

Introduction | The Corporation That Therefore I Am

President Ronald Reagan was not quite himself when he delivered the annual Churchill lecture at London's famous Guildhall in the summer of 1989. If he had Alzheimer's disease at that time, it did not show. Reagan was absent in other ways. Mainly, for the purposes of this monograph, he spoke, and not for the first time, as a corporate persona.¹ In the past Reagan played various roles in vintage ads for General Electric, Union Pacific, Chesterfield Cigarettes, and Royal Crown Cola, but this time he sponsored a more discreet but no less ubiquitous company in his promotion of the democratic possibilities of the microchip: an international mining company called Rio Tinto.

Advancing Rio Tinto's extractivist interests throughout the world, and especially in the American Southwest, Reagan strategically used mineral-bearing technologies as seemingly neutral realpolitik "matters of fact" to bridge troubled waters between the East and West. Technology was dubbed the "oxygen of the modern age," and communication technology was Reagan's weapon for transcending the United States's entrenched divisions with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. "The Goliath of totalitarian control will rapidly be brought down by the David of the microchip," he said before an audience of about one thousand, hosted by the English-Speaking Union.²

Reagan may not have mentioned Rio Tinto by name, but this *Geist*-like corporation was, intentionally or not, one of the main benefactors of his speech, and it could not have missed the relevance of this speech to its global operations. Rio Tinto was present subjectively *through* Reagan as an implied corporate network that would carry out Reagan's implicit calls for heightened extractivism to create the technology needed for global peace and prosperity. After all, Rio Tinto's global headquarters were located just down the street from Guildhall in London's mining financial district.

Communication technology does not come from thin air.³ Nor do the mineral metals that sustain it (e.g., copper, lithium, palladium, cadmium, gold, and silver). As this book shows, these taken-for-granted commodities in the age of information and networks create very material “metabolic rifts” for ecological systems and greatly affect persons, cultures, and place-based identities for those that live near these mines.⁴ Rio Tinto is therefore presented with difficult exigencies across its many different vistas of terranean and subterranean rhetoric.

What is Rio Tinto? That is one of the main questions of this book. Rio Tinto is one of the largest and most essential companies most people have never heard of and yet are quite possibly connected to at this very moment. Founded in the nineteenth century, Rio Tinto has become an international mining conglomerate with at least sixty projects and operations in thirty-five countries.⁵ With 46,500 employees, Rio Tinto reported \$44.6 billion in gross revenue in 2020, making it one of the top three largest metals and mining companies in the world (behind only Glencore and BHP).⁶ From gold to aluminum, copper to uranium, coal to borax, Rio Tinto is the juggernaut behind modern, taken-for-granted commodities such as cell phones, automobiles, computers, and even renewable energy technologies (e.g., solar panels, geothermal systems, electric vehicles). Demands for Rio Tinto’s minerals and metals have risen dramatically in pandemic times, not to mention in response to the climate change crisis. From these increased demands for resources and the technologies they build, Rio Tinto has built a twenty-first-century empire that “envelops the entire space of . . . civilization.”⁷

The Rio Tintos of the world remind us that communication technologies, like the energies that flow through them, are far from neutral and atomistic. They rely on natural resources extracted from the earth, and they have material effects on ecosystems, economies, and cultures that must be accounted for as we plunge deeper into the Anthropocene—a geological epoch defined by humanity’s irrevocable impact on the planet. With increased dependencies and shortages of the metals that make up electric vehicles, smartphones, gaming consoles, computers, televisions, and their semiconductors in pandemic times, natural resources and their extractive companies are increasingly becoming what Bruno Latour has called “dingpolitik” (politics of things) “matters of concern” and less *realpolitik* “matters of fact.”⁸ This is especially true considering the historic transition we have experienced from the “public sphere” to the “public screen.”⁹

Rio Tinto is an elusive global traveler cloaked beneath layers of black-boxed technologies, extractive processes, and political allies (e.g., Reagan). The company would not even come to the surface if not for the sublime presences of its open-pit mines. Whereas average consumers unknowingly rely on its resources on a day-to-day basis, those that live within the vicinities of these mines have very different sets of relations that provide researchers with a unique window to study how Rio Tinto builds potentially passable rhetorical identities in the places it dwells.

This book is all about Rio Tinto and its vast extractive economies, flows of resources, and networks of subjectivity and agency. Although research in environmental communication has studied different rhetorical strategies of coal, chemical, and energy companies, and also their counterpublic movements, research is limited when it comes to the rhetorical practices of hard-rock mining companies. Through Rio Tinto, I hope to show how extractive companies *alchemically* create rhetorical presences in the places and spaces they extract. In an era of dwindling natural resources yet surging demand, Rio Tinto can teach publics and critics what the future of extractivism may look like as we head deeper into the twenty-first century. While extractivism, or *extractivismo*, is a concept derived from the Global South, namely Latin American political climates, this book shows that North America is also the site for present and future extraction politics. Recognizing this creates new opportunities for cross-continental alliances through elevated consciousnesses about how extractivism works.¹⁰ It may also expand our understanding of how extractive coloniality works as an agentic global force.

From the outset it should be known that this project approaches Rio Tinto as a rhetorical actor that shapes meanings and orientations toward the environment. In the following pages, I narrow in on rhetoric's abilities to alchemically transform objects, environments, and even persons into something deemed more valuable. What Ronald Walter Greene calls "money/speech" is an important component of understanding Rio Tinto's rhetoric. To Greene "money/speech" defines the ways the Supreme Court of the United States has interpreted corporate financial contributions to political campaigns and advocacies as constitutionally protected "speech." Money/speech accounts for the ways capitalism "incorporates rhetorical communication into its regime of accumulation and its modes of regulation" in ways that have created an "overdetermined articulation of money and advocacy that can appear in different

rhetorical forms.”¹¹ For instance, Emma Bloomfield has argued neoliberalism—what many have argued is our current regime of economic governance—has created a system where the markets themselves are agentic actors both “alive” and “hungry” with “economic autonomy that should not be violated” (e.g., “neoliberal piety”).¹² As an agentic actor, Rio Tinto uses money/speech, among other *things*, to build localized place- and space-based identities. In doing so, Rio Tinto rhetorically mediates its complicated identity politic.

One of the main arguments this book will make is that Rio Tinto is a networked rhetorical subject, which allows the company to extract without experiencing any of the ecological costs associated with extraction. The term “subject” here is not used casually as it speaks to a historical tension within philosophy that since Descartes has assumed subjectivity, or the ability to exist as a knowing subject, is defined by a human’s unique capacity to think, reason, and speak. Rio Tinto of course does none of these as an abstract corporate actor with no mind, body, soul, or flesh; yet it nevertheless exists as an actor “subjectivized,” or articulated as a subject, through legal discourses that recognize corporations as constitutionally protected subjects (e.g., “money/speech”), cultural apparatuses that hail them as desirable (e.g., wealthy patrons of sports arenas such as “Ford Field”), and political decision-making processes where they participate in important debates that affect the “public sphere” (e.g., global warming, gun rights, tobacco consumption). As developed in the following chapter, Rio Tinto exists as a unique kind of “poststructural” actor defined by different assemblages, absences, and traces as opposed to a fully-present singular subject (e.g., the Cartesian kind).

A 2018 visit to Rio Tinto’s headquarters, a short “tube” ride away from Guildhall, made these absences clear. Here, in London’s St. James’s Square, Rio Tinto—the singular, human actor—is nowhere to be found. Sure, one can find employees at the front desk, and others coming in and out of the building, but none of them are Rio Tinto, the essential subject. The building itself is mundane with a façade that blends in with surrounding architecture. Far from the alcazar I had in mind, Rio Tinto looks innocuous and mundane (see fig. 1).

The employees were also friendly, even funny. While they would not allow me to go beyond a gated entrance, I was permitted to casually browse the foyer, which was full of comfortable furniture, reading material, and a map of global operations. How can this place be the essence of one of the largest mining companies in the world that somehow simultaneously exists in thirty-five countries? Is this the same company that Reagan discursively implied when he was hailing the future of



Fig. 1 | Rio Tinto's London headquarters. Photo taken by the author.

technology just a few blocks away? If this building and all of its spaces are not the agentic Rio Tinto, who speaks for Rio Tinto? Where and how does it exist?

To locate Rio Tinto we must look beyond its metropole (London) to its mines, where it exists at the most basic level as an extractive agent of immense ecological, social, and cultural change. By the time this book is complete, I will make the argument that Rio Tinto is a colonial assemblage that, like the colonial “overseer” in the sugar plantations in the Caribbean (viz., Hispaniola [Haiti and Dominican Republic]), extracts from afar as a knowing, seeing, ordering subject. Is Rio Tinto all that different than the former British Empire? While both are/were global actors that form a colonial/modern regime of governance based in London, Rio Tinto is also unique in that it is subjectivized as a singular actor that transcends nations and states in free market economies, which raises important questions about the nature of Rio Tinto’s being. As such we must begin this interrogation with an ontological probing of Rio Tinto to determine the nature of its rhetorical existence at its different mines.

By visiting three different submerged places in the American Southwest—Boron, California; Salt Lake City (SLC), Utah; and Oak Flat, Arizona—I will show that Rio Tinto crafts different rhetorical personae to mediate its extractive ontologies through discursive and material “masks.” I call these different masked identities *corporate personae*, which function very differently than traditional personae because not only are they from an authorless agent, but they are, though not exclusively, place-based and affective (see chapter 1). In this way, Rio Tinto is a global traveler that extracts a wide range of resources cross-continentially as a modern-day resource colonialist, or colonial assemblage.

Before we can draw this conclusion about Rio Tinto’s being, however, we must foremost determine Rio Tinto’s ontological nature without any preconceived assumptions about how it exists (chapter 1). This is important because it allows us to determine the nature of Rio Tinto’s being—a worthwhile pursuit in and of itself given Rio Tinto’s corporate existence in a post-*Citizens United* world. Throughout the course of this book, we will travel to different mines in the American Southwest to see how Rio Tinto rhetorically exists in personified form. We will see how, for instance, Rio Tinto invokes metaphors of pioneerism, progress, and frontierism as vehicles for extractivism at its mines.

What some have called the “extractivist frontier” is very much alive as a dominant narrative frame.¹³ From Columbus to Buffalo Bill, the frontier myth has defined American national identities and shaped rhetorical agencies. “Since

the beginning,” observes Janice Hocker Rushing, the pioneer spirit has shaped the American dream and infused its rhetoric.”¹⁴ For instance, In *The Frontier of Science*, Leah Ceccarelli convincingly argues that the frontier myth, and its different clusters of metaphors, has shaped the evolution of scientific exploration. Since the twentieth century, scientists have burnished their ethos with frontier imageries before lay audiences that may otherwise reject their work.¹⁵ In similar ways, Rio Tinto draws from this myth to deflect environmental criticism about its extractive practices. Drawing from this frontier myth, Rio Tinto posits itself as a sort of masculine, risk-taking individual fulfilling its manifest destiny to extract, exploit, and strike it rich in the American West. While this rhetoricity may not be apparent to most transglobal natural resource consumers, those who visit these sites encounter the full range of *rhetorical resources* that Rio Tinto uses to stabilize not just its own presence but also the visual presences (and absences) of their mines.

Reagan is an example of a corporate person that advanced Rio Tinto’s rhetorical motives, even if he did not know it. He never stopped being an actor, which is why, among other reasons, he lives on as a rugged frontiersman at Rio Tinto’s Visitor’s Center at the Borax Mine in Boron, California—the first stop on our ontological journey (chapter 2). Sitting atop the “biggest and richest deposits of borax on the planet,” in Boron, California, the Borax Mine Visitor’s Center allows visitors to encounter a wealth of cultural artifacts that commemorate Reagan, and the Hollywood persona he carried with him, in the annals of Rio Tinto’s corporate history. Visitors who travel to this place of corporate rhetoric will find that Rio Tinto uses Reagan’s celebrated “pioneer” persona to infuse the Borax Mine, and its otherwise invisible minerals and metals, with rhetorical life. This agentic corporate personality is especially poignant given that Reagan was featured in more than a few commercials for “20 Mule Team Borax”—a brand of borax cleaner that came from the Borax Mine—which was once featured on the hit radio and TV series, *Death Valley Days*. Images of Reagan and the twenty-mule team are ubiquitous throughout this “corporate town” of Boron, not least of which includes the Twenty Mule Team Museum. In more ways than some, Boron is a place-based version of a *chemical* utopia that, among other things, contributed to the invention of “nature” at Death Valley National Park (DVNP).¹⁶ Reagan is therefore more than some simulacra that keeps shadowed the true face of Rio Tinto; he is an example of how Rio Tinto creatively uses persons—and also objects, places, and spaces—as media for translating its identity or personality.

Rio Tinto also has a much larger networked identity that adapts its different parts to meet certain place-based exigencies. In chapter 3, for instance, I show how Rio Tinto is capable of drawing from very different rhetorical resources to craft another iteration of this frontier identity in Salt Lake City, Utah, which is home to Rio Tinto Kennecott's Bingham Canyon Mine (BCM). At this colossal mine, oftentimes celebrated as "the largest" and "richest hole on Earth," Rio Tinto uses its main resource, copper, as a *rhetorical resource* for crafting a pioneer persona uniquely adapted to the cultural significations of pioneerism among Mormon populations throughout the Salt Lake Valley. Even though more than a few environmental activists charge Rio Tinto for disproportionately contributing to the Salt Lake Valley's atrocious air pollution problem, Rio Tinto rebuts these challenges affectively. Through different material rhetorics at places of corporate community, Rio Tinto transforms the mine into a felt iconic object that is necessary for sustainable futures in "the Beehive State."

Rio Tinto's presences are not always so seemingly innocuous, as its extractivist practices are also illustrative of how resource coloniality simply works in the Anthropocene. In chapter 4, I engage Rio Tinto's involvement in plans to create the largest underground copper mine in North America at Superior and Oak Flat, Arizona. As with many other extractive operations, though, the proposed Resolution Mine is a textbook example of how extractivism racializes land in ways that disproportionately target Indigenous communities and persons of color.¹⁷ The massive deposits of copper exist beneath ground sacred to the San Carlos Apache, and the project would devastate cultural attachments to this holy site. Rio Tinto has responded to heightened criticism by extending its pioneer persona in ways that paternalistically appropriate folksy, yet securitized, affects to stabilize its mercurial identity. Under the joint corporate name Resolution, Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton attach their corporate identities to the extant architecture of mining (e.g., mining shafts, smelters, mining towns) in this region of Arizona known colonially as the "Copper Triangle" or the "Pioneer District." This material rhetoric grafts Rio Tinto onto a legacy of mining that has "racialized the land," rendering it and the Indigenous persons that live there "terra nullius," while also constituting an extractive version of "the people" in Superior.¹⁸

These are some of the many different faces, or "masks," that Rio Tinto wears in its efforts to "pass" among different audiences as a necessitous corporate actor without having to settle in those ecological communities and bear the costs of extraction. As I argue in the concluding chapters, Rio Tinto is an extractive

colonialist that mediates its networked identity through myriad object-oriented colonialities, or rhetorical colonialisms, that produce different, and not altogether coherent, dimensions of its corporate persona. While Rio Tinto emphasizes its rugged frontierism in Boron, its community partnerships in Salt Lake City, and its paternalistic qualities in Superior, these personalities and traits are extensions of a dominant pioneer persona that has for centuries defined dominant agencies of Western actors. Whether or not Rio Tinto can be essentialized as such is a question I address in the conclusion.

As I argue in chapter 1, these personae are much more than mere masks that hide or mislead publics about truer environmental realities. Corporate personae are ontological strategies that alchemically *create* corporate beings through the material and discursive flows of their natural resources. In this way, Rio Tinto is the Archimedes of the Anthropocene that not only transforms mountains into purified rare earth metals for communication technologies such “public screens,” but it also invents its own corporate genesis in the places it dwells. How this happens is part of the basis of this book as I consider corporate rhetoric and their places and spaces of extraction.

Before we can arrive to these specific arguments about Rio Tinto’s material, yet fragile, identity politics, we must first situate this work within relevant literature and unpack some of its theoretical and methodological underpinnings. The remainder of this chapter thus walks readers through some of the main concepts of this book. I begin with a discussion about the similarities and differences between coal and copper companies’ neoliberal rhetorics in environmental communication. I then introduce the concept of alchemical rhetoric as one way to interpret Rio Tinto’s materialistic rhetorical strategies and then discuss my methodological approach for investigation and preview the remaining six chapters.

Rio Tinto, the Peabody of Copper

In a way, this book is just as much about Reagan and his corporate networks as it is about Rio Tinto. Although networks that hold together Reagan and Rio Tinto are not always made apparent, Reagan remains at the core of contemporary industrial rhetorics and their rootedness in neoliberalism. He also played an important role in Rio Tinto’s rhetorical history. Throughout his career, Reagan frequently played the part of a corporate subject with a persona that boosted

corporate ethos with his Western pioneer persona.¹⁹ This kind of rhetorical performance is exemplary of what Jen Schneider et al., authors of *Under Pressure: Coal Industry Rhetoric and Neoliberalism*, call corporate ventriloquism, which usefully describes how corporations, especially mining corporations, use different front groups, faces, or personas to “transmit messages” that advance deregulatory motivations rooted in neoliberal ideologies.²⁰

For instance, the authors observe how Reagan was featured in General Electric’s (GE) “Live Better Electrically” campaign where at least in one commercial with his wife Nancy, he showcases their “all-electric” home full of different electrical appliances in a post–World War II era. “When you live better electrically,” Reagan concludes, “you lead a richer, fuller, more satisfying life. And it’s something all of us in this modern age can have.”²¹ To Schneider et al., Reagan’s role in this particular ad is illustrative of “energy utopia,” a corporate rhetorical strategy that suggests “a particular energy source [is] key to providing a ‘good life’ that transcends the conflicts of environment, justice and politics.”²² As I have suggested, Reagan was also the dummy for corporate ventriloquists GE and Rio Tinto. With Reagan, after all, are the “roots of neoliberalism, American style, with a cultural politics featuring an idealized version of private life made possible by an abundance of electricity.”²³ Reagan was no less rhetorical at Guildhall as he appeared to draw from those same rhetorical energies afforded by both coal and copper to end the Cold War.

Corporate ventriloquism and energy utopia are two of five strategies Schneider et al. name in their study of how coal companies strategically deflect criticism. Other strategies include what they name the industrial apocalyptic, technological shell game, and the hypocrite’s trap, which illustrate the rhetorical wiliness of coal companies against heightened environmental pressures to clean up their environmental messes.²⁴ For coal companies, these rhetorical ploys thrive off of and reinforce dominant neoliberal ideologies that emphasize deregulatory, market-based approaches to environmental problems. Conceptually, neoliberalism refers to the ways industries invoke rhetorics for deregulatory, privatized, and anti-taxation practices that have their roots in Milton Friedman’s work at the University of Chicago in the 1970s. Neoliberalism was also politically enacted in the United States by none other than Reagan himself, and also British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, in the 1980s. As a hegemonic ideology that “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities,” neoliberalism to Wendy Brown reduces subjectivity and agency

to *homo oeconomicus*, or the idea that humans themselves are configured “exhaustively as market actors” in a “market regime of governance.”²⁵

Neoliberalism has granted corporations of all stripes, especially natural resource companies, wide agencies to rhetorically engage publics with privileged status. A corpus of work in environmental communication has studied how corporate rhetorical strategies shape discourses and practices about the environment and mislead publics and consumers about their environmental practices.²⁶ Through what Schneider et al. call “the paradox of voice,” neoliberal rhetorical strategies may appear to broaden the pluralities of voice but actually stymie the very voices they seem to promote by narrowing discourses to market-based rationalities from neoliberal ideological positions.

Unlike coal, which tends to be more visually and discursively apparent in American culture, most of Rio Tinto’s metallic minerals remain hidden beneath layers of black-boxed technologies in the nation’s unconscious. Reflective of the invisible, yet necessitous “underlands” that support rapid flows of commodities, capital, and energy on the terranean world, Rio Tinto’s mines are demonstrative of the continuous ruptures of place in an epoch defined by humanity’s irreparable impacts on the planet.²⁷ These “sunken networks of extraction, exploitation, and disposal support the surface world,” and, notes Robert Macfarlane, are metonymic of an “ongoing occurrence experienced most severely by the most vulnerable.”²⁸ While Rio Tinto may keep subterranean matters submerged beneath dominant consciousness, Rio Tinto’s extractive politics also have a way of rising to the surface.

For instance, if readers are not aware of the 1969–88 Bougainville ecological crisis, which led to a deadly civil war (and genocide) over Rio Tinto’s Panguna Mine in Papua New Guinea, readers may be familiar with Rio Tinto’s desecration of the Juukan Gorge caves in Western Australia during the summer of 2020.²⁹ In its search for iron ore, Rio Tinto “blasted” several sites sacred to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) people in the western Pilbara region, destroying more than a few burial sites and sacred objects—including a four-thousand-year-old “plaited” strand of hair from several different people related to PKKP persons. The site had served as a “resting place” for Aboriginal ancestors since the last Ice Age.³⁰ “It was the sort of site you do not get very often, you could have worked there for years,” said archaeologist Michael Slack. He asked, “How significant does something have to be, to be valued by wider society?”³¹ This blunder caused many, including investors, to question the

politics of Rio Tinto's mineral-infused technologies, which is why it did not take long for Rio Tinto to publicly apologize and accept the resignation of executive officer Jean-Sébastien Jacques. While Rio Tinto has attempted to rebuild its image as a company sensitive to Indigenous cultures and lands, the Oak Flat controversy at the proposed Resolution Mine indicates otherwise (chapter 4). These high-profile cases bring Rio Tinto's environmentally unjust practices to the international spotlight, but what about Rio Tinto's other extractive operations that remain beneath the surface?³²

While most of Rio Tinto's extractive networks for resources such as iron ore, copper, and borax might be more submerged than the previous examples suggest, they are no less commonplace and impactful and merit equal scholarly attention. Although research in environmental communication and rhetoric have studied different rhetorical strategies of coal, tar sands, chemical, and energy companies—all of which greatly inform this book's reading of Rio Tinto's environmental rhetorics—research remains limited when it comes to the rhetorical practices of other minerals and metals under less environmental pressures or even new demands as global societies wean off coal. This is especially true in Reagan's information age, where hidden minerals such as borax and palladium quite literally hold screens together. These *elemental rhetorics* cannot necessarily be separated from the practices of fossil fuel companies given their numerous cross-dependencies and political intersections, but there are also different local and national challenges tied to mines where these resources are primarily extracted. Below I consider one of Rio Tinto's most predominant resources, copper. While Rio Tinto mines many different resources, including coal, it tends to focus on copper above all other resources. Copper is such an important part of Rio Tinto's operations that it in a way can be considered the Peabody of copper.³³

The "Pressures" and Affordances of Copper

While there are many parallels between industrial rhetorics of coal and copper, there are also more than a few key differences, not least of which is somewhat competing rhetorical situations. Whereas coal is "under pressure," as Schneider et al. observe, from different environmental advocates and policymakers to cease and desist or diversify for more environmentally sustainable futures, copper is becoming increasingly called upon for many technological "solutions" to global

climate change. Since copper is such an efficient conduit of energy, it is an indispensable element for virtually all technologies that require some form of electrical current. This includes renewable energy technologies such as solar panels, electric vehicles, geothermal systems, and “paperless” campaigns. In and by themselves renewable energy technologies are pushing demands for copper upward by at least 2.5 percent per year, with those trends rising into the future. Electric vehicles alone are expected to increase demands for copper by as much as 10 percent by 2030 (currently 1 percent). While global demands decreased by 2 percent in 2020 (20 million tons fewer than in 2019 because of COVID lockdowns and layoffs),³⁴ production and demand are projected to increase exponentially in the future as more companies invest in “green” technologies that rely on the red metal.³⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic is even more demonstrative of the staying power of the “age of copper” with millions working, and communicating, from home on screens.³⁶

While the technologies that copper supports may be considered renewable, copper itself is not. There is a limited supply of it in the world, and as global dependencies for the element continue to surge it will only continue to be a hotly contested dingpolitik resource. Currently, total reserves of copper are nearly 830 million tons and annual demands are approximately 28 million tons. This means that, like coal, we have more than enough of the precious metal to meet global needs for the coming years, even with anticipated growth rates over the following decades.³⁷ Nevertheless copper companies keep on ramping up supply to maximize profits.

Copper also enables “public screens” and their “image events,” which more than a few have used to conceptually read possibilities of radical environmental protest.³⁸ Where there are public screens and microchips there are possible traces of Rio Tinto and its minerals and hard-rock metals (e.g., gold, silver, copper, borates) from places such as the Bingham Canyon Mine and the Borax Mine. Consider how each iPhone requires at least forty-six different elements—most of which are mined by Rio Tinto on some part of the planet and come with extraordinary environmental effects.³⁹ Again, the global reliance on digital technologies during pandemic and postpandemic times even further supports this point. As I write, actual microchips, and their semiconductors, are in such demand for global economies that their shortages have reached “a crisis point” of epic proportions.⁴⁰

While not all public screens or renewable energy technologies necessarily have resources mined by Rio Tinto—as if one could tell—they are both linked

in some way to hard-rock mineral mining exemplified by Rio Tinto, which is one of the top three largest of its kind in the world. When it can, Rio Tinto operates off a politics of invisibility. As Jared Diamond notes in *Collapse*, the processes and presences of copper in everyday commodities, let alone the companies that do the extracting, are nearly entirely clandestine to the individual consumer.⁴¹ Unlike coal and gas, two resources that consumers may have more attachments with—either through their national significations, their uses, and their brands—consumers “are eight steps removed” from the processes of extracting hard-rock mineral metals. Among other effects, this makes protesting or boycotting “a dirty mining company virtually impossible” even though the environmental effects of postmining “forever chemicals” are just as, if not more, damning than, say, a highly visible oil spill.⁴² Boycotting copper-infused technologies would be even more profoundly untenable since consumers have no idea which products have tiny bits of copper in them or where they may have come from.⁴³ All of this also assumes that copper comes from just one company and not a merged company such as Resolution Copper (which is owned by both Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton) or many more.

Consumers do not shop for palladium, aluminum, or copper. Instead, they tend to seek out the most inexpensive car, computer, or smartphone where these invisible resources are instead bundled into countless commodities that are passed on from producer to manufacturer and salesperson. Nonelectric vehicle drivers may not know where their oil comes from when they fill up their tanks of gas, but they at least know the reputation of the refining company that has marketed its brand. At the very least, brand recognition allows consumers to boycott certain companies for certain environmental practices such as BP in the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon crisis. One cannot do the same with copper, even though the metal is one of the most important resources for “sustainable” technologies in our age of anthropogenic global climate change.

When it comes to copper, there are very different rhetorical situations that grant extractive companies certain leverages and affordances not available to coal companies. While coal may be tied to nationalistic symbolologies within the United States, copper tends to be more global in its reach while also necessary for possible futures and plainly invisible. To Tim Heffernan, “Worries about oil and gas hog all the airwaves,” he says, “but copper is also essential to keep the world running: It threads through your house, your computer, your eco-correct hybrid car. And it’s getting just as difficult, expensive, and environmentally menacing as oil to extract. We have entered the era of tough ore.”⁴⁴

Given this unique rhetorical exigency where copper is becoming increasingly hailed for sustainable futures, and its presences are less apparent than coal, how does Rio Tinto manage its rhetorical presences and absences? Below I introduce the concept alchemical rhetoric as one way of reading Rio Tinto's copper rhetorics at its mines and beyond.

Alchemical Rhetoric

Copper does not speak for itself. For it to be made present for publics and consumers, its bits of red metal require corporate agencies. As discussed further in the following chapter, Rio Tinto's process of calling forth resources such as copper and circulating them for consumption is not just materially extractive but rhetorically as well, for Rio Tinto's rhetorical presences depend on a constant process of reduction, colonization, and reappropriation for particular rhetorical motivations. Rio Tinto agentically uses its natural resources as *resources for rhetorical invention*. For instance, at places such as Salt Lake City, Rio Tinto appropriates its dominant resources, namely, copper, to highlight its mundane importance to modern life. Considering natural resources as rhetorical resources for invention is suggestive of Rio Tinto's alchemy, which is a form of magic that turns mines into monuments and copper into public screens.

As Kenneth Burke has observed, magic is one of three orders of rationalization, in addition to science and religion, for understanding humans' role in the universe. As the "schema which stressed mainly the control of natural forces" as opposed to human (religion) and technological (science), magic for Burke is a "primitive rhetoric" that fills gaps between poetics and science.⁴⁵ Burke's notion of magic is rooted in the idea that rhetoric itself is not just symbolic action but what he labels "hortatory" action that exhorts through "suasion with a potential for inducing action in human beings."⁴⁶ In *Rhetoric of Motives* Burke notes, "Whereas poetic language is a kind of symbolic action, for itself and in itself, and whereas scientific action is a preparation for action, rhetorical language is *inducement* to action (or attitude, attitude being an incipient act)."⁴⁷

Magic is thus a form of "coercive command" that creates and re-creates reality. This is why to William A. Covino, to "do magic" is to "do rhetoric." Likewise, doing rhetoric is doing magic.⁴⁸ For Kevin Johnson, who reads the artist Eminem as the "magical product" of *The Eminem Show*, Burke's magic is also located within "a hegemonic scene, where magic as agency exists for the purpose of

either challenging or perpetuating the scene.”⁴⁹ In other words rhetoric is a “symbolic inducement” that shuffles and reshuffles symbolisms to achieve particular goals.⁵⁰

As a sort of magic, Rio Tinto alchemically mediates its sites of extraction to stabilize its corporate presences. Alchemical rhetoric, as understood here, is a form of what Robin Jensen has called “chemical rhetoric” that shows how minerals and metals with chemical properties become vernacularly imbued in public places and spaces.⁵¹ As Jensen observes, studying the vernacularism of chemical rhetoric, and from a critical rhetorical standpoint, it is one of several “lens[es]” for viewing chemical rhetoric as a “nonexpert communication” that has functioned “as a powerful public vocabulary featuring chemical terms, tropes, figures, appeals and/or narratives.”⁵² While chemistry as a technical field may have emerged from alchemy, alchemical rhetoric—which exists within Burke’s order of magic—highlights the rhetorical performances of natural resource companies that go beyond technical language within the order of science to convince publics about the necessities, and continued valuations, of resources such as gold, silver, and copper as we move closer to what Burke satirically calls “Helhaven.”⁵³ Alchemical rhetoric, as I show in the following chapter, is how corporations use natural resources for rhetorical invention, even corporate genesis.

While several scholars have discussed alchemy as a rhetorical genre, a political tactic, and a psychoanalytic form of Enlightenment, I take up alchemical rhetoric as a metaphor for the very real practices of Rio Tinto that create new realities by mixing different elements in places and spaces to create new rhetorical presences through countless technologies, objects, and even people that spread its hybridized identity across vast terrains.⁵⁴ Importantly, alchemy is not a faux truth in the classic sense. While Joshua Gunn and Thomas Frenzt point out in their reading of the *Da Vinci Code* that the alchemical genre is a fake truth advanced in ways that expose the absurdities of realities in plain sight, alchemical rhetoric for our purposes emphasizes how different resources (e.g., base metals) can be used as a sort of rhetorical elixir for the creation of desired wealth. In a way, Rio Tinto achieves what many alchemists have attempted in the past by metaphorically turning base metals, especially copper, into gold. Copper is just one example of how Rio Tinto uses its resources to create new presences in the architecture of place, space, and community.⁵⁵

Alchemical rhetoric is principally an agentic force that hybridizes places, spaces, objects, and persons to normalize certain distributions of sense and their

affective economies and narratives, that solidify Rio Tinto's presences. For instance, as I show in chapter 2 (and as previously noted), Rio Tinto's alchemy works by creating a corporate town entirely centered around the Borax Mine and attaching itself to the social construction of "nature" at Death Valley National Park. While many can read this as a fake corporate town, or what Baudrillard may call a hyperreal simulation,⁵⁶ it is no less real than the mine itself. This is how places, objects, and even people become part of Rio Tinto's vast network. Recall how Reagan became an extension of Rio Tinto's network through his inducements to action at Guildhall. Through Reagan, Rio Tinto was able to transmit its messages to wide audiences about the necessity of technologies in the Information Age. Since Reagan's speech (1989), Rio Tinto has become part of new technologies—including renewable ones—that increase global dependencies on copper.

Rio Tinto is thus both chemist and magician. Using extracted resources such as copper rhetorically, Rio Tinto shapes and reshapes realities to induce action that valorizes its presences. For instance, consider the Spanish river called the *Río Tinto* (tainted river), from which Rio Tinto bears its name (see fig. 2). At the same time Reagan promoted the democratic possibilities of technology at Guildhall, the *Río Tinto* ran red in Spain's Huelva Province, and not for the first time. For thousands of years the *Río Tinto* has bled as a result of mining precious metals such as pyrites, copper, silver, and gold. While some contend that the water's bloody discoloration is mostly the result of a natural process of acid mine drainage, there is no doubt that the abandoned *Minas de Riotinto* (Rio Tinto Mines) played no small part in the river's unnatural transformation as one of the most toxic rivers on the planet. "In more than a thousand years," writes Richard West in *River of Tears*, "the countryside round the Rio Tinto did not recover from the effect of the fumes from the ancient smelters. No vegetation grew and no birds sang among the abandoned pit shafts."⁵⁷ Even the poet Lord Byron spoke of this area after visiting the mines at this time: "The dust we tread upon was once alive."⁵⁸

Rio Tinto purchased the *Minas de Riotinto* from the Spanish government in 1873, forming Rio Tinto Zinc. Since the nineteenth century, Rio Tinto has acquired tremendous extractive agencies from this barren "moonscape" that have alchemically transformed this river, its resources, and its meaning before public audiences. Even mining waste is apparently valuable for Rio Tinto's alchemical process. As an alchemist of many different types, Rio Tinto has transformed the term "Rio Tinto" into an international corporation with great wealth from a dead, highly polluted river.



Fig. 2 | Río Tinto. Photo taken by Carlos Cantero.

Place itself has been alchemically transformed into a meaningful site of memory.⁵⁹ *Minas de Riotinto* is publicly remembered today not as a sacrifice zone but as a historical site that stirs memories of romance.⁶⁰ While mining operations have been deceased for hundreds of years, the *Minas de Riotinto*, located just outside Seville, Spain, continues to live large in the imaginations of many as an amusement park called *Parque Minero Riotinto* that, through Río Tinto, celebrates its mining pasts. The mining park includes a museum, historic train rides through the mines, and tours in old mining shafts. Visitors can survey archaic mining tools, mineral assays, and pottery; journey through the mines as “a trip back in time through landscapes of another planet” (including a night train through ancient mines); and walk in the shoes of Roman miners in underground collieries. This shows how mining companies and their alliances rhetorically control “natural forces” by altering the scene through symbolic and extrasymbolic inducements. By effect *Minas de Riotinto* is alchemically made a place of celebration rather than an environmental sacrifice zone.

Another example I discuss further in chapter 3 is Río Tinto’s sponsorship of the Natural History Museum of Utah (aka the Río Tinto Center), which has a 42,000-square-foot copper façade unearthed from the nearby Bingham Canyon

Mine. To Aaron Phillips the façade “elides extractivism at the BCM,” but I wish to suggest it also makes the mine visible as a necessary storehouse for cultural education.⁶¹ The way Rio Tinto mediates its rhetorical identity from mine to museum for its corporate benefit is an alchemical process that greatly informs rhetorical critics about rhetorical agency, resources, and invention in the Anthropocene.

These examples show how Rio Tinto draws from actual natural resources (e.g., copper) to create altogether new golden realities (and truths) that rhetorically commemorate places that are otherwise horrifying environmental sacrifice zones. As such they reveal how Rio Tinto acquires rhetorical agency through inducements to action predicated on the “control of natural forces” (i.e., natural resources).⁶²

Importantly, this conception of alchemy is more than just an object-oriented approach to rhetoric, as it accounts for the way rhetoric, like Rio Tinto, is a force that has everything to do with transformative change. This occurs through different affective economies attached to rhetorical creations. As Sara Ahmed puts it, “emotions *do things*” in affective economies, “and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”⁶³ While *affect* for our purposes is more usefully understood as a presubjective sense that induces “the body’s capacity to affect and be affected, to act and to perceive, unleashed,” rather than emotions, Ahmed nevertheless helps understand how Rio Tinto’s alchemical reactions at museums, stadiums, and public screens create public affective attachments that alter actions and attitudes toward those objects.⁶⁴

Rhetoric in this way is a transformative yet irreducible force that still shapes attitudes and induces actions, but it is also located at the nexus of different material, affective, and symbolic milieus. Rio Tinto, in other words, is a rhetorical agent that exceeds the objects of its assemblage and thus points to some limits in what is referred to in philosophy and sociology as object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, or material-semiotics that assume objects are defined only by their relations.⁶⁵ Rio Tinto exists through countless objects and relations, but it also exists as a corporate subject. The legal idea of corporate personhood, for instance, brings to life corporations as fictitious persons with legal prerogatives even though corporations exist as non- or more-than-human actors comprising many different objects and relations.⁶⁶ Corporate personhood is thus a premier example of alchemical rhetoric that has brought corporations to life as legal and market-based persons.

Alchemical rhetoric can be understood as a material form of greenwashing. To Phaedra Pezzullo, greenwashing involves not just the “greening” of “the appearances of products and commodity consumption” but also “the deliberate disavowal of environmental effects.”⁶⁷ Rather than duping publics into believing something that is untrue, however, alchemical rhetoric creates altogether new more valued realities through a series of chemical reactions.⁶⁸ For instance, when copper is coupled with borax and palladium as one of forty-six elements that go into iPhone assemblages it becomes much more than the sum of its parts as new technological assemblage that is then branded as a fetishized object with a new value entirely unto itself.⁶⁹ Copper, as a base element, could be separated from the phone, but such disassembly would not inform us about the full rhetorical effect of copper that, mixed with other elements, creates the iPhone. Copper, by itself, may be rhetorical as “vibrant matter” but only when it is mixed, matched, and blended with other materialities does it become a potent resource for rhetorical invention.⁷⁰ Post-extraction copper becomes tied to countless new materialities with utterly different relations, yet these relations, and their alchemical creations, are no less real than copper’s geological realities pre-extraction.⁷¹ They are just different.

Rio Tinto works the same way as a corporate rhetorical actor imbued within its elements’ alchemical creations. At its mines in the American Southwest, Rio Tinto becomes part of the very architecture of alchemical creations within certain cultures and communities. Rio Tinto’s carefully created presences may distract from other, possibly more sustainable realities, but such worlds are far from faux and immaterial. They are real and concrete. As I am suggesting, the world consists of actors and networks, or assemblages, that constantly create or become. As Edward Abbey has said repeatedly on his trip “Down the River with Henry David Thoreau,” which may as well have been the *Río Tinto*, “appearance is reality.”⁷²

A related example is that of the Ford Motor Company. In *Rhetoric Inc.: Ford’s Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism*, Timothy Johnson argues that Ford used films produced from its Motion Picture Laboratory to weave its industrial culture into the fabric of American life in the early twentieth century. Through a blending of film theory, economic history, and rhetorical theory, Johnson studies Ford’s film as a rhetorical force that contributed to the ascendance of American corporate culture through motion pictures that taught audiences how to live and work within the Fordist rhetorical economy. Johnson calls this rhetorical practice “incorporational rhetoric,” which he defines as “the work of a

massive, distributed system of actors and producers” that “is often executed simultaneously across a number of coordinated media” and “can sustain a consistent and cumulative presence for decades.”⁷³ Johnson notes that the effectiveness of incorporational rhetoric is defined by “a new perceived ‘reality’ composed of a new kind of reason, new identities, and new spaces.” This novel and transformative capacity of incorporational rhetoric is an important part of the process of alchemical rhetoric, and it aids understanding of how industrial corporations hegemonically shape public life through “systems of economic reason and action that appear natural and are ubiquitous.”⁷⁴

Alchemical and incorporational rhetoric both show how industrial corporations imbue their identities in everyday life as mundane, and oftentimes instructional, rhetorical actors. Per Ronald Walter Greene, this can be seen as a sort of “governing apparatus” and “technology of deliberation,” wherein power is not hidden but in plain sight.⁷⁵ Alchemical rhetoric for our purposes specifically emphasizes the material dimensions of rhetoric that creates and transforms something new with greater social, cultural, or economic value. In a way, alchemical rhetoric is all about social change and creates spaces thinking and acting about how processes of alchemical transformation can be jammed, rerouted, or *détournés* (i.e., “monkey wrenches”).⁷⁶ As I show in chapter 5, one way of doing this is through disrupting Rio Tinto’s processes of identity construction during public hearings or labor disputes.

Rio Tinto may be abstract, but it comes to life as a rhetorical actor through different alchemical processes at its different sites of extractivism. Like copper, Rio Tinto is in constant motion as a conduit or medium for what George Kennedy has called “rhetorical energies,” which is why this book embraces a form of what Elinor Light has called a “moving methodology” that looks to “movement, affect, and aesthetics as primary modes of understanding *in situ* [rhetorical] communication.”⁷⁷ This methodology is used to highlight how Rio Tinto maintains consensual “distributions of sense” that normalize extractive coloniality in the Anthropocene.⁷⁸ Below I call this method secular pilgrimaging.

Secular Pilgrimaging

I approach Rio Tinto as a secular pilgrim who travels to, and seeks out, Rio Tinto’s different rhetorical presences at the places it dwells: mines, visitor centers, national parks and forests, and cities. The secular pilgrim has its roots in the

practice of “pilgrimagining,” which involves a religious journey to certain holy sites (e.g., Mecca, Bihar, the Mormon Trail, Canterbury Cathedral) to gain increased awareness about oneself from in situ past events. The “rhetorical pilgrim,” to Marouf Hasian Jr. is one who journeys to certain sacred sites to learn about the different rhetorical decisions that go into curating, designing, or assembling place-based rhetorics. In his journey to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for instance, he details “interventionist practices of the rhetors associated with the museum” and also a range of “clues about the privileging” of certain “historical memories of the Holocaust.”⁷⁹

While pilgrims may be motivated by certain religious impulses, or transcendent objectives, the secular pilgrim is one who travels to those extraordinary, special, or mysterious sites without a teleological (or transcendent) objective, for example, a “religious” paradigm. For our purposes secular pilgrimagining is a practice rooted in what Edward Said has called secular criticism (as opposed to religious criticism) in *The World, the Text and the Critic*. To Said, secular criticism is an orientation toward the world that does not assume a subjective pretense about how the world is, or how it should be, based on certain theoretical commitments.⁸⁰ To assume one “knows” the world before the critical act is to adopt a “religious” orientation toward the world that, I may add, also adopts what Donna Haraway has called the “god trick.”⁸¹ Instead, to Said, criticism “is always situated, it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings.”⁸² In this way secular criticism becomes “not a theory but a practice that counters the tendency of much modern thinking to reach for a transcendentalist comfort zone, the very space philosophy wrested away from religion in the name of modernity.”⁸³ In other words, secularism is immanent, meaning it does not assume a distinct separation between rhetor and the world it studies to advance a particular “religious” objective.

My pilgrimages to Rio Tinto’s different sites in the American Southwest are also informed by the immanence of participatory fieldwork methodologies, which provide a vocabulary for tracking the movements and presences of Rio Tinto as a dominant rhetorical actor that naturalizes dominant orientations toward its sites of extraction.⁸⁴ Participatory rhetoric has its roots in Middleton et al.’s germinal essay on rhetorical field methods (RFM), which has served as a touchstone for rhetorical fieldwork operating on the “intersections between [critical rhetoric], ethnography, and performance studies.”⁸⁵ While not the only way to go about rhetorical fieldwork, RFM, and what has since become participatory critical rhetoric (PCR), equips rhetorical scholars

with tools and sensibilities for advancing the critical rhetoric project to “live” rhetorical situations.⁸⁶

Advancing critical rhetoric in the field is no doubt an important telos, but this author also recognizes its tension with secularism and what scholars have named immanent participation. As McHendry et al. write, and Middleton et al. affirm, immanent participation “asks what can be done in the immanent moments of (co)participation in the field and demands that such moments (and the choices they entail) equally influence our critical findings.”⁸⁷ Rather than *mining* objects for discursive or material fragments, immanent participation is “a way to understand how in situ rhetorical approaches embed critics and their bodies in a web of interpersonal relationships, affective claims on the critic, potential vulnerabilities, and political choices.”⁸⁸ In this way, secular pilgrimaging can be a form of immanent participation that privileges the here and now over the “proper” course for future action.

This tension between immanent and critical rhetorical fieldwork is present in these pages about Rio Tinto’s rhetorical existence when it comes to naming. While naming and essentializing Rio Tinto as a colonial, racist, or genocidal actor before pilgrimaging to its sites of extraction could lend itself to important insights into how Rio Tinto functions as *that* kind of subject, I find it intellectually necessary to foremost understand how Rio Tinto works before evaluating its actions within larger moral, economic, and political frameworks. Doing so allows us to immanently study how Rio Tinto’s rhetoric stabilizes particular visions, feelings, and tropes about its identity and its mines within the communities in which it resides.⁸⁹

At the same time, we have to land somewhere. That landing happens in chapter 5, where after imminently tracing Rio Tinto’s existence from secular pilgrimages to Boron, Salt Lake City, and Superior, I take up different rhetorics of social protest struggling for labor rights, clean air, and decolonization. This critical rhetorical intervention is a departure from the more immanent secularism of the first four chapters but is also necessary for understanding the fuller range of issues and identities surrounding Rio Tinto’s extractive practices. Rio Tinto is a global colonial power, but we must first immanently attend to its subtle nuances, differences, and alchemies, because as we will see, Rio Tinto is also so much more.

As a secular pilgrim, I have traveled to Rio Tinto’s three different mines, cultural centers, and places of rhetoric to seek out, decode, and construct different readings of Rio Tinto’s rhetorical presences (and absences). Through rhetorical

fieldwork methodologies these experiences have allowed me to study Rio Tinto's alchemical rhetorics in the places it dwells. For instance, over the past decade, I have visited the Bingham Canyon Mine in Salt Lake City, Utah (five times); the Borax Mine in Boron, California (one time); and the proposed site of the Resolution Mine in Oak Flat, Arizona (one time). At the mines themselves, I have apprehended the magnitude of erasure, gone on corporate mining tours, visited visitor's centers, and contemplated corporate being in the Anthropocene. Since Rio Tinto, as a sort of network, spends most of its rhetorical energies away from these mines, in the urban-scapes that surround them, I have also visited many of the places and spaces that Rio Tinto has sponsored.

Rio Tinto is an agent that consists of many different subject positions and personae (see chapter 1).⁹⁰ Since our geological epoch is defined by different hybridities that we are coupled with, including extractive companies and their mines, this work can also inform us about ourselves in these strange times. Understanding how Rio Tinto works has the potential for other critics or activists to use this book, and its concepts, as they will. As Deleuze and Guattari have put it, "A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window."⁹¹

Why Rio Tinto?

At this point it is worthwhile stating, in case it is not already clear, why this one particular mining corporation is the focus of this book rather than a broader more comparative approach to different mineral mining companies or extractivism generally. Beyond the obvious fact that Rio Tinto is one of the largest of its kind in the world in "the age of copper," it is also indicative of the mundane and unseen, yet necessitous, nature of natural resource companies in everyday life. Precisely because of its invisibility, Rio Tinto as a rhetorical object helps us make sense of our entire world in this current geological moment defined by the ordinariness of absence. What better way to study the processes of erasure in the Anthropocene than through a mundane, yet colossal, mining company?

Because Rio Tinto's main extractive focus, from the nineteenth century to the present, has tended to be copper, Rio Tinto also has great value in the field of communication (among others) in the digital age. For environmental communication specifically, Rio Tinto reveals many of the tensions within the very

idea of sustainability through green technology while also informing critics how extractive companies, not just coal or energy companies, work rhetorically.

This project can also be seen as a Wendell Berrian commitment to place (or emptiness, considering the focus on Rio Tinto's open pit mines).⁹² In our changing and disposable world, there is much theoretical value and praxis in staying committed to one object of study over time. Samantha Senda-Cook emphasizes the value of this kind of concentration for "long-term field work" that can determine how the materialities of place and space, and their discursive effects on identity formations, change over time.⁹³ Of course a true long-term account of Rio Tinto, over the more appropriate geological time, would exceed the scope of this project (and the lifetime of this mortal); nevertheless, it remains of great importance to commit oneself to place through the objects that we study while we can.

Christine Harold has recently argued for greater attachments to objects as a form of resistance to fetishized capitalism and its culture of disposability.⁹⁴ What if we treated rhetorical artifacts the same way? I am suggesting that extraction is not just the physical action of mining land for precious mineral metals. It is a cultural practice intersected with different sensibilities, performances, language, and rhetoric that some might suggest is inescapable. All too often, objects of rhetorical analysis, like, if not *as*, objects of consumption, are treated by the same politic of disposability as commodities where researchers assay, extract, and dispose before moving on to the next artifact. Rhetorical texts have become commodities and then trash.

Consider what Thomas Rickert has called the "extraction model" of rhetoric that is opposed to his notion of "ambient rhetoric," which calls for more attention to environs, nonhuman rhetorics, and ways of being in the world, or the "weddedness in the world," that call out rhetoric as an extrahuman affair. Rickert notes, "We might keep in mind what the rhetorical tradition often asserts, that just as a comedian extracts what is funny from life and world to make an audience laugh, so a rhetorician extracts, via the available means, what is persuasive from life and world to motivate or transform an audience. . . . The extraction model fosters the belief that rhetoricity or comedy, being human-initiated affairs of the symbolic are exclusively human doing."⁹⁵ Whether or not it is possible to escape this kind of extractivism in rhetorical theory and praxis—possibly through a form of *strategic essentialism* or *extractivism* I discuss in the conclusion⁹⁶—it is nevertheless worthwhile naming this practice as a rhetorical colonial tactic grafted on top of layers of extractivism from mine to computer.

Rhetoric, like geology, is not neutral. At the same time there are limits to this idea of extractivism within, or through, rhetorical criticism because of the ways criticism can give back through certain fieldwork methodologies, coalition building, and care.⁹⁷ From another viewpoint, maybe rhetoric, if anything, is more akin to photography than extraction.

These are some of the questions I work through toward the end of the book. For now, I am suggesting that we may consider spending more time with objects as “things worth keeping” while they last.⁹⁸ While there are numerous explanations for the extractivist process of consuming and disposing of artifacts in rhetorical research—for instance, tenure clocks, institutional resources (or lack thereof), allotted time, and also artifact burnout—in the Anthropocene, where geological temporalities are so rapidly rupturing place and its changing “ecocultural identities,” there is increased value in sticking with objects, and their troubles, to see how they, and we, change over time.⁹⁹ This is especially true when it comes to mining companies given the pace of their “mass destruction” within our global economy.¹⁰⁰

Given the global reach of Rio Tinto and the scale of its ecological costs at its numerous mines, the company deserves sustained critical analysis rather than passing glances despite the fact that our visual culture inculcates this kind of consumption. This by no means is a case for more object gazing to try to interpret truer transcendental meanings. Rather, it is a simple form of academic commitment by conducting more analyses of the same objects over time with the emphasis on difference (e.g., different readings of changed objects in constant motion). This can also become one way of challenging extractivist ideologies and their links to different colonialities in the academy (#RhetoricSoExtractive). The goal after all is not to provide the final reading but to keep the conversation going in more inclusive, polyvocal ways.

Chapter Previews

The remainder of this book is organized around Rio Tinto’s different sites of extraction in the American Southwest. Before studying these mines, however, the basic, or primordial, nature of Rio Tinto’s rhetoricity must first be more firmly established. That is why in chapter 1, I begin again with an ontological probing of the nature of Rio Tinto’s existence as a corporate actor. In this chapter I situate Rio Tinto broadly within discourses of corporate personhood

and make the case that corporations have personae. Building off the concept of alchemical rhetoric and adding to those in rhetorical communication that have conceived different kinds of personae, I read the corporate persona as an animate, and affective, force that gives corporations rhetorical presences where otherwise there are absences. Advancing work by those that have already studied different kinds of discursive persona—namely, the first, second, third, fourth, and null—I argue that the corporate, or “fifth,” persona responds to questions about the nature and necessity of corporate rhetoric in the present as one way to understand the ontology of their personae at different places and spaces. To show how this works, I seek out “corporate personhood” through the spatial absences of the Bingham Canyon Mine and show that while Rio Tinto’s existence is akin to these absences, it is very much alive through objects, media, and places (*topoi*) of corporate rhetorical invention.

After working through Rio Tinto’s rhetorical existence, I then move geographically from west to east—and temporally from the past to the future—to draw out Rio Tinto’s alchemical rhetorics and corporate personae at the Borax Mine, the Bingham Canyon Mine, and the proposed Resolution Mine. I start in chapter 2 at the Borax Mine in Boron, California (Rio Tinto’s western-most mine in the United States) with a reading of Rio Tinto’s rhetorical pasts by returning to the one and only Ronald Reagan. Reagan, as noted, was a spokesperson for the mine’s 12 Mule Team Borax on several commercials during *Death Valley Days* when the mine was owned by the U.S. Borax Company. While Reagan was no longer with us when Rio Tinto took over the mine, the company nevertheless continues to use his celebrated rugged frontier ethos to fill the Borax Mine’s material absences with cultural presences (a form of what I call “historical incorporation”). These presences are most immediately felt at the U.S. Borax Visitor Center where Reagan is a condensation symbol for all the meanings of borax in everyday life. The cultural articulations of the mine are also felt at the Twenty Mule Team Museum and Death Valley National Park, which both, in different ways, commemorate the legacy of physically hauling borax from the Mojave Desert to cityscapes using twenty-mule teams. The mine, its visitor center, and other places of rhetoric, such as Death Valley National Park (Furnace Creek) and museums, all indicate how Rio Tinto draws from vast cultural resources to build a historical, and famous, persona uniquely adapted to place.

Chapter 3 takes readers back to the Bingham Canyon Mine in Salt Lake City, Utah. This mine is a present-day example of how resource companies imbue their identities in the materialities of place. I argue that Rio Tinto embeds its

identities in the materiality of places and spaces throughout Salt Lake City to create a pioneer persona that is uniquely adapted to Mormon cultural identities and memories of emigrating west during the nineteenth century. Based on years of fieldnotes, participant observations, and several personal correspondences, I follow Rio Tinto in the Salt Lake Valley and piece together a patchwork of images and narratives that stabilize Rio Tinto's persona as pioneer. My objects of study include a visitor's tour of the mine, the Natural History Museum of Utah, Daybreak (a suburban community on reclaimed mining land), and a Major League Soccer stadium that is home to the Salt Lake Real and was formerly named the Rio Tinto Stadium (now the America First Stadium).

Chapter 4 takes readers to Oak Flat, Arizona, where Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton have created a joint company, Resolution Copper, to extract one of the last largest deposits of copper in North America, which exists on land sacred to the San Carlos Apache. Through the particular methods of mining that Rio Tinto intends to use, a metallurgic method known as block caving, sacred burial and ritual sites would be decimated by a future one-thousand-foot crater-like mining subsidence. Indigenous social actors and protesters have decried Rio Tinto's Resolution Mine as an instance of cultural and religious genocide that extends a legacy of colonialism and conquest of Indigenous persons. Responding to heightened public scrutiny, Resolution attempts to stabilize a paternalistic persona that knows the needs of "the people" and provides through economic, historical, and securitized rhetorics in Superior and Oak Flat, Arizona.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the ongoing struggles of those impacted by Rio Tinto's extractivism at Oak Flat, Salt Lake City, and Boron. In this chapter I argue for a stronger process-oriented approach to extractivism that sees companies such as Rio Tinto as rhetorical actors made real through processes in constant motion. I take up different moments of dissensus—or a redistribution of the sensible—that can performatively "jam," or "monkey wrench," Rio Tinto's becomings—to shape new communities of sense.¹⁰¹ I identify three possible moments of process-oriented interruptions: public hearings, organized labor, and place-based protests and occupation.

I conclude with a brief discussion of the effects of these extraction politics to the idea of "public screens," which, I hold, must be considered via theory and praxis alongside the possibilities of "image events." Not only are there severe ecological, social, economic, and colonial implications to processes of corporate world-making and -ending, but we must also ask difficult questions about our

own culpabilities during the critical rhetorical act. Are critics liable for world-ending practices in Oak Flat or Bougainville when using digital technology to critique those practices? Are we not all becoming Rio Tinto? How to de-link these colonial networks, and decolonize, from copper in the Anthropocene? Again, the objective here is not to make any Kantian conclusions but to open up the dialogue for new creative possible futures as we plunge deeper into the Anthropocene.¹⁰²