

## Queer Planetary Memory

Chandler L. Classen

*Taking seriously Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reformulated maxim that politics might be galactic someday, this article interrogates an imagined interstellar political world by examining a not-so-earthly-anymore artifact: The Golden Record (Sedgwick 2008). Affixed to Voyager I and Voyager II and launched in August and September of 1997, respectively, The Golden Record(s) now exist outside of our heliospheric "bubble," provoking contradictory imaginations of violent or benevolent extraterrestrial contact. This essay positions the Golden Record as a contested queer artifact and argues the record performatively survives beyond planetary extinction, a prospect that seems to be rapidly approaching with little governmental action. The Golden Record performs memory for an unknown other, evoking various entanglements and relationships with extraplanetary beings. In challenging linear logics of time and accumulation, what Jaclyn I. Pryor calls straight time, I suggest the Record provokes a multitemporal relationship pushing our present into the deep future and materially inviting the future into our present (Pryor 2017). This article proposes non-reproductive futurism as an alternative to straight logics of (re)production that amplify the volatility of ecological crises. This article attempts to expand performance studies and queer theory's capaciousness for thinking about the social and political potential for memory as we float toward envisaged intergalactic life-worlds.*

Keywords: The Golden Record; Memory; Queer Ecology; Performance Studies; Extinction; Survival



*This is a present from a small distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope someday, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination, and our good will in a vast and awesome universe. — Jimmy Carter*

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In August and September of 1977, NASA launched two soon-to-be interstellar voyagers from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Their task: “dramatic exploration,” leaving their solar system – “emissaries of Earth to the realm of the stars.” Voyager I and Voyager II continue to bear the weight of planetary discovery, memory, and interstellar exploration.<sup>1</sup> Affixed to the spacecraft’s hull is a gold-plated copper record called “The Sounds of Earth.” This eclectic phonograph goes by another name, synonymous with its most visible aesthetic feature: The Golden Record. In *Murmurs of Earth*, a book developed to recount the process for creating the record, Carl Sagan, F.D. Drake, Ann Druyan, Timothy Ferris, Jon Lomberg, and Linda Salzman Sagan emphasize the Golden Record is a message for life that may exist outside the solar system in which our planet, Earth, exists. The record includes a sliver of various auditory and visual remnants of our planet that will exist long after our species and planet die –from ecological crises or solar death or both. Sagan et al. (1978) characterize the contents engraved on the record as follows: “118 pictures; The first two bars of the Beethoven Cavatina; Greetings from the President of the United States; Congressional List; Greeting from the Secretary-General of the United Nations; greetings in 54 [55, 56, or 57, or even more languages – the historical record is unclear]; UN Greetings; Whale Greetings; The Sounds of Earth; Music.” Responding primarily to the new political imagination(s) that distant memories of our planet take as we face dramatically intensifying ecological crisis, this article interrogates The Golden Record as a “historical” artifact that attempts to contain planetary memory for faraway celestial worlds. We exist in the traces of a record we can no longer see or touch for some distant extraterrestrial life who may stumble upon a cultural artifact that knew the Earth of 1977. The planetary memory of us is being reshaped, expanded, and thrown to beings who we can barely even begin to imagine. But, as we face rampant and proliferating ecological crises, the possibility that some memory of *us* will live on takes on new importance. Sharing the memory of *us* was not without reservation. Peter Van Wyck (2005: 33-34) points out that “British Astronomer and Nobel laureate Martin Ryle (nephew of Gilbert) actively, though unsuccessfully, attempted to have the International Astronomical Union vote a resolution – in the interest of the safety of Earth from malevolent others – to the effect that no such message should ever be sent.”

### Performing Queer Ecological Hope

The “hope” offered in these pages is a troublesome vision. Contradictions abound among differing affective entanglements with the Golden Record. Particular “straight” visions (uttered by some of the voices on the record) perceive

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, NASA launched Voyager II before Voyager I; the documentary *The Farthest* mockingly points out the enormous confusion the *disordered* numbers created.

a hope that the record will instantaneously save our world, hopeful that aliens are searching for us, because – after all, we have yet to move fully beyond Ptolemaic geocentric thinking – we are the center of the universe. I reject this notion, opting for queer(ed) hope: beyond – temporally and spatially – the destructive forces of ecological crisis, we will survive in some capacity, even if it is on a small artifact drifting in a basically endless void. While contradictions and problems exist within this record of *us*, I focus on the non-representational affects cohered in the Golden Record. In turn, this essay operates in the mode of performance and queer theory to reckon with drastically under-theorized interplanetary and galactic relationalities, or how we imagine ourselves in relation to the cosmos.

Theorizing planetary relationships is not outside the scope of either performance or queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2008: XIII) points out all politics are local, except for “regional, national, international, planetary, or (who knows, maybe eventually) galactic instead.” While not the vision of interplanetary and galactic governing bodies, a trope in some science fiction stories, the Golden Record provokes us to rethink the potential for affective entanglements with extraplanetary beings. For us terra-bound humans stranded on a deserted island, the record performs nostalgia for the present, what Glenn Albrecht (2006: 35) calls *Solastalgia*, “the lived experience of the loss of value of the present and is manifest in a feeling of dislocation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given. In brief, Solastalgia is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home.” Cognizant of the role ecological crises play in animating or deanimating the hope cohered within the Golden Record, Solastalgia amplifies the importance of the memorial capacity for/of the record. Ecological crises such as global warming and nuclear threat dominate the everyday.<sup>2</sup> Jaclyn I. Pryor (2017: 5) points out, performance is “inherently acts of hope;” the hope I have now is not that some huge scientific advancements will allow us to colonize other planets, but that we can be remembered. Even if it is an incomplete record, something out there carries parts of *us* with it, memories of, as Sagan asserts, “the only home we have” (Reynolds 2017).

The Golden Record claimed my thoughts, to borrow Della Pollock’s (2005) language, one evening during a blur of insomniac film consumption when I came across the documentary *The Farthest: Voyager in Space*. A tidal wave of questions came upon me: does a record from the 70s really contain a part of me? If not me, who is on this record, what is on this record? Is there a spatial slip which renders us interplanetary voyagers stuck on a pale blue dot, without a paddle? What is there after extinction? What is the temporality of a human-made object that exists outside the control of humans, something “massively distributed in time and

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<sup>2</sup> I use global warming to push back against the conservative cooptation and use of “climate change” with the hopes that it would de-animate fears over the crisis resulting in no political action.

space relative to humans,” what Timothy Morton (2013: 1) provocatively calls *hyperobjects*. While an incomplete list of questions, they are the fertile ground that prompted me to consider the inherently hopeful act that synecdochically takes the place of all memory of planet Earth. While these questions speak to the larger intrigue I have (and hope to provoke in you) about The Golden Record and the possibility for planetary thinking, I focus this article by addressing the following question: how does The Golden Record create and imagine queer possibility for survival and provoke queer planetary relationships among Earth and the life distantly residing in the galaxy when we consider its (incomplete) coherence of Earthly memory for extraterrestrial life? Further, this essay grapples with how these relationships speak to living within planetary ecological crisis and queerness as a political response and mode of survival.

To begin, I sediment the record as a queer artifact and materialize its robust connections to queer theoretical topographies. Upon this landscape, I discuss the affective turn in theory and its capacity to address the various problematics introduced by the Golden Record. Next, I turn to the memorial capacities of the Golden Record in which I address how it performatively constitutes planetary memory. Performativity here, and throughout this article, is the material potential (and the imagined material potential ingrained in the Golden Record) to “stylize” world-building through repetitive force. I am calling to mind here Butler’s (1988: 519) classic position on performativity as a “stylized repetition of acts.” Thirdly, I consider the expansion of queer performance theory into the realm of deep time alongside speculative fiction and thought-provoking failures the record inhabits. Lastly, in addressing the relationship between science fiction/science fact the Golden Record provokes, I conclude on a meditation of the notion of the closet and its applicability to seemingly far-removed contexts to question the fear of being discovered by a planetary other and hope among the interrelations between queer investments and survival.

Ultimately, in articulating the Golden Record as a queer life-world of/for memory, I argue that it performs queer planetary memory: a site of memory for an unknown planetary other and invokes an intergalactic mode of being in relation to/with non-reproductive futurism. While planetary crises may end our lives, our *being* lives on as a memory for others we have yet to encounter. As a performer, the record expands the spatio-temporal possibilities for the life of performance.

To performatively reckon with the record in text, Pollock’s (1998: 83) “Performing Writing” pushes me to dramatize “the limits of language...in an endlessly open field of representation.” Thus, I map out a conceptual constellation, a queer method that rejects ontological certitude in favor of a diffuse assortment of theoretical concepts that attempt to grapple with this tactilely ungraspable record. As a project attempting to write about the question of communication with the unknown, this essay may – at times – function on the tangent line of the

incommunicable, hopefully (but no promises) never crossing into that territory, at least not for too long anyway!

### Queer(ing) the Golden Record

Michael Warner (1991: 9), in “Fear of a Queer Planet,” suggests that “probably most lesbians and gay men have at some point encountered the obliterative heterosexual rationale in which it is asserted that if everyone were queer, the race would die out (i.e., so don’t be queer).” On the contrary, straight logics that hold a violent obsession with reproduction are destroying the planet and causing the race to die out. Straight logics animate fears about what it means to exist on a planet headed for extinction; this fear that props up certain science fiction(s) to relieve itself of responsibility with narratives of grand technological advancement that deanimate eco-crises. Science fiction, speculative fiction, or SF (to use Donna Haraway’s (2016) intentionally overdetermined signifier) offer the space for queer theorists to push back against straight logics obsessed with destroying the planet. SF, a discursive formation (Foucault 2010) overflowing with contestation, theorizes horizons of incommunicability (Peters 1999: 2) “the vexing question of communication with animals, extraterrestrials, and smart machines” as an obstacle to overcome. The Golden Record, a project of overcoming what Peters (1999: 227) terms horizons of incommunicability, “harrowing scenarios in which people come face-to-face with creatures with whom they can have no communication,” produces relations with uniquely *other* beings that challenge human(ist) temporal logics, what Pryor (2017: 4) calls straight time, “strictly linear time – the sequential progression of past, present, and future” which “begins to come undone when considered in the context of trauma and survivorship.”<sup>3</sup> Undoing rigid straight temporalities speaks to the lived experiences of queer subjects who do not abide “linear, teleological, and *straight*” temporalities (Pryor 2017: 4).<sup>4</sup> The Golden Record, a science fiction adjacent object, complicates (or queers) temporalities as it offers future extraterrestrial societies the memory of us, saving a piece of *our* present for deep time and space, pushing against the temporality of the present toward a displaced future that we may never see.

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<sup>3</sup> *Arrival* is a film in which learning the language of aliens allows one to see vividly into the past and the future. *Annihilation*, a book and film, plays out a Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) rhizomatic daydream: affective de/reterritorialization phytomorphizing one’s body. Jane Bennett explicates the genealogy of materialism(s) (Bennett 2010). Additionally, Bennett provokes us to think about the political and agential capacities of the material world.

<sup>4</sup> *Interstellar*, for example, heightens the severity of kinship to the point that trauma from being away from those you love can bend time and allow one to go “back,” where going back places one at a distance, never fully reaching that which was left behind.

Sedgwick points out resistance inhered in “queer-ness,” which contests the supposedly natural homo/hetero sex/ed/ual dichotomy. In asking how *Epistemology of the Closet* is queer, Kosofsky (2008: XVI) reflexively claims:

I would say it’s exactly this resistance to treating homo/heterosexual categorization – still so very volatile an act – as a done deal, a transparently empirical fact about any person...the dividing up of all sexual acts – indeed all persons – under the “opposite” categories of “homo” and “hetero” is not a natural given, but a historical process, still incomplete today and ultimately impossible but characterized by potent contradictions and explosive effects.

Discursive terrains and geographies of contestation are where queer scholars recognize the “masterly slipperiness” of “queer” (Chen 2012: 59). Judith Butler (2011: 228), in deconstructing the politics of “queer” claims, “if the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.” Politically recasting queer, in this light as point of departure from binaristic Western hegemony, emboldens discursive resignification(s) political potency, invoking what Elizabeth Freeman (2010: XIV) describes as “semiotic warfare eventually known as ‘queering.’”

Several queer theorists, in part influenced by poststructuralism and Derrida, propose that the term queer never casts itself as a guaranteed ontological practice.<sup>5</sup> The Golden Record, as a specifically queer artifact, fits well within the generally accepted queer position of rejecting ontological certitude. Queering, or queer warfare for devotees of imagining queer soldiers, rejects theories and concepts that enable and reproduce guaranteed outcomes (be it hetero/homo dichotomies or reading practices of cultural artifacts).<sup>6</sup> In subscribing to the slipperiness of the term queer, Butler (2011: 230) claims that the term “queer” cannot “fully describe those it purports to represent.”<sup>7</sup> Failing to capture those it ostensibly represents maps aptly onto the Golden Record, an artifact that could

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<sup>5</sup> Performativity, within explicitly queer genealogies, speaks well to this point; Karen Barad offers a helpful discussion of performativity clarifying the ways it is picked up by Butler and utilized in Haraway. Additionally, Barad’s notion of posthumanist performativity helps think about “material and discursive, social and scientific, human and non-human, and natural and cultural factors” of the Golden Record. (Barad 2003: 808)

<sup>6</sup> Connected to the cultural studies project, queer theory has long had a penchant for reading things oppositionally. (Hall 2019)

<sup>7</sup> Mel Y. Chen’s *Animacies* complicates what we mean when we say the queer has been “reclaimed.” Additionally, Chen entertains how we linguistically position ourselves in relationship to object. I take this point seriously when considering the agential capacities of the Golden Record and Voyager as they exist outside of us and planetary controls. (Chen 2012)

never wholly represent human history's complexity, let alone planetary history. Similarly, the political functions of music – a vital component of the Golden Record – are not inherently representational. Connected to the potential affective capacities of nonrepresentationalism, Lawrence Grossberg (1984: 97) suggests, "the political functions of music cannot be totally explained by the representational content of the music itself." While the Record – by way of the recorded messages – makes few allusions and invitations for aliens to come solve our planetary crisis, there is nothing in the music that explicitly calls aliens to fix rapid global warming. Instead, the record provokes distinct affective entanglements that call futural beings into a relationship with our life-world. Additionally, the record invokes a distinctly intergalactic political imagination that considers, evidenced by Carter's written greeting, what could happen if we act (joining an intergalactic community) and the obvious result if we do not.

The affective turn offers a necessarily queer orientation to challenging representationalism and terraforming theoretical terrain on which to grasp planned pre-cognitive biological and emotional potentiality invoked in relation to extraplanetary beings (Massumi 2010; Ahmed 2010).<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Sara Ahmed, Holladay and Classen (2019: 4) suggest that "Because we are made to feel through the culture around us, it is paramount to investigate those sites that are 'sticky, or saturated with affect,' and how affect comes into being through the interaction between individual subjects and affective objects." Articulating the Record as a site of/for affective memory - something calling extraplanetary subjects into a relationship with the human life experience vis-à-vis music, pictures, and voice recordings - is useful to address some of the problems the record invokes: namely, what does it mean to envision communication intended in planned sites of remembrance for unknown entities.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, Sedgwick (2003: 20) delineates the distinctions and connections between the affect system and the drive system (alongside biological "need" or desire); affect systems operate with primacy and greater freedom alongside the secondary drives in which "motivation to satisfy biological drives, is the business of the affect system." Not unproblematically, there is a mapping of an allegedly human drive to know the other – and often conquer the other – onto absent alien creatures. Straight and colonial affective entanglements demand satisfaction of humanistic colonial drives to know the other – contradictorily as-

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<sup>8</sup> I use "potentiality" to invoke the complex relationship between presence, present, and futurity that José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 99) explores in *Cruising Utopia* where "potentiality is and is not presence, and its ontology cannot be reduced to presentness...reading for potentiality is scouting for a 'not here' or 'not now' in the performance that suggests a futurity."

<sup>9</sup> This question is not unique to the Golden Record, we can think here of nuclear waste storage facilities (communicative problems relating to the epochal longevity of the danger sign are the centerpiece of the documentaries *Into Eternity* and *Containment*).

serting aliens will conquer us if we do not do it first. Alternatively, queer affective entanglements refute this outlook, opting for bleak hopefulness that enjoyment and pleasure in this record and the memory of a planet and its assortment of critters is enough for planetary survival. This article, thus, approaches the Golden Record as a necessarily generative site for affective memory: specifically, queer memory.<sup>10</sup>

### Time Capsule in a Bottle

The Golden Record connects two commonplace tropes of memory designated for others: the time capsule and the message in a bottle. Time capsules are usually a container, buried in the ground, in and for which groups of people collect everyday objects for a not-too-distant future, usually themselves or closely related descendants. Time capsules recount the quotidian objects of a particular era, providing an exciting foil by which to counter objects of today versus objects of a not-too-distant past. They are commonplace archives of the everyday; whereas museums and other archives hold onto the “important,” the time capsule holds the commonplace. The Golden Record has been described in a similar vein, a kind of time capsule that will “travel unharmed through deep space on the two Voyager spacecraft long after our sun has gone cold and our solar system fallen silent” (Nelson and Polansky 1993: 361). The Golden Record captured various music and pictures of the world up until 1977, and it is, in part, frozen at that moment, flying around space for the foreseeable and unknown future, waiting to be found.

The “message in a bottle” has life-saving responsibilities; some stranded person(s) craft one to make other travelers aware of their desperate presence and their need for a savior. Visually, the documentary *The Farthest* depicts the message in the bottle floating in a vast ocean. The elusive message in a bottle enacts the ultimate performance anxiety; it is the performance of hopefulness with the worst consequence: Death. Similarly, the Golden Record acts as a prophylactic both in ensuring the memory of our planet in death and as some hope it ensures the safety of the human planet against a seemingly unconquerable quest: solving ecological crises. Certainly, extinction is not a singularity with a fixed temporality. Critical interventions in the various environmental and ecological (inter)disciplines have shown the ways that the Anthropocene is a poten-

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<sup>10</sup> While the record’s content is undoubtedly worthy of critique, my intention in this article is not limited to, or even primarily, a criticism of the Golden Record for its inability to represent an entire planet in a record. A phonograph with only 118 photos and less than 90 minutes of audio cannot capture the complexity of a planet isolated in a distinct moment, let alone planetary history.



tially universalizing logic that does not hold accountable those who are genuinely responsible for ecological crisis.<sup>11</sup> Rejecting universalizing a human experience with eco-crises reveals convincingly that some communities will survive (Baldwin, Noodin, and Perley 2018). Pryor (2017: 5), challenging straight time, articulates the ways by which “queer and trans people have always found ways to extend and rewrite their own lives: from safer sex practices that queer people invented in the early HIV/AIDS crisis and continue to teach, to antiretroviral therapy (ART) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) which have become central in queer public health.” Following Pryor, I suggest the record is a memorial site that extends and rewrites the life-world of our planet. In the face of ecological crisis, which threatens populations, the record is queer survival that rejects straight death.

The seemingly and unnecessarily inevitable – due to failures on the part of governmental regimes – extinction of large portions of this straight planet intra-actively connects the tissue between fears over a queer planet and a planetary death drive that leads to an acceleration of climate crises (many would rather die “straight” than engage in queer ways of being).<sup>12</sup> Contrary to Lee Edelman’s (2004) suggestion that reproduction is the straight future and queer refusal is to accept no future, the Golden Record is just one artifact – among a hopefully growing number of contingent queer artifacts that seek to challenge straight reproductive failures and whose existence offer new ways of thinking about the fecundity of life – that entertains non-reproductive queer futurism.<sup>13</sup> (Re)production that falls prey to capitalist models of growth ignores the necessary infrastructural changes that can remediate global warming and accumulate strategies for partial recuperation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For an expanded discussion of the problematics of universalizing assumptions made in using “the Anthropocene,” see (Haraway and Tsing 2019; Mirzoeff 2018; Yusoff 2018)

<sup>12</sup> I use death drive in this article to articulate the ways various populations ignore (in)visible climatological crises and intentionally engage in activities that seek to damage the planet further. See (Edelman 2004)

<sup>13</sup> I call to mind Donna Haraway’s call for new forms of kinship and love – “Make Kin Not Babies!” (Haraway 2016: 102). There are legitimate concerns about Haraway’s invocation of making kin and not babies as flirting with what Neel Ahuja rightly criticizes as xenophobic discourses of reproduction (the harshest critics here suggest Haraway is embracing eugenics, thereby failing to implicate those who are most responsible for ecological degradation). In light of this, my primary critique of (re)production is not reduced to sexual reproduction, but of biopolitical capitalist models that seek to maximize growth; as such, I am implicating discourses of growth replicated and propagated by polluting industries.

<sup>14</sup> I am cautious to point out that logics of overpopulation discursively and materially oppress and precaritize already threatened communities. The problem is NOT overpopulation: it is industries and governmental regimes that fail to fix infrastructures that could make increasing populations more sustainable than they are now.

If we take survival as a queer and racialized act, then on consideration of rapidly nearing extinction, an artifact with less than an infinitesimal chance of finding *intelligent* life is a queer act of survival.<sup>15</sup> In the introduction to the edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Warner (1993: XXIII) suggests that the plaque attached to Pioneer 10 and 11 “testifies to the depth of the culture’s assurance (read: insistence) that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous. This reminder speeds to the ends of the universe, announcing to passing stars that Earth is not, regardless of what anyone says, a queer planet.” Fortunately, queer cultural producers routinely show, we can exploit intended meanings and read things queerly. Warner (1993: XXIII) insists that for a “space-alien, junk dealer audience” to understand the plaque as a visual logic of heteronormative culture, they would have to be visually oriented and have similar conventions to humans. Warner discounts the reception and negotiated meaning penis-obsessed aliens could make upon seeing this plaque – and the Golden Record with its own heteronormative logics of visual cultures – offering a queer reading, or not reading it all.<sup>16</sup> Especially on consideration of artifacts for unknown planetary beings, these artifacts do not denote an ontologically a priori “straight planet,” but suggests *some* humans are attempting to straighten, or keep straight, the planet.

Straight logics of (re)production processually destroy Earth, ensuring no future. Astronomic queer modes of survival offer non-reproductive futures. Voyager and the record survive as traces of a distant blue dot. This time capsule in a bottle is a poetic of and for deep time and space which, “via their sensuous properties, certain textures can admit us to the conditions of flux that distinguish Anthropocene temporalities” (Farrier 2019: 22). Survival operates both in the future and in the present as Voyager flies across space-time. The record pushes against an unknown temporality and bleeds into deep time, suggesting we will not know if it is found. That is, we will not know until/unless aliens are at our planetary doorstep thanking us for sending them Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B Goode.”<sup>17</sup> Survival artifacts for deep time conflate two distinct materialities: time capsule and message in a bottle. Additionally, survival artifacts merge two other sites: archive and repertoire.

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<sup>15</sup> Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* discusses numerous ways by which minoritized and queer of color subjects engage in worldmaking strategies against cultural hegemony as a form of survival. I take this to articulate the ways by which various investments in the Golden Record reject dominant ideological positions (Muñoz 1999)

<sup>16</sup> *The Onion* has recently parodied a similar prospect with their news in photos “Confused Primitive Extraterrestrial Shrugs, Take Huge Bite of Golden Record.” (n.a. 2020)

<sup>17</sup> *The Farthest* depicts an SNL skit that acts out this scene.

### Archival Repertoire

While Sagan et al. were not aware of Diana Taylor's (2003) heuristic of the archive and the repertoire – because they wrote *Murmurs of Earth* thirty years before Taylor wrote *The Archive and the Repertoire* – they describe the record as a “repertoire.” As I read Sagan et al., my affective entanglement at the use of “repertoire” caused me to set down the book, pause, and reevaluate my understanding of the Golden Record as a site of/for memory. Articulating the record as a performance of planetary memory is not to prescribe a universalizing (in the sense of the whole of the universe) queer theory of performance or to ignore the complexities of the various places and space on the planet; it is merely to reconcile the fact that an object exists that synecdochically encompasses our planet.

Epistemically, the Golden Record takes the place of all human knowledge. While having access to all Earthly knowledge seems like the dream of certain enlightenment thinkers, it is not without problems: this knowledge comes from vastly reductive epistemes (ways of knowing) in Western Discourses. Dwight Conquergood (2002: 146), referencing Michel Foucault, addresses subjugated knowledges, “alternative” ways of knowing that dominant culture erases, “dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context.” Recognizing this oppressive epistemological prioritization (and epistemic violence), Taylor (2003: 19) distinguishes between the archive and the repertoire, in which “Archival memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change. Archive, from the Greek, etymologically refers to ‘a public building,’ ‘a place where records are kept.’ From *arkhe*, it also means a beginning, the first place, the government.” With adequate technology, the record emits sound; if one can decode the record using an audio converter system, one can produce the documents encoded in the record as prints. The artifact is projected archaeological remains of an absented society, and possibly planet or even galaxy (depending on when/if the record is found).

Contrary to the archives of planet Earth, no one claims that we can physically access the Golden Record – transportation devices enabling spatial proximity to the Golden Record would also permit us to leave our planet. Taylor (2003: 173) points out that the archive outlives us, but it cannot contain “the live.” Importantly, Taylor (2003) criticizes for whom the archive is meant, that is, who has and should have access. The archive of today washes itself clean of sins of exclusivity on the grounds that people can spatially and materially access them, ignoring the socio-economic and temporal restrictions that prevent people from *going* to and *using* the archive. There is no *going* to the Golden Record; while some archives proper may have copies of the materials on the record, they do not have the Golden Record “itself.” The record cannot be contained in one

place. It perpetually moves away from Earth, faster than most objects ever invented on our planet. It is not a place one can visit; one could only stumble upon it and carry it with them to a new place. Thus, the Golden Record, while adjectivally archival, is not an archive proper. Additionally, it is not a memory for *us*: it is a memory of a faraway planet for another time, place, and species, performatively capturing atmospheric liveliness in the sounds and images encoded in the grooves etched into the phonograph.

Striving for embodied knowledge expresses the ways by which the Golden Record wants to surpass the archive, the confluence of archival and repertoire performativity:

The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasury, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency, referring also to ‘the finder, discoverer,’ and meaning ‘to find out.’ The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same (Taylor 2003: 20).

The repertoire offers possibilities that the archive can/does not; the repertoire activates and operates in an affective register in ways the archive refutes. Music, several NASA employees interviewed for the documentary *The Farthest: Voyager in Space* claim, does not have a “pure” scientific value. Music captures an emotional resonance that the “scientific” information encoded into the record cannot. Affect Theory has roots in both emotions and bodily potentiality (Ahmed 2010; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Affect articulates potentiality for a collection of Earth’s music to invite extraterrestrial life to our planet. Ahmed (2010: 37) offers a useful analysis of the ways that happiness contributes to affective resonances, one that I hope to complicate in thinking about the alien, “think too of experiences of alienation. I have suggested that happiness attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community -when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good.” In the context of the Golden Record’s affective capacity, the rich lineage of theorizing alienation takes on new possibilities whereby it is because we are alienated – in one sense of distanced spatially and emotionally – that the record expands its affective relations with and for an unknown other; in another sense of alienated, we are encumbered by the hope that aliens will save the memory of us and our planet. The hope for affective entanglements, as both bodies in motion and emotions evoked in interactions with objects, provokes the belief that extraterrestrial life will be affected by the music on the record that they will decide we are a planet worthy of saving or they will commemorate us by experiencing our long-gone planet.

Queer planetary memory contained in the music of the record is an enduring request that lives on, inviting a collective and haptic experience of our planet to beings we do not know. As archival repertoire, the record offers an aesthetic experience of our planet and offers the imagined audience a taste of earthly *Umwelt*.<sup>18</sup> “Small sensory details,” Laura Doan (2017: 113) says, “evoke an experience of the past as haptic,” in which the collective memory of queer life binds death to sexuality. Straight logics of (re)production animate Earthly death from ecological crisis, binding planetary death to straightness. Earthly death imbricates specific planetary forces (that is, certain humans) in hetero-logics of domination— I can think of no better case for queer worldmaking practices. Queer planetary memory, a place of affective entanglement with an object billions of miles away, establishes an evocative relationship with an unknown society. Thus, the artifact is comprised of embodied act(s), a repertoire necessarily knotted in hope for a not-guaranteed future.

### Deep Time and Dis/Re/Appearance

While work on queer temporalities and memory often focuses on the remarkable ways in which trauma causes temporal slippages, this does not negate the lively possibilities that co-exist alongside trauma (Dragojlovic 2018; Doan 2017; Freeman 2010; Pryor 2017). While the Golden Record exists as a fantastical seemingly science-fiction object, it is deeply engrained in planetary trauma, the trauma of species knowing extinction is coming alongside geological or Earthly wounds. Music, as a site of affective possibility, captures this trauma. In particular, one of the songs on the Golden Record, “Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground” by Blind Willie Johnson, captures melancholia in a song with no words; “Guitarist Ry Cooder called this ‘the most soulful, transcendent piece in all American music’: it is a deeply moving, haunting slide guitar instrumental by one of the masters of the instrument” (Sullivan 2013). Johnson was blinded at the age of 7 when his mother threw lye, which was meant for his father, in his face. While Johnson is celebrated as an incredibly talented blues musician, he devoted his life to preaching in the streets, “giving up what probably would have become a decent career as a blues singer” (Greenblatt July 2013: 66). Johnson’s “Dark was the Night - Cold was the Ground” is praised as Black soul music that captures the trauma of homelessness in rhythmic heavy-breathing and moaning that accompanies indelibly sharp guitar notes (he used his pocketknife as a slide). Melancholia and trauma evoke affective multitemporalities in which “the ‘political imaginary of a future memory’ haunts us (Parikka 2018: 40;

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<sup>18</sup> I am drawing here on Catriona Sandilands, who claims that tasting honey offers a sensorial and aesthetic taste of bee *Umwelt*. (Sandilands 2014: 377) Sandilands discussion of the politics of bees also offers an intervention into the experience of other-than-human life on our planet.

Sandilands 2010) . The multitemporality of extinction suggests that (if we take extinction as *fait accompli*) Johnson's song exists as one of the 27 remaining songs ever created on our planet (maybe the universe).<sup>19</sup>

Trauma and optimism captured in the Golden Record create queer temporalities in opposition to what Freeman (2010: 3) calls chrononormativity, "a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches, inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls 'hidden rhythms,' forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege." The spatio-temporality of the Golden Record exists outside of the human scale and control. *The Farthest* details one incident exemplifying the limits to human control in which Voyager spacecraft, a hyperobject in its own right, would not respond to the controls that humans sent to it, prompting one newspaper to label it a "mutiny in space" (Reynolds 2017).

Pryor takes the term chrononormativity and warps it to "straight time," which structures time in relation to capitalist logics of production and accumulation. For me, the Golden Record (and Voyager) refutes logics of capitalist accumulation both in the sense of production and reproduction and thus are a project of queer time. The production of the record is one aspect that speaks to its queer temporality: it was recorded at half speed so twice as much information could be placed upon it, a temporal slip that prioritizes the aesthetics and performance of music.

Travis Brisini's phytomorphizing of performance provokes us to reconsider the temporal dimension of posthuman performance in which, on a discussion of the performative potential of plants, Brisini (2019: 14) asks "what do we make of performances that might take a century to unfold, as in the case of the flowering of the bromeliad *Puya Raimondii*?" The Golden Record necessarily expands the temporality of performance encouraging us to respond to Peggy Phelan's (1996: 146) claim that "performance's only life is in the present" by asking whose *present* we mean. If we consider, as Brisini does, the role of the audience, either in traditional or expanded and phytomorphized performance theory, the imagined audience of the Record suggests that it is continuously performing for a being of a future time and place. Phelan and Brisini help us consider the queer temporality of the Golden Record, which paradoxically amplifies and problematizes Phelan's claim on performance's temporal ontology. The Record habitually operates in the constant past, present, and future, "poised forever at the threshold of the present," (Phelan 1996: 27) simultaneously living always and already beyond (spatially and temporally) our planetary present, outside of our

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<sup>19</sup> Gramsci's famous aphorism "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" speaks well to how we can approach environmental theory. My point here is that we should not accept extinction from eco-crises as *fait accompli*, but it will take drastic socio-cultural, infrastructural, and geographic changes (to name a few) to attain partial recuperation.

coeval grasp and bleeding into deep time, but operating in its own present(ing)—one ignorant to the destructive affects limiting the human life-span – to a future species. Additionally, Phelan (1996: 146) claims, “performance’s being, like the ontology of the subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.” Spatio-temporally, the record has undoubtedly disappeared, at least from our perspective. However, a failure to address the imagined (re)appearance of the record neglects its expanding – spatio-temporally – affective attachments. We must confront and interrogate a humanistic narcissism that suggests performance/objects/things/oddkin subscribe to the same spatio-temporalities as humans. The Record’s performative optimism lingers. With each passing second, the further it travels out of our solar system, it moves towards disappearance, toward the point where we cannot track it anymore and the declining possibility it will encounter someone. However, the potential for (re)appearance marks new possibilities for theorizing queer performance and posthumanist performativity.

No Earth-bound object can claim the Golden Record’s epochal longevity, in part, because the (non)atmosphere the record occupies experiences no erosion or degradation, allowing durability for billions of years. Suspension in the vast emptiness of space also means that it will not reach another star, and potentially other life forms, for at least 40,000 years. The Golden Record, in performative entanglements with deep time, is marked for reappearance. Thus, performance operates between the cracks of disappearance and reappearance. Indeed, futural (re)appearance harmonizes survival’s reliance – and insistence – on non-reproductivity (contradistinctive to contemporary discourses of reproductive futurism), enacting performance’s “productive appeal of the nonreproductive” (Phelan 1996: 27). The record does not (pro)create anything. Indeed, as a performance of and with deep time, the Golden Record refuses to “enter the economy of reproduction,” never betraying “the promise of its own ontology” (Phelan 1996: 146). This promise is a fleeting one; it invokes fantastical visions of producing relations with extraterrestrial life following along a growing body of SF that imagines similar possibilities.

## SF

In wonderful irony and serendipity, in nearly every context I speak about this queer artifact, someone asks me the exact same question upon my incomplete – and still incomplete – description of The Golden Record: “is that like a *Star Trek* thing?”

Science fiction, in particular, tales of fighting against eco-crisis through significant scientific advancements allowing the human species to immediately remedy environmental destruction, or, simply, leave the planet offers what Jussi Parikka (2018: 33) points out is “a sort of fabulated end of history, the solution to the material issues of the planet.” Straight affective entanglements that posit

technology is ours to use and abuse let us off the hook for necessary action to remediate eco-crises, Haraway (2016: 3) calls this a “comic faith in technofixes” in which “technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children.” Connectedly, the trope of leaving the planet, a technocolonial logic particular science-fiction features, offers problematic territory where *beleaguered* peoples – read unsatisfied über wealthy people like Elon Musk – find hope (and money).<sup>20</sup> One of the problems with technological reliance to fix planetary issues is that mining the resources to develop these technologies is part of the destructive force(s) killing the planet. Enter a destructive logic: we have to leave our planet because it is being destroyed (the passive voice here obscures the obvious destroyer). To leave our Planet we have to extract minerals and build technologies that are killing the planet: so that we can leave, so we have to build, so that we can leave.

A ubiquitous and haunting prospect of the Golden Record is the uncertainty that it will *succeed*. Haraway (2016: 2-3), who articulates the importance of SF in *Staying with the Trouble*, is worth citing at length:

A ubiquitous figure in this book is SF: science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far...Science fact and speculative fabulation need each other, and both need speculative feminism....SF is a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark, in a dangerous true tale of adventure, where who lives and dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice... SF is practice and process; it is becoming with each other in surprising relays; it is a figure for ongoingness in the Chthulucene.

SF performs hopefulness. It is a method, both for writers and readers, of imagining otherworldly possibilities. SF, as Haraway points out, plucks out dense webs and tries to make sense of them in an intentionally volatile space – we know what it will take to aid our planet in healing from global warming, why haven’t we done it? Importantly, science fact and speculative fiction go hand in hand. I feel immense joy whenever someone asks me if the record is from *Star Trek* or another science fiction show. SF articulates the possible and the Golden Record as an object of science fact and the mapping of speculative fiction onto it – by those who have yet to encounter it – speaks to oddities and difficulties we have

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<sup>20</sup> Félix Guattari targets people who proliferate on the social ecology, destroying the environmental ecology, “men like Donald Trump are permitted to proliferate freely, like another species of algae, taking over entire districts of New York and Atlantic City” (Guattari 2000: 28). Comparably, Elon Musk and other technocolonialists fume the social ecology with unnecessary visions of planetary exodus, instead of using their immense wealth to act on climatological crises.



of placing the record.<sup>21</sup> Placing the planet in images looking back on our planetary system evoke a similar difficulty, *The Farthest* shows a NASA employee who tried to wipe away Earth because she believed it to be a dust spec on the image. Sagan's *Pale Blue Dot* melancholically renders the immense loneliness of our Earth in a sunbeam, a microscopic entity in the vast webs of the universe. Nevertheless, what Sagan articulates is a "stuckness" on our planet that does not encourage us to disregard our planet and search for a new one, but to exercise immense care for our planet. The record, a posthuman creation, operates outside our control and our reach but a queer reading of it does not encourage us to forget our troubles and imagine some technocolonial *deus ex machina*.

For Haraway and other scholars concerned with anthropogenic destruction, fever dreams of technocolonization offer misplaced foci for investments to remediate global warming and other ecological crises. Importantly, Haraway's idea of staying with/in the trouble articulates our *stuck-ness*, mandating care for/with the planet we occupy. While the record has spatially vacated "the trouble" on our planet, its creation and existence are constitutive of a realization that we are stuck in the trouble, and speculation of benevolent life forms might be one way out. Contrary to technocolonial logics that assert with the right forms of technology we can terraform other planets, forcing them to be our home, the record is a project of interspecies and interplanetary kin making. It does not force its existence on anyone, nor does it force anyone to listen, it is stumbling, hopefully, in space, waiting to be plucked from its happy immortality flying into and away – simultaneously – from emptiness.<sup>22</sup> For us critters *stuck* on Earth, the record (contra logics that assert technological advancements are a panacea to all Earthly problems) does not negate the importance of political and infrastructural changes necessary to combat ecological crisis. The record is part of a last-ditch effort, saying that if we cannot fix our issues, more accurately, if the ruling political class refuses to fix our trouble, then maybe a more advanced planetary being will be able to. Thus, the record is a project grinding up against assorted failures.

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<sup>21</sup> Sagan's pale blue dot speech evokes the loneliness we have in an expansive universe in which we cannot find signs of other life. (Reynolds 2017) *Troop Zero*, a recent film, depicts the Golden Record as fighting back against the loneliness we humans experience in a vast universe. Speaking to the ostensible ethos of the record as the keeper of our planetary memory, a NASA scientist asks the children who will compete to have their voices on the record why a girl from some unknown town in Georgia should not "be the keeper of our immortality" (Bertie 2019). This is but one more example of how SF renders the collapse/ability of human(ist) spatio-temporal logics.

<sup>22</sup> Another strand of thinking this project hopefully prompts is the question of recognition. While I do not fully explicate it in these pages, (Oliver 2001) offers witnessing as a compelling alternative to recognition. This text has been influential for me, and while not explicitly quoted in this article, its traces can be found in my thinking.

SF, as a project of/for queer ecology, must include speculative failure in its necessarily loose and amorphous qualities. The music of the Golden Record embraces the possibility of failure, suggesting that affective entanglements might draw otherworldly and planetary beings into kinship with us, or maybe they won't, (who knows?). Jack Halberstam (2011: 3) locates failure as a specifically queer prospect, "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style." While hope is found in these pages, it is not a recognizable hope, in the contemporary sense permeated with (to borrow Halberstam's (2011) phrase) toxic positivity. This hope is a reconciliation of widespread ecological crisis, a recognition that, to quote Neel Ahuja (2015: 370), "we are already living in the future of extinction. The planetary *present* – not some speculative future – exhibits a staggering scale of 'reproductive failure,' human and nonhuman." Extinction, a present(ing) event, marks the Golden Record as a project that "dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live" on (at least) two fronts (Halberstam 2011: 2). First, while some other life *may* find it someday, there are no signs that this will happen; thus, the contemporary imaginary of the project is one that accepts the likelihood of it not completing its mission, which is evidenced by the small budget (25,000 USD) and time frame - six weeks - Sagan and company had to complete the record (Reynolds 2017; Sagan et al. 1978). Second, if by some chance some/one/thing does find the record, it is unlikely that we will still inhabit the planet. Calling this a "failure" would be a ridiculous proposition considering the infinitesimal probability the artifact has of being found. Alternatively, carrying planetary memory of extinct species for an unknown other is, at best, an extremely nihilistic "success." Simply, it defies the very categories of failure or success in its imbrication with extinctive processes and ecological crises. Indeed, the record is a whisper, floating in the abyss, that says we existed. Whispering existence into the ether, I suggest, evokes the logic of the closet and the attempts made to exist outside the planetary closet.

### **The Planetary Closet**

Warner points out that fears of the queer planet connect to a politics of (non)reproduction, whereby fear of the queer is an extinctive worry that suggests that queer existence is unsustainable for life (oh, the irony!). The record waits endlessly for someone to affirm its existence, sending out small messages from the radiation that powers the craft, alerting passersby and voyagers to the closeted existence of an isolated life-world. The closet, Sedgwick, claims, "for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life" (Sedgwick 2008: 68). The closet performatively fulfills assurances that no one knows the queer secret. Fears of violence, acceptance, rejection feed the multiplicity of voices telling one to stay in or come out. SF evokes a similar logic of isolation as a protectorate, where planetarily, we are in the closet trying to come out to aliens (a way of

being that queer subjects are often made to feel). We have sent out a message and are waiting to see if someone picks up the signal.

One fear of the closet is being forced out through the traces that could connect one to their space in the closet, compulsory forms of masculinist performance demand that anyone/thing that deviates from expectations is suspect of being queer (Butler 2011, 1988). Gramsci (1999: 628) theorizes historical processes as depositing “an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.” The hope of staying in the closet is that these traces will not inventorially identify – frequently for safety – one as a queer subject. I introduce the concept of the planetary closet as a creation of straight logics that proliferate fears of being discovered by a violent other hellbent on destruction. Various sci-fi films evoke and amplify the straight desire for the planet to stay in the closet through its assertions that extraterrestrial life will want to do us harm if they have the slightest idea planet earth harbors a vast array of life.<sup>25</sup>

*The Farthest* features interviews with several NASA employees, some of whom discuss fears relayed to them about sending a message in a bottle to a potentially violent extraterrestrial life. For some, the attempts to out the planet by way of the performances of memory in the Golden Record are fear-inducing spectacles that anticipate Earth at risk of attack. Fear is one trauma the closet murmurs, louder, louder, louder, on contemplation of leaving its *safe* confines. Hope can inspire one to leave the closet. In the case of our planetary closet, in 2012, Voyager I exited the heliosphere and now exists in interstellar space.

### Performative Utopia – Beginnings and Ends

I conclude this article with a discussion of hope, of the performative utopia in and by the Golden Record. José Esteban Muñoz’ (2009: 95) reminds us that “it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity.” The Golden Record is cruising (in the sense of looking for and performing utopia). Borrowing from Muñoz (2009: 56), who claims that performance can be “outposts of an actually existing queer future existing in the present” this essay suggests the Golden Record presents just one possibility for queer futures that

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<sup>25</sup> I am thinking here of the film *Independence Day* which begins with a radio broadcast that, from our visual setting near the moon, we can suggest made its way into outer space, alerting the ominous ship of our presence. Additionally, the film shows SETI, which has sent transmissions and has a wide array of radio telescopes that have been listening for transmissions from other planets/worlds. SETI’s website points out, “some have also expressed concern that broadcasting might be dangerous, literally calling attention to our existence.” Various sci-fi films rely on this fear to cast other-planetary visitors as destructive of our way of life. Films such as *Arrival* problematize this logic where the film does not depict a violent planetary visitor, but militarized countries assuming alien-visitors will become violent unless Earth’s armies kill them first. <https://www.seti.org/seti-institute/project/details/broadcasting-message>

cross the temporality of our present into an unknown future that will exist long after we are gone (whether from ecological crisis or natural planetary and solar death) without relying on normative notions of whiteness or neatly presented white futures. Its affective capacity for memory expands the possibility for the livelihood of performance. As Nick Sagan, one of the voices on the record, recounts, “Sending our first craft into interstellar space is such an amazing achievement, and there’s something deeply reassuring in knowing that even if the worst befalls us on planet Earth, some record of us will survive... I often dream about a benevolent alien civilization finding Voyager, reaching out to us, telling the story of how they made it through their technological adolescence without destroying themselves, and showing us how we can do the same” (Showstack 2013). Sagan’s hope maps a Gramscian (1999: 628) mandate onto extraplanetary beings, “the first thing to do is make such an inventory;” if some extraterrestrial life agrees that they need to find an inventory for the traces contained in the Golden Record, then they will be led to us.<sup>24</sup>

I join Pryor (2017) in rejecting strands of queer theory that are anti-futural; as our relation to our imagined future defines us, we cannot contain our trauma in the present, our trauma is a future bleeding into our present and a present pushing against a distant future. Anti-futurity is antithetical to the queer project of survival. Muñoz (2009) necessarily articulates queer visions of the future as a displaced utopia that we can, with feeling, access in the present. Affective relationships with an envisaged future propel political struggles; if we want to “*survive our time so we may live into yours*,” as Carter claims, then we will need to take drastic action for planetary (at least partial) recuperation (Sagan et al. 1978: 28). While we could let the Golden Record be our only saving hope, this would be a political failure. The Golden Record’s use of music and artwork imagines a relationship brought into existence because of affective modes of address to extraplanetary beings. Twenty-seven songs, while not representative of our planetary history, remain as a memory for some-one/some-thing else. The trauma captured in this music – both in the time it was made, and in the new trauma it develops as it carries our planet with it – performs memory waiting to be discovered. While inextricably traumatic, queer planetary memory offers the potentiality that the memory of *us*, stationary beings on a becoming-queer blue dot, can be discovered by that which we can barely imagine. The memory of our not-yet-queer blue dot is out there, waiting to be plucked out of the seemingly infinite space beyond our planetary closet. We are trying to come out: hopefully someone is listening.

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<sup>24</sup> The trace, what Derrida (2016: 76) calls the “arche-phenomenon of ‘memory’” is one way by which we can understand ourselves always-already in relation to other planets. The Golden Record is just one example of the traces we, at times, unintentionally send every day.

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