Their attacks land on the news: 1996, a vehicle torched; 1997, a tree spiked; 1999, an office building doused with gasoline and set on fire; 2001, a corporate developer’s mansion destroyed by flames; 2003, newly built luxury homes ruined by arson (“Fanning the Flames”). The press has come to portray them in an increasingly negative light, tossing around words like “terrorism” without explaining that they damage only property and never people. The public falls in line, seeming to assume that these attacks are motivated by nothing more complex than the psychotic drive of violent, angry anarchists.

This is the world of the radical environmentalist movement, a social movement that claims that peaceful efforts made to preserve the environment are too little and too slow and thus lashes out in desperation against institutions it sees as destroying the natural world. Yet the movement is not one entirely of violence and rage; its literature demonstrates that it is a world of peace, intelligence, and, oddly, magic. Indeed, the latter unexpectedly crops up throughout the rhetoric of the radical environmental movement, from terminology like “elves” and “Moots” to theories relating human myth and religion to the power of nature. Although often used subtly, these prevalent themes of fantasy and myth are particularly effective, achieving many of the goals typical of social movements. The use of fantasy themes in the rhetoric of the radical environmental movement creates a new reality for its supporters in which they are able to commit violent acts because they are protected by magic, by nature, and by divinity.

Theoretical Framework

The use of fantasy as a rhetorical strategy can be analyzed using “fantasy-theme criticism,” an analytical framework created by Ernest G. Bormann. As Sonja K. Foss sums up in her book *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Bormann’s theory is based on two concepts: first, that a person’s reality is created by communication and language, and second, that this communication can create a “shared reality” among many participants (122). By employing these strategies in their rhetoric, writers create a reality, through language, with which the audience comes to identify, what Bormann calls the “rhetorical vision” (qtd. in Foss 125). In this new world, participants may come to see themselves as heroes or villains and their actions as just or unjust, entirely based on the ideas within a text(s). The so-called “fantasy themes” created in this new reality can be “character themes,” in which rhetoric is used to alter ideas about the participants themselves, and “action themes,” in which participants’ acts are viewed rather differently (123).

While the term “fantasy” often connotes elves, fairies, and dragons, in fantasy-theme criticism the term instead refers to a world separate from reality, created by language and communication. Although much of the rhetoric discussed below incorporates the ideas related to this typical con-
cept of fantasy, the theory itself relates more to the invention of a new reality that can alter participants’ perceptions of morality, legality, supremacy, ability, and other key aspects of themselves and their situations. Indeed, in *Persuasion and Social Movements*, Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr. describe a most essential goal of protest movements as “transforming perceptions of reality” (50). These authors base their theory more on the necessity for movements and their organizations to convince protestors that the current social reality is fundamentally flawed; but the same principle stands in their framework and in Bormann’s theory. The reality created by a social movement is as important as its motivation; the world in which protestors live is the world in which they decide whether or not they have the willingness and ultimately the ability to enact change. Without the optimal world surrounding participants, the protest movement’s efforts fail entirely; and with this world, an otherwise average person may be convinced to passionately join a cause, to protest actively for it, and, in the case of the radical environmentalist movement, to become violent for it.

This paper, then, seeks to analyze the rhetorical artifacts of the radical environmentalist movement in order to understand the fantasy world it creates to form a more radical perspective in the minds of its participants. This examination reveals three major strategies of the movement’s rhetoric—transformation, transference, and transcendence—which effectively transition followers to a frame of mind more susceptible to violent ideas in the pursuit of a peaceful cause.

**Transformation**

A social movement advocating violence usually must enact a transformation within the protestors, creating a being capable of performing violence. Though not every protestors necessarily abhors violence to begin with, the entire goal of many environmental protestors is to stop violence against the environment. The typical protestors, simply wishing to protect an endangered species or save a certain forested area by raising a picket sign, might not be easily won over to violence. Whether by a newfound desperation or a slow shift in morality, a protestors must be fundamentally altered from a concerned optimist into an individual willing to live outside the law. As British direct-action protestor Ellen Rickford stated in a 2006 interview, “The big anti-war march was one of my first political experiences. I saw all those people take to the streets, and they were ignored. This [protecting the environment] is a bigger, more important issue, and I’m not going to let that happen again. The only thing left is to take direct action” (qtd. in O’Keeffe 13). Stewart, Smith, and Denton echo this idea, suggesting that there exists an “ego function” in protest movement rhetoric, meaning that protestors “must have strong, healthy egos when they take on powerful institutions and entrenched cultural norms and values” (58). Indeed, this effect is one clearly sought by the rhetoric of this movement, as the mindset and esteem of protestors are key to any widespread attempt at enacting violence.

However, while many, including Stewart, Smith, and Denton, assume that this mindset is best created by rage and harshness (277), this movement formulates it with fantasy and magic. One of the most significant organizations in the environmentalist movement is the Earth Liberation Front—often shortened to the initials ELF and pronounced “elf.” Although this name actually originates from ELF’s sister organization the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), the terminology has also led to a particularly effective piece of rhetoric that changes the way protestors see themselves (‘Ecoterrorism’). In the first communiqué linked to the Earth Liberation Front, the anonymous authors attest:
We take inspiration from . . . the little people—those mischievous elves of lore. Authorities can’t see us because they don’t believe in elves. We are practically invisible. We have no command structure, no spokespersons, no office, just many small groups working separately, seeking vulnerable targets and practicing our craft. Many elves are moving to the Pacific Northwest and other sacred areas. Some elves will leave surprises as they go. Find your family! And let’s dance as we make ruins of the corporate money system. (“Communiqué”)

With just this initial piece of rhetoric, the authors of the movement transform their followers into mysterious and fantastical creatures. By repeatedly calling activists “elves” rather than humans, this artifact links the movement to fantasy, and on at least a subconscious level, the protestors begin to identify themselves as participants in this new reality. When protestors begin to operate as “elves” rather than “environmentalists,” they can shed conventions that constrain their choices and behaviors. As elves are typically portrayed as immortal beings tied to nature and “invisible” to the eyes of their enemies, the protestors can now see themselves as creatures above morality, creatures that will never be caught, arrested, or charged, and creatures of nature rather than human society. They, as mysterious “dancing elves” eluding the authorities, are able to ignore the consequences they must eventually face for their use of violent, direct action. Even on its own, the organization’s name evokes this fantasy theme, the movement forming a new world in which violence is no longer a matter of moral or legal consequences but a “craft” that functions to protect a fantastical world that includes the protestors themselves.

This same style of rhetoric is found throughout works created by the movement. In Dead Trees, a publication of Earth First!, another central radical environmentalist organization, an article recounting the events of Jesmond Dene—a large environmental direct-action protest in 1997—continues the character theme of protestors as magical creatures: “July 22nd: Last night the fairies must have frolicked—this morning locks on security cabins and tools have stopped working, and graffiti has appeared on them; e.g. ‘Juhad’ (Jihad?), ‘Counsel Scum’ and ‘Remember the Earth goddess’—obviously the fairy folk who live at the bottom of our Dene can’t spell” (“For Flapjack”). The traditional idea of fairies incorporates many of the same aspects that the ELF communiqué lists about elves, such as smallness, magical abilities, ties to nature, and an air of mystery; even the slight mention of fantastical creatures illustrates the new reality of protestors and emphasizes their immunity to and separation from the practical world (“Communiqué”).

Also of interest is the spelling of “elves” throughout the movement’s literature. The use of the letter “v,” rather than the more traditional “elfs,” certainly refers to a specific image: the mythological creatures portrayed in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Indeed, “Lord of Machines,” an article published in the Earth First! Journal, examines ties between the environmentalist movement and the world of Middle-earth, exalting Tolkien as a true environmentalist. The author, James Bell, ultimately states, “[The Lord of the Rings’s] appeal to environmental activists has grown over the years, with its author, J.R.R. Tolkien, becoming a sort of patron saint of neo-luddites . . . one [must] wonder if Tolkien would have approved of today’s ‘elves’—those of the Earth Liberation Front.” Likening its own image to specific examples of magic and fantasy only strengthens the character themes originating in the movement’s rhetoric. The connection between Tolkien’s Middle-earth and the surrounding world offers the protestors concrete ideas to which they can relate; thus their image of themselves as magical, gifted, and impervious further ingrains itself into their psyche. This per-
ception protects them from realizing the effects and consequences of their actions, allowing them to take a direct and violent approach.

**Transference**

The radical environmentalist movement relies on altering perceptions not only of protestors themselves but also the beings that they fight to save. To the movement’s participants, the values of plants, animals, and humans must be equalized, and their views on nature must be as passionate as their views on family and friends. Once this mindset is reached, the death of a plant or an animal can evoke the same powerful reaction as that of a human, and in the wake of these emotions any act of revenge may seem justified. Perhaps the most effective method of achieving this mentality is personification, the transference of human qualities to nonhuman beings.

Personification here acts as a type of victimage, portraying the “oppression and exploitation of others,” in this case, nature; as Stewart, Smith, and Denton write, “Activists . . . are willing to sacrifice their security, dignity, and social status for other innocent victims” (61). Personifying creates ties between protestors and the environment by affecting the way protestors see the environment and intensifying their emotions concerning it. Suddenly, by employing this tactic, deforestation is not only a corporation’s act of greed but also the mass murder of sentient beings, and thus ultimately deserving of protestors’ retribution.

In *Dead Trees*, Aldo Leopold’s “Thinking Like a Mountain” details his first turn toward environmentalism. However, Leopold’s story is not the typical environmentalist epiphany in which a man recollects the first time he realized the extent of global warming or the damage caused by deforestation. Instead, Leopold tells his tale as though it were a traditional myth or legend, turning a hunting expedition with his father into a romantic story of a child’s sudden comprehension: “We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain.” By describing the wolf as having a fire in her eyes, a typically human characteristic, Leopold elevates her from animal to person and gives her death a far more powerful meaning. The author portrays the wolf not as a dangerous creature or a foreign entity but as a pitiful being to which he can relate on fundamental and substantial levels. Indeed, throughout the tale, the narrator learns a life lesson from the wolf, which demonstrates the intensity of their relationship and the effect this connection ultimately has upon him. In this way, personification serves as a piece of rhetoric forging the bond between the narrator and nature and, by extension, the audience and nature. This psychological bond creates the drive of the environmentalist movement, as the participants believe that they are saving sentient beings which are capable of feeling pain and of making connections with each other and with themselves. Through this belief, the wish to save the environment is elevated from a simple desire to a powerful need, which can help create a mindset that is willing to turn to violence in order to achieve its goals.

The *Earth First! Journal* also includes an article written by the cleverly named “R. T. Vole,” entitled “Tale of the Red Tree Vole.” Throughout the article, the author uses the perspective of a red tree vole—a small rodent living in the trees of the Northwest United States—to tell the story of humans invading its natural forest habitat:

> Everything was going pretty well for us here in the forest. We just like to keep to ourselves, you know, do our own thing. We don’t really bother anyone. We wish no one both-
About 16 seasons ago some very funny looking animals showed up. Apparently they wanted to live like us, but they couldn’t even climb. They had to use some very strange contraptions to get up into the tree. Our friends who had come here from afar said these animals were humans... the ones who had come in and destroyed their previous homes.

Although the typical human could probably find few ways to relate to a small rodent, this document allows readers to forge a surprising connection by granting the red tree vole human characteristics such as curiosity, independence, and annoyance. Even this slight artificial relationship can engender feelings of friendship and affection. Throughout the piece, the author mentions the tragic details of humans destroying the voles’ homes; because the rodent now seems more human than animalistic and more endearing than distant, the narrator is elevated to a human level and created as a victim, a being truly worth saving.

Also interesting about this particular article is its colloquial, almost childlike tone. Although many of the other documents mentioned here use the traditional, fanciful mechanisms associated with ancient legends, the author of “Tale of the Red Tree Vole” dares to take a different approach. Instead of a wizened storyteller, the rodent instead seems closer to an adolescent boy, babbling about his exciting outdoor activities and very curiously peering at the “contraptions” the humans brought. Again, the transference of human qualities to the animal enables protestors to forge a stronger and more empathetic relationship to nature, ultimately leading to emotions that can make violent direct action seem warranted. Moreover, the immaturity of the narrator’s rhetorical voice adds a further, perhaps childish, dimension to the fantasy world created by such an article; because the audience sees environmental degradation through the eyes of a naive, innocent creature, the morality called into question also takes a more childish tone, emphasizing the stark nature of good and evil typically related to such a childlike perspective. By viewing human action against the environment as the innocent notion of pure evil, any moral misgivings the adult followers may have pale in comparison to this new view of the universe, making violent action seem more rational and even more ethical.

Transference can also be seen in rhetoric personifying the earth. The online magazine Green Anarchy, which gives voice to the anarchistic tendencies of many in the radical environmentalist movement, published “Earth’s Lament,” whose writers use the perspective of a fictional Mother Earth to narrate the course of human history:

In those golden days, the thin-haired apes who call themselves people were just another tribe among my laughing, playful children... [Then] human societies began to move faster and faster, working to gobble up all that was wild and turn it into factory farmland, or piles of slag and debris, or massive stone and metal monuments to the brutal apes’ self obsession and complete estrangement from the community of life... I grow old, I grow old. (“Everyday Revolution”)

The spirit of the earth is a common theme in myth and legend, found in ancient stories from the world’s founding civilizations. Yet here this theme is applied for a purpose other than explaining an incomprehensible occurrence such as creation. In this instance, the audience must envision the spirit of the earth as a human-like creature crying out for help against the people destroying her, only to realize that those people are the audience themselves. The strategy of personification allows the reader to better understand the extent of the damage inflicted upon “Mother Earth” and empathize with the physical pain she suffers from it. In addition, the strategy capitalizes on the reader’s child-
like desire to want to protect a maternal figure, casting the earth in a role of compassion and powerlessness and attributing to protestors the role of its young, valiant protector. Playing on protestors’ emotions incites a feeling of collective guilt and gives them the drive to save their Earth Mother at all costs, including direct action or violence.

**Transcendence**

The final element of the rhetorical effect created by the radical environmentalist movement is the principle of transcendence, described by Stewart, Smith, and Denton as the moral justification for a protest movement to use violence; they state, “Radical activists claim they are morally obligated to counter the ‘tensions’ of murder, atrocity, massacre, slavery, and torture, and their motive or goal is summed up in a single word, ‘justice’” (280). They further suggest that the idea of a moral obligation to a higher or transcendent law allows protestors to ignore human laws and consequences and to deploy the direct action they see as most useful for the purposes of their movement (282). This belief in a higher power of goodness and justice that condones the acts of violence protestors may use, as well as the rhetoric supporting it, creates a further dimension to the new and fantastical reality of the radical environmentalist movement, in which the protestors not only have magic and nature on their side but also a divine and morally supreme power, adding an almost religious fervor to a protestor’s passion for the movement.

The writing of Jeffrey “Free” Luers exemplifies this tactic. His own story of epiphany, “How I Became an Ecowarrior,” contains comparisons between trees and gods, and exhibits his belief that trees are spirits of infinite power. In this piece, Luers describes a spiritual experience he had while trapped in the branches of a redwood tree in the midst of a violent storm:

> On this night, I distinctly heard, or rather felt, the tree ask why I was scared. It was a sensational feeling, like instinct. You just feel it, and if you ignore it, it goes away. If you pay attention, a whole new world opens up. I calmly explained my situation. We actually talked like this for a while. . . . It was astonishing. It came to light that the forest understood why I was there, that I was there to protect it. I understood that within this forest, I would be safe. . . . When I awoke in the morning, the snow was still falling. There was about three inches on the ground. However, there was no snow on my tarp. In fact, there was a perfect circle of forest floor completely bare of snow around my tarp.

A document such as this, describing an ethereal and, indeed, transcendent experience, would seem to belong more to a work of scripture than to a social movement notorious for its violence. Luers’s story is one of religion and miracles, concordant with the audience’s desire for the fantastical and mysterious. By portraying the trees as protective and benevolent spirits with far greater power than humans, they are revealed to be magnificent creatures that participants must sacrifice themselves and others to protect. This particular story grants the trees characteristics of kindness, protectiveness, and wisdom; not only are they powerful and awesome, but likeable and gracious as well. The rhetoric here creates a peculiar, worshipful feeling for the trees, which could ultimately lead to the use of extremist measures to protect them.

More of Luers’s writing in the *Earth First! Journal* contains this element. In “Against All Odds, We Must Win,” he explains why he refuses to abandon the environmental movement, despite the moments in which it seems hopeless:

> I will not be silenced in my defense of Mother Earth. I am alive and strong, and I will fight because the spirit is with me. . . . It is our warrior spirit that makes us strong. It is our will-
ingness to struggle to the end, never giving up, that will see us through. Against all odds, we must stand strong and united, courageous with the belief that our spirits cannot be broken. We stand with the strength of Mother Earth, with the strength of all our animal brothers and sisters and the web of life.

Luers’s emphasis on the warrior “spirit” here invokes the transcendent values expressed in his other essay. To Luers, the strength of the environmentalist movement is based not on correctness or determination but on a certain type of spirituality derived from the “strength of Mother Earth.” He clearly believes strongly in these ties and their presence deep in a protestor’s soul, further underscoring the presence of a transcendent moral being for him and those who follow his rhetoric. Plus, Luers’s use of the term “Mother Earth,” although previously applied to the mythical elements of environmentalist rhetoric, here signifies a particular being that the author considers to be the source of goodness and justice, truly giving an air of religion and divinity to what may otherwise be considered a simple philosophy.

An article by Tim Ream follows similar lines, emphasizing spirituality and transcendent connections to the earth. He rejects the ways in which the current Earth First! membership privileges science, instead encouraging spiritual exercise and deeper thought: “The Earth is a living being. . . . The world often responds to our most sincere intentions in truly amazing ways, if we call upon it and give it the chance. In this communion with another, our sense of self loses some rigidity. The picture becomes not just clearer but bigger. Some fears and helplessness may drop away. Greater possibilities for change appear.” While Luers’s articles have a more religious twinge to them, Ream’s essay focuses more on the connection between humans and the earth and the strength derived from it. Throughout, he emphasizes spiritual exercises to understand the earth’s powers, its strength, and its effect on those who devote themselves to it. The passage above relates the importance of the earth and the abilities it gives those who seek to connect with it. Although not evoking a specific Mother Earth, Ream’s article certainly reaffirms divine faith and promises deeper thought and a stronger spirit to those who follow his philosophy, stirring emotions and passions in potential protestors and causing them to dedicate themselves to the protection of this spiritual and morally superior being at all costs.

The idea of transcendence has clearly had an impact on the radical environmentalist movement, as can be seen simply by scanning titles of articles in the online archive of the Earth First! Journal. The publication frequently features articles detailing the importance of spirituality, philosophy, and reverence to the movement, rejecting practicality for the moral and divine. These articles include “Living the Truth” by Sprig, “Gimme That Ol’ Time (Earth First!) Religion” by Karen Pickett, “Evolving Earth First!” by Panagioti, and “Hold On, Hold On, Hold the Vision, That’s Being Born” by Starhawk; all emphasize the need for Earth First! to move in a direction even more open to spirituality and more emphatic on the role of religion and divinity in the movement.

**Conclusion**

Across news media, every attack by members of the Earth Liberation Front and Earth First! is soundly denounced as the terrorism of mindless, violent, and unstable anarchists waving signs for environmental change as a façade for their own sick desires. However, these portrayals are surprisingly far from the intelligent, composed, and rhetorically effective movement found beyond the superficial notoriety. Instead of power-hungry lunatics, the radical environmental movement is comprised of people who live in an impractical and fantastic reality formed by the rhetoric provid-
ed to and generated by them. In their world, they are elves and fairies, dancing through the forests. In their world, they commune with animals and talk to the earth. In their world, they have a divine and passionate connection with the earth that demands action and surpasses any consequence they may then face. To a person unfamiliar with the movement’s rhetoric, such claims may seem too far-fetched to be truly believed; they might appear as simple excuses for violent anarchists. However, by examining the movement’s rhetorical artifacts, we can disprove that easy assumption, understanding this environmentalist “fantasy” and comprehending the ease with which one can become attuned to it. This is a movement of intelligent and rhetorically savvy environmentalists, who can transform the perceptions of their followers, who can create a new world of magic and fantasy, who can dance and damage throughout the night without the authorities ever realizing what they are.

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