

**M. Allewaert** Preface: Under Water  
and  
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In fall 2011 in Durban, South Africa, the most recent round of international negotiations on greenhouse gas emission regulation was brought to a halt by a small group of diplomats from the United States, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and China over the protests of less powerful nations intent on making the developed world repay the carbon debt it incurred as the condition of its economic ascendancy. Not long before that, the citizens of I-Kiribati, whose island-archipelago home will disappear as ocean levels rise, worked out an agreement with New Zealand to relocate to several diasporic centers, a fate they will share with former inhabitants of the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. It was a year ago that the world's largest oil spill, estimated at 10 times the size of the Exxon Valdez disaster (5 million barrels), was broadcast from the floor of the Gulf of Mexico—just 130 miles from New Orleans, which was itself still feeling the effects of the flooding that accompanied 2005's Hurricane Katrina. Such headlines have joined others—about hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) in the Appalachian Marcellus Shale, the ongoing acidification of the world's oceans, the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe, another massive oil spill off the coast of Nigeria, and the Keystone XL pipeline from Alberta to the Gulf Coast—in sharpening the sense of major crisis among the majority of our planet's inhabitants, if not their political executives.

Closer to our academic homes in Madison, Wisconsin, and Davis, California, some of the most significant American public protests in many years have highlighted accelerating trends of economic inequality resulting from a variety of interlinked causes ranging from

Wall Street bailouts to antiunion legislation to steep increases in college tuition at once-accessible universities. More than 13 million Americans are out of work; those who do have work have on average seen their real wages decline by approximately 15 percent since the peak in the early 1970s. Millions more are obligated to make payments on mortgages much higher than the value of the property itself. The words of the hour in ecological and economic circles are *meltdown* and *underwater*.

These two forms of drowning are connected by more than just metaphor. *Bankrolling Climate Change*, a report drafted and circulated by four environmental action groups from Germany, South Africa, and the Netherlands, details the way that the same banking interests that created, profited from, and have thus far avoided punishment for the mortgage bubble have been ramping up their investments in coal production and coal-fired power plants, spending more than \$300 billion since 2005.<sup>1</sup> Clean-tech investment, on the other hand, has recently dropped by double digits despite clear evidence that global warming is proceeding at even faster rates than the alarming scientific predictions of a year or two ago. Much as they manipulated the financial markets with no regard for the wider consequences, the principals of banking giants JP Morgan Chase, CitiGroup, Morgan Stanley, and Bank of America are now locking the entire planet and its inhabitants into catastrophic climate change. Urban planners involved in large coastal projects now regularly plan for sea level rises of up to ten feet by the year 2100.

At such a moment, the work of Jason deCaires Taylor, the artist whose sculpture *The Lost Correspondent* haunts our cover, becomes something more than a local commentary on the destruction of Caribbean coral reefs. Carved from concrete and then lowered into the shallow coastal waters, his sculptures are designed to be the basis of an artificial reef, an acknowledgment of and small act of restitution for the vast damage done to this ecosystem worldwide, much of it as a result of carbon-related acidification. Left alone in small coastal sanctuaries like deCaires Taylor's *Museo Subaquatico* near Cancun, the figures and objects are soon covered with microscopic plant and animal life, ultimately attracting the full range of reef species. Like the prolific genre of posthuman futurism (including works such as Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* [1954] and Alan Weisman's *The World without Us* [2007]), these pieces often work as reflections on the end of human dominance

and the reassuring return of the nonhuman world to the status quo ante. But the oceanic tranquility of the *Lost Correspondent*—rooted to his office chair, his mouth and ears stopped, breathless in the filtered tropical light—seems in this particular image to be posthumously menaced by a cloud of sand approaching on the horizon. It appears that even the ironic, Ozymandian consolation that the Anthropocene era too will pass is to be denied us. And as we notice that the ominous dust cloud has likely been stirred up not by any external force but by the lowering of the sculpture itself, we must face the fact that the ostensibly radical ecopolitical impulses of resignation and relinquishment are themselves destructive events. DeCaires Taylor's doubled ecological version of the posthuman here offers not simply the familiar elegy for an imperiled paradise but a snapshot of the anxious affect of the modern world as it destroys itself—and then denies even its own traces.

It is from within this ecologico-economic situation, in which the damage is done and traditional forms of outrage and reflection can do little but pour saltwater on the wounds, that the essayists featured in this special issue are operating. For them and for us, the lines between human concerns and environmental issues have eroded, and their amalgamation leaves us with few if any normative ethical certainties from which to mount familiar forms of critique. Our contributors' responses to this state of affairs take us away from the place-based, policy-focused, and phenomenological preoccupations of older forms of ecocriticism toward an engagement with murkier aspects of our condition: the historical imagination as an alternative resource for a world facing shortages in the feedstocks of modernity; the significance of new identities and communities—often involuntary—that arise from environmental crisis; and the complex new forms of affect that accompany the recategorization of the planet.

Hester Blum's contribution directly attacks the question of globalization—the widespread interpretation of the geophysical planet as a space of economic exchange—by drawing on a peculiar episode from the early years of the United States. Elaborating on John Cleves Symmes's apparently crackpot notion that the earth is a hollow shell containing an additional world populated by an advanced race (and the long tradition of hollow-earth fiction descended from it), she draws our attention to Symmes's pronounced rhetorical avoidance of the national and imperial precedents for the exploration and exploita-

tion of distant lands. For Symmes, the polar entrances to the interior belong to “the world” and to the mind rather than to the factional economic and political actors that—in his age and ours—continually conquer new territory in search of wealth. Thus from a most unlikely context (the massive colonial expansions of the nineteenth century) and genre (exploration writing), Blum extracts an early precedent for “planetarity,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s term for an orientation toward the earth that is radically different from the currently pervasive forms of globalization. The key to this attitude is the recognition of imagination and speculation as infinite planetary resources whose inexhaustibility destroys the logic of property and scarcity that underlies our failed global system.

Sonya Posmentier’s contribution, on the agricultural imagination of acclaimed Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, meditates on the possibility of a planetary form of ecological practice lingering at the margins of the urbane texts of black modernism. McKay, who as a young man earned his living as a field hand and briefly pursued an education at Booker T. Washington’s famed Tuskegee Institute, appears in Posmentier’s careful reading not to repudiate the country for the city but to reimagine ecoagricultural connectedness for the African American and Afro-Caribbean diaspora. The mechanism for this accomplishment Posmentier describes as an analogue of the plantation “provision ground,” marginal bits of land where slaves grew crops to supplement their meager allotments of rice and corn. Unstable but necessary externalities of capitalism, provision grounds served as places whose local immunity from market forces allowed them to maintain the laboring bodies of the bottom rung of the working class without cutting into the profitable excess those bodies created for employers and financiers. Standing for survival, independence, ingenuity, and cultural memory as much as exploitation and poverty, the provision garden has come into increasing relief as a topos of the black Atlantic to rival the ship, the talking book, or the abused beast of burden. Precisely because the rhetoric of diasporic gardening walks a line between the reinscription of historical abjection and the triumphant reclamation of African American identity, it may be wise to approach it as a nonlinguistic form of environmental signifyin(g) in which the sustenance practices of the homeland (Africa, the Caribbean, and the US South) are detached from the soils of their origin yet can provide nourishment for an insurgent retroping of colonial social and eco-

monic forms even at the modern capitalist metropole. As Posmentier demonstrates, McKay's Glissantian revisions to the sonnet form are intimately connected both to his personal history in the fields and to the material conditions of his cultural past and present.

As McKay was establishing his writing career in New York, Mexican laborers fleeing the disruptions of the revolution and its aftermath were swiftly replacing an abused and despised Asian agricultural workforce in the West and Southwest, initiating an ongoing demographic shift that has since broadened into the re-Latinization of the region. Despite the efforts of rural sociologists like Paul Taylor (in the 1930s) and farm advocates like Wendell Berry (from the 1970s) to settle these immigrants into the pattern of the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal—rooted, propertied, and politically and economically independent—state and federal land and labor policies have created a large migrant labor population with ever fewer civil rights and financial resources. As Janet Fiskio argues, adequately representing the actual agricultural sector requires a break from the comforting conventions of the domestic family farm and experimentation with other models of food, labor, and community. Fiskio's two proposed models—the migrant magical realism of Helena María Viramontes and the documentary journalism surrounding the conflict over a fourteen-acre community garden squat in South Central Los Angeles—are points on a much larger spectrum of possibilities ranging from muckraking to academic scholarship to dystopian fantasy to personal testimony. Interestingly, all of these approaches are characteristic of early twentieth-century agricultural writers like Taylor, Upton Sinclair, Hamlin Garland, Sanora Babb, and John Steinbeck, raising the possibility that despite massive changes in food production over the intervening decades, this prewar American archive might offer resources and warnings for the challenge of the moment.

The overall failure of early-twentieth-century progressive activism to produce forms of solidarity that could endure the racialization of farm labor suggests, however, that any successful move away from the Jeffersonian localist paradigm toward novel de- and reterritorializations must take place within the context of intercultural sympathy and identification. Lisa Lynch's discussion of the evolving strategies of antinuclear documentary reveals that, even after the rhetorical limits of NIMBY antipollution campaigns have been exposed by the apparent success of "green nuclear" advocacy, the recent countermove to

a more globalized and other-directed antinuclear approach still relies heavily on the very old tropes of injured autochthony. In Lynch's examples, the Australian Aborigines supply the role of the despoiled culture; in US writing and activism, it is Native American groups (particularly the Navajo) whose plight lends special pathos to the critique of nuclear industrialism. There are well-known dangers involved in this kind of allo-regionalism and its appropriative sympathy, to be sure, but Lynch suggests that these difficulties are best overcome by better, broader forms of sentiment rather than by a retreat to the technical (the chosen ground of pronuclear propagandists).

Matthew Taylor's argument that fear is a politically and ethically necessary affect offers one way to produce collectivities capable of responding to the imperial, agricultural, and technological crises documented in this special issue. Turning the American environmental canon on its head, Taylor proposes that American transcendentalists' absorption of the world into the self is ultimately too solipsistic to inspire the collectivities necessary to respond to twenty-first-century crises that originated in the Industrial Revolution. In place of this canon, Taylor offers Edgar Allan Poe as a central figure in an ecocriticism that emphasizes the fear human beings might well feel in recognizing themselves as part of a cosmos that threatens their undoing both because of its own agency and because of the destruction caused by human industry. Poe's aesthetics of fear and his appreciation of nothingness and nonbeing anticipates the negativity of the antihumanist position and offers a necessary corrective to those posthumanisms whose unwarranted optimism indicates a troubling protoimperialism and an equally troubling blindness to the massifying environmental and economic problems of the present. Redeploying the methods and terms of antihumanism, Taylor forges a posthumanist ethics based on humans' vulnerability to environmental and economic processes in which they are enmeshed and that render them, whether they like it or not, terrifyingly exposed.

Moving from fear to the seemingly more utopian experience of wonder, Heather Houser offers a darker account of the potential of any affect to mitigate environmental and economic crises. Filtering her account of wonder through an analysis of the eco-sickness and cognition theory so powerfully narrativized in Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*, Houser shows that if wonder can sharpen attention and perception, thereby fostering a sense of connectedness, it can also pro-

duce unreliable perceptions that culminate in projection and paranoia. The double valence of wonder challenges greenwashing as well as academic criticisms that platitudinize connectedness, boundary blurring, and the feeling body, none of which on their own offers the systemic and structural analyses that give traction to ecological critique or ethics. While eco-sickness is a disease without a cure, Houser's essay suggests that attending to sick and cognitively damaged populations requires a methodological shift whereby humanists develop more rigorously biological understandings of disease and affect. One of the upshots of this methodological shift is a rematerialization of cognition such that the mental is not the opposite of the bodily but a key aspect of a diseased personhood whose workings remain largely uncharted. Scientists as well as narrative theorists confronted with this uncharted personhood take up the work of recalibrating understandings of attention and intention in ways that might well be necessary to building politics adequate to the challenges of the present.

Sarah Ensor proposes an ecocriticism grounded in the figure of the spinster. The forgotten pasts and the nonteleological genealogies Ensor elaborates from the figure of the spinster emphasize modes of intransitivity that deepen temporalities of ecocriticism. This intransitive ecocriticism claims a present that enfolds possible and impossible futures as well as foreclosed pasts and minoritarian histories that might be remobilized for the present. Like other recent theorists, Ensor attends to affects that might seem "too weak or quiet" to have any political significance but that she proposes allow an "invested suspension" that stretches and holds open the present, a process and a tonality that is at once an expansion and a contraction that Ensor passingly suggests might be understood as a sort of stoicism. With BP mobilizing a mythos of the regenerative sea to cover over the fact that the Gulf's oil-saturated habitats and the communities that make a subsistence living from them can be rebuilt only with difficulty if ever, with President Obama just temporarily suspending the extension of the Keystone XL Pipeline, and with the Kyoto treaty seemingly on the verge of collapse, it might seem that stoicism is the very opposite of what is necessary. However, we believe Ensor's insight has significant critical and political purchase. If traditionally stoicism has been seen as a diminishment and repression of feeling that aims to produce a self willing to accept the world as it is, recent accounts of affect as an atmosphere that extends beyond any subject provides the grounds for

reconceiving stoicism not as a dangerously quiescent psychic discipline but as a way of producing an atmosphere of suspended intention that allows for the circulation of the range of often incompatible affects we feel in response to the present. Thus the suspension Ensor offers is not at all a way of slowing down processes like anthropocentrism, bad environmental policies, or global warming that are the future in which we already dwell. Rather, this suspension and the stoicism associated with it *produce* the space and time from which we can see other futures unfolding in the present and, with effort and with affects slight and strong and personal and atmospheric, claim these futures for our present.

Suspension turns us back again to the eerie breathlessness of deCaires Taylor's *Lost Correspondent*. Rereading this image with the insights provided by the essays collected here, we propose two injunctions that respond to the two linked drownings we named at the outset: first, to foster imaginative work, and second, to use it to create an ecoimaginative commons. If we are all in the same situation, we might well adapt ourselves to the privations threatening us and learn to breathe underwater. Yet when we find that we can breathe underwater, it is not evidence of the neoliberal version of the Darwinian mythos of endless adaptability or a Prufrockian retreat from drowning human voices but proof that we can do and demand more than the rhetoric of limits has allowed. This "more" requires building lyricisms, stories, and inhabitations of place that tell us how we got to where we are and that give us the tools to remake the present otherwise. This injunction recalls Lawrence Buell's argument, in his first and last ecological works, that the crisis in human-environmental relations is a crisis of the imagination. The ongoing destruction of large ecological systems comes from a failure to recognize that we already possess the tools necessary to realize a world far more just and sustainable than we now inhabit. If this first injunction to imagine otherwise is not to be intellectual pabulum, we must expand the often counterintuitive and aesthetically attuned interventions of the essayists collected here to build more scholarship as well as curricula and communities that prioritize the exercise of creative power.

This attention to creativity as a power in common leads to our second injunction to build an ecoimaginative commons. Environmental histories and literatures once regarded as marginal—of spinsters and crackpot geographers and Jamaican farm poets and displaced aborigi-



nes and migrant laborers and the neurologically impaired—show us just how narrow the predominant vision of the environment has been. From these excluded people, places, and practices we are challenged to create a new space—not unlike the impromptu urban commons staked out by the Occupy movement last fall—in which human and environmental needs are addressed together by participants coming from every part of society. While Occupy Wall Street has shown that the presence of collective and individual bodies in increasingly privatized parks, universities, and homes reclaims them as places and rights that can be available to all, these essays as well as deCaires Taylor’s image remind us is that this commons can and should be larger still, including not only human beings and institutions but the seas in which nuclear and other wastes circulate, atmospheres that are getting hotter, corals and other sea creatures that grow in the places humans leave vacant, and turbulences, whether those of divers dropping art into the seas or of the larger stochastic forces that have the power to remake the scene entirely. No doubt this is an impossible collectivity—but it is one that has precedents in the impossible logic of the provision ground and the hollow earth.

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### Note

- 1 *Bankrolling Climate Change: A Look into the Portfolios of the World’s Largest Banks*, prepared by urgewald, groundWork, Earthlife Africa Johannesburg, and BankTrack (Sassenberg, Ger.: urgewald, 2011), [www.banktrack.org/download/bankrolling\\_climate\\_change/climatekillerbanks\\_final\\_0.pdf](http://www.banktrack.org/download/bankrolling_climate_change/climatekillerbanks_final_0.pdf).