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The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief

STEPHANIE LEMENAGER

The title of an August 2010 article in the satiric newspaper *The Onion*, “Millions of Barrels of Oil Safely Reach Port in Major Environmental Catastrophe,” ironizes the systemic violence and long duration of the petro-imperialism that was reanimated through the BP blowout. Describing the routine docking of an oil tanker at Port Fourchon, Louisiana, *The Onion* continues: “Experts are saying the oil tanker safely reaching port could lead to dire ecological consequences on multiple levels, including rising temperatures, disappearing shorelines, the eradication of countless species, extreme weather events, complete economic collapse.”¹ As Rebecca Solnit notes, the BP blowout is “a story that touches everything else.”² Solnit’s comment, which is not satiric, points to why the article in *The Onion* is recognizable as humor. The BP blowout marks a rough edge of what we in the United States and arguably in the developed world take for granted as normal, petroleum economies that generate multiple levels of injury. Mike Davis has written of the “dialectic of ordinary disaster” in relation to the apocalyptic rhetoric that defamiliarizes predictable geological events such as landslides in the poorly sited inland suburbs of Los Angeles.³ Extending Davis’s critique, Rob Nixon refers to the “slow violence” of neoliberalism as the occluded referent of “disaster,” which in a

modern risk society is often a misnomer.⁴ From the Greek *astron*, or star, “disaster” suggests an unforeseen calamity arising from the unfavorable position of a planet. The BP blowout confirms disaster criticism’s focus on the expectedness of the so-called unexpected while pointing to a different aspect of how ecological collapse can obscure human social and technological histories. Here the problem is proximity. The petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one’s feet are incorporating practices, in Paul Connerton’s term for the repeated performances that become encoded in the body.⁵ Decoupling human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it may be the primary challenge for ecological narrative in the service of human species survival beyond the twenty-first century.

The BP blowout poses a unique representational challenge because it follows an unusual episode of de-reification, a failure of the commodity form’s abstraction. This “disaster” did not work as spectacle, in Guy Debord’s sense of the mystification of modern means of production through screen imagery.⁶ The continuous video feed available on the Internet of oil shooting out of the damaged well—however that might have been manipulated by BP—read as a humiliation of modernity as it was understood in the twentieth century, which is largely in terms of the human capacity to harness cheap energy. Unlike anthropogenic climate change, which resists narrative because of its global scale and its as-yet-limited visibility, the Deepwater Horizon rig localized a plethora of visible data, more than could be disappeared by the hundreds of thousands of pounds of Corexit that BP poured into the Gulf. The BP blowout resembles Hurricane Katrina in its manifestation of “events” that support predictions of environmental catastrophe (e.g., peak oil, global climate change) that otherwise might be dismissed as effects of scientific modeling or Left fear-mongering. Yet, just as Katrina did not result in a changed national affect toward black, urban poverty, the BP explosion has not, it seems, spurred Americans to reconsider loving oil. “Even if they cap the well, hell it’s just another oil spill,” sang Drew Landry to the president’s awkwardly sympa-

thetic Oil Spill Commission in mid-July 2010.⁷ Landry's briefly famous "BP Blues" predicts that the blowout will not have the effect on the Gulf Coast that, say, the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 had on California, which became a strong industry regulator and the arguable headquarters of U.S. environmentalism after that event.

What Katrina and the BP blowout foreground is a competition between emotional investments in modernity as we know it, through its fossil fuel infrastructure, and in ecology, as the network of human-nonhuman relations that we theorize as given habitat. We learn from these two events on the Gulf Coast of the southern United States not only that modernity and ecology are entangled objects, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, but also that the melancholia for a given Nature which has supposedly characterized modern environmentalism might be eclipsed, in the twenty-first century, by an unresolvable grieving of modernity itself, as it begins to fail. Of contemporary industrial "accidents," Latour writes, "the recent proliferation of 'risky' objects has multiplied the occasions to hear, see, and feel what objects may be doing when they break other actors down."⁸ For Latour, all objects are agential, and the fundamentally ecological, relational materialism worked out through Actor-Network Theory gets a boost from incidents that physically play it out, such as the BP blowout, where, for example, benzene and other volatile organic compounds associated with petroleum extraction enter the living cells of coastal cleanup crews.⁹ Of course, Latour's sort of ecological thinking, wherein humans mingle and are perhaps invaded by other "agents," does not necessarily feel good to the ordinary people enmeshed in these events. Feeling ecological need not be pleasant; I use "feeling ecological" as a gesture toward Timothy Morton's concept of a *dark ecology*, indicating the humiliating desire and dependency of the human vis-à-vis non-human actors which has become a prominent theme in twenty-first century environmental rhetoric.¹⁰

Ironically, "feeling ecological" in a positive sense may consist in feeling at home in the obsolescent energy regime of the twentieth century, at least when its systems work. Artists and writers responding to both Katrina and the BP spill locate the human, as an ontological category, within industrial-era infrastructures that

may be not only in the throes of failure but also predetermined to destroy basic conditions of (human) living, such as water systems. That melancholia for modernity might eclipse environmental melancholia and activism in the context of the United States' Deep South makes especial sense, because it could be said that U.S. modernity never assumed its fullest form there, so it still piques aspirational desire.¹¹ Rather than acting as pure counternarrative to the ecological violence of late capitalism, the stories that Katrina and the BP blowout produce tend to imagine modern infrastructure failure as tantamount to human species extinction—as if the species is unthinkable without these increasingly obsolescent objects.

Feeling Ecological, Thinking History

In Barack Obama's June 2010 speech from the Oval Office on the Gulf oil spill, the words "catastrophe," "disaster," "assault," and "epidemic" touch the edges of what is happening in the Gulf, which the president describes as no less than the destruction of "an entire way of life," the loss of "home" for tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of people. Noting that "the oil spill represents just the latest blow to a place that has already suffered multiple economic disasters and decades of environmental degradation," Obama moves away from the idea of disaster as singular, connecting it, if vaguely, to past policies of deregulation and privatization.¹² But he cannot link this past to a tangible national future—the speech was widely criticized for its vague prescriptions. In the tradition of presidential rhetoric, Obama concludes within sacred, rather than historical, time, with a reference to the tradition of the Blessing of the Fleet, an annual event that takes place in predominantly Catholic, Cajun fishing communities throughout Louisiana: "As a priest and former fisherman once said of the tradition: 'The blessing is not that God has promised to remove all obstacles and dangers. The blessing is that He is with us always . . . even in the midst of the storm'" (4). The priest's words seem to refer back to Hurricane Katrina ("the storm") and were most likely spoken in reference to that event, as the president places them in that context.

Once we start talking of humanity in terms of the sacred, as Hannah Arendt pointed out in the wake of World War II, we essentially acknowledge the collapse of constitutional or civil rights—sacred humanity is humanity without citizenship, “raw” and unprotected. Giorgio Agamben has since revised Arendt, urging a consideration of *Homo sacer* as the modern everyman, the man who can be killed, without legal retribution, but not sacrificed, in other words not inducted into the redemptive time of the sacred. The “naked human,” in Arendt’s words, or “bare life,” in Agamben’s, marks a modern dissociation from protective traditional statuses as well as the volatility of constitutional guarantees.¹³ Similarly, humanity defined as ecological, in the sense of those whose “way of life” is conditioned by a regional ecosystem, may as well be recognized as humanity unprotected by rights or status—the human animal whose primary community is nonhuman. Obama’s repeated invocation of Gulf Coast residents’ threatened “way of life,” which echoes and has been echoed by media accounts of the loss of “a way of life” or a “unique way of life,” indicates that Gulf Coast people have fallen out of (or were never included within) the concept of modernity, where life practices are not clearly tied to place. Theorists of the global South such as Ramachandra Guha caution against broad references to “ecosystem people,” a term meant to refer exclusively to a very small or even nonexistent number of tribal humans who live outside of modern technologies and markets.¹⁴ Yet when modernity evinces spectacular failure, as in the oil-soaked Niger Delta or the significantly more privileged oil colony of the U.S. Gulf Coast, perhaps a revised definition of “ecosystem people,” indicating humanity in the process of becoming identified with the limitations of collapsing naturecultures (techno-ecological systems), can be useful. Gulf Coast residents’ recognition of their deep entanglement with modernity’s most risky objects has prompted a discourse of activism, the environmental justice movement, as well as a vernacular poetry of species failure.

The Gulf Coast materializes a twentieth-century U.S. history in which energy, perhaps the most essential quality of biological life, has supplanted personhood, the social “face” of the individual human body. Southern personhood has long been degraded in the

U.S. national imaginary, in part as a legacy of slavery—southern blacks in particular continue to struggle with the imposition of social death—and in part because of the perceived backwardness of southern industrial development, which has figured as the lassitude of the South’s poor whites. From the headquarters of the U.S. oil colony, Houston, Texas, the African American sociologist Robert Bullard fostered the U.S. environmental justice movement (EJ) in the 1980s as a direct response to the influx of polluting industries into southern states in the late twentieth century. What Bullard saw in the South of the 1970s and 1980s, in his self-described role of “researcher as detective,” was the local trail of a global trend, the bargaining away of health—a baseline measure of human energy—for jobs.¹⁵ EJ’s well-known definition of the environment as the place where “we” (humans) “live, work, play, and pray” should be understood as, in part, an explicitly southern response to the trade-off of civil rights for corporate privileges in a region where humanity had historically been commoditized through chattel slavery.

While the environmental justice movement is now vibrant and international, the Gulf Coast origins of its North American theoretical framework are often overlooked. The oil corridor from Houston to Mobile produced this second wave of environmental activism that resonated with other national and international protests on behalf of human health; “ecopopulist” revolts, in Lawrence Buell’s terms, including Lois Gibbs’s battle with the Hooker Chemical Company in the working-class suburb of Love Canal, New York; and the international response to Chernobyl.¹⁶ African American activists recognized that toxic pollution spelled the revision of a hard-won, racially inclusive concept of U.S. citizenship and the reintroduction of *Homo sacer*, the man who can be killed without repercussion. Bare life has been a recurrent theme within southern U.S. history, an index of both racial and regional disenfranchisement. Bullard writes tersely of the vulnerability of southern poverty pockets to corporate exploitation: “Jobs were real; environmental risks were unknown” (32). The paper mills, waste disposal and treatment facilities, and chemical plants that made the South the last mecca of U.S. industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s—in

1980 Jimmy Carter famously intoned, “Go South, young man,” in response to a national recession in which only the South seemed to be growing industrial jobs—had of course been preceded by the oil industry, which set up shop in coastal Texas in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The bargaining away of southern health for jobs has an historical arc concurrent with that of U.S. modernity, though it is perhaps only now, after Hurricane Katrina and in the wake of the BP blowout, that the inclusion of U.S. southerners within the South as a *global* region has become clear.

When Bullard compares the intangible quality of environmental risk with the hard realism of jobs, he points out a problem that environmental advocates have long recognized as both representational and political: environmental damage yet to come, without (current) aesthetic dimensions, does not stir up alarm or activate an ethic of care. This is one of the supposed pitfalls in trying to communicate the threat of global climate change—it still can’t be seen or felt, the argument goes, at least not in the continental United States. Yet for decades, the Gulf Coast has been sinking, quite visibly manifesting a dramatic change in climate and geological structure. What was marsh is now open ocean—to the tune of twenty-five to forty-square miles of disappearing marsh per year—and that is *prior* to the BP spill. The strong aesthetic dimensions of this problem, whose geological name is subsidence, have been well documented by journalists, politicians, and even Shell Oil, which launched a media campaign to save the wetlands in the early 2000s. Loss at this scale of a nation’s territorial state would normally be attributable to an act of war, which calls to mind the comedian Lewis Black’s recent joke (again, incongruity that should not register as incongruity) that the United States might declare war on BP, since the corporation is “attacking us with oil.”¹⁷ Yet the sinking of the Gulf Coast has not stirred significant national outrage, even since BP’s debacle. Mike Tidwell, the environmental journalist whose *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana’s Cajun Coast* (2003) marks perhaps the best-known chronicle of Gulf Coast subsidence, notes in that book his own struggles to garner attention for the crisis. Initially, Tidwell’s reportage was relegated to the back pages of the *Washington Post’s*

travel section, an editorial choice that underlines the perception of Gulf wetlands loss as a regional peculiarity.¹⁸

Explicitly political iterations of the subsidence story linked it to human health and the survival of the city of New Orleans nearly a decade before Katrina. In 1998 the Louisiana governor's office, with the state's Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and all twenty of Louisiana's coastal parishes, published *Coast 2050*, the first comprehensive plan for restoring coastal Louisiana and a clarion call for federal remediation of the ecological "system collapse" wrecking the Gulf Coast.¹⁹ Potential losses were listed then—lists we hear again, twenty years later—as 40 percent of the country's wetlands, one-third of its seafood, one-fifth of its oil, one-quarter of its natural gas, and a "historic" urban center of some 500,000 persons, namely, New Orleans.²⁰ The price tag for coastal restoration at the time of *Coast 2050*'s publication, the late 1990s, was around \$14 billion, modest in comparison to estimates of what restoration will cost in the wake of the BP blowout. Former Louisiana governor Mike Foster envisioned federal legislation akin to that which created Everglades National Park, and he hoped it would be passed into law by 2004. "Yet despite these efforts," Tidwell wrote in 2003, "the nation remains almost totally ignorant of Louisiana's plight" (*BF*, 336). Tidwell's epilogue to *Bayou Farewell*, written in 2005, after Katrina, expresses the hope that the massive hurricane "finally awakened America to the fragility and importance of south Louisiana." But the book concludes in the fatal rhetoric of the sacred: "Either we are witnessing the death of something truly great in America or the start of something even better, something new and blessedly permanent" (*BF*, 343, 344). *Bayou Farewell* prominently features the Cajun Blessing of the Fleet. Again, the sacred is invoked when social death has already occurred, and civil rights suspended. Thinking through subsidence as a narrative that has not become national despite its dissemination through national media raises the question of when, exactly, the Gulf Coast fell out of the U.S. territorial imaginary.

One might say—as anthropologist James Clifford suggests—

that it becomes clear that a certain set of humans have lost civil rights and protections when scholars gather their oral history, with the archiving of the voices of a doomed community serving to memorialize their sacrifice. In the first year of George W. Bush's presidency, 2000, the now defamed and defunct Minerals Management Service (MMS) funded an oral history of southern Louisiana, *Bayou Lafourche: Oral Histories of the Oil and Gas Industry* (2008). Bayou Lafourche is the Gulf Coast region most intimately linked to the deepwater drilling that began in the 1990s, and it was chosen as the site of the oral history project in part to create an epochal break between the era of onshore oil drilling and "shelf" drilling for natural gas and the outer continental shelf deepwater industry. In the prologue to *Bayou Lafourche*, author Tom McGuire acknowledges that "people who knew these communities prior to the oil and gas industry, people who orchestrated the technological innovations to explore, drill, and produce in the marshes and bays for the coastal wetlands, people who ventured out into the open Gulf in the risky pursuit of fossil fuel—they were passing away. A collective memory . . . was dying out."²¹ Since "incorporated towns with municipal governments which might be expected to preserve community history" were few along the Gulf Coast, and "corporate memories have been erased through mergers, acquisitions . . . closures," and "blue-collar workers seldom write memoirs," the project solicits the federal government, the MMS, to support the transcription of voices that have no other representative (*BL*, 2–3).

The result of the grant proposal would be some four hundred interviews, archived at several Gulf Coast universities, and a book-length report, *Bayou Lafourche*, that alternately could be titled *MMS: The Novel*. The report has "not been technically reviewed by MMS," and it is "exempt from review and compliance with MMS editorial standards" (*BL*, iii); it seems to be yet another object that slipped through MMS regulatory filters and, ironically, condemns the federal government's role in the industry history that it describes. A messy social panorama composed of interwoven interviews, *Bayou Lafourche* predicts the rash of interwoven life stories that appeared in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, from Spike Lee's epic *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and journalist Dan

Baum's nonfiction *Nine Lives* (2008) to Josh Neufeld's graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (2008) and writer/producer David Simon's recent HBO series, *Treme* (2010–). To a certain extent, all of this post-Katrina art foregrounds the tension between the structure of the individual life, with its aspiration and its foreboding of death, and bodiless corporate structures that change form over durations longer than human life spans. Corporate temporality, like ecological time, is not strictly historical, insofar as it involves the duration of systems and “persons” neither human nor mortal. The larger conflict between human and corporate ecologies is played out more specifically in post-Katrina narrative when the wished-for triumphalism of art meets a limit point in the collapse of naturecultures made vulnerable by the deregulation that feeds corporate entities.

Bayou Lafourche intends to offer an epic of oil-made-by-hand, of petroleum extraction as craft and embodied memory. Interviewees reflect a landscape where risky objects like deepwater rigs share real time and space with traditional extractive work such as shrimping, since the shrimpers' large boats have been used for years to service the offshore rigs. Oystermen, who don't enjoy the off-season compensation from Big Oil that shrimpers do because their smaller, flat-bottomed boats are not ocean-worthy, emphasize the more purely ecological perspective of the oyster beds that they work, which are the natural filters of the wetlands. “Barataria Bay used to be full of oysters,” Whitney Dardar, a Houma fisherman, complains, “Oysters don't grow like that anymore because there is too much salt. . . . I know a lot of places that oysters used to grow that they don't grow anymore. Now, it is like the Gulf; it is all open. They are trying to restore and all but I think they are about twenty years too late for that. They pump and pump all that oil and don't put nothing back. It sinks and sinks and sinks” (*BL*, 118). Nearly every interviewee mentions the problem of subsidence; all recognize that the profit their region has gained from the oil industry is balanced by geologic loss, salt water invading freshwater marshes due to shipping canals cut for oil transport, freshwater kept from replenishing marshlands because of the channeling of the Mississippi River, also for industry and development.

Living on the line between earth and world, between ecological systems and the technologies that attempt to make them more accessible, the ordinary people of Bayou Lafourche live at the cutting edge of climate collapse. Theirs is, and has been for decades, a twenty-first-century ecology.

The oil industry picked up in southern Louisiana in the 1930s, with the arrival of the Texas Oil Company, now known as Texaco. At first resented, the “Texiens,” as Cajuns called them, began to hire locals for their skills as carpenters and sailors, bringing jobs to a poor, rural region made more desperate by the Great Depression. For the World War II generation in southern Louisiana who became middle class as a result of Big Oil, the industry still appears, nostalgically, as a robust future. Subsidence fails to make sense within this historical boom narrative, even as it is being somatized. *Bayou Lafourche* only touches the U.S. oil industry downturn of the 1980s and the reinvention of the industry in the 1990s through deepwater play. With deepwater drilling came unprecedented technological experimentation, subcontracting to foreign rigs and crews, the perception of federal takeover, and less local love for Big Oil. As early as the Submerged Lands Act of 1953, the federal government claimed ownership of the continental shelf to three miles off the coast of Louisiana and other Gulf states, with the exception of Texas and Florida, which own the ocean bottom extending twelve miles out from their coasts. What this meant is that the United States would be in charge of leasing the outer continental shelf, and federal coffers would enjoy income from deepwater leases—if the technology ever got that sophisticated, which was scarcely imaginable in the 1950s.

Windell Curole, a Cajun radio personality and marine biologist who has a large voice in summing up *Bayou Lafourche*, dissociates the U.S. government from any image of a “country,” representing its role in the Gulf region as that of an irresponsible corporate actor: “If you’re a business man, CEO of government USA, and I see three billion dollars [from leases] coming into my treasury in my business . . . I’m going to make sure that things that protect that infrastructure are in good shape and yet government doesn’t see it that way” (*BL*, 164). Curole rejects both the ecological and the

moral price that he feels has been levied on Louisiana by the oil corporations and environmentalists, respectively: “We’re human beings. It’s us and the environment we live [*sic*] and the environment and every part of it, well, every part of it. We use up stuff just like every animal uses up stuff in the environment, but the point is don’t use it up so that the reason you’re living there isn’t good anymore” (*BL*, 163). The repetition of “the environment” and “every part of it,” tics duly transcribed by Curole’s interviewer, indicate the anxiety of ecological compromise, a constant rehearsal of losing something not quite anticipated. Human aspirations toward incorporation as part of a privileged and potentially timeless entity such as Texaco falter when subsidence begins to indicate a new *telos* of infrastructure, infrastructure that serves itself. The MMS oral histories offer a template for art (as in innovating, creating, triumphing) without the human.

The poet Martha Serpas, who has lived all her life in Bayou Lafourche, suggests a postscript to the MMS interviews that were conducted throughout her home parish. Serpas refers to the dialectic of petroleum and subsidence as “decreation” in a poem of that name and elsewhere in her collection *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (2007). Imagining herself in a coffin that has been unsettled and set afloat by the invading ocean, the poet writes,

Someone will lay a plaster vault for me to ride,
like long boxes children pull down flooded roads.
In my plaster boat I’ll ride Gulf shores
till I vanish like a rig in the sun.²²

The poem suggests the Leeville cemetery, one of many Cajun burial sites that have floated out to sea due to subsidence. Serpas’s poetry invites an openness to personal extinction (“If only I could give the land my body— / . . . I would lie against the marsh grass and sink, / . . . and welcome the eroding Gulf—”), as if humans count primarily as matter, our corpses sandbagging the wetlands (79). To live in such a world is to be sculpted by subsidence, with that geological artist linked tenuously to the rigs, whose silhouettes against the sun make them appear as symptoms of distant intelligence. Serpas and

the MMS interviewees offer a vernacular poetry of human species collapse: heroic, Catholic, melancholic. Feeling ecological means the discomfort of surrendering historical thinking, with its linearity that honors the perceived arc of human lives, and welcoming breakdown of the human into “marsh grass and sink.” This organicist vision is not unfamiliar in environmental discourse, yet it takes on force, and threat, in a place where human bodies literally fight back the ocean because of the technologies meant to extend human energy and comfort. Feeling at home in a petrol “world” creates an affective drag on thinking through human survival.

The Social Promise

In the weeks and months after the BP blowout, the people of the Gulf Coast reasserted their reasons for living in an efflorescence of regional sociality that has taken place largely on the Internet. Social networking on Facebook and in the blogosphere has kept the blowout alive, with emphases on human intelligence and empathy as ecological actors. Internet first-responders to the BP blowout join a vibrant recent history of activist reappropriation of new media for the purposes of “culture jamming” or remaking corporate memes, such as the Greenpeace/Adbusters 2000 “Spotlight” campaign for Coca-Cola, which published *subvertisements* of Coke’s polar bear icons huddled on melting ice to protest the climate effects of the hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) Coke used in its cooling and bottling processes.²³ Early uses of the Internet to protest BP have focused less on brand hacking (which BP essentially performed for itself) than on foregrounding the capacity of the Internet to provide a space of appearance, in Hannah Arendt’s term, in which the potentiality of power—“whose only material condition is people living together”—might be fulfilled through collective speech.²⁴ Regardless of the Internet’s embeddedness in corporate and state efforts to extend neoliberal economies, and its own petroleum footprint as media, its facilitation of cheap self-publication and its extension of public access enables rapid response by communities organized around issues not clearly associated with political rubrics, such as the nation. Post-blowout Internet activists have been performing

the gathering of marginal, invisible agencies that Latour recognizes as the essentially ecological promise of the social, to “assemble beings capable of speaking” (*PN*, 53).

For example, *Project Tantalus*, a research proposal by three scientists to gather water samples from the Gulf region and beyond using Facebook, offers a social definition of intelligence as collective experience. As the title of *Tantalus* suggests, researchers’ frustration about not being able to reach the water, in all of the locales where oil-tainted water might show up over time, inspired their use of Facebook as a means of collecting 100,000 water samples from the Caribbean and the U.S. Atlantic coast. Rules for making samples will appear on the *Tantalus* Facebook page in what is both an admission that professional scientists are outmatched by the extent of the BP spill and an opportunity to reinvent public science along the lines of the Smithsonian Institution’s nineteenth-century weather project, which mobilized hundreds of amateur weather observers to generate a “national” image of weather systems. “This is an opportunity, I think, for people to get involved and be part of the larger picture,” says chemist Mark Olsen, one of the three directors of *Tantalus*, who believes social networking will be crucial to twenty-first-century environmental monitoring.²⁵ As with the weather project, here the hierarchical structures of science open into hands-on practice for volunteers, who not only enjoy sample gathering as a means of building the public knowledge base but also experience a sensory connection to the sites of environmental injury. What is on offer here is an aesthetics of intelligence, “feeling scientific,” along with the affirmation of membership in an informing national public.

The blog offers a very different model of Internet speech, scarcely recognizable in terms of an idealized public sphere that fosters disinterested intelligence, yet viable as a space of appearance in which the potential of living together might be realized. Poppy Z. “Doc” Brite’s *Dispatches from Tanganyika*, hosted by LiveJournal, features the BP blowout and its aftermath, post-Katrina trauma, New Orleans food culture (Brite’s partner is a chef), and Brite’s struggles to find compassionate care as a pre-op transman. In short, *Dispatches* speaks eloquently to the problem of being human: its

deep themes include embodiment and its discontents, the ethical complexity of empathy, and the interruptive moments that constitute happiness. Brite cribbed the blog's name from a letter written to author John Gregory Dunne by an editor comparing New Orleans to Tanganyika and New Zealand, as unthinkably off-center places. But the name also situates a deeply human place—the East African region of Tanganyika is broadly known as “the cradle of humanity” due to archaeologist Louis Leakey's discoveries at the Olduvai Gorge. Doc Bright writes from Tanganyika/New Orleans as a queer humanist, upholding but also shifting the value of the human by emphasizing our (relational, socially enacted) materiality. Many of his/her readers have signed on because they are transsexual, or because they are New Orleanians—both queer statuses to the extent that New Orleans residents have, since Katrina, been regarded as a people not quite returned, death-bound subjects following their “historic” city.

One of Brite's entries on the blowout emphasizes the blog's capacity to memorialize subpolitical events, in Ulrich Beck's term for issues removed from national agendas, often because such issues are expressed by corporate actors.²⁶ At Shell Beach, which is the site of both the Katrina Memorial and a BP-cleanup at the time of Brite's visit, Brite simply notes what he/she sees: “We saw pelicans and people fishing in Lake Borgne and, way out on a pier, guys in lifejackets messing with huge piles of fluorescent boom. As we walked back to my car, a St. Bernard Parish sheriff's deputy came by in a little golf cart and gave us a desultory warning about taking pictures. ‘Go ahead and take pictures of the [Katrina] memorial and y'all hanging out, but be careful about them working over there, because BP will get pissed off.’ He obviously didn't like saying it and was only trying to save us getting yelled at, so I didn't burden him with the knowledge that I had already committed a felony by snapping two or three crappy long-distance shots.”²⁷ The Katrina Memorial follows Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC; it is a somber wall listing the names of those who died in the flood, those who could be identified. The memorial stands as a reminder that the realization of a war comes about through the destruction of human bodies and that here human bodies realized a racially inflected civil war, enacted in ordi-

nary urban space. This memory, so devastating to the American ideals of democratic pluralism and federal citizenship, can be photographed, while the placement of absorbent polyurethane around New Orleans to combat oil invites a suspension of the normal privileges of citizenship in peacetime. BP's bans on photographing "clean-up" have inspired a great deal of amateur journalism. But Doc Brite lets the conspiracy speak for itself, showing by mere observations the absurdity of BP's attempts to inhibit ordinary people from knowing that they are living together and once again suffering together. Noting the essential kindness of the policeman on his "little golf cart," Brite refuses not to recognize him/herself in even spokespersons for the corporation and state.

This persistent effort of recognition touches the dynamic of empathy, of entering into the pain or simply the haptic space of others, and empathy raises ethical problems. Saidiya Hartman, writing of empathy as an excuse for sensationalism in abolitionist literature, is only one of the better-known cultural critics to remind us that empathy is kin to spectatorship, entertainment, co-optation.²⁸ Doc Brite's response to the filming of David Simon's HBO series *Treme* delivers a stark critique of empathic colonization: "I respect many of the locals hired as consultants by 'Treme' (mostly folks who were doing pretty well already, as far as I can tell) and I'm glad if the work has helped them, but I don't feel that Simon and company have done New Orleans any favors by bringing this show here. Let us keep our (fictional) selves in the public eye as we choose to. Don't come sniffing around from Hollywood and take it upon yourself to ~~exploit our pain~~ tell our story."²⁹ *Blogging Tremé*, a promotional site for the HBO series, responds to Brite by implying that he/she is a hypocrite who ignores the cultural work of sentimental fiction, such as Dickens's literary pleas for impoverished London.³⁰ HBO's "literary-historical" defense does not answer Brite's concern that filmmakers compensate residents of Central City, one of New Orleans's poorest neighborhoods, for the inconvenience of filming in their streets and homes. But if sentimental fiction, with its implicit mandate to feel for and humanize those denied civil rights (children, prisoners, animals, slaves), can be invoked as a potential means of recuperating New Orleans, Brite's

own performance of sentimentalism deserves further scrutiny. In *Dispatches*, he/she emphasizes the necessity of foregrounding one's own pleasure in feeling as motivation for what might appear to be an ethic of care.

The first documented BP-related suicide stirs Brite to question the effectiveness of the blog itself as a tool for generating sociality and political action:

On Saturday [June 23, 2010], the *Times-Picayune* printed the story of Captain William "Rookie" Kruse of Foley, Alabama, who appears to be the first BP-oil-disaster-related suicide. I became sort of obsessed with this man, not so much because of any particular thing about him as because *I know he will only be the first*. We saw the wake of suicides after the federal levees failed, and that was when most of the worst had already happened and there were things we could do about it. Now there is nothing we can do, and we know this has only begun to happen. My mind made a weird cross-connection between Captain Rookie and Dylan Thomas's poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London," and I spent a couple of days obsessing on the poem, too, trying to figure out why I'd made this connection . . . Is it that the first death symbolizes all those to come?³¹

The comments section that follows this entry—which also includes a lengthy discussion of Brite's search for a trans-friendly doctor and desire to begin hormone therapy—features a recurrent dialogue between Brite and "wanderingastray," a reader who knew "Rookie" Kruse. "Rookie was a family friend," remarks "wanderingastray." "If you can, try to think of him as the man he was—a friendly, loving soul so connected with the Gulf that he had seawater in his veins. I hate that his death affected you the way it has, but at the same time, there's a tiny part of me that is still at least a little glad that he is remembered."³² Brite's response interrogates his/her own motives for memorializing a stranger's suicide: "I hope my post didn't seem to dishonor or diminish him in any way. It absolutely wasn't my intention, but sometimes I'm afraid I come off as making other people's tragedies all about MEEEEEEEEEE and OMG MY FEEEEEEEEEEELINGS."³³ A reassurance from "wan-

deringastray” that there’s “nothing but respect and love in everything you do, darlin” prompts Brite to reflect upon how “one of the few things I appreciate about having been raised and socialized as a female is that I can usually cry.”³⁴ This is sentimentalism disassembled into the constituent elements of its twentieth-century critique—the feminization of feeling, the dangers of empathic co-optation, the dubious cultural value of representing another’s pain.

In the heyday of the sentimental novel, conversations “breaking down” the effort of fellow feeling also occurred, for example those that inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe to publish *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853) in order to prove that she had not fabricated black suffering in slavery as a means of advancing her own political position or literary career. But the blog makes the critique coextensive, in time and space, with the empathic performance—it offers the possibility of immediate correction from those closest to the injury, in addition to multiple perspectives upon the injury. If nothing else can be said about the personal blog, I would suggest that it has made possible the distribution of authority over feeling, particularly pain and identification with injury, within the sentimental genre. In other words, the problem that Hartman identifies of a single author or silent reader acting as “proxy” for the injured in sentimental texts which rely upon the imagination of shared sentience is troubled by the blog’s interactivity, which authorizes many potential witnesses as well as those perceived as the injured to speak about, or author, human pain (SS, 18). Brite’s hypertext links to a *Los Angeles Times* article on Kruse’s suicide and to Dylan Thomas’s poem offer counternarratives to her or his sentiment, in addition to an active trail of how that sentiment played itself out in his or her reading and physical movement—as Brite must have retrieved the obituary and the poem from a computer file or print archive. We have, in these fragments of “Rookie” Kruse, also a shimmering hologram of Doc Brite’s mobile body, and this is important insofar as Brite, as author, fails to disappear into or stand for Kruse. A few lines down from Kruse’s story, we can link to the Thomas poem “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London” (1945). It is the last line of the poem, “After the first death, there is no other,” that Brite asks us to consider.

Of course, once we have linked to the poem, we can interact

with it as we please, moving away from the specific phrase that Brite remembers. The interactivity of the blog makes the effort of grieving also an effort of collective intelligence, as inevitably readers work together to think through the meanings of Thomas, of Rookie Kruse. I, for one, read more of Thomas's poem. In earlier lines, Thomas refuses the conventional consolation of poetic imagery as an insult to the child's life:

I shall not murder
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth
 Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
 With any further
 Elegy of innocence and youth.³⁵

Throughout the poem, Thomas refuses mourning, in the Freudian sense of replacing the lost object or instigating a new attachment; "the shadow of a sound" of prayer, itself a surrogate for the dead child, will come forth from the poet "never," at least not until the end of all living, when "the still hour / Is come of the sea tumbling in harness." In the preceding line, which concludes the first stanza, and again in the penultimate image of the final stanza, we are asked to conceive of water as a figure of eternity, that which holds the cyclical time of all living and dying and has, by its essence, no end. What seems the poet's refusal of consolation is softened by his imaging of the dead child held in a mode of time figured predominantly as water:

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
 Robed in long friends,
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
 Secret by the unmourning water
 Of the riding Thames.

The comment I choose to add to Doc Brite's remarks on Rookie Kruse's suicide and Dylan Thomas's poem is that the BP blow-out severed water from the traditional symbolism that has allowed oceans and rivers to stand for a temporality larger than any dying.

The still hour came to the Gulf of Mexico, but this hour looked like nothing we imagined, because it made the ocean visible as a collection of mortal bodies—waters “bleeding oil,” in Alabama conservationist John Wathen’s phrase, suffocating and burning animals, bubbling waves that signal damage to the water column by toxic dispersant.³⁶ What becomes of the human when the ocean is no good for metaphor? Where the blogosphere compensates for the bleak condition of being alone with mortality is in its interactive and therefore open-ended mourning—melancholia enabled and emboldened through Internet sociality.

Endurance through Genre

The ecological value of artful expression as means of human endurance became a significant touchstone for discussion in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and to an extent Katrina nurtured the regional arts community that is beginning to respond to BP. In the film *Trouble the Water* (2008), for example, fifteen minutes of Kimberly Rivers Roberts’s and Scott Roberts’s amateur videography, a practice again gaining prominence since the BP media ban, makes possible the imaging of human biological resilience as something like enduring nausea. The viewer loses equilibrium in the Robertses’ dizzying footage, which creates deep mimicry, “communicating trauma as a visceral and cognitive experience,” as Lauren Berlant describes the translation of intimacies made possible through testimonial rhetorics.³⁷ From videography to the blogosphere to the book, experimentation with what we might call EJ genres, artistic forms in the service of human health and survival, began in earnest in Katrina’s wake. “We are becoming aware that biocultural evolution is more tragic than comic,” writes African American poet and critic Jerry W. Ward Jr. in *The Katrina Papers* (2008), “that battles with external nature eventually are transmuted into battles with ourselves.”³⁸ Ward’s project in *TKP*—his shorthand for the book, which is subtitled “A Journal of Trauma and Recovery”—is nothing less than shoring up his, or our, contribution to the biocultural fate of the species. To this end, Ward advocates “creating what is not literature” (53). For him, this means pushing literature

to become “interdependent,” mingling in biological practices (eating, sleeping, sheltering) and the infrastructures that sustain them. Keeping in mind the material organizations that enable particular kinds of art, “interdependence” also could be a call to rethink genre in terms of the sustainability of media, from digital to print.³⁹

Although Ward claims that he neither can nor will theorize the relationship of art and disaster, *TKP* gives philosophical heft to the conversation that shows up un-self-consciously in the proliferation of post-Katrina art about the interdependence of singular lives (e.g., *Nine Lives*). In *TKP*, writing, as a means of making time conventional, serves as a weak surrogate for “living.” Living, in turn, figures as like water, insofar as “life” sympathizes with water’s evasion of measurement and sequence. “Time knows what it is,” Ward writes, “It is flowing past the hotel on the surface of the Mississippi River” (180). Water’s instigation to enact time as something other than progressive sequence figures in “Hurricane Haiku,” one of the many poems that interrupt *TKP*’s narrative prose: “Aqua vitae heard / Mad death massing in their throats: / Blues, disaster hymns” (53–54). The water of life, strong liquor, strangles the urban poor, the southern poor, Africans “in the slave ships,” as Ward elsewhere refers to Katrina survivors. But after or even within the episode of human dying, in the collapsed time of haiku, “aquae vitae” returns, as rhythmic (time-conscious) language, the blues, “disaster hymns” that immerse Katrina in histories of flooding along the Mississippi Delta, of racialized poverty, of pellagra and sharecropping. Sound, in “Hurricane Haiku,” is voice *and* water, both standing for prelinguistic, elemental expression that cannot be parsed through Saussurean or calendrical systems of difference. If this implies a romantic naturalization of voice, the poem’s thrust is pragmatic. The storytelling arts, the blues, hymns, are heroic but not triumphant here, human biocultural rhythms that relive traumas of systemic disruption.

Throughout *TKP*, Ward reminds us how the repetitive—and improvisational—also index diminished parameters of human health and energy that should not be obscured by the beauty of the rhythms; the lessons of African American history include the contingency of culture and health, for all humans. “It is not about

us,” Ward writes, presumably referring to Katrina survivors and particularly to black Katrina survivors. “The sad condition of our planet is the damnation of all classes; it is a signal that the American empire shall gnash its teeth” (114). Ward ties African American history to the tentative “pre-future” of “our planet” and the fate of humans more generally, again highlighting, in a lyrical echo of Bullard’s work in environmental justice, the relevance of the Gulf Coast, and the black South, to U.S. ecological futures. Updating Richard Wright’s naturalism for the era of global climate change, Ward urges a consideration of global climate change in terms of war—race war in the sense of both warring racial factions and of *the human race* at war with the collateral effects of modern technologies and political compromise. Ward writes: “Friends urge me to see the film that is based on Al Gore’s lectures regarding global warming. If I don’t ever see the film, cool. In either case, the weather in New Orleans can inform me about the progress of global warming. The film I really want to see pertains to the origins of World War Three. It has not yet been produced and edited to protect the guilty” (183). The weather in New Orleans stands for the vulnerability of that city, and many locales within the global South, to climate collapse. That the U.S. Gulf Coast delivers an American environmental prophecy is central to Ward’s critique.

With “World War Three,” Ward offers a frame for global climate change that supersedes older environmental narratives. Turning repeatedly to poetic forms, he essentially jettisons story structure to display the unclosing wounds of New Orleans’ black, Latino/Latina, Vietnamese, largely impoverished climate refugees; Doc Brite’s *Dispatches from Tanganyika* similarly maintains an open narrative frame, inviting a collective response to local injury. In contrast, Josh Neufeld’s graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (2008) elicits a national public through more conventional plotting; the novel grew out of a comics blog hosted by the storytelling site SMITH magazine and to some extent is about the art of telling a compelling story, crafting suspense and resolution. SMITH offers a test run for comics authors, who can increase the market for print editions of their work by tens of thousands through preliminary web distribution.⁴⁰ Neufeld’s popular audience shows up

awkwardly in the blog, for instance, when a comment praising his skillful plotting (“Looking forward to the rest!”) is answered by another online reader: “I wonder if any of you jerkoffs are really from New Orleans . . . but yeah . . . looking forward for the rest . . . ha ha.”⁴¹ We can credit this correction to what I’ve described as the blog’s capacity for distributing authority over feeling, such that sentiment is negotiated by multiple authors.

By making Katrina into comics, Neufeld takes sentimentalism to its representational limit, wherein actual persons become stripped-down icons to be “filled” by the viewer/reader. Following Marshall McLuhan, comics theorist Scott McCloud argues that because our “mind picture” of ourselves is “just a sketchy arrangement . . . a sense of shape . . . a general sense of placement,” we see realistic drawings of faces as other persons but experience cartoon faces as *potentially* ourselves.⁴² Similarly, Sean Cubitt recognizes comics as a precursor to simulation games, although the ludic possibility built into games with multiple outcomes cannot be realized through comics panels, or in a comic that treats a historical event (such as Katrina) whose outcome is known.⁴³

A.D. marks a departure for Josh Neufeld from his first Katrina-related publication, *Katrina Came Calling: A Gulf Coast Deployment* (2006), which appeared as a LiveJournal blog and then as a printed book. The evolution of Neufeld’s experiments with genre (blog, printed journal, comics) traces a struggle to find artistic forms relevant to ecological endurance. In *Katrina Came Calling*, Neufeld recounts his stint as a Red Cross volunteer in Biloxi, Mississippi, taking himself to task for his self-identified uselessness as a “culture-producer” (“what real good are comic book stories . . . ?”), theorizing his commitment to Katrina survivors as an effect of “scopophilic attraction,” and wondering if the 9/11 bombings created an expectation of the scale of crisis that Katrina answers more fully than smaller disasters.⁴⁴ *Katrina Came Calling* digs around in the psychology of empathy, turning up an appeal to ecological crisis as, at best, a new kind of war that might encourage moral clarity. “For me, ‘disaster relief’ had a double meaning,” Neufeld reflects, “It also meant relief from the doubt, confusion, and gnawing self-hatred of being an American in today’s world.”⁴⁵ *A.D.* also

offers relief from the uncertainties of being an American insofar as it subverts the World War II-era origins of the comic superhero, that midcentury everyman, with his anxieties about the bomb, who was expanded through larger-than-life avatars of exceptionalism and Cold War preparedness. In contrast, *A.D.* gives reader-viewers the opportunity to become larger-than-life humans in extremis. The book plots a virtual tour of bare life, leading the viewer to enact closure by letting go, panel by panel, of all the privileges of U.S. modernity, including comics.

Chronicling seven “real” individuals’ journeys through hurricane and flood, *A.D.* highlights the diversity, connectivity, and segregation of a modern city, suggesting the distinct odds of survival for an unemployed African American woman (Denise), an Iranian shopkeeper and his black fishing buddy (Abbas and Darnell), a gay doctor who lives on the high ground of the French Quarter (“The Doctor”), a middle-class black student (Kwame), and two downwardly mobile white artists (Leo and Michelle). Neufeld presents almost an archaeology of the private spaces of this varied cast, their homes and small businesses in New Orleans, as if sifting through Pompeiian households and calculating class-based resilience based on which furnishings are unearthed from the ruins. In the comics tradition attributed to *Tintin* creator Hergé (Georges Rémi), Neufeld’s settings are realistic in their meticulous accounting of material culture, while his characters are drawn loosely enough to evoke broad identification, even though we read them as variously ethnic or “white.” Denise becomes our Dantean guide through the underworlds of the New Orleans Superdome and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, nightmare instantiations of the graphic novel’s generic iconicity. Here there are no particular objects or persons. The ubiquitous male/female icons on the bathroom doors of these institutional spaces acquire a referential tie-in to filth and excrement, raising questions about how the iconicity of the comic genre might also enable depersonalization and disposability.

As a hand art that requires little translation, since it is not dependent upon language or culturally specific imaging, comics potentially could disseminate new global stories to normalize more sustainable energy regimes or defamiliarize obsolescent ones, as in

Harriet Russell's post-petroleum short comic "An Endangered Species, Oil" (2007).⁴⁶ Yet the ecological fate of print comics is itself uncertain, betraying the lack of resilience of certain artistic genres within increasingly untenable systems of production. Neufeld queries the future of comics in *A.D.* through his character-double, Leo, who loses some 15,000 comic books in the post-Katrina flood. When Leo learns that his Mid-City neighborhood is under seven feet of water, his subsequent disaster fantasy earns a two-page panel, featuring Leo, starkly uncolored and therefore visually permeable, spinning with his erstwhile comics in a deep red, toxic sludge. The white, paper-colored bubbles from Leo's mouth suggest that he will survive, but his comics are already pink, taking on the expressionistic hue of the killing waters. Given the amount of water that it takes to make comics, newsprint, or any printed book, the fate of Leo's collection could be said to refer back to the material history of this popular art in some of the oldest and most ecologically damaging industrial practices.

The making of paper involves cooking wood chips until the tightly bound wood fibers separate into pulp, a process that consumes a tremendous amount of fresh water—which is why paper mills are often built next to rivers. According to Michael W. Toffel and Arpad Horvath, one year's worth of the *New York Times* (a single subscription) consumes about 22,700 liters of water.⁴⁷ Toxic effluents released back into rivers and streams by paper mills include cancer-causing dioxins. These effluents have been found to impair fish reproduction by interacting with fish neurotransmitter systems, and they are linked to human mercury poisoning through consumption of contaminated fish.⁴⁸ About 76 percent of all pulpwood production for U.S. paper takes place in the U.S. South—the paper industry was an early target of Robert Bullard's analyses in the 1980s. The latest episode of ecocide inflicted upon the South by the paper industry involves genetically engineered pine plantations, some sterile and others allowed to propagate their seed, which will result in a falling-off of biodiversity. Because the U.S. South has less public land than any other national region, it has been difficult for environmentalists to block the growth of so-called "frankenforests" through state or federal regulation.⁴⁹

By virtue of their means of production, books like *A.D.* are looped into the regional ecosystem failure of which Katrina and the BP blowout only compose dramatic examples. As a complex four-color work, *A.D.* was printed in China, where looser environmental and labor regulation make possible cost-effective printing of books, including graphic novels, which require high levels of craftsmanship.⁵⁰ The dissemination of visual art through printing is quite literally very bad for the environment, contributing to the poisoning of rivers, to the clear-cutting of forests, and to global climate change—the book industry is the fourth-largest industrial emitter of greenhouse gasses. Add to that the emissions generated by shipping art books back to the United States from China. The unsustainability of print has led writers and graphic artists to digital media, whose primary environmental advantage over print media is its elimination of paper.⁵¹ Yet, as Neufeld suggests in contrasting his blog and book versions of *A.D.*, the book allows for a play of “aspects of timing, meter, and rhythm,” due to the tiering of images on the page and to the physical act of turning pages, which our computer screens don’t allow.⁵² I would add that the power of the gutter, that blank space between comics panels that invites the reader/viewer to make conceptual bridges across time, is diminished by the digital format—particularly where a web host allows reader comments onto the page so that social noise interrupts the perceptual “filling in” that cartoon iconicity invites. To me, it is unclear whether the social potentiality enabled by interactive web features such as comments sections ought entirely to replace the empathic mimicry associated with conventions of silent reading; neurobiological speculations about intersubjective relations suggest that recognition of the shared states that make us human requires “inner imitation,” which might be reinforced in silent reading, by imagining other lives.⁵³

To be human, to be southern, to imagine our own bare life within a twenty-first-century ecology, we need now more than ever representations, narratives, pictures, moving and still. The answer to Martin Heidegger’s question in the lecture “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935-37)—“Is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our histori-

cal existence?”—seems now more than ever to be yes.⁵⁴ Understanding the Gulf Coast as a diminished American future may be crucial both to national and species survival. Such understanding takes time, the sort of time handled well by the traditional arts of duration. But the printed arts require great quantities of water and trees. There may not be time enough, in terms of the endurance of human habitat, for print media or for commercial film production, which also relies heavily upon petroleum products and is a major emitter of greenhouse gasses. What this means for the endurance of genre remains to be seen. The relentlessly social and interactive creativity of the blogosphere may be complemented by performance arts that are entirely off-grid, or Internet sites that refer out to embodied performances, like the New Orleans social network *Humid Beings*, whose name reminds us that we, too, are made of water.⁵⁵

Notes

Thanks to Katrina Dodson and Michelle Ty for their generous and rapid editorial work on this essay.

1. “Millions of Barrels of Oil Safely Reach Port in Major Environmental Catastrophe,” *The Onion*, August 11, 2010, <http://www.theonion.com/articles/millions-of-barrels-of-oil-safely-reach-port-in-ma,17875>.
2. Rebecca Solnit, Diary, *London Review of Books*, August 5, 2010, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n15/rebecca-solnit/diary/print>.
3. Mike Davis, “Los Angeles after the Storm: The Dialectic of Ordinary Disaster,” *Antipode* 27 (Summer 1995): 221–41.
4. Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 55 (Fall 2009): 443–48. See also Curtis Marez, “What Is a Disaster?” *American Quarterly* 61 (September 2009): ix–xi; this entire special issue of *American Quarterly*, edited by Clyde Woods, creates a strong template for cultural studies of disaster.
5. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
6. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Aldgate Press, n.d.).
7. Drew Landry, “BP Blues,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6E9HyoOyHg8>.

8. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 23. Hereafter cited as *PN*.
9. Solnit discusses the feeling of being in New Orleans and breathing in VOCs (volatile organic compounds), with a periodic “gas station smell,” in “Diary.”
10. Timothy Morton, “The Mesh,” in *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2011).
11. When I refer to the degree that “U.S. modernity” has taken hold in the Deep South, I consider both proximity to the grid and fulfillment in this region of the now ordinary U.S. landscape of highways, low-density suburbs, strip malls, fast food and gasoline service islands, and shopping centers ringed by parking lots or parking towers. For an extended reading of African American expressions of environmental melancholia in the South and other U.S. regions, see Jennifer James, “Eco-Melancholia: Slavery, War, and Black Ecological Imaginings,” in *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2011).
12. Barack Obama, “Text of Obama’s Speech on Gulf Oil Spill,” *New Haven Register*, July 16, 2010, <http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2010/06/15/news/doc4c184f9627d4f201824265.txt>.
13. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
14. Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997), 12–13.
15. Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), xiii. Hereafter cited as *DD*.
16. Lawrence Buell, “Toxic Discourse,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Spring 1998): 641.
17. “Lewis Black’s Spill Solution: Declare War, Invade BP,” *The Raw Story*, June 10, 2010, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2010/06/lewis-blacks-spill-solution-declare-war-invade-bp>.
18. Mike Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana’s Cajun Coast* (New York: Vintage, 2003). Hereafter cited as *BF*.

19. Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force and the Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Authority, *Coast 2050: Toward a Sustainable Coastal Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, 1998), 1–2.
20. Discussion of these figures and the fate of *Coast 2050* can be found in Mark Fischett, “Drowning New Orleans,” *Scientific American*, October 2001, 78–85.
21. Tom McGuire, *History of the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry in Southern Louisiana*, vol. 2, *Bayou Lafourche: Oral Histories of the Oil and Gas Industry* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, 2008), vii. Hereafter cited as *BL*.
22. Martha Serpas, “Decreation,” *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (New York: Norton, 2007), 79.
23. W. Lance Bennett discusses the Greenpeace/Adbusters’s Coke “Spotlight” campaign and other environmental activism via the Internet in “New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism,” in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, ed. Nick Couldry and James Curran (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). Hereafter cited as “NM.”
24. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 201. Thanks to Michelle Ty for her suggestions regarding Arendt’s relevance to the space of appearance facilitated by internet communities.
25. Bethany Halford, “Scientists Use Social Networking to Study Spill,” *Chemical and Engineering News*, June 2010, 24.
26. Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2001).
27. Poppy Z. Brite, *Dispatches from Tanganyika: The Journal of Poppy Z. Brite*, “‘This a lotta shit,’ someone said, but Ignatius ignored the voice,” June 29, 2010, at 10:55 p.m., <http://docbrite.livejournal.com/739298.html>.
28. Hartman’s analysis moves between a widely applicable critique of empathic co-optation and an explicit analysis of how the fungibility of black bodies in chattel slavery enables the “projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values.” Hartman’s ironic use of “enjoyment” indicates the pleasures of feeling another’s pain but finds its primary context in the legal definition of “enjoy” as “to have, possess.” Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 22–23. Hereafter cited as *SS*.

29. Brite quoted in mf, "Treme Is Not OK," *Back of Town: Blogging Treme*, March 23, 2010, <http://backoftown.wordpress.com/2010/03/23/treme-is-not-ok>.
30. mf, "Treme Is Not OK."
31. Brite, "'This a lotta shit.'"
32. "wanderingastray," "Comments," *Dispatches from Tanganyika: The Journal of Poppy Z. Brite*, June 30, 2010, 4:10 a.m., <http://docbrite.livejournal.com/739298.html>.
33. Brite, "Comments," June 30, 2010, 4:14 a.m..
34. "wanderingastray," "Comments," June 30, 2010, 4:22 a.m.
35. Dylan Thomas, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," hyperlink from Poppy Z. Brite, *Dispatches*, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-refusal-to-mourn-the-death-by-fire-of-a-child>.
36. John Wathen quoted from his Internet video, as "hccreekkeeper," "BP Slick THE SOURCE 05.07.10," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG8JHSAVYT0>. See also Wathen's blog, <http://www.bpoilslick.blogspot.com>.
37. Lauren Berlant, "Trauma and Ineloquence," *Cultural Values* 5 (January 2001): 44.
38. Jerry W. Ward Jr. *The Katrina Papers: A Journal of Trauma and Recovery* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2008), 206.
39. See Michael Ziser's brilliant discussion of the relative carbon weight of culture in new media systems in "Home Again: Peak Oil, Climate Change, and the Aesthetics of Transition," in *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2011).
40. Jeff Newelt, comics editor at SMITH, contends that web publication could produce a graphic novel that "sells 60,000 or 70,000 copies instead of 5,000." Quoted in Dave Itzkoff, "The Unfinished Tale of an Unlikely Hero," *New York Times*, September 5, 2010.
41. Josh Neufeld, A.D.: *New Orleans after the Deluge presented by SMITH Magazine* (January 1, 2007), <http://www.smithmag.net/afterthedeluge/2007/01/01/prologue-1>.
42. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 30-37.
43. Sean Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics* (London: SAGE, 1998), 14.
44. Josh Neufeld, *Katrina Came Calling: A Gulf Coast Deployment* (Brooklyn: Josh Neufeld Comix and Stories, 2005-6), 2, 82.
45. Neufeld, *Katrina*, "Afterward" (n.p.)
46. Harriet Russell, "An Endangered Species, Oil," in *Sorry, Out of Gas*,

- ed. Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini (Montreal, Canada and Mantova, Italy: Canadian Centre for Architecture and Maurizio Corraini, 2007), n.p.
47. Michael W. Toffel and Arpad Horvath, "Environmental Implications of Wireless Technologies: News Delivery and Business Meetings," *Environmental Science and Technology* 38 (May 2004): 2963.
 48. Robert Weinhold, "A New Pulp Fact? New Research Suggests a Possible Mechanism for Some of the Damage to Fish from Pulp and Paper Mills," *Environmental Science and Technology* 43 (March 2009): 1242.
 49. Conner Bailey, Peter R. Sinclair, and Mark R. Dubois, "Future Forests: Forecasting Social and Ecological Consequences of Genetic Engineering," *Society and Natural Resources* 17 (August 2004): 642, 643, 645.
 50. Noelle Skodzinski, "Offshoring and the Global Marketplace," *Book Business Magazine*, <http://www.bookbusinessmag.com>.
 51. Nathalie Hardy, "A Writer's Green Guide," *Poets and Writers*, 37, no. 1, <http://lion.chadwyck.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048>; Michael J. Ducey, "Paper's Environmental Agenda," *Graphic Arts Monthly*, July 2001 (accessed July 17, 2010); <http://www.gammag.com>.
 52. Josh Neufeld, "Afterword," in *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (New York: Pantheon, 2009), 193.
 53. I'm referring to the controversial study of mirror neurons as a subpersonal ground for empathy and more broadly for the recognition of common humanity. For example, see Vittorio Gallese, "The 'Shared Manifold' Hypothesis: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (2001): 43. By "the shared manifold," Gallese intends the states we share with others, including "emotions . . . body schema . . . our being subject to pain" (44).
 54. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 78.
 55. See <http://nola.humidbeings.com/about>.