the neoliberal ideology by collectively acting, both of which reframe nature from passive entity to formidable force in a way that fully realizes and acknowledges its agency.

The closing scene depicts the rewards of these efforts as the animals bask and play in the lake formed by the masses of water returned to the desert that replaces the arid conditions of their town, now named Mud to emphasize its reestablished hydration. The scene is filmed in a continuous panning shot to capture the languid, lighthearted mood contrasting with the prior

depictions of the dried, financially and socially unstable Dirt. And to further emphasize the idealistic quality of the resort they have created, The Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice" plays in the background. This scene does not imply that water is no longer being pumped to Las Vegas, but it does reveal the possibility for a different, reimagined future of the environment and ecological conditions. This is a reality where destructive, individualistic capitalist efforts are replaced by a more encompassing concern for social welfare and equal distribution of water that includes the natural world as well. This is a reality where both humans and nonhumans can survive, thrive, and coexist. And, in reference to the real ongoing water pumping efforts, this is a reality that realizes the dangers of relentless resource extraction and works to establish alternative methods that consider the needs of both humans and nonhumans.

However, in order to more properly understand the significance of this final scene, it is important to note what takes place just before it, namely Rango's meeting with the legendary Spirit of the West. The Spirit of the West is a human character voiced by Timothy Oliphant though modelled after Clint Eastwood's Spaghetti Western figure the "Man With No Name." He rides an "alabaster carriage" and carries "golden guardians" to protect him, which are really just a golf cart and numerous Oscar awards. While these objects are largely for comedic, meta purposes, they also characterize the Spirit as someone who carries substantial experience and wisdom, whether it be through his history in Hollywood or his familiarity with the desert that he is depicted casually traversing through.

Although the scene takes place in an implied dream space, this is the only moment when humans and nonhumans explicitly interact and converse with each other in the film. Their conversation is complemented by a series of shot reverse shots and eyeline matches, and the camera takes turns filming them in high and low angles. Eye contact is maintained and the two

characters even exchange several lines of banter. Even though the Spirit of the West towers over Rango due to his taller height and occupies a conventionally superior position both as a species and in relation to his implied knowledge, a steady, balanced power relation is established. They do not recognize each other as human and reptile, but transcend these distinctions by talking one being to another being.

Their meeting occurs during the falling action of the film. Rango has just admitted to the townspeople that he is not the accomplished gunslinger he has been pretending to be; the Mayor seems to have won, and the water has still not been found and restored to Dirt. He believes he has failed both himself and the townspeople and refuses to return to the town until the Spirit scolds him to “Be a hero” and insists that “No man can walk out on his own story,” advice that of course ultimately rests not on Rango alone, but on his alliance with the other animals. Once the Spirit bestows his counsel to Rango and rides away into the distance, the armadillo returns and takes up the effort of prompting Rango into action. Rango then discovers the water pump, forms his plan, and eventually defeats the Mayor and brings water back to Dirt.

Noting where these scenes occur in relation to each other is a crucial distinction to make because it reveals the necessary conditions the film suggests must take place in order to bring this fruition into existence. It is only after these two successive meetings that Rango is able to experience his epiphany and that the animals eventually form their ideal, utopian-like paradise. That is to say, the resolution of shared welfare is contingent on not just a collaborative effort between the animals themselves, but also a collaborative effort between a human and an animal, whether in terms of Rango meeting with the Spirit or the Spirit and the armadillo combining their wisdom to inspire Rango. This not only solidifies the film’s critique of neoliberal capitalism by relying on collective action over individual gain, but also entirely reshapes the perceived



connection between humans and the natural world through the symbol of the Spirit. A brighter future starts not with “free enterprise and private ownership” as neoliberal ideology wants us to believe, both of which only lead to the aforementioned destruction of the environment and dismissal of the natural world, which are of course our world as well (Harvey 37). It starts with and depends on a mutually recognized interdependence between humans and nonhumans, one that acknowledges and respects their shared places in the ecosystem. Only by reshaping our views and treatment of the natural world can we perhaps someday lay the groundwork for an alternative economic system and create the means for a harmonious, healthy ecological world.

### **Conclusion**

*Rango* arguably concludes on an extreme idealistic scenario. It presents a nonhuman nature healing itself in the face of climate change that diverges from the harsh reality of endangerment and extinction; it projects a type of Hollywood fantasy world through the animals' paradisiacal society; and it embraces a romantic reality where humans and nature can unproblematically and equally coexist, something that may seem entirely unrealistic in relation to our contemporary capitalist society. Yet any potentially theatrical aspects it presents only work to further emphasize its vision and demonstrate the possibility for futures that do not end in environmental devastation and the collapse of the ecosystem or return to the triumph of individual, neoliberal privatization. Whether or not the film's reality is possible is not necessarily as important as the recognition that other, better futures are possible. While conservation efforts and sustainability, both on the larger local or public scale and on the smaller household level, are useful strategies for protecting the natural world, they often either fall into the misconception that nature should be held separate from humans or work at protecting the natural world rather than offering ways for humans and nature to engage in a complementary, reciprocated

relationship. And while *Rango* itself does not necessarily provide a specific solution to these issues, it does raise the conditions that must take place before a solution can be reached: that of mutuality rather than relentless, careless mastery.

I would therefore like to conclude by quoting Haraway's simple yet telling observation, one that I believe sums up this paper and the message *Rango* helps visually and cinematically convey, one that relies on the fundamental Golden Rule we learn as children but often forget as we become too blinded by neoliberal ideology, and one that we should carry with us each time we venture outdoors—"all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages" (103).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> T.V. Reed refers to a similar motif of garbage infused landscapes, although he refers to it in relation to the “wasteland” literary trope that points “to various kinds of real waste—toxics, garbage, landfills, industrial debris, etc.—that are so much part of the contemporary ‘landscape’” (150-151).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to clarify just how vast the Mojave Desert is. Spanning almost 48,000 square miles, it extends into California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona and therefore geographically includes many cities, one of the largest being Las Vegas. In this sense, the Mojave has technically been settled. However, the Mojave is more often associated with the barren, animal inhabited areas while the human populated sections are associated with the boundaries of their respective states, therefore accounting for the misconception that the desert is unpopulated.

<sup>3</sup> The history of water pumping in the Mojave and of Cadiz Inc. is a long and complex one. Cadiz has been buying up land and investing in water for many years, and more recently their goal has been to secure the aquifers lying below the desert. They plan to pump approximately 16.3 billion gallons of water into California each year for fifty years, insisting that they will only pump water that would otherwise be evaporated and ensuring that the aquifer will have ample time to recharge with rainwater, therefore leaving little to no negative environmental impacts. And, coinciding with our neoliberal economic system, the project has been backed by various government officials and businesses since it would increase local water supply and decrease the need for imported water. However, many argue that Cadiz’s estimations of water recuperation are grossly underestimated, especially since there have been claims that the hydrological studies were carried out by contractors paid by the company. Environmental groups and lawmakers are extremely opposed to the project, not only because they recognize it as a money making

endeavor, but also because the risks to the environment and the misuse and wasting of water that occur on a daily basis are too substantial of risks to take. Ongoing legal obstacles and resistance by environmental groups still occur today to stave off Cadiz's plan, but the future of the desert remains uncertain.

While there are ample articles, websites, and blogs detailing and commenting on Cadiz's water pumping endeavors, see the following works for further information: Howard Fine's article notes the recent resistance and lawsuits Cadiz is being met with; Julia Sizek and Kim Stringfellow provide a comprehensive history of water pumping in the Mojave; and Sandra Emerson as well as the blogpost "The Absurdity of the Cadiz Water Export Scheme" are both useful introductory points that give a general overview of Cadiz's plans, the opposing and supporting groups, and the possible dangers of their project.

<sup>4</sup> Noël Sturgeon opens her book by questioning and exploring the word "natural," the various ways it is used, and its potential dangers, especially within the context of contemporary media and advertising. See the first chapter of her book for more.

<sup>5</sup> There are many references to other films and genres in *Rango* besides those associated with Westerns. Here, the two occupants are based on Johnny Depp's and Benicio del Toro's characters in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

<sup>6</sup> Sean Cubitt, one of the very few scholars who has written on *Rango*, also spends time examining the film's animation style and characters, although he takes a much different approach. He does briefly mention neoliberalism and frames his writing around the limits of species autonomy in the Anthropocene, much of his focus is centered on the ethics of animation and what is owed to the inanimate characters that are being brought to life. See his article and book chapter on *Rango* for further reading.

<sup>7</sup> Although each artist brought very different styles to the drawing board, their visions were combined to create the quirky characters we see on screen. Their process is truly fascinating, both in terms of observing the early drafts compared to the final stages and in terms of the eighteen month long crafting of the storyboard itself, all of which took place in Verbinski's California ranch house. To watch the collaboration that took place, see "Rango behind the scenes- Breaking the Rules: Making Animation History: The Stage is Set."

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Verbinski filmed using an extremely unconventional process, especially in relation to animated films. Typically animated films shoot actors only for sound by having them record voice overs in isolated studio booths. However, Verbinski had the actors engage in a mock, live stage production in order to capture a genuine sense of actors reacting to one another and to incorporate each person's individual mannerisms and expressions into the animated characters themselves. For more about the filming process, see "Rango (2011) | Making of with Johnny Depp."

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