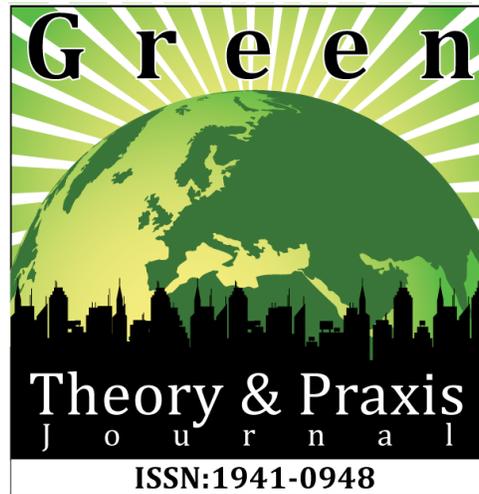




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Special Issue:

The Public Humanities, Post-Hurricane Harvey

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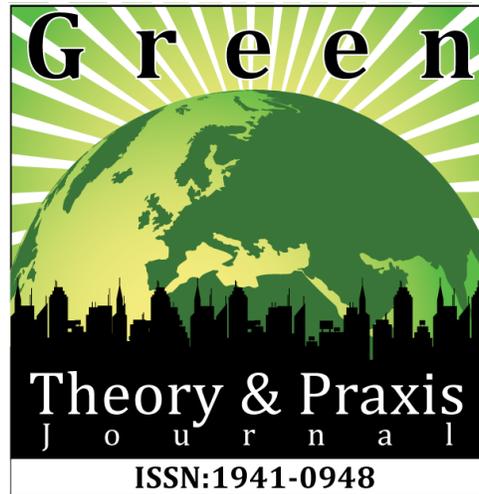
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Introduction: The Public Humanities, Post-Harvey

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Abstract

This essay introduces the readers to Hurricane Harvey's impact on the ways in which the public humanities have been conceptualized at Rice University and the University of Houston, specifically in the convening of a think tank whose participants' essays constitute this special issue. It shows readers how the several authors' works fit together as urgent calls for the inclusion of humanistic thinking in conversations around disaster and theorizes how the exclusion of the humanities from these conversations is a product of and contributor to such disasters.

Introduction: The Public Humanities, Post-Harvey

Halfway through Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984), the novel's academic, unbearable un-hero finds himself in a refugee camp, fleeing an "Airborne Toxic Event" and pitifully complaining that things like this don't happen to people like him: "'Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his street in one of those TV floods?'" (p. 114) The sensibility expressed here is that knowledge is supposed to put the knower on the right side of power: both practically, insofar as cultural capital is exchangeable for social capital and keeps the learned from being on the receiving end of injustice, and morally, insofar as their knowledge of such injustices absolve them of any culpability.

What is perhaps most appalling about this pseudo-intellectual sensibility of blameless privilege is that it represents the purest expression of postmodern anti-intellectualism. To deny culpability when we know the part we have played, to yearn for an aesthetic sublimity when we know that there is no place of safety, is to wall off our life-world with a fragile, self-satisfied ignorance. And yet for academic humanists to hurry into what are called politics, policy, and culture, following our colleagues in the applied and natural sciences, runs the very real risk of imagining away our distance from the world as it putatively is, and thereby abandoning the historical, philosophical, and aesthetic existences we know of, whose potentialities include much-needed alternative forms-of-life. In short, it would be a profound mistake, *especially* in moments of existential crisis, to ask the humanities to abandon their knowledge-producing social function; such an abandonment is precisely the opposite of what Linda Ray Pratt (1995) was advocating when she called for the humanities to "go public": "Too often, politics is power, not wisdom ... [but] [f]ew of us are willing to forego wisdom, knowledge, and truth" (p. 49). The problem here is not wisdom but rather the tension at the heart of any public humanism, between the need to challenge society with new ways of thinking, knowing, and feeling, and at the same time winning social investment in this transformation.

This articulation of a tension in the public humanities is neither accommodationist nor pessimistic but rather pragmatic with seeds of militancy; the crises in the humanities are opportunities as much as they are problems if we consider them from their points of connection with broader global crises. And in Houston, at Rice University, where I am writing this introduction, the necessity of this perspective was made crystal clear during Hurricane Harvey, which in 2016 had damaged or destroyed a quarter of the homes in Houston (Kinder Institute, 2018, p. 3), and reminded us all that everyone here is both culpable and vulnerable—but not equally. A reading that took place at Rice in Spring 2019 exemplified this alternative sensibility, which Kate Rigby has called "dancing with disaster." Martha Serpas, a poet at the University of Houston and a native of South Louisiana, and

Paul Otremba, a poet at Rice and formerly of UH, both read new and old works in memory of Harvey. Gathered just before dusk in James Turrell's *Twilight Epiphany* Skyspace, a two-story sod-and-steel pyramid whose dynamic lighting interacts with the sky through a roof portal reminiscent of the Roman Pantheon's, the poets spoke to the crowd underneath a visible plume of smoke from the Deer Park fire, which burned from March 17-20, east of downtown Houston (Fig. 1).

I opened the event by reading the day's air quality report for Houston as forecasted by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (2019): "... Additionally, smoke from an industrial fire in Deer Park near Houston could result in locally increased PM2.5 levels at times near and immediately downwind of the fire, though the AQI across the majority of the Houston area should remain in the 'Good' range overall" (n.p.). Serpas read from *The Dirty Side of the Storm* and a forthcoming essay on Harvey, recalling to us the gulf coast's long history of losing ground: "This is marsh, the egrets say. Someday it will be open water, when we will stop coming and reminding you that." And she suggested that ethical agency—a term I borrow from Niki Kasumi Clements—even for our species, whose actions have been so universally deadly, has always been present to us as an alternative future: "Without the agency of the marginalized, and our mercy when we feel marginalized, we will be doomed to repeat this past which has always been our present."

Otremba, also a lover of birds, read from his forthcoming collection, *Levee*, about creatures and effects taking flight and new forms: "If there is a lesson/on how not to worry, it's that you're not stuck only being one thing,/the multitudes in me and the multitudes in you." He seems to suggest that such transformations attune us to the ever-present worlds we have made and those we have unmade—and that we have been schooled in ignorance of both: "No one is afraid/of what they should be, complained Horace./It's simply enough to pass beneath a branch of the storm-weakened live oak/or to move through this place in a body/playing telephone with its own cells...." Blanketed with unnatural weather, our poets refused to be smothered by it. Like the contemplatives who inhale the world's ills and exhale love



Fig. 1: Paul Otremba and Martha Serpas, March 18, 2019.

back into it, they transformed our Airborne Toxic Event from a terrifying spectacle into a planetary gathering: we all live under a Houston sky, changing which requires undertakings which will change Houston.

This particular event took place as part of the “Public Humanities Post-Harvey Initiative” during the 2018-19 academic year, led by Farès el-Dahdah and Melissa Bailar, the director and assistant director of the Rice HRC. In year-long think tank that I led as HRC faculty, five humanities graduate students from Rice and UH met regularly to explore different avenues by which the humanities might contribute to (and meaningfully critique) the current, dominant modes of disaster preparedness, resiliency, and recovery in the wake of Harvey. In a seminar setting, the group brought its varied areas of expertise and community engagement to the table, from literature, theater, oral history, animal studies, gender studies, and the arts, and met with outside experts, from green infrastructure engineers in Houston, to scholars in the emergent field of critical infrastructure studies, to local poets, in order to gain a better understanding of how to talk about what happened to our city, and what we could do going forward, both here and elsewhere. This collection of essays represents the joint effort of six researchers at the two institutions to identify specific matters of public concern in the domain of “disasters” that could benefit from specific humanistic interventions and contributions.

Such academic joint efforts are both precedented and productive. Consider just Houston, where engineering and social-scientific initiatives have been undertaken in response to and anticipation of similar disasters. Responding to the destruction of Hurricane Ike, which made landfall in the United States as a Category 2 storm in 2008 but still managed to inflict billions of dollars in damage and left millions stranded and without power in Texas, the University of Houston and Rice partnered to develop civil engineering solutions to these problems in the joint Severe Storm Prediction, Education, & Evacuation from Disasters Center. In March 2016, six months before Harvey, the new media investigative journalism outfit ProPublica published an interactive data-journalistic simulation of how various, probable storm events could impact the region with their “Hell and High Water” series, using SSPEED data. In July of the same year, Rice’s Shell Center for Sustainability published preliminary findings from funded research on the intersecting sociological and environmental risk profiles along the Houston shipping channel, highlighting numerous chemical plants that stood a better-than-50-percent probability for failure in a 500-year flood event (Shell Center, 2017, pp. 26-27) in a city that has set a tempo of experiencing such events nearly annually.

These models and plans, made by civil engineers, environmental scientists, and quantitative sociologists, address real problems in actionable ways. However, these responses to current and projected disasters are limited in specific, articulable ways; what is more, humanists have both diagnosed these failings in our critiques of the industrial techno-sciences, and have proposed alternatives and supplements to these frameworks in our imaginative and creative endeavors. To

put this polemically: *current plans for disaster resilience, management, and recovery are at best incomplete and at worst counterproductive as a result of the failure to include humanistic thought. To make the argument more charitably: the question of disaster response and preparedness is one of the most promising areas for humanistic thought to contribute to public discourse and to reassert its relevance.*

Consider the “PETS” act. In 2006, following Katrina’s devastating impact to the gulf states, but specifically in response to public outcry over a photo of a child being separated from his dog at the door of a New Orleans storm shelter, the federal government established the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standard Act, providing guidelines by which FEMA could oversee disaster managers’ provision of resources for companion animals; during Harvey, the George R. Brown Convention Center was the first such shelter to admit animals under the act’s provisions. For all its charity and life-saving potential, this framework is both excessively anthropocentric and insufficiently humane. By including “companion” animals to the exclusion of others, it doubles down on humanity’s arbitrary legislation of life and death; it exposes wildlife to mass death beyond our protection, and industrially-farmed livestock to a moribund, born-to-die existence, both of which exclusions contribute in their own ways to ecological and climate collapse.

The discipline of animal studies that has emerged following Cary Wolfe, and the new articulations of biopolitics that follow Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, have provided us with a critical vocabulary to re-assess the arbitrary hospitality that we show towards animals with the PETS act, and to ask whose cries we are responding to. As Derrida argues in his late essay on “the philosophical problematic of the animal” (Derrida, 2002, p. 395), our exclusive inclusion of companion animals both operates cynically, as a disavowal of our culpability in the annihilation of species, but at the same time quite radically, as a flash of self-doubt and self-recognition: who are we to legislate species’ life and death? Lesli Vollrath’s contribution to this special issue therefore takes up the challenge of universalizing hospitality from an animal studies perspective, in order to show that attention to our shared vulnerability is necessary not only for flourishing but even for survival.

Or we might consider civil engineering risk models and solutions, especially in their novel, interdisciplinary collaborations with social and environmental scientists. In Houston, a fascinating debate is currently unfolding across the spectrum of infrastructure planning, from green to grey. The greenest of the green infrastructuralists argue that the native prairie land, pocked with potholes and tallgrass, is the best buffer against flooding events; the green-grey engineers argue that such natural buffers are overwhelmed by today’s peak events, and so need human-made supplements such as massive detention ponds; the greyest of the grey, the Army Corps engineers, argue that we need to drain the swamp in order to manage it and its attendant disasters, which necessitates deeper concrete channels and higher concrete walls. And in the complexity of this debate, even the greenest shade grey (they do allow that construction will continue in some manner) and the greyest

shade green (they collaboratively integrate their macro efforts with smaller green projects and recognize the indispensability of natural systems for buffering cities against storm surges).

The humanities are possessed of nuanced theoretical apparatuses for mediating the complexities of this debate as well as identifying and addressing the internal contradictions of each position, which are both obvious and intractable in a city that is drowning itself in seas raised by the oil that fuels its economy. The category of “the planetary” which emerged out of Gayatri Spivak’s (2012) postcolonial engagement with Marxist geography and critique of “the global” allows us to negotiate the tension inherent in the question of “the built environment,” as both human-made yet geological in its scale; Ursula K. Heise (2008), working more immediately in ecocriticism, has elaborated this category of the planetary as the appropriate frame for developing a meaningful “sense of place” at a moment of global warming and global capitalism; and, as Tim Morton (2016) has argued, these precise conditions make “place” into a non-local phenomenon (p. 11).

Texas is unfortunately well-situated to study such non-localized places and spaces, as water historian Kenna Lang Archer (2015) reminds us in her study of the Brazos River: “the string of projects proposed along the Lower, Middle, and Upper Brazos Rivers between 1821 and 1980 speaks not only to the determination of a people committed to the broad idea of development but also to shifting ideas about the shape, form, and purpose of improvement” (p. xix). While infrastructural success stories blind us to our vulnerabilities, the hydrology of Houston and its upstream neighbors has kept this dialectic uncomfortably close to the surface, and reminded us of the necessity of shared historical awareness. And so while this white paper is written with an eye to planetary concerns in an age of climactic change and ecological collapse, many of our examples are local because Texas has been on the leading edge of the historical developments that brought us to this point, and is poised to be ahead of the curve in experiencing the consequences. Kevin MacDonnell’s contribution to this white paper therefore addresses the question of what new forms of citizenship, what political geographies and hydrologies are necessary for inhabiting this particular end of the earth.

Indeed, the question of culture and the possibility for mutual understanding raises the problematic of creative works and aesthetic theory, for which the humanities serves as its own foil, offering both the progressive enlightenment paradigm of a *sensus communus* and the postmodern/Romantic formulation of aesthetics as helping us to imagine the unimaginable, projecting utopian potentialities, and sheltering and nurturing forms of life excluded under modernity’s regimes of instrumental reason. My intention in outlining above these theoretical shortcomings in non-humanities models for what we broadly call “disaster preparedness” and “resiliency” is simply to point out that *these solutions will not work for the very specific reason that they lack humanistic input*. Of course, to argue that the humanities should have an equal seat at the table with respect to pressing problems is to make a deceptively modest proposal, is to use the rhetorical trick of profound understatement adopted by the engaged artist-activist Ted Purves (2005) when he argued

that “what we want is free.” To request the humanities’ inclusion on an equal footing in disaster planning and response is to make a reasonable request which highlights the unreasonableness of excluding such a broad domain of thought and action.

Indeed, the programmatic exclusion of the arts from matters of pressing concern begins to suggest that those in charge of disaster management suggests that part of their job is to downwardly-manage political imagination. It is for this reason that two of our contributors interrogate the status of art in the context of such disasters and the humanities. Joe Carson, an eco-critic and performance actor, explores his own work in the community and the community response to the devastation experienced by a local playhouse, in order to make a posthumanist case for a Brechtian aesthetics of alienation. Marley Foster, a sculptor and art theorist, approaches the question from a different angle, arguing that our tendency to criticize rather than build, coupled with the terrors of ecological collapse, makes for a toxic combination when we critique pleasure in order to critique consumer capitalism. Consumerist economic stimulation in fact constitutes a disinvestment, argues Bernard Stiegler (2010), and Foster makes a case for reclaiming pleasure from critique, in order to resist the logic of austerity. Houston-based artist Lynn McCabe (2019), who studied under Purves, came close to synthesizing these views when she argued that the humanities and engaged art necessarily operate according to a logic of abundance:

It is my proposition that a radical love, one predicated on our assumed mutual perfection and not our lack may offer a strategy towards a new methodology for the engagement of artists As we look to the rebuilding of not only our city of Houston but cities across the country, it is my assertion that we need to acknowledge this collective need as the solution. Not a gift, but many gifts, a process of exchange, a becoming, together (p. 76).

The humanities are already in possession of extant disciplines, archival resources, and robust theories for contributing to these problem areas, and these disciplines’ value inheres in our ability to share them. We should be generous in both our critiques and our contributions to ongoing discussions concerning disaster preparedness, recovery, and resiliency.

Finally, we might even consider the mechanisms of data gathering, analysis, and archiving that have developed around anticipated disaster scenarios. We might for instance ask what institutional/disciplinary motivations have led to a proliferation of sociological data publishing platforms without a concomitant, programmatic flourishing of humanities disaster archives. An imaginative and politically ambitious contribution to the question of humanities disaster archiving, which approaches the task as a problem of archiving for the future, is offered by Joshua Gottlieb-Miller, in his micro-history of Houstonian oral history projects, as inflected by theories of folklore. As Gottlieb-Miller reminds us, public humanities projects of this sort need to embrace their implicitly normative dimension – in Houston, a city built on the erasure of its troubled political

history and ignorance of its topography/hydrology, this normative dimension addresses the fact that engaging communities is a form of disaster planning, management, resilience, and rebuilding that necessarily participates in the process of community-making.

To return to the chemical plume that opened this introduction: the anthropocene demands that a public humanism embrace its inherent tensions between addressing, and creating, a public. Ironic distanciation is not something we can congratulate ourselves for when, as Morton has observed, we are all hypocrites, enmeshed in our own destruction (Morton, 2013); indeed, it has never been particularly politically tractable (Bewes, 1997). Again: “Climate is Something Different,” Otremba’s most explicit dialogue with Morton’s work, makes us feel that universally bubbling-up something, a self-misconstruing vitalism:

... I mean this flood now abated,
Yet still as it will be fifty, a hundred years from now, and you, gathered
on what shore you may have found there, you in this echo
I might have detected in pulses under the water’s depth,
and—measuring them—have found myself also, does it help
I only wanted so I could have the need?

If the task of public humanism has always been to articulate a counter-public sensibility while meeting the public where it is at, the apparent difficulty of a post-anthropocentric public humanism in fact reframes the problem in a clarifying if urgent way. Academia need not “reach out” to some alien public but rather come to terms with the fact that we hunch under and tiptoe over the same union of earth and sky: an earth that is billowing toxins into the heavens and a sky that is falling on our heads.

In the process of revising this introduction, I came to feel uncomfortably less like Serpas and Otremba, and more like DeLillo’s comitragic scholar of the tragicomic field of “Hitler Studies.” I began the rewrite on September 20, the day our group was supposed to meet for the purpose – but tropical depression Imelda has shut down much of the city, perhaps in solidarity with the day’s planned climate strikes. I have not checked to see how those protests came off. I did take an hour in the morning to take a jog around the neighborhood, my first since recently moving to “midtown.” My route began a block east of the Midtown Drainage Project’s limits, one of many infrastructure-rebuilding projects that accelerated after Harvey. Heading east from here, one crosses 288, the local low point that acts as a detention pond for the surrounding neighborhoods, trapping water during peak events, and sometimes drivers. On the other side of the freeway is a ridge of old, sturdy homes on elevated lots from when this area was a center of black wealth in this decentralized city. 288 was built through the predominantly black third ward in order to facilitate automobile traffic from the downtown to the suburbs, in the sprawl growth pattern according to which Houston was the exemplary and exceptional “sunbelt city,” as post-war

sociologists termed this particularly American spatialization of neoliberal urbanism. Houston typified the twin aspects of depoliticized urbanization: antidemocratic planning and extreme inequality (Fisher, 1990, pp. 40, 46). And so when a highway was planned through here, it exhibited at best an utter disregard and carelessness towards the people who lived and worked in, or just visited the place. The population and asset value began a steady decline (Shelton, 2017, pp. 76-81), and since this construction, locals have been struggling against the legacy and perpetuation of this neglect.

Crossing over the 288 freeway/detention pond, one finds that outside the Montrose and Midtown Drainage Projects' limits, the flooding infrastructure can go quickly from moderate to substandard to nonexistent. Past the sugar hill stone houses and shaky new speculative developments to the north and south on this rise, the drainage is largely in streetside gulleys. Such drainage ditches can be effective but, by the fifth block on Tuam, just past Emancipation Park at Delano, these have become filled in by silt and grown over by vegetation. Robert Bullard's 1988 description of the view out of his faculty office window is persistently accurate:

My third-floor office at Texas Southern University provided a picturesque view of Houston's most diverse black neighborhood, the Third Ward, a microcosm of the city's larger black community. From my office I was able to observe in the foreground one of the city's oldest public housing projects built for blacks (Cuney Homes), rows of "shotgun" houses, well-maintained single-family brick homes, black churches sprinkled throughout the area, storefront shops and small business establishments, and a host of daily interactions which make up the urban black experience. The background of these black community institutions was the towering and sparkling Houston skyline (Bullard, 1987, p. 9).

West of 288, my own street is being torn up to install feet-wide drainage pipelines while east of it on Tuam most blocks have an arbitrary, feet-deep basin, a hyper-local detention pond/pothole that takes days to drain. This area doesn't, hydrologically speaking, have to flood like this; it is on relatively high ground, there is infrastructural capacity that can be renovated, and there is 288 just west of here; indeed, Blodgett, just south of here, has well-maintained, subterranean drainage pipelines and the houses are built on a slight rise.

Looked at from a perspective of solidarity and compassion, the unnecessary flooding of a black ward would prompt a critical reevaluation of the historical decisions that got us to this point, and an attempt to correct for those decisions in the present. But to a cynic, this sort of arbitrary destruction of homes and encroachment of silt, termites, vines, and shrubs can look like a reasonable concession of the built environment's ideals to the natural environment's necessities. "[C]ities are built on the assumption that the water that would have been absorbed back into the land they occupy can be transported away instead," wrote Ian Bogost in the wake of Harvey, "[b]ut

there are some regions that just shouldn't become cities" (Bogost, 2017). Such finger wagging at nature's scofflaws projects the critic's own carelessness onto populations that were made vulnerable through planned disinvestment. "Many folks know that they have a local city council and school board, but local planning, zoning, and urban design agencies also hold regular public meetings—unfortunately, most people only participate in this aspect of local governance when they have an axe to grind," he condescends in his ambitious sententiousness, unconcerned by the fact that these very meetings have for decades been sites of active political struggle in Houston, and that people have been grinding axes because their neighborhoods are on the chopping block. Looked at with the easy disregard of an armchair technocrat, the depopulation of the third ward would make it an ideal flooding buffer for downtown, midtown, and the Montrose, a lush swath of green infrastructure just next door that could contain the flood on bad days and be enjoyed on good days, serving the same functions that Memorial Park does for Uptown and River Oaks. This city would much greener without all of those people.

Over miles in this soft sacrifice zone, I saw just one public works crew, working at a drainage point where the ever-more-scenic bike path meets the campus of TSU, a historically black school and a major Houston institution. A block further down is the auditorium where the university had hosted the most recent Democratic party presidential primary debate, during which Joe Biden had channeled the Moynihan report, asserting that poor, black parents do not know how to parent, before seeming to offer a public service announcement about playing the phonograph for children at bedtime. South Bend Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg, also on the debate stage in this auditorium, had made a point that night of defending the sanctity of polite political discourse in general against the degradations of the ad hominem critiques that had been visited on Biden's particularly erratic person. Prior to this defense of Biden against the implicit charge of racism, Buttigieg had nodded to Richard Rothstein's 2017 *The Color of Law*, a history of the racial segregation of the American housing market, by expressing incredulosity at the apparent irrationalities of structural racism:

[A] lot of the racial segregation taking place in our neighborhoods that we maybe treat today as de facto actually happened as the result of very specific and very racist policy choices.... You would think it would make sense *if resources went into creating that racial inequity* that resources would go into reversing it (emphasis added). (Pete Buttigieg...)

Buttigieg postulates that the American government has participated in discriminatory practices under the color of law; this is a strikingly adversarial way of reading a history book, to re-present its narrated facts as conditional statements. Indeed, his purpose is to negate this history and its moral imperatives by rendering it speculative, subjunctive. You would think that it would make sense to work to make things better, but actually, it doesn't.

This nonplussed common sense derives from a sublime cynicism. Confronted with the unthinkable or unspeakable, we feign outrage. Buttigieg's performative disbelief only effects disillusion, in service of the anti-strategy of disinvestment (Stiegler, 2010b). Less a dose of realism than a cynical sneer, Coriolanus hectors us: this is a tough, dog-eat-dog world, that we don't even know how good we've got it, that at least we're keeping the peace. Our disinvestment lets nature take its course, we withdraw our protections (unequally), we downgrade the value of life and dignity by understanding these as scarce resources, and we can't ever believe our eyes at what happens next. I turned back towards 288 and passed a fanciful, turretted mansion that Googling tells me is the Houston Towers Inn, a "unique, one of a kind place with a history stretching more than 80 years back" (About us, 2019), but which history I cannot find online with my phone. I arrive home 10 minutes before the next storm band hits, read K. Animashaun Ducre on the similar effects that "urban renewal" and highway construction had on Syracuse's black community, and work on the house's plumbing.

The lack of the diversity of the think tank that wrote these essays chafes against our attempt to reckon with the post-Harvey state of Houston, the most racially diverse (yet highly segregated) city in the United States (Kinder, 2010). We are all white. We are all Ph.D. holders or candidates. And though the project connected two Houston universities, there are many higher education institutions in the area other than Rice and UH. We have attempted to mutually inflect our discussions of class, gender, and race, but race could have been centered better, for a collection of humanities essays written in response to the visitation of disaster on the most diverse city in the United States. What we present here is far from an authoritative account of this place at this time, and as the essays show in their engagements with other prior and ongoing projects, it is neither the first nor will it be the last. We do hope that it legitimately contributes to the growing sense of the possibility and necessity of humanistic scholarly intervention in the transformation of how questions such as resilience, justice, disaster preparedness and mitigation, and ecological awareness are being framed, debated, and answered.

When this think tank's papers reprise the public humanities' motivational questions, then, it is not simply to raise the stakes or thereby to renew our own project's clarity of purpose (though these are, I believe, desirable outcomes) but primarily to challenge the humanities to do more and better work in changing our cultural, political, and even material worlds according to sensed needs and possibilities that are both wider and more acute. We can bring this into focus negatively by noting that both internal calls for a more public humanities and external calls for humanistic perspectives in our techno-scientific culture call out for humanists because we are felt in our absence. Or we can understand it more positively by reminding society at large that the humanities are that which we all have always found ourselves counting on, and that interdisciplinary, public, humanistic interventions do work.

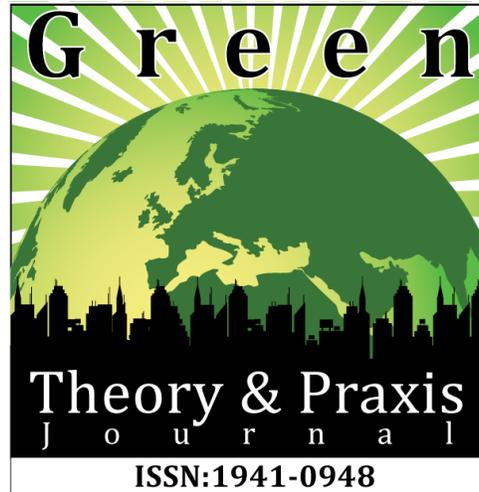
What is more, we can make both of these cases without losing a taste for humanistic critique: neither the sense of strengthened social bonds nor the felt need for a renewed public humanism are unchanged when they are brought into view. Our notions of the public and the humanities in Houston's Post-Harvey context must directly attack dehumanizing (anti)social processes in support of the people subjected to these, and coordinate this attack on dehumanization with an expansion of interests to include non-human lifeforms, human-built environments, and ecosystemic forces. Houston is particularly interesting as a case study in both, having only become a city in the era of central air, that most anthropocentrically eliminationist technology, while also growing as a segregated city in the era of nominal desegregation. In what follows, our various think-tank contributors will explore the varied but radically flat terrain of Houston by focusing on sites where the public humanities, reconceptualized, might contribute meaningfully to this and other cities' rebuilding in an era of accelerating transformation. Each writer will take on a specific formulation of the problem of the (un)natural disasters that "Harvey" metonymically stands for, demonstrate how specific, actually-existing humanistic perspectives are what is missing in these moments of crisis, and show how critically revisiting these sites of the humanities can constitute a useful contribution to our understanding of where we are and what we can do in the face of our historical uncertainty.

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Hydrological Citizenship after Hurricane Harvey

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Abstract

Watersheds are critically important to the health of regional ecosystems, but infrastructure along the Gulf Coast has been developed with little concern for the well-being of these hydrological systems. The devastating consequences of this shortsightedness were on full display during Hurricane Harvey, when decades of infrastructural mismanagement of Harris County's watershed system exacerbated the effects of the worst natural disaster to ever hit the city. In response to such incidents, a growing call to construct environmentally conscious "green infrastructure" has swept

through engineering and urban planning discourse. These new approaches to infrastructure are promising from an environmental perspective yet fail to properly address the social and political issues that remain tied to infrastructure. This essay proposes that Harris County's watershed system can provide us with a working map for how we might arrange forms of regional sociopolitical identity rooted in the functioning of local ecosystems in a way that might infuse the emergent green infrastructure regime with a necessary sense of justice.

Hydrological Citizenship after Hurricane Harvey

...ten thousand River Commissions, with the mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, 'Go here,' or 'go there,' and make it obey; cannot save a shore which it has sentenced; cannot bar its path with an obstruction which it will not tear down, dance over, and laugh at.

Mark Twain

Within the bureaucratic administration of the Gulf Coast's watersheds, the natural environment has historically been characterized as an externality—a mere obstacle that requires technical ingenuity to be overcome, managed, or most often, contained. Consider the case of the Atchafalaya River Basin in Louisiana (Fig. 1). The watershed is the site of a seemingly endless infrastructure project initiated in 1928 by the US Army Corps of Engineers, whose Sisyphean efforts to mitigate the effects of the ever-changing regional topography through a complex levee system have been employed to ensure the integrity of the social and economic systems composing the world's busiest port (Reuss, 1998). While natural alterations to the environment have always acted as catalysts for changes to social and political formations, technoscientific advances in civil engineering have inverted this relationship, making social and political formations the ultimate agent of environmental change. The management of the Atchafalaya in this way thus appears a prime example of humanity's relatively newfound role as a "geophysical force on a planetary scale" (Morton, 2016, p. 9). Industries and communities whose successes and failures have long been dictated by the unpredictable movements of the Atchafalaya and Mississippi Rivers are now themselves able to control the contours of these rivers and their watersheds (Chakrabarty, 2009).

Advances in science and engineering have enabled ongoing development within fickle ecosystems like the Atchafalaya Basin, where increasingly urgent environmental vulnerabilities have been successively managed by the Army Corps of Engineers, albeit at a cost that is now in the billions of dollars. Accordingly, nonhuman ecosystems have come to be thought of as what Timothy

Morton (2007) calls “mere background” within modern technocratic approaches to infrastructure. The progress of twentieth- and twenty-first-century civil engineering has transformed watersheds into assemblages of land and resources passively awaiting development while their role as active participants in social production have been minimized. This reduction of the role of natural environments can be situated within a broader transition in modern economic ideology, which Richard Heinberg (2011) describes as being constituted by a gradual removal of “land” from the formula of “land, labor, and capital” coined by classical political economists (p. 36-38). Simultaneously, these processes through which human-built infrastructures are superimposed over nonhuman topographies have erroneously, and mostly unsuccessfully, sought to eradicate the natural world from political life. Whereas forms of local and global citizenship have historically developed in relation to regional geographies, late industrial society has severed this tie, giving rise to forms of communal belonging without grounding in the surrounding environment. This increasingly alienated relation between humans and their nonhuman environments has not only unleashed an ecological maelstrom on regions subjected to such development but has also negatively impacted human social relations. In other words, in the same way that modern infrastructure has attempted to exorcise the natural environment from the political sphere, so too has infrastructure ignored or erased the human bodies who stand in the way of such development.

This sociopolitical erasure of the natural world that we see occurring in and around the Gulf Coast’s watersheds is itself a constitutive feature of what contemporary civil engineering discourse refers to as “grey infrastructure.”¹ Drawing its name from the dismal color of the materials that compose our existing dams, highways, and pipelines, grey infrastructure refers more broadly to infrastructure that adopts a utilitarian approach to the environment whereby local ecosystems are subordinated to the vision of engineers and planners. If infrastructure paradoxically refers to the “built environment,” grey infrastructure exaggerates this paradox by renouncing the latter term—environment—and amplifying the former—built. Such an approach, it’s worth pointing out, has operated as the default approach to infrastructure up to the present day, as cost-cutting practices, lobbying, and broader ideological resistance to change have continued to exert their influence on American infrastructure. When it comes to the Gulf Coast’s watersheds, grey infrastructure paves over the natural world, literally and figuratively, foreclosing its political existence by smothering these keystone ecosystems with asphalt, concrete, and steel.

¹ The concept of grey infrastructure has only emerged as the antithesis of so-called “green infrastructure,” which I discuss below. But the impact of these concepts cannot be understated, as governmental and intergovernmental institutions now actively employ such terms in public policy discourse.

The devastating social and ecological consequences of the grey infrastructure paradigm are on full display in the Gulf Coast's most populous city, Houston. A city whose very existence is contingent upon the global capital flows engendered by the oil and gas industry established around the Port of Houston during the twentieth century, the infrastructure of Houston has been developed with little regard for ecosystemic needs (Kaplan, 1983).² The low-lying marshland upon which the Houston metropolitan area was established is not capable of supporting the city's sprawling housing developments and 1,200+ mile highway system (Kahn, 2006). And putting even more stress on the overburdened ecosystem is the fact that the 22 distinct watersheds found within Harris County's municipal limits have factored very little into urban planning efforts as Houston's infamous lack of zoning laws has enabled decades of overdevelopment that has crippled the region's hydrological systems (Fig. 2) (Shelton, 2018). As a result, local forms of citizenship and identification with place have been determined without relation to regional ecosystems. Grey infrastructure—freeways, strip malls, and parking lots—supporting the oil and gas industry have been built over Harris County's intricate watershed complex, progressively destabilizing the regional environment to ensure the proliferation of the American petro-state (LeMenager, 2014; Mitchell, 2011).

Until recently, Houston's commitment to grey infrastructure has been utilized by the city's neoliberal systems of governance, ushering in an economic "boom" that triggered rapid development both within and outside the city's limits (Fisher, 1990), particularly on the Katy Prairie in western Harris County, where over half of the 500,000-acre wetland has been developed over the past several decades (González, 2015).³ Amid this boom, the shortcomings of Houston's grey infrastructure remained largely out of sight, only manifesting as a palpable challenge for the city's lower-class and minority communities who were more vulnerable to minor and local infrastructural failings (Bullard, 1987). As Bruce Robbins (2007) reminds us, "Infrastructure is a heritage of which we are usually unconscious until it malfunctions" (p. 32). Implicit in Robbins' claim, though, is that while such malfunctioning certainly occurs regularly, it only registers as a problem when its effects are felt by communities with political capital.

² One cannot separate the city's lack of government planning and public land use controls from its economic dependence on fossil fuel development, which mobilized a free market ethos that remains ideologically powerful in Texas.

³ The legal battle from 2009-2012 over the installment of a segment of the Grand Parkway running through the Katy Prairie marked a pivotal turning point in Houston's ability to handle flooding. Sierra Club lawyers citing the central importance of the Prairie to natural flood mitigation sued to stop construction of the highway but were defeated in federal court, and within three years of its construction Houston had experienced three 500-year flooding events.

The inability or unwillingness to properly account for Harris County's fragile watershed system by urban planners was eventually rendered shockingly visible when Harvey—itsself a byproduct of Houston's petro-industrial complex—dumped roughly 50 inches of rain on southeast Texas in late August of 2017. The region's rudimentary water retention infrastructure, which had been teetering on the brink of failure for some time, was overwhelmed by this deluge, resulting in widespread flooding that even submerged parts of the city that fell outside the local floodplains. Dependence on a grey infrastructure apparatus had subordinated these ecosystems for decades and methodically detached them from political consideration, but Harvey brought Harris County's watersheds roaring back into the public sphere, violently revealing the region's hubristic approach to infrastructure.

Despite having exposed the shortcomings of the grey infrastructure paradigm, the progressive worsening of Houston's flooding in recent years has prompted few city planners to move toward an alternative, so-called "green" approach to infrastructure (EPA, 2018).⁴ In theory, green infrastructure would provide a necessary corrective to the utilitarian instrumentality of its grey counterpart by developing a built environment that attempts to imitate the "natural infrastructure" of local ecosystems. There have been some commendable efforts to introduce green infrastructure to Houston, even if only sparingly. Environmental scientists at the Katy Prairie Conservancy, for example, have for decades advocated for the reintroduction of the agricultural levee system employed by traditional rice farmers as a terraforming process that at least come close to recovering the prairie's hydrological capacities. As they see it, the installation of a levee complex on the prairie would mitigate the impact of flooding in nearby Houston while preserving some green space in the region and changing the relationship of locals to the floodplain.

Likewise, the Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) has experimented with green infrastructure near some of the county's bayous as a form of mitigation banking. Bayous are slow-moving creeks, but in Houston these were concretized and channelized to handle high-water events and constructed with a slight grade to the Gulf of Mexico to ensure floodwaters quickly flow out of the city. But during flooding events, the rapid flow of water enabled by this grey infrastructure damages the structural integrity of the bayous' banks, which are naturally intended to support a slow flow of water. Recognizing this issue, the HCFCD has constructed sites like the Willow

⁴ According to the EPA (2018), "Green infrastructure uses vegetation, soils, and other elements and practices to restore some of the natural processes required to manage water and create healthier urban environments. At the city or county scale, green infrastructure is a patchwork of natural areas that provides habitat, flood protection, cleaner air, and cleaner water. At the neighborhood or site scale, stormwater management systems that mimic nature soak up and store water."

Waterhole Stormwater Detention Basin adjacent to Brays Bayou to control the movement of floodwaters along the bayou by allowing a gradual flow between a retention pond complex and the bayou itself, thus slowing the rate of flow to a more natural pace (Fig. 3).

These and other green infrastructure projects have provided a small glimpse of hope in the wake of Harvey and mark an important return of the natural environment to the city's infrastructural governance. These efforts, moreover, have sought to reintroduce the local watersheds into the social sphere, enabling forms of community heretofore detached from natural processes. For example, a recent story in the *Houston Chronicle* on the Willow Waterhole touted its community impact "beyond drainage," citing its

expansive urban park ranking as one of the largest in Houston; over 200 acres of new or enhanced wildlife habitat; miles of trails; the site for numerous community and citywide events throughout the year; and a dramatic change of scenery in what is otherwise an ordinary Houston landscape of strip malls, industrial facilities, residential subdivisions and vacant land. (Leshinsky, 2017)

But while these projects claim to cultivate forms of community in relation to the regional watershed, the problematic history of green infrastructure should give us pause. Green infrastructure, after all, often manifests in ways that do not enable, but instead foreclose upon, democratic forms of community. The most infamous historical example of such governance can be found in New York City's Seneca Village, where one of the city's largest communities of African American landowners were systematically displaced to clear the space for what would become Central Park (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992).

In the case of the Katy Prairie Conservancy, the vision for the "restored" prairie merely aims to re-create the historical conditions and land-use practices that supported widespread social and political inequality in the American South, reproducing not a "natural" environment but one that had already been transformed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century agricultural practices. The inherent risks of such a vision become increasingly evident when we consider the fact that the land relegated to the prairie's green infrastructure development is composed of comparatively cheaper property that would otherwise be available for development supporting lower income populations. Due to financial constraints, land restoration projects must develop in relation to regional property values, buying up affordable pockets throughout the region. Rather than fostering community, infrastructure that seeks to re-create "natural" ecosystems ultimately restricts community—even

if inadvertently—dispossessing the lower class in order to restore natural habitats for the infrastructural and aesthetic use of the upper class.

Despite the best efforts of these projects to remediate Houston’s “built environments” into processes of social production, there remains a disconnect between Houston’s green infrastructure and the city’s broader infrastructural arrangements, which must be dealt with before any meaningful green infrastructure apparatus can be established. Alan Liu (2017) reminds us that large-scale entities like society and political economy are not merely the *grounds* for all social relations, “but, to play on the word, precisely *groundworks*; particular ways of working the ground (i.e., a mode of production supported by discursive, epistemic, psychic, and cultural institutions).” Before Harris County’s urban planners can successfully incorporate any effective green infrastructure system, the city’s political institutions must be reoriented so as to account for the active role of local ecosystems on social production. Put simply, “techno-fixes” won’t solve social problems; the efficacy of any such measure thus necessitates a corresponding response that seeks to repair the abject position of the local ecosystem within the region’s cultural imaginary.

The first step in mending the city of Houston’s broken relationship with its watershed system, then, is to begin the process of constructing new social and political formations that might complement the advent of a green infrastructure regime. Harris County’s watershed system—oft-ignored by urban planners—can in fact provide us with a working map for how we might arrange such forms of regional sociopolitical identity rooted in the functioning of local ecosystems; what we might call “hydrological citizenship.” This concept emerges at the intersection of Nikhil Anand’s (2017) discussion of “hydraulic citizenship” and Dominic Boyer and Cymene Howe’s (2018) analysis of what they refer to as “hydrological globalization.” While Anand locates regional forms of political belonging being born out of complex urban water management and plumbing systems, Boyer and Howe identify social, political, and economic networks developing out of global currents and water flows. To imagine a hydrological citizenship is to begin building political formations that draw from both Houston’s built environments and natural environments, thus constructing a sense of sociopolitical identity tied to water management infrastructures *and* natural hydrological processes. There is a precedent for this kind of political work in Houston. Kyle Shelton’s (2017) account of “infrastructural citizenship” in 1970s Houston explores the way socioeconomically and racially diverse communities within the city adopted a common language and shared practices to resist disruptive infrastructural projects that had been proposed. The forms of citizenship that emerged out of such efforts suggest that political participation can in fact be generated out of the relationship between the social and the environmental; built or natural. As sea levels rise and superstorms become more frequent, a hydrological citizenship—in which larger, more diverse

populations are grouped together based on ever-changing and unpredictable flows of water—provide affordances for establishing and sustaining new forms of community that remain attuned to alterations to the region’s geography.

Media representations of the deluge that swept through Houston in August of 2017 appear to run counter to the logic of most natural disasters. Because lower income and minority communities tend to live in less desirable, more vulnerable regions, such populations traditionally take the biggest hit during disasters (Nixon, 2013). This was the case in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, where districts like the Ninth Ward, a 99% African American neighborhood, were all but wiped off the map, undergoing flooding so severe that rebuilding efforts have mostly been abandoned. But the narrative crafted by local and national media outlets presented a city whose socioeconomic partitioning was momentarily suspended during Harvey, resulting in the common misconception that Harvey had affected everyone in the city equally. To be sure, there were instances in which destruction was proportionate in communities heretofore spared from the adverse effects of environmental disasters. Perhaps the most notable example of this occurred when the Barker Reservoir in west Houston breached, forcing the Army Corps of Engineers to flood the unsuspecting neighborhood of Memorial Thicket—a wealthy, mostly white, suburban neighborhood—without warning in the middle of the night. Yet while such instances received disproportionate media coverage, the notion that Harvey’s effects were distributed evenly throughout the region is ultimately unfounded. In fact, social scientists have recently determined that flooding was “significantly greater” in majority-minority neighborhoods than their majority-white counterparts, even after outliers like Memorial Thicket are factored into the equation (Chakraborty, Collins, and Grineski, 2019). Moreover, in the few cases where large-scale damage was inflicted upon upper-class neighborhoods, the unequal distribution of aid and resources to assist in recovery efforts simply corrected this divergence from the norm, with the most disadvantaged communities receiving the least relief funding and resources (Milligan, 2018). Although perceptions of Harvey as a leveling superstorm were either fictitious or short-lived, the widespread idea that Houstonians were equally vulnerable during the storm nevertheless opens new possibilities for thinking about community and infrastructure. As such, conceptions of community implicit in the idea of a “hydrological citizenship” signify a return to historical forms of relating to the environment as an active participant in the production of society, both materially and discursively.

While Boyer and Howe (2018) have thus far remained focused on the idea of community in a somewhat abstract way, their work invites us to imagine new political and legal formations that could arise were Harris County to commit more fully to considering its distinct, dynamic

watersheds as subjects, rather than objects, of political life. By revealing how closely vulnerability is tied to the activity of the local watershed, Harvey should implore us to consider how new forms of political representation and organization might be tied to these natural hydrological systems. Doing so would require Houstonians to realign their administrative and bureaucratic systems in relation to the surrounding ecosystems. Attention to the activity of local watersheds would become a key element of political life in a city whose ideological approach to the natural world has historically been best characterized by what Michel Serres (1995) would call a state of war against “the worldwide world” (p. 11).

New political and legal forms arranged around the Harris County watersheds would be more in line with the kind of agreement Serres (1995) advocates for in proposing a “natural contract” between society and the environment, recognizing reciprocity and co-dependence as the foundational features of a political contract between two parties. The future of Houston is dependent upon the establishment of an agreement with the increasingly volatile ecosystems of the Gulf Coast and political systems that recognize this reality and incorporate the natural world as an integral party to future social formations will be best prepared for the next storm when it comes.

Serres’ (1995) call to reconceive of natural environments as juridical subjects in themselves, and not merely the background to political life, should inform how we conceive of the new forms of citizenship and communal belonging made necessary in the wake of Harvey. Moving in this direction would mark a significant shift in the operation of the political as such, in that it would reintroduce the natural world as an equally important agent of social production, one whose actions shape public policy and administration. Mega-cities like Houston that have developed as urban manifestations of anthropocentric ideologies can and should be relegated to history as green infrastructural development becomes more fully committed to accounting for the needs of surrounding environments. Such changes, however, must be made with an eye to our embeddedness in history. An unjust, unequal environmentalism will reproduce the hierarchies within and beyond the human that produce these sorts of disasters.

The establishment of new forms of political citizenship with an eye to hydrological processes offer alternative ways of giving the natural environment autonomy while also acknowledging the deep roots of our connection with it. Hydrological forms of citizenship might allow regional ecosystems to reacquire some degree of agency with respect to the functioning of human social formations as political figures become more concerned with the activity of these new participants. Finally, the devastating flooding of farming communities in Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska in recent months reminds us that the failures of our present-day infrastructure paradigm are not only persistently

resonant in our changing world, but also challenges that rural communities will need to confront. Though we will certainly continue to pursue techno-fixes to the environmental problems of tomorrow, such a relationship would wisely begin the process of restoring our broken infrastructures by making space in our political sphere for nonhuman actors.

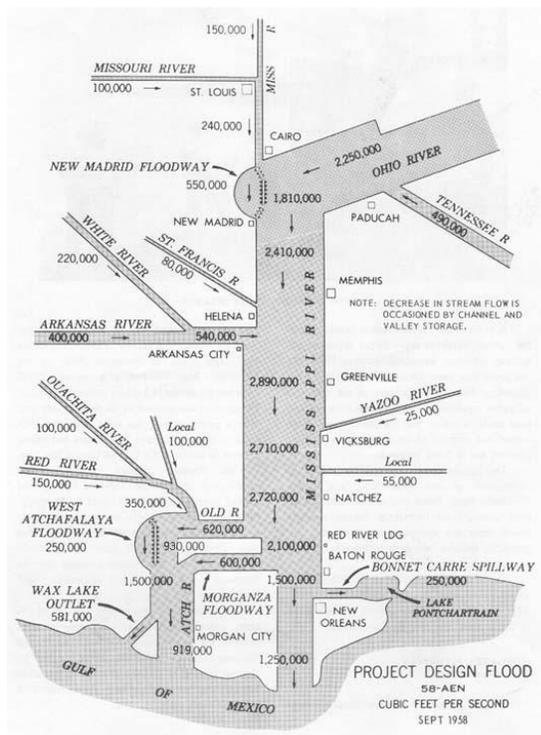


Fig. 1

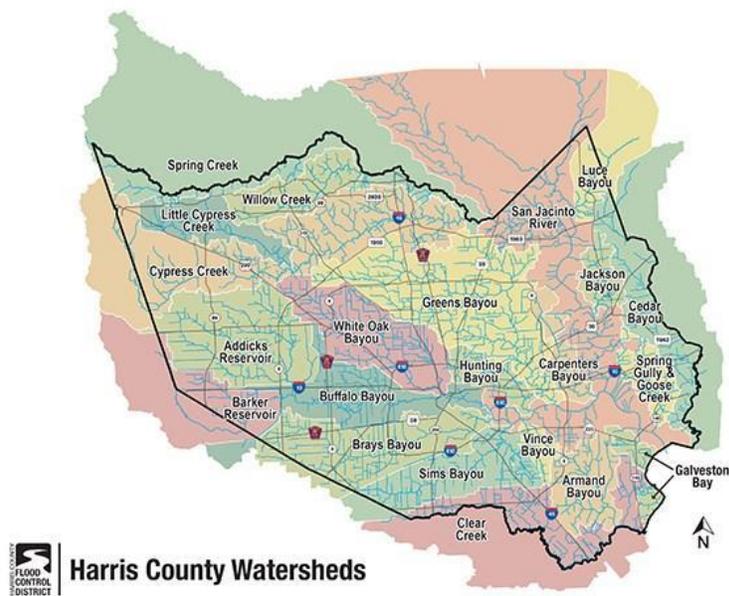
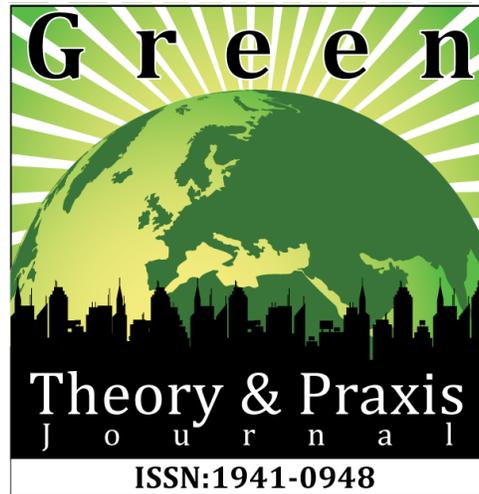


Fig. 2

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Shared Vulnerability: Rethinking Human and Non-human Bodies in Disasters

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Abstract

Although the PETS Act was passed in 2006, there is more critical work to be done to improve the emergency response for animals during disasters. The PETS Act acknowledges the lives of companion species but does nothing to protect wildlife and livestock. Creating intersections between the fields of Critical Animal Studies, Nineteenth-Century Literature, Philosophy, and Social Sciences, this essay argues for an ethics of “shared vulnerability” towards animals during disaster emergency response. Building from Anat Pick’s work on vulnerability in the field of Critical Animal Studies and Cora Diamond’s work in philosophy, I define shared vulnerability as

the human responsibility to acknowledge that animal bodies, like human bodies, are vulnerable during times of disaster. To carry out an ethics of shared vulnerability, humans must admit the violence they enact on animals and alter their course of behavior by improving animal lives with direct action, efficient planning, or implementation of protection measures during disasters. After analyzing an example of shared vulnerability in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's nineteenth-century novel *A Story of Avis* (1877), I turn to news stories about human responses to animals during Harvey, in Houston and other areas of Texas, to consider what an ethics of shared vulnerability entails.

Following the essay, I have included an interview with Salise Shuttlesworth, Director of the Friends For Life shelter in Houston and lead organizer of the cohabitated shelter at the George R. Brown during Harvey, which was the first of its kind.

Shared Vulnerability: Rethinking Human and Nonhuman Bodies in Disasters

“When you think about it, a storm doesn’t recognize species.”

—Salise Shuttlesworth (2019)

“The creature, then, is first and foremost a living body—material, temporal, and vulnerable.”

—Anat Pick (2011)

In 2006, after being introduced by Representatives Tom Lantos (California) and Christopher Shays (Connecticut), Congress passed the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act (PETS Act), an act that authorizes the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide rescue, care, shelter, and essential needs for pets and service animals as well as to their owners after a major disaster. Lantos cited the footage of a little boy crying to the point of vomiting after losing his dog, Snowball, during rescue operations for hurricane Katrina as evidence for the necessity of the bill: “The dog was taken away from this little boy, and to watch his face was a singularly revealing and tragic experience” (Pace, 2006). In another interview, Lantos presents his own sympathetic response as the catalyst for his action: “The scene from New Orleans of a 9-year-old little boy crying because he was not allowed to take his little white dog Snowball was too much to bear. As I watched the images of the heartbreaking choices the Gulf residents had to make, I was moved to find a way to prevent this from ever happening again” (Nolen, 2015). Media coverage of such a critical moment revealed the little boy’s depth of suffering upon separation from his dog; Lantos’s emotional response to viewing the scene is largely responsible for the PETS Act’s creation.

The appearance of the child’s bereft response in the public domain transformed it into an exemplification of suffering produced by the severing of a human-animal relationship, an example of what David Pellow classifies as an interpellation from the nonhuman. In *Animal Liberation*

(2014), Pellow points out that social change often occurs after human activists “‘hear’ a ‘call’ or ‘interpellation’ from nonhuman natures that pushes them to defend ecosystems and nonhuman animals” (p. 4). Pellow also asserts “there is nothing that humans do that is entirely isolated from influence and guidance of other species, ecosystems, and inanimate objects” (2014, p. 4). As a receptive listener to and subject of this interpellation, Lantos matches the depth of the boy’s feeling with his own, which in turn propels him to act by fighting for the passage of a law to protect companion species during natural disasters.

In this essay, I explore realms of such sentiment across diverse fields such as sociology, philosophy, and nineteenth-century American literature, to reveal how an ethics of shared vulnerability—an empathic awareness of the risks created by natural phenomenological events to both human and nonhuman animals—might lead to a reconfiguration of the human perspective towards nonhuman animals during and beyond natural disasters. Following Pellow, I see this “struggle” for an alternative ethics as necessarily “human-centered” (2014, p. 11) and examine human responses to nonhuman animal suffering during hurricane Harvey in order to show how disasters, used critically and pointedly, can open up new potentialities of exchange and interconnection between humans and nonhuman animals.

Beyond PETS

Although the PETS Act reflects a cultural shift and stronger awareness of the significance of the relationship between pets and their owners, it does nothing to protect other groups of nonhuman animals, such as wildlife or those used for factory farming, that are also deeply affected by natural disasters.⁵ For example, in 2018, 3.4 million poultry and 5,500 livestock died after hurricane Florence hit North Carolina—disturbing statistics that spotlight the loss of nonhuman life that can result from a lack of planning in behalf of factory-farmed animals (Murawski, 2018). As for wildlife, some scientists believe we are in the midst of “the sixth extinction,” a rarity in contrast with other extinctions because it is the first to be caused by life forms. Elizabeth Kolbert delineates the process of this devolution:

Meanwhile, an even stranger and more radical transformation is under way. Having discovered subterranean reserves of energy, humans begin to change the composition of the atmosphere. This, in turn, alters the climate and the chemistry of the oceans. Some plants and animals adjust by moving. They climb mountains and migrate towards the poles. But a great many—at first, hundreds, then thousands, and finally perhaps millions—find themselves marooned. Extinction rates soar, and the texture of life changes (2014, p. 2).

⁵ Companion animals only make up two percent of the animals living in the U.S. (Irvine, 2009, p. 40).

Kolbert highlights the scale of impact that humans have had and continue to have on other species that comprise various ecosystems of the environment. If humans continue to alter the climate in drastic ways, then different species will continue to disappear.⁶

In order to address the problems regarding the management of nonhuman animals during emergency response, we need creative solutions and an awareness of a variety of species' needs. As Kate Rigby suggests, we need an environmental ethos that is "alert to more-than-human voices and concerned with more-than-human flourishing" (2015, p. 21). To ensure that steps like the PETS Act start a new trend rather than making the broader context of extinction more tolerable for humans by surrounding us with companionate animals to the exclusion (extinction) of others, we must reconsider the human-animal relationship within the framework of vulnerability.

In *Filling the Ark* (2009), Leslie Irvine provides us with a critical starting point for a reconfiguration of the human perspective towards nonhuman animals during natural disasters. Irvine identifies the problems with our government's emergency response toward nonhuman animals during disasters: the American Red Cross does not tend to their concerns, the U.S. Department of Agriculture does not have funding for them, and the United States lacks a comprehensive plan for zoos and marine parks (2009, p. 14). She builds her argument from what social scientists refer to as the *vulnerability paradigm*, a metric used for understanding how different populations are affected by disasters in varying degrees: "The characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society" (Blakie et. al Qtd. in Irvine, 2009, p. 4). While Irvine acknowledges the benefits of tracing the relationship between social inequalities and disaster "impact, response, and recovery" (2009, p. 4) for humans, she also extends this anthropocentric frame by including species as another factor of consideration for the vulnerability paradigm.⁷ By examining "which animals are vulnerable, to what, and how," (2009, p. 6) Irvine applies the vulnerability paradigm to different animals to explore the complex and diverse challenges that cities face regarding animal management during disasters.

While Irvine explores how different groups of nonhuman animals fit within the vulnerability paradigm, I work from a humanist approach to widen the scope of what vulnerability entails. In

⁶ If humans fail to alter their current behavior, scientists estimate that up to one million species could face extinction in the upcoming decades unless changes occur (Plumer, 2019).

⁷ Fiona Probyn-Rapsey defines anthropocentrism as "a form of human centeredness that places humans not only at the center of everything but makes "us" the most important measure of all things" (2015, p. 47). Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin offer the following definition for Anthropocene: "Combining the Greek words for 'humans' and 'recent time', scientists have named this new period of time the Anthropocene. It describes when Homo sapiens became a geological superpower, setting Earth on a new path in its long development. The Anthropocene is a turning point in the history of humanity, the history of life, and the history of the Earth itself. It is new chapter in the chronicle of life and a new chapter of the human story" (Lewis and Maslin, 2018, p. 5).

the next section of this essay, I build on Irvine's work by synthesizing Cora Diamond's and Anat Pick's conceptualizations of vulnerability to argue for a cross-species ethics of care that centers on "shared vulnerability." I then use this concept as a lens for examining the dynamics of some of the human-animal encounters that took place during hurricane Harvey. In the final section of this essay, I offer snapshots of stories from Harvey that focus on livestock, wildlife, and companion species to reveal how shared vulnerability operates across different formulations of the human-animal relationship. By exploring shared vulnerability, I hope to contribute to contemporary conversations centered on improving planning for nonhuman animals during times of crisis.

Shared Vulnerability

Natural disasters produce difficult and challenging circumstances that reveal an uneven distribution of vulnerability between human and nonhuman bodies. While humans are faced with difficult choices, such as whether to hunker down or flee their homes, the fate of nonhuman animal lives often depends on those short-term choices as well as the longer-term critical infrastructure and regulatory decisions made by humans.

In *Creaturely Poetics* (2011), Pick's designation of embodiment as a critical site for a framework centered on vulnerability is useful for examining human-animal encounters during a disaster. She argues that the "material, the anonymous, and the elemental" aspects of embodiment counter the effects of anthropocentrism by emphasizing the "materiality" of humanness and by offering a "different sort of aesthetics and ethics" (Pick, 2011, p. 6). Building from Diamond's philosophical discussion of J.M. Coetzee's lectures that were published as a story titled *The Lives of Animals* (1999), Pick also argues for vulnerability as a mode of ethics. Diamond examines the character of Elizabeth Costello, an elderly woman who is "wounded" by "what we do to animals" (Qtd. in Pick, 2011, p. 421) through the horrors of factory farming.

In contrast to the use of vulnerability for an anthropocentric paradigm that excludes nonhuman animals, Diamond identifies the vulnerability of corporeality as a site of connection between humans and nonhuman animals:

The awareness we each have of being a living body...carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, [and] the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding; but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking one but also of isolating one...(Qtd. in Pick, *Creaturely*, 2011, p. 10).

By asserting that humanity's acknowledgement of this shared vulnerability is "wounding," Diamond creates a feedback loop that layers our experience of vulnerability; to be vulnerable is to be capable of being "wound[ed]," but the act of recognizing vulnerability and the violence we

commit towards other species also creates its own painful impression or wound. The question is whether this second wounding transforms the first, or simply re-traumatizes us and leads to a repetition of this violence.⁸

Pick incorporates Diamond's concept into her argument to argue for the significance of bodily vulnerability, what she defines as the "creatureliness we share with other animals" (2011, p. 10). In a similar, yet different departure, I argue that this notion of "awareness" can be thought of as an ethics of "shared vulnerability," an alternative framework for considering the human-animal relationship during times of disaster. In this context, Diamond's designations of the "shared" experiences of "exposure," "death," and "vulnerability" translate into harsh challenges that human and nonhuman animals confront during disasters. When humans "share vulnerability" with nonhuman animals by choosing to occupy a threatened space of corporeality, they transform the potentiality of human feeling into a strategy for alleviating nonhuman animal suffering.

A Story of Avis (1877): A Narrative of Shared Vulnerability

The emphasis on sentiment in nineteenth-century American literary studies makes it a productive field for reconsidering the practice of "sharing" in the human-animal relationship. In *Public Sentiments* (2001), Glenn Hendler uses Raymond Williams' definition of "structures of feeling" which are "specifically affective elements of consciousness" and "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (Williams Qtd. in Hendler, 2001, p. 18) to argue for a reconsideration of the value of the sentimental novel in the nineteenth century. Building from Williams' assertion that art and literature are often among the first spaces where new structures of feeling can appear, Hendler argues that the sentiment of nineteenth-century novels channels sympathy into the political sphere: "The experience of sympathetic identification characteristic of the sentimental novel...functioned as psychological preparation for readers' participation not only in the reading public, but also in the political public" (2001, p. 27).

While Hendler explores the relationship between sentiment and the formation of human subjectivity, I focus on how Elizabeth Stuart Phelps uses sentiment to alter her audience's view of nonhuman animals in her novel *The Story of Avis* (1877). Offering an array of formulations that arise from shared flights between the female and bird body, Phelps includes orioles, carrier-doves, blue-jays, robins, blue herons, sparrows, and other birds, alongside and as figurations of Avis's womanhood. By conceptualizing female embodiment as interconnected with and extended by the animal, Phelps counters patriarchal oppression by recasting the model of late nineteenth century womanhood within the frame of coexistence. This pluralization of womanhood enacts what Donna Haraway describes as the work of companion species, which involves "living with animals, inhabiting their/our stories, trying to tell the truth about the relationship, cohabiting an active

⁸ For a discussion of Diamond's approach within broader context of Posthumanist philosophy, see Cary Wolfe's "Flesh and Finitude: Thinking Animals in (Post)Humanist Philosophy" (2008).

history” (2016, p. 111). As a novel that pairs Avis with birds in an array of encounters, *The Story of Avis* reveals the potentialities of cross-species companionship, exchange, and resistance.

In one striking interconnection between human and nonhuman animal bodies in *The Story of Avis*, Phelps positions female rebellion on the same plane as nonhuman animal suffering. After drinking a liqueur, Avis envisions a parade that includes powerful, rebellious women from various points throughout history followed by images of nonhuman animals suffering. This juxtaposition pairs women’s resistance with activism, signaling that social reform must include an awareness of the human and nonhuman:

Instantly the room seemed to become full of women. Cleopatra was there, and Godiva, Aphrodite and St. Elizabeth, Ariadne and Esther, Helen and Jeanne d’Arc, and the Magdalene, Sappho, and Cornelia,—a motley company. These moved on solemnly, and gave way to a silent army of the unknown. They swept before her in file, in procession, in groups... Still before her closed eyes the panorama swept imperiously; but it had become a panorama of agonies. For a long time she perceived only the suffering of animals... She saw the quiver of the deer under the teeth of the hound, the heart-throb of the pursued hare, the pathetic brow of dying lioness, the reproach in the eye of a shot bird, a dog under vivisection licking the hand that tore him (Phelps, 1877, pp. 82-83).

Phelps’s selection includes women known for their leadership, such as Cleopatra and Godiva, for their exceptional beauty, such as Aphrodite and Helen, and for their religiosity, such as Esther, Ruth, and Jeanne d’Arc. Although the women comprise a “motley company” that represents a variety of challenges and victories for womanhood throughout history, their solemnity and silence within the panorama highlights the reach of patriarchal violence into this afterlife of remembrance.

While the female figures are signified by their names and actions in life, the animals that follow are unknown victims of human mistreatment and appear in still life frames of physiological specificity such as the “quiver of the deer,” “the ‘heart-throb’ of the hare,” “the pathetic brow” of a “dying lioness.”⁹ By juxtaposing the panorama of silent women with the nonhuman “panorama of agonies,” Phelps highlights how the patriarchy enacts oppression and violence in distinct, yet interlocking ways. In this paired grouping of suffering, Phelps radicalizes sympathy by using it as a strategy to multiply resistance across human and nonhuman animal bodies.

While Phelps’s novel provides a powerful image of shared vulnerability in nineteenth-century literature, I shift back to the present to examine how stories from hurricane Harvey reveal the

⁹ Consider these images of the effects of human violence towards nonhuman animals with the following story that describes what a lack of shared vulnerability can entail. During hurricane Katrina, in St. Bernard Parish, police deputies shot and killed pets that had been left at schools by their owners. Even though David Leeson Jr., a photographer covering the storm in that area, videotaped some of these shootings, all of the animal cruelty charges that had been brought against the deputies were dismissed (Irvine, 2009, p. 25).

different challenges arising from vulnerability that humans and nonhuman animals face during a disaster. By reading the following stories from Harvey through a lens of shared vulnerability, I offer examples of humans translating their emotional response into action by ameliorating nonhuman animal suffering in the wake and very moment of the storm. I also ask how we might sustain this radical identification in which humans “hear[d] the call” of suffering before deciding to put their lives at risk for the safety and protection of nonhuman animals. These snapshots of shared vulnerability—humans responding to the suffering of livestock, wildlife, and companion animals with action—demonstrate the value and necessity of a cross-species ethics of care.

Livestock

Although we usually think of ranchers’ relationship to livestock as exploitative, Logan Goudeau’s response to her family’s cattle during hurricane Harvey suggests otherwise. In Hungerford county, a ranching community fifty miles southwest of Houston, the Goudeau family saved livestock by delivering hay to cattle submerged in water by airboat and by teaming up with ranchers from San Antonio and George West to redirect hundreds of cattle (Locke, 2017). Using five helicopters, ranchers hovered over the cattle, nudging them until they moved to higher ground. When Logan Goudeau described her response to seeing all of the water on her family’s land after Harvey, she shared, “You could hear the cattle lowing. It was heartbreaking, because you knew they just wanted to get on dry land” (Locke, 2017). Demonstrating a keen awareness to the cattle’s expression of suffering, Goudeau reflects her sensitivity to their vulnerability and discomfort in the water. Goudeau’s paradoxical positioning as a rancher who takes care of the cattle, yet views them as an economic food source for her family’s business, portrays the complexity of shared vulnerability.

In another example that centers on livestock, a father and son duo risked their lives to save horses in their community. Thirty-five miles outside of Houston, in Dayton County, a seventeen-year-old cowboy, Rowdy Ward, rode his horse through floodwater to save livestock and horses stranded in floodwater. In a video that would go viral, Rowdy steers his horse through the floodwater to position himself parallel to a locked gate; then he proceeds to force the gate open to allow a trapped horse to escape (Burke, 2017). Rowdy’s father, Chance, narrates as he films the action, reminiscing with the viewer that Rowdy often jokes, “Whatever you do, don’t let your kids grow up to be a cowboy,” a reference to the famous song Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson sang as a duo in 1978. As Rowdy continues to pull hard at the gate, opening it a bit more with each aggressive movement, Chance continues by sharing, “Somehow I let mine grow up to be a cowboy, but I don’t know if he’s bred to be any other way.” The gate opens, and then we hear Chance make a clicking sound to coax the frightened horse out of the flooded corral pen. Although this story brings the Texan cowboy cliché to life, it’s powerful to see two humans putting their own lives at risk by riding around in murky floodwater to rescue nonhuman animals. Chance and Rowdy’s awareness of the horse’s fear and their willingness to respond results from their recognition of shared

vulnerability. After only a couple of days of rescue missions, Chance and Rowdy saved six hundred cattle and fifty horses.

Wildlife

Traveling from the outskirts of Houston to the inside of the loop, I offer an example of how one city dweller responded to a wildlife species' need for rescue. At sunset on most evenings in Houston, tourists and city dwellers gather to watch the largest bat colony in the city, comprised of Mexican free-tailed bats, fly out from under the Waugh Drive bridge. During the storm, when Alicia Plunkett saw the bats, drowning one by one in the rushing floodwater that had risen up to the bridge, she decided to save as many bats as she could, with a bucket and her bare hands. She would eventually get some gloves and help from friends, saving a hundred bats by the time her rescue mission was complete. Belly-down on the concrete, Plunkett leaned out between the railing of the bridge to scoop up the bats as they came within reach. She describes her experience of hearing them cry out in the water: "You could hear them in there. The sound of their usual tweeting sounded like screams in that moment. They couldn't get out" (Gordon, 2017). Like Goudeau's response to the cattle, Plunkett took action in response to the sounds of nonhuman suffering. Plunkett's knowledge of the bats typical tweeting sounds also helped her translate their cries of distress, what she refers to as "screams," during the flooding. Plunkett's strong emotional response led her to act on the shared vulnerability she felt when she heard the bats cry out during the storm.

Approximately one hundred thousand bats died due to Harvey, leaving the colony at 200,000 after the storm (Smith, 2018). Initially, there was concern about whether the colony would survive the storm, but wildlife biologist, Diana Foss, who works with a group of skilled and trained volunteers in a group known as the Houston Area Bat Team, predicts that the colony will be back to its pre-Harvey size by the summer of 2019 (Smith, 2018). However, the numbers of the colony were not the only marker of change for the bat colony. Instead of flying out together as a large swarm like they did prior to the storm, the bats now travel in smaller groups or as individuals (McSweeney and Brooks, 2018). The bats have also taken to leaving the bridge after dark has fallen instead of their previous departure around dusk. These subtle changes in the bats' behavior show that a species' survival should not be the only concern when it comes to assessing the effects of extreme weather; climate change, signified by the 500-year floods brought to Houston by hurricane Harvey, is altering ecosystems in ways that we have yet to comprehend.

Wildlife biologists continue to track Harvey's effects on various wildlife populations, but, luckily, most endangered species survived the storm. The Attwater prairie chicken, one of the most endangered birds in North America, calls the Texas Gulf Coast home. Prior to the storm, the hen count was documented at twenty-nine; after the storm, the number dropped to five (Gaskill, 2017). Although the Attwater prairie chicken population took a hit after a few years of consecutive flooding, recent reports show that the birds have recovered, thanks to conservation efforts at the

Attwater Prairie Chicken Wildlife Refuge and on private land in Goliad county (Southern, 2019). Within the framework of shared vulnerability, these conservation efforts show an awareness of the value a single species contributes to an ecosystem; they also provide specific examples of how humans can counter their destructive behaviors by creating safe shelters and research centers to protect and propagate species that cannot otherwise survive extreme weather caused by climate change. However, as former refuge manager, Terry Rossignol, points out, the battle for the preservation of an endangered species points to a larger concern: “The Attwater’s prairie chicken is an indicator species for the coastal prairie ecosystem. The plight of this species tells us that something’s not right. What’s the next species that will be affected?” (Saldana, 2018).

Companion Species

Even though Houston benefitted from the passage of the PETS Act and lessons learned from hurricane Katrina, there is still much work to be done. Assessing the effectiveness of the response to animal needs created as a result of Harvey in post-PETS Act implementation era, Steve Glassey argues that animal emergency planning needs improvement: “Hurricane Harvey repeated many of the challenges observed in previous emergency events including Hurricane Katrina, from overwhelming donations of goods, lack of coordination, unreasonable abandonment, lack of common reunification systems, inter-organizational tensions, and lack of preparedness” (Glassey, 2018, p. 47).¹⁰ Director of Friends for Life no-kill adoption and rescue shelter, Salise Shuttlesworth points out that a gap can often arise between legislation and its actual implementation: “The PETS Act basically says there should be a plan, you need to make a plan, but there aren’t any teeth in it, any direction” (Kinney, 2019). Although this slippage between the passage and implementation of the PETS Act demonstrates that cities will need to assess their nonhuman animals’ needs prior to seasons of extreme weather to improve their disaster responses in real time, the following story about the first co-habitated shelter during Harvey, also suggests that responding in the moment can also lead to beneficial outcomes.

When the George R. Brown (GRB) Convention Center first opened its doors to those displaced from hurricane Harvey, nonhuman animals were not given entrance. However, Shuttlesworth took the initiative to coordinate with officials at BARC (one of Houston’s animal shelters) and The American Red Cross to create a shelter for pets within the GRB so that pet owners could have safety and warmth without having to leave them outside. In the first twenty-four hours, they triaged 671 nonhuman animals (Shuttlesworth, 2019). When the GRB ended its term as a shelter, it had served more than 1,500 nonhuman animals and, according to Shuttlesworth, served as perhaps the first emergency cohabited shelter on this scale. By creating a shelter that housed human and

¹⁰ According to Leslie Irvine, “An estimated 727,500 animals were affected by Katrina in the city alone. Best estimates by the LA/SPCA suggest that over 15,000 abandoned animals were rescued from the homes and streets of New Orleans” (2009, p. 34).

nonhuman bodies together during a moment of shared vulnerability, Shuttlesworth provided us with a realistic image of what Rigby describes as “dancing with disaster,” the “multispecies performance...of an interactive and even ‘intra-active’ material-discursive *modus vivendi* in the midst of uncertainty” that aims to avoid “eco-catastrophe,” improve “resilience,” and foster “transformation” (2015, p. 21).

This next example is one of the many stories of people who evacuated their homes with their pets and ended up at the GRB.¹¹ When a Houston Police Department officer knocked on the door of one home with rising water, he was met by a Houstonian named Thomas, who said, “I’m not leaving. I’m not leaving. I’ll die here with my little dogs. My dogs are going to die here. I’m going to die here.”¹² Even though the water was rising up to Thomas’ chest, he refused to leave his home. Instead of abandoning Thomas and the dogs, the police officer grabbed a galvanized trash can as it was floating by, put Thomas’ five little dogs into it, grabbed some dog food, and transported Thomas and his dogs to the GRB. Thomas was initially separated from his dogs when he was sent to the American Red Cross section of the GRB for a medical assessment. However, they were reunited once volunteers figured out that Thomas’s dogs were located in the co-habited shelter area of the GRB (Shuttlesworth, 2019). By accepting and expressing death as his final, shared outcome with his dogs, Thomas deployed sentiment as a strategy of refusal that forced the police officer to respond with a solution that met both human and nonhuman animal concerns.

In these stories from Harvey, humans translate their sentiment—created by a recognition of shared vulnerability—into a strategic response, going so far as to risk their own lives for the sake of nonhuman animal lives. In this context, feeling leads to an ethics of cross-species care. “To speak of an ethics of vulnerability,” as Pick suggests, “is to apprehend the ubiquity of power and imagine its suspension” (*Critical*, 2018, p. 422). While disasters create challenges that disrupt and unsettle ideological systems of power that are often firmly in place, we should not need to be faced with such extremes to practice an ethics of shared vulnerability. To have a body, as a human or nonhuman animal, is to be at risk for pain and suffering. In order to create a society that optimizes and protects all forms of life, we must live with this shared awareness, ready to hear the call and respond with action.

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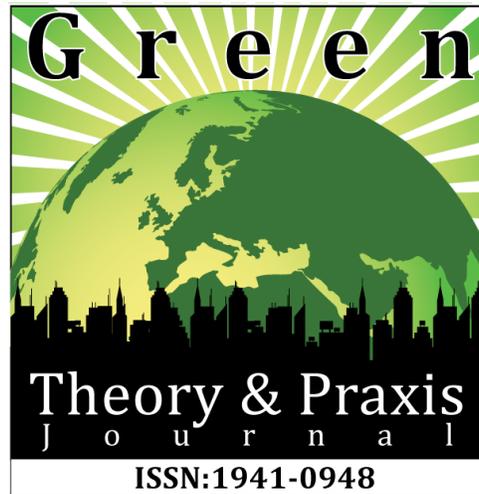
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¹¹ In a personal interview, Salise Shuttlesworth shared this story from her experience of working in the co-habited shelter of the GRB.

¹² Sebastian Heath and Robert Linnabary assert that 20-30% of people who fail to evacuate do not because of pet ownership (2015). Robin Chadwin cites that 44% of people who chose not to evacuate prior to hurricane Katrina did so because of their pets (2017).

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The Theatre of Climate Change; or, Mold Humanities

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Abstract

This essay argues that experimental theatre and performance offers a unique mode of reflecting on the humanities' understanding and theorization of the environmental consequences of climate change. Theatre provides an embodied translation and presentation of environmental humanistic inquiry for the public. Drawing on Bertolt Brecht's theory of alienation and multimedia experimental theatre practices, I devised and mounted a climate change performance in December 2018 that explored the imagery of a moldy Christmas. This interactive performance made strange our traditional habits of celebrating the holidays, asking: what is the moldy afterlife of culture? What does it mean to integrate mold with performance and how does mold become a poignant metaphor for culture we wish no longer held on to us? In the spirit of making strange, throughout

the academic year, I also worked with students from local high schools in Houston exploring methods of recreating scenes from Hurricane Harvey through the practice of image theatre. The intersection of theatre practice and environmental thinking ponders the limits of human forms of representation in ways that textual mediums cannot.

The Theatre of Climate Change; or, Mold Humanities

As the floodwaters receded following Hurricane Harvey, theatre practitioners and reporters entered the heavily flooded, recently renovated Alley Theatre (Houston, TX). Floating in the bottom of the theatre was the doll used in the annual *A Christmas Carol* production. In the performance, the doll would transform into the Ghost of Christmas Past and she would show Scrooge visions of his youth; this waterlogged and soon-to-be moldy doll seemed an eerily poignant Ghost not for Scrooge but for the City of Houston. Rather than discard the doll, the Alley Theatre ought to have kept it, mold and all, and employ it yet. The mold will remind Houston of the past far more than the images of Christmas long ago. The mold will inspire a new form of performance.

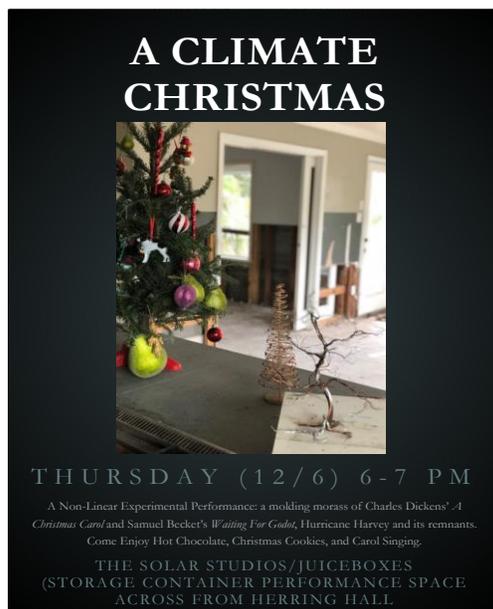


Fig. 1 Poster for the Performance

This essay argues that experimental theatre and performance offers a unique mode of reflecting on the humanities' understanding and theorization of the environment and climate change. Theatre provides an embodied translation of environmental humanistic inquiry for the public. Put simply, theatre represents the story of “us”—even as what “counts” in the category of “us” seems to be radically changing in the 21st century. Drawing on multimedia experimental theatre practices and Bertolt Brecht’s theory of alienation, I devised and mounted a climate change performance in December 2018 that explored the imagery of a moldy Christmas. This interactive performance made strange our traditional habits of celebrating the holidays by asking: what is the moldy afterlife of culture? What does it mean to integrate mold with performance and how does mold become a poignant metaphor for a culture we wish would no longer hold on to us?

In the spirit of making strange, as a pedagogical practice throughout the academic year, I also worked with students from local high schools in Houston exploring methods of recreating scenes

from Hurricane Harvey through the practice of image theatre. Originally employed by Augusto Boal in his theory of the Theatre of The Oppressed, image theatre offered students an embodied means to explore how environmental disaster challenges the Western conception of the human.

As Wallace Heim argues, “in the times of climate instability, there need to be new forms of art-making, improvisation, and collaboration with lands and species that engender an ability to respond to conditions of changes” (p. ?). Mold Humanities strives for new collaborations and imaginings while continuing the fight against oppression and racism.

Performance

“A Climate Christmas” reimaged a post-Harvey performance of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* as an immersive, interactive performance with video projections, mixed sound, and live singing. We performed in an outside performance space on Rice University campus known as the Solar Studios (or as the Juice Boxes): three storage containers equipped with solar panels, sound and video projection connected by a wooden deck. The Ghost of Christmas Past wore a Victorian dress cut from blue tarp stitched onto a hazmat suit, and she wore a ventilator mask, both for aesthetics and because the shipping container in which she performed has a perpetual mold problem. Bob Cratchit worked away hanging wet and damp pages from a book up to dry in the storage container next door. Tiny Tim was conspicuously absent. The Ghost of Christmas Present passed out candy canes and coffee. There is no Ghost of Christmas Future.

The initial idea for the performance, a moldy theatre practice, was inspired by the descriptions and images of a flooded theatre in the wake of Harvey. As the city measured the loss and reach of Hurricane Harvey, several news sources visited the recently renovated Alley Theatre. Having received its “first major improvement since the building opened in 1968,” the Alley Theatre underwent a 46.5-million-dollar renovation only to be inundated with floodwaters (Chen, 2017). As camera crews and reporters trudged through the soggy carpets and remaining water, the damages and losses became apparent. Drenched programs, tickets, and papers reformed into a thick wad of illegible pulp; rows of seats marked how high the water rose in the theatre.

The theatre lost the entire prop storage. As props master Karin Rabe catalogued, the storm waters claimed, “All of our luggage, foliage, rugs, china, typewriters, computers, books, paper props, kitchen items, lamp shades are all gone,” and Rabe estimated, “There were probably 20,000 pieces of china and 70 TV sets down there.” (Chen, 2017). It is the sort of thing easily forgotten as part of a theatre space but upon reflection seems so obvious: naturally a regional theatre would amass a plethora of various props and ephemera, the sorts of materials that mark the difference between a house set in Victorian England and a house from the 1960’s. Props as visual and material markers of time, perhaps even more than language, are so central to the theatre and representation in the

popular American imagination. But after the flooding, these props, if they weren't directly destroyed, could no longer be safely used—mold sets in quickly.

Perhaps the most striking image, detailed by one reporter, was the image a Victorian era doll floating in the water. “It’s a gem of a creation, a Victorian era doll featured in the Alley’s beloved ‘A Christmas Carol.’ It’s the doll that’s given to the Scrooge, which later manifests into an eerily beautiful ghost. A steam clock, a giant candy cane, Scrooge’s chair – these iconic ‘Carol’ items also lay toppled in the water” (Chen, 2017). Time is out of joint: a soaked clock cannot run on steam; we can imagine the candy cane dissipating into sugary flood waters. Though the writer quickly moved on from this saturated image of a floating, ruined doll, I began to think about the profound implications of finding the Ghost of Christmas Past in a flooded basement of Houston’s oldest working theatre.

In *A Christmas Carol*, The Ghost of Christmas Past, the “eerily beautiful ghost,” takes Scrooge on a journey to his past and history. If the City of Houston were to have a Ghost of Christmas Past rise up in the middle of the night and take us on a journey though the past, we could do no better than be greeted by a moldy, floodwater-drenched doll—a perfect mixture of culture and environment. The faint smell of mildew ought to accompany us as we trudge along to see the memories of our youth, and we would certainly find environmental disaster and flooding in our pasts.

With the image of a mildew covered Ghost of Christmas Past in mind, I began to explore how to represent the intersection of ruin and Christmas traditions. I wanted to capture not only the damage caused by Hurricane Harvey and the loss experienced by Houstonians and the Alley Theatre alike, but I wanted to ponder the limits of holiday traditions in the age of climate change. At what point, between environmental destruction, rising sea levels and global warming, does a Christmas tree become an absurd idea? What would historians find if our basement of Christmas artifacts, traditions, and trappings all became an indistinguishable wad in the flood waters? Furthermore, what about the parts of Christmas tradition we didn’t want to float up to the surface in the aftermath? How can we perform with mold, mildew, and rotting wood?

Expanding performance to include the nonhuman and the environment has been an increasingly important function as theatre theory and ecological theory come into close contact. As Baz Kershaw argues, “‘theatre ecology’ (or ‘performance ecology’) refers to the interrelationships of all the factions of particular theatrical (or performance) systems, including their organic and non-organic components and ranging from the smallest and/or simplest to the greatest or/and complex” (pp. 15-16). “A Climate Christmas” sought to create a performance that worked *with* mold as a full participant as a means to simultaneously reorient our understanding of what counts within the ontology of performance and to accept the necessary risk to our own bodies. Furthermore, mold

quickly became an essential metaphor in the performance as well. That is, the performance explored and exhumed the cultural mold of Christmas in a post-flood city.

Prior to the live performance, we recorded a performance in a home damaged by Hurricane Harvey—the home had been subsequently gutted of dry wall and damaged furniture. Despite the absence of the ruined materials, the home was, in the words of the former owner, “a mold farm.” In the video, two actors in Hazmat suits and ventilator masks decorate a very small Christmas tree amidst the



debris of a dilapidated house. The floor has buckled, the bottom four feet of drywall have been cut out, and the molding joists frame the small scene. During the live performance, this video was projected on the side of one of the shipping containers that faced the street. As audience members approached the performance space, they had to pass by the projection. Though the audience watches safely away from the mold in the house, they are quickly reminded of the presence of mold in performance space itself (as one of the containers continually grows mold despite the technician’s best efforts).

When conceptualizing the relation between Christmas, mold, and disaster, I drew on *White Christmas* (1954) and *Holiday Inn* (1942) as source materials, and through these texts, “A Climate Christmas” engaged the haunting specter of race and minstrel performance in American Christmas films. Scholars have long been attentive to the ways in which early Hollywood films not only include blackface performances but draw on/steal from the tradition of the minstrel shows. With less than a subtle nostalgia for blackface performance--“I’d rather see a minstrel show than any other show I know,” Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye sing--*White Christmas* interweaves racialized performance with Christmas in the popular American imaginary. As a strange revision of Crosby’s earlier film *Holiday Inn* (which includes a blackface performance by Crosby and an ode to Abraham Lincoln), *White Christmas* becomes a moldy growth of early 20th century racial performance. As Linda Mizejewski writes, “If anything, the highly artificial finale of *White Christmas* looks toward the proliferation of white American suburbs, constructed like synthetic

model villages, empty of men during the day, empty of racial diversity, their garages and attics filling with plastic junk of Christmas” (p. 29). “A Climate Christmas” explored the performative “junk” of Christmas festering in our cultural basements.



In order to emphasize the relationship between familiar Christmas songs and minstrel tunes, when building a soundscape to accompany the film project in the gutted house, I mixed familiar Christmas tunes with more obviously problematic songs concerned with nostalgia or race. Judy Garlands’ “Have Yourself a Merry Christmas”; Bing Crosby’s “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”; and Eartha Kitt’s “Santa Baby” were mixed with recordings of Al Jolson’s “Mammy” or a choir singing “Dixie.” The soundtrack created a flooded soundscape, a mixture of familiar songs

and the specter of race. As the audience watched the film and moved around the performance, the music replicated the background music at a Christmas party, but the voices of Jolson and others interrupted the ambient holiday sounds. Perhaps even more interesting was when the audience members couldn’t differentiate between the Christmas music and the additions.

Once the audience entered the main deck, there were performances in each of the shipping containers. Inside one container, the Ghost of Christmas Past stood with the Christmas tree from the video projection, and I built a second soundscape using “The Depths Have Covered Them” from George Handel’s *Israel in Egypt* (1739):

*The depths have covered them,
The depths have covered them,
They sank,
They sank into the bottom,
They sank into the bottom,
Into the bottom as a stone*

This second soundtrack mixed the Handel recording with readings from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, audio clips from interviews during Harvey, and Christmas songs such as “Baby It’s Cold Outside.” Inside the container with the Ghost of Christmas Past, I wanted to create a collage of

recognizable Christmas songs with the uncomfortable overlay of Old Testament retribution. Whereas Christmas presumably offered a new covenant, flooding recalled an older arrangement. In this sense, the use of Handel fostered the association of Houstonians with the drowned Egyptians in the red sea, and by meditating on Handel's "The Depths Have Covered Them," the performance pondered how Houston, as a central city and economic hub in the petrol complex, becomes the new Egypt and that the city may be eventually consumed by the rising waters of the climate change it fuels.

Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Present and a performer with a guitar led audience members in familiar Christmas carol tunes; however, I replaced the traditional holiday lyrics with 19th century hymns texts with imagery about flooding. Singing the familiar melody of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," audience members instead sang the following:

*He to dry lands turns water-springs,
And floods to wilderness;
For Sins of those that dwell therein,
Fat land to bareness.*

*That burnt and parched wilderness
To water-pools he brings;
That ground that was dry'd up before
He turns to water-springs*

*Fools, for their sin, and their offence,
Do sore affliction bear;
All kind of meat their soul abhors;
They to death's gates draw near.*

*Again they are diminished,
And very low brought down,
Through sorrow and affliction,
And great oppression*

*For he commands, and forth in haste
The stormy tempest flies,
Which makes the sea the rolling waves
Aloft to swell and rise
The storm is chang'd into a calm
At his command and will;
So that the waves, which rag'd before,
Now quiet are and still*

In "Bethlehem_Theatre_Climate.mp3", we recorded a version of the "O Little Town of Bethlehem" with the lyrics listed on the left here. After a few verses, sounds from famous Christmas sounds come in and out, alongside the distant imitations of Al Jolson, making strange the emphasis on a "white" Christmas.

"Emmanuel_Theatre_Climate.mp3" offers a more traditional recording of the Christmas hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" with lyrics based in flood imagery.

Experimental theatre always blurs the lines between performer and audience member; singing flooded Christmas carols transformed the audience from passive onlookers into a chorus for “A Climate Christmas.” Describing protest theatre, Scott Magelssen writes, “one of the compelling aspects of protest performance is that each event functions as an occasion in and of itself, and at the same time as an infiltration and a co-optation of (or a performance acknowledgment of and resistance to) the elements and aesthetics of already standardized occasions” (p. 224). In this way, the performance attempted to simultaneously make strange the trappings of Christmas amidst environmental destruction while also making normal, if only briefly, the prospect of reorienting our yuletide celebrations to focus on flooding and wrath. Undergirding “A Climate Christmas” was an interwoven tapestry of theoretical commitments, including contemporary ecological theory, experimental theatre forms, as well as midcentury Marxist theatre projects.

Theory Interlude

Theatre can make legible our moldy pasts and futures. As a humanist tool, theatre exposes and amplifies socio-cultural patterns as means to incite the audience into thought-provoking action. But not all forms of theatre lend themselves to the task—the theatre can sometimes seek to naturalize rather than disrupt. As Una Chaudhuri (1994) argues, “The theatre...cannot escape the liabilities of its status as cultural institution producing cultural artifacts; but it can avoid misrecognizing that status as something natural” (p. 28). Furthermore, aligning the commitments of theatre and environmentalism presents additional potential hazards. As Baz Kershaw (2002) warns, “The act of seeing performance as a cultural product tends to transform nature into a resource to be exploited in the making of performance. Scholars and theorists of performance, in searching for ecologies of performance, therefore need to be wary of the usual strategies of analysis” (p. 120). With these pitfalls in mind, ecological theatre needs to reorient cultural understanding while making clear the materials and mechanism of its performance. Experimental theatre with a strong influence from mid-century Marxist playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht offers necessary tools for critically, mutually informing theatre and environmentalism.

Brecht’s theory of alienation and epic theatre provides an entry point into the resurrection of theatre and performance as a means to translate our current ecological crises. Brecht’s notion of alienation involves breaking the conventions of realism and creating a sense of uncomfortability in the audience. Experimental theatre takes what is familiar and makes it unfamiliar in an effort to force the audience to contend with the seemingly well-known anew. In *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, Brecht (1948) writes, “It is a matter of indifference whether the theatre’s main object is provide knowledge of the world. The fact remains that the theatre has to represent the world and that its representations must not mislead...they cannot work out satisfactorily without knowledge of dialectics—and without making dialectics known” (p. 18). Brecht parses an important distinction between “knowledge of the world” and “representation” of the world” --the theatre ought not try

to provide truth and knowledge but instead the theatre should place critical pressure on the representations of truth. The theatre, according to Brecht, reveals the dialectics of understanding.

Alienation not only reorients the dynamic of theatre practitioner to performance, alienation finds fruition in the reorientation of the audience towards collectivity. Walter Benjamin (1998) describes the relationship between Brecht's theatre and its audience: "For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area. For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy" (p. 2). The performance transforms the audience from passive individual subjects into an assemblage, and the demands for intervention are not for the individual but for the assemblage. Benjamin continues, "Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. This uncovering of conditions is brought about through processes being interrupted" (p. 4-5). It is through constant interruption that Brecht creates a radical distancing between the spectator and the performance, and this continuous disruption prevents the audience from passively observing the performance.

While Brecht's epic theatre was principally concerned with raising humans' consciousness of class and the systems of capitalism, his theatre of alienation and distancing performs a necessary reorientation of audience and performance in the age of climate change more broadly and environmental disaster more specifically. Particularly channeling Brecht through Benjamin's readings, we see how epic theatre and alienation anticipates the critical investments of contemporary theories of ecology.

For example, Jeremy Braddock and Timothy Morton (2018) call for a new form art in the age of climate change, and their proposed medium sounds eerily familiar not only to a Brechtian formula but to the practices of experimental theatre. Braddock and Morton call for art as "the interaction of multiple forms and regimes of media (and sound)" as a means for "these forms [to] disrupt the listener's sense of supposedly authentic and unitary experience" (p. 49). While this does appear like Brecht's notion of alienation, Braddock and Morton extend this disruption to articulate the relationship between the "human" and the multitude of things and nonhumans. In other words, alienation vis-a-vis climate change art ought to not only disrupt passive consumption but instead deconstruct the very performance of the human. This is a simultaneous separating of the human body from the figure of the human, and in the void of the lost symbolic liberal individual, we find a collectivity, an assemblage where we are already apart of the "mesh" of not us.¹³

While neither Braddock nor Morton gesture towards Brecht, they do draw on Benjamin to theorize the reorientation of the audience to performance. Braddock and Morton argue, "If we're going to deploy Benjamin, his concept of *Zerstreuung*, or reception-in-distraction, is highly significant. For

¹³ See Morton (2010), for his discussion of "mesh" in relation to Queer Ecology.

‘distraction’ is akin to growing-wondering and has a motile, architectural reference point, as when one is walking around a building one can’t see all of it” (p. 59). While Braddock and Morton do not trace Benjamin’s notion of distraction from Brecht’s alienation, it is clear Benjamin’s concept of distraction carries the critical residue of Brecht’s theory of theatre.

To this end, I suggest contemporary ecological theory, in particular Morton’s writing, inadvertently draws on theatre’s political project. Drawing on Morton’s term “hyperobject”-- “entitles that are so massively distributed in time and space that they require very powerful computation to keep track of them scientifically”-- Braddock and Morton describe the relation of hyperobjects, humans and art: Always in “the shadow of hyperobjects,” humans must create art that imposes “radical transformation[s]” in the “*age of asymmetry* in which the infinity of human subjectivity is matched by the infinity of nonhuman beings” (p. 42). As a focus on the materiality of climate change enacts a reorientation of ontology and being, so too should art challenge Western theories of ontology and liberal individualism.

The theatre should perform and expose representations of the world, climate change, flooding, and other environmental changes. Rather than necessarily provide a solution, theatre in the age of climate change ought to enfold us in the uncertainty of the contemporary moment and foster connections, next collectivities, and assemblages. It is not only that the theatre can imagine alternative assemblages, but that the theatre can enact these new collectives. Mold can act for itself, and we can perform with mold instead of against it. Further still, beyond the institutional genres of performance space and academic article, the theatre of climate provides a key pedagogical tool for the classroom.

Pedagogy

In the 2018-2019 academic year, as a Civic Humanist Fellow for the Humanities Research Center (Rice University), I traveled to local public high schools in Houston to speak with juniors and seniors. Drawing on the practice of image theatre, I challenged the students to create tableaux based on images from Hurricane Harvey. Image theatre—the performance and pedagogical practice of collectively reimaging images—provided students an alternative way to explore the vast implications of environmental racism, disaster, and the nonhuman. Only allowed to use their persons (no props, desks, or backpacks), the students had to represent the entire image (humans, water, boats, trees, concrete, fire, smoke). Students quickly realized how hard it was to represent everything in the images with only their persons. The exercise helped the students to ponder the limits and affordances of representing such a large-scale ecological disaster with only the human form, and the challenge opened a productive feeling of alienation from the human as the central and only important component in representations of environmental disaster.

As part of his Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal developed the practice of image theatre to offer performance as a tool for the proletariat. Boal writes, “The creation of images produced by

ourselves rather than by nature or a machine, serves to show that the world can be re-created. The creation of Images of the world as we want it to be, is the best way to penetrate the future” (p. 46). Not only does this reimagine the world in alternative ways, it empowers those without power. He continues, “we concentrate our efforts and focus our attention on the creation of conditions in which the oppressed can develop fully their metaphoric world” because it is through “imagination, symbolic language, [and metaphor] that we transform from “hominids” into human beings (p. 40, 41). Boal’s theory of theatre and humanization stems from his teacher, Paulo Freire. Freire writes, “dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed,” and the pedagogy of the oppressed out to offer the “restoration of their humanities” (p. 44, 45). Expanding the practices of Freire and Boal to include nonhuman elements extends its original purpose to accommodate the age of climate change.

While Freire and Boal, among others, remained committed to the liberation of the working class, in the age of climate change we understand class struggle is a symptom of the larger multifarious ways in which we destroy the environment and ourselves. In the words of Davis Pellow, “the domination of nonhuman nature is necessarily linked to the domination of human beings, that there can be no liberation of one without the other” (83). Our pedagogical task now is to “articulate a theory of intersectionality that expands that traditional concept beyond humans to include nonhuman species and ecosystems” (ibid.). My work with students attempted to amplify intersectionality and the question of the nonhuman even as I gave them tools to reorient their own relationships to the city, flooding, and the environment.

There was always a fair amount of giggling, and with limited time, the tableaux are not the most polished. To a student standing off from their group looking terribly bored, I asked: “And what are you?” “A tree.” I invited them to perhaps offer a more fully realized tree, maybe raise their arms for branches. Houston has, apparently, many branch-less-trees. And it is always perhaps my most rambunctious male student that needs to be the water. The representation of water ranges from throwing oneself on the floor to aggressively gyrating. One student both gyrated and surfed; he received a standing ovation from his peers. “I was just really studying my character,” he said. Occasionally, the students create something really quite beautiful that captures the gravity of the images we are engaging. And even when the tableaux aren’t fully realized, the students seem to have a sense of the



Fig. 4: Brendan Smialowski, “People Make Their Way Down Partially Flooded Roads Following the Passage of Hurricane Harvey.”

importance of it all. A respectful somberness comes over the room, if only for a brief moment, when the students come into the poses and everyone stops to see “how they did.”

Students recreated the image of a man pulling a child on a unicorn float through a flooded street (**Fig. 4**). Two cars pull through the water and a kayaker appears far in the background. Here one student appeared as a building, one as the sign in the fast distance, one as a car, and another as a stop sign. One boy lies still across the floor as the water. Rather than represent the person AND the floating unicorn, the students combined the rider and the unicorn (**Fig. 5**). The picture from the flood represents somewhat the absurdity of it all: a colorful unicorn appearing in the street, a man in board shorts and a tank top. It is beach scene transported to a flooded city.



What I like in particular about how the students recreate and change this image is the slight variation on the man pulling the floatation device. As we compare the images, we wonder: does the student being pulled represent the unicorn or the person riding the unicorn or some amalgamation of the two? The student tableau takes on a narrative of its own: the young woman being pulled appears as a struggling person, perhaps with an injured leg. If we didn't know the young man in the foreground was representing water, it would appear as though he is equally sick or dead even and the young woman in the black shirt and jean skirt is instead moving bodies.

Perhaps the most challenging photo I offered was a factory on fire in North Houston; the factory had lost power and safety systems during Hurricane Harvey.

This was one of the few photos completely devoid of human beings, and it was the only photo that didn't include water or flooding (**Fig. 6**). Various groups offered different interpretations of how to represent the smoke. This group placed three students together. Each group at this high school all focused on the water tower (in this particular photo, the student said he had to be the water tower because he had on a blue shirt). In addition to the fire, the students represented the buildings in the foreground of the photo (**Fig. 7**).



Fig. 6: Morgan Winsor, “A Fire Burns at the Arkema Chemical Plant in Crosby, Texas.”



Fig. 7: Students Recreate “A Fire Burns”

The hardest image for recreating is the image of the factory burning. In North Houston a factory that produced peroxide caught fire and burned; the smoke was laced with chemicals. Even as the students found creative ways to represent the billowing smoke coming from the building, they weren't sure how to necessarily represent the toxicity of the smoke. One insightful student did suggest showing someone choking or falling over as result of the smoke but that fell outside of the parameters of a non-moving, non-verbal tableaux.

Before we begin even trying to represent these images, I warn them: the human body can represent many things but it will not be able to truly capture everything here.

And I acknowledge that theatre need not be mimetic or work towards verisimilitude. I necessarily limit their mediums of representation for a pedagogical purpose. The problem and multiplicity of water and smoke in these images reifies the problems and limits of representing these images of environmental destruction solely with human bodies. As the human body fails to represent these environmental and nonhuman elements, this failure necessarily decenters the individual human body in an improvised theater of environmental destruction and climate change wrought by humans as humans.

The students realize, I hope, the ways in which climate change and environmental disaster needs a posthuman mode of representation that can only be achieved through new forms of human behavior. And I hope that my pedagogy practices experimental theater's alienation effect in ways

that give students the tools for participating in this reformation of human relations. Specifically, I attempted to provide tools for critical reflection and uncertain interaction rather offering tools that will quickly provide successful, mimetic and beautiful representations of the world.

Conclusion

Experimental theatre, as a practice and a pedagogy, is one important way for the humanities to translate critical thought on our environmental crises to a broader audience. It is not only a particularly ostentatious way of incorporating the public into this conversation—experimental theatre and the methods of alienation can potentially create and enact new collectives or new ways of seeing relationality. Before we can realize such new forms of relationality, however, we need to disrupt our dominant human-centered narratives of disaster and climate change, which necessarily elevate some humans over others as they nominally elevate humans over the natural world.

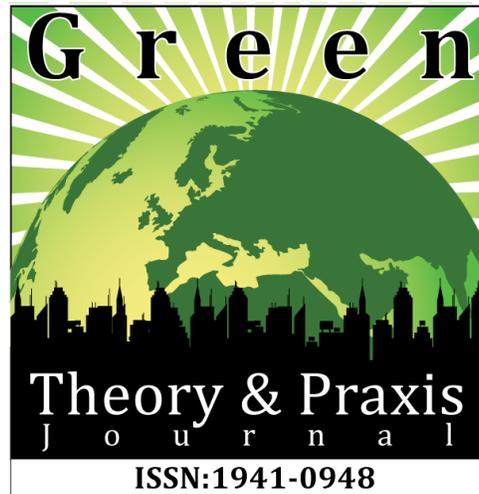
In some ways, Harvey and continual flooding gestures towards a dark collectivity ahead. We no longer have a choice to keep ourselves separate from the “not us.” The mold now grows on our walls and coats our lungs, just as our cultural technologies of dehumanization are embedded deep in us. Experimental theatre can act as a form of incorporation, in which we articulate and enact new assemblages, and stage the new theater of bio-cultural co-existence that unwinds our eliminationist hierarchies as quickly as humanly possible.

Moving forward, I believe the City of Houston, the institutions of Higher Education in Houston, and the local theatre community should collaborate on pop up theatre installations, protest theatre, and experimental theatre performances that raise awareness about climate change, disaster preparedness, and a variety of environmentally important components. Unencumbered by traditional constraints of the realist theatre, experimental theatre is mobile, adaptable, and challenging. We should strive to disrupt, make strange, and reorient the people and things of Houston always with an eye towards the brave new and damp worlds of Houston and coastal cities.

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The Art of Living with Our Damaged Planet

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Abstract

In post-Hurricane Harvey Houston, this essay intervenes in the fields of aesthetic and ecological theory. Through the analysis of several art installations that have taken place in Houston in the past year, I develop a theory of relational, pliable, and embodied aesthetic acts called “imaginative matterings” – pulling from such scholars as Timothy Morton, Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway, Deborah Bird Rose, and Michael Gardiner. As I develop what it means to create art that has a politically aware deployment of aesthetics, I argue that our tendency to criticize rather than to imagine, coupled with the melancholia that comes with an awareness of ecological collapse, breeds a toxic combination when we critique consumerism through the framework of critiquing pleasure. Rather, it is through acts of what I have theorized as “imaginative mattering” that pleasure can be

re-centered outside of capitalism, creating space for pleasurable, ecologically-minded, imaginative solutions to our current state of climate crisis.

Author's Note: "The Art of Living with Our Damaged Planet" is a play on and reference to the following anthology: Tsing, Anna, et al., editors. Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. University of Minnesota Press, 2017

The Art of Living with Our Damaged Planet

*We tell her, it's gonna be a long road, and
she says, as long as there's a road, I'm on it.
- Martha Serpas (2008)*

The Embodied Archive

In the humid, steamy final weeks of August 2017, Hurricane Harvey paid visit to Houston, Texas, and hammered the city in a seemingly endless deluge. The rain was nothing new for the land of bayous and berms, but its intensity was something difficult to describe, even two plus years after the fact. "A 500-year flood," when just the April before Houston had experienced similar levels of water. Houston is sinking – a fact deeply apparent and tangible to those of us, like myself, who have called the city home for many years. The bowl keeps filling (faster and higher for some than others) and each time drains less and less, and we're left somewhere in the middle to literally sink or swim. Harvey was unique in that it distributed suffering differently than most events of its kind. In a city designed such that those with the least resources and ability to rebuild are intentionally located in areas that bear the brunt of the destruction, Harvey acted as a sort of apocalyptic equalizer as many middle- and upper-class homes flooded when the Addicks Reservoir was released. Across race and class lines more than ever before, Houstonians were left literally floundering. Complicating this disaster narrative even further is the disparate rates at which folks from different pockets of the city have been able to recover. Many are still actively dealing with the damage brought over two years ago.

As the geographical and conceptual territory that Houston rests on grows increasingly slippery in the ways that hurricane Harvey exemplified, its residents sit at a particularly important precipice of remembering and forgetting. Perhaps our current climate crisis is largely a result of collective forgetting. Going about the hustle and bustle of our progress-driven workaholic lives, we take our city's infrastructure for granted, only noticing it in the moments that it fails (which it is doing at an ever-increasing rate). This forgetting is largely a product of Western industrialization and Enlightenment:

Instead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth [and, I interject, the earth itself as it became increasingly valued for its "resources"], blindly replace human labor by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated techniques, all through a

general rationalization of the production process. So the modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy (Bourriaud, p. 12).

We forget that it was humans who, in this lineage, built this city, and humans who are responsible for its continued care and stewardship. In this forgetting, our city fails us because we have failed it.

This cycle of forgetting further obfuscates our knowledge of the land upon which we depend especially if, when allowed to remember, we continue down a slippery stumble into nihilism and melancholia. But here we also find an opportunity to actively remember, and as Meghan Forbes argues, create archives as placeholders for memory (p. 7). These placeholders become increasingly valuable as they allow us a space to place what is often painful to look at. Better than allowing ourselves to forget, when we summon objects from the archive, we put ourselves back into awareness for a time, reframing responsibility from civic (infra)structures to personal kinship with the increasingly temperate/tropical environment that is Houston Texas and the Gulf Coast of the United States. Then, when we have done all we can for the time being, we can allow ourselves the temporary salve of forgetting – the archive will be there to remember for us, in the moments when we cannot. This reframing, facilitated by engagement with an archive, acknowledges that infrastructure matters, and of course much of disaster response, recovery, and preparedness depends on our urban planning and governmental structures. But how can these structures serve us if we don't remember the history of this land or even of the human infrastructure that was supposed to supersede it?

This is where humanists are perfectly poised to intervene by conducting research – actively, out in the community. The time has passed for us to stay cozy and dry in our academic ivory towers, and we must create archives – curating ephemera/residue by and for the public. It is imperative that this humanistic work is rooted in creating personal relationships with one another and with the land. As Stephanie LeMenager (2014) argues, with the rise of the American middle class borne of the oil boom (nowhere more evident than in Houston, Texas, which owes the relative stability of its economy to the oil and gas industry), a rift occurred between production and consumption, producers and consumers. This schism created a mass culture reliant upon a willing ignorance – a collective forgetting of where power and products come from – that holds up the structures that enable our ill-fated American love affair with oil to continue into an uncertain environmental, social, and political future (p. 5). In large part, this is why we Houstonians have experienced multiple “500-year” flood events in the last decade. The role of the archive that Forbes theorizes and I propose here is a radical counter to this: by using the archive to actively preserve and engage with memory, we acknowledge that we are not separate from the land on which we live and it is time we stopped pretending to be so.

It is imperative, then, that our humanistic work towards remembering creates an archive invested in materials. We cannot restrict our work to the things that will fit on a page or live in a computer's hard drive. Those things matter, and must be part of the archive, but can't be where it begins or ends. In order to really remember, we must engage all senses and types of memory – it's a physical,

tactile, embodied memory we are after, not merely a cerebral and academic one. So, to borrow from Marie Laure-Ryan's theory of transmedia narratives, we must gather "documents" in as many forms as possible – books and articles, yes, but also videos, songs, conversations, advertisements, sculptures, dirt, photographs, stories, legends, video games, etc. etc. etc. The potential scale of such an embodied archive looms large and potentially unending. This paper attends the materially-based hurricane Harvey archive in two ways: first, the physical/geographic spaces in which each of the art exhibitions took place; and second, this writing itself as a form of documenting and making accessible the exhibitions long after they have been taken down.

Imaginative Mattering

One Saturday night in the spring of 2019, Natasha Bowdoin's synthetic garden of colorful, gator-board blooms at Rice University's Moody Center for the Arts was inhabited by the designs, fashions, camp, and props of New York-based artist and designer Machine Dazzle. In a fabulous, do-it-yourself display, models walked among Bowdoin's big floral bursts to music tracks ranging from classical to electro-pop. The garden came to life, as each model was draped in (or undressing themselves from) designs resembling Bowdoin's blooms. Each strut played to the audience, but with equal respect and attention to the overgrown, lush pathways created by the pieces of the interior jungle as models navigated their way amongst the towering forms down a path towards the audience.

It wasn't hard to imagine that the models had been borne of this place, their big floral headpieces looking freshly plucked from the freestanding bush-like forms. The art installation created the environment in which a group of humans existed in temporary community with one another, and it determined how we looked and the way we behaved. Although aware of the audience on the "outside" of this small ecological other-world, the surreal-seeming performance, for a short while, offered a new perspective on human existence. Rather than constructing an environment around ourselves – too often taking the shape of walls, barriers, and denial – it was crystal clear that, in this temporary universe, the environment came first and, as it draped the bodies of those who walked among it, would come last, to welcome each one of us home at the end of our days.

This stunning display was as amusing and visually delightful as it was seductive. It imagined new interactions of human with environment, while still being deeply aware of its own enmeshment in capitalist material culture as evidenced in the performance's investigation of fast fashion, DIY, and pop. It is exactly this sort of display – this sort of playful, pleasurable questioning of how to move our current western reality into a sustainable future – that I examine in this paper. I put forward the belief that our tendency to criticize rather than to imagine, coupled with the melancholia of ecological collapse, becomes a toxic combination when we critique consumerism through the framework of critiquing pleasure. Rather, it is through acts of such **imaginative mattering** projects (which I define as utilizing various materials to visually communicate a portion of embodied knowledge, activated when viewers engage with the artworks) like Dazzle's that pleasure can be re-centered outside of capitalism, creating space for pleasurable, ecologically minded, imaginative solutions to our current state of climate crisis. We aren't ignoring capitalism,

but rather becoming deeply aware of what it is and how it operates – searching for solutions in a larger-than-capitalist worldview which looks to the pleasure generated through aesthetic experiences as a site of generative possibility. This space of imagination and re-centering of pleasure is opened up by the exhibitions curated here as the beginning of my embodied hurricane Harvey archive.

(re)Locating Pleasure

Viewing aesthetics (subsequently, pleasure) as disparate from cultural production makes it, in capitalist society, into a consumer product – something that can be thrown away and forgotten. This only serves to reify the human/environment epistemological divide that has allowed human beings to falsely fabricate a hierarchy in which we reign supreme and can ignore our very real need for/dependence on ecology.

Imagining new aesthetics (meaning, to re-establish where and how we value pleasure derived from aesthetic experiences) alters the way that we relate to materials and, subsequently, become aware of our own human materiality. This changing relationship offers opportunity for renewed focus on coexistence, holding dear a corporeal ethics/ethics-in-place borne from experiencing our own bodies as permeable and enmeshed with what surrounds us (Alaimo, 2016). By examining recent art installations in Houston, we see these community-oriented imaginative projects grapple with our future potentialities. Projects in creative, meant-for-the-public fields, here discussed through examples of recent art installations housed in Houston, reflect our current culture back to us, and in so doing, offer commentary and imagination on future potentialities. It is in this space of the mirror that there is room for change, imagination, and growth. Such projects, often done as labors of love, exemplify the aesthetics of relational care imperative to artfully living not just on, but with, our damaged planet in symbiotic, enmeshed coexistence.

It's not mere pleasure this project is after; rather, I'm after a transformative and transforming pleasure. This transvaluation of care and re-alignment of where and what we find the pleasurable is not apolitical, austere, or even hedonistic – rather, it is relational, pliable, and embodied. Mirroring aesthetic acts, then, deeply aware of their politics, are acts of imaginative mattering: – material manifestations projecting images of what pleasure may look like in a co-existent, shared future. It's important that these acts of imaginative mattering are physical bodies of work – their materials matter, because they reflect back current Western material culture (and therefore, subtly, politics/value systems) while simultaneously imagining new co-existences outside the bounds of the very material systems through which they were brought to life and put on display.

Drawing on Nicolas Bourriaud's definition of art as an "activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions, and objects" (107), I begin my embodied archival project reading three art exhibitions that (by no coincidence) took place in Houston in the year following Hurricane Harvey. Each one has its particular environmental interests and engages in what I theorize as imaginative mattering. Each exhibition, too, is by definition public, and works to engage Houston's communities on multiple levels. On the one hand, the exhibitions reach out to Houston communities to invite us in, and on the other hand, the

art spaces re-form communities within the gallery. Although none of the shows are explicitly about or in response to Hurricane Harvey, each engages with larger concerns about the “environment” and the relationship between humans and the environment. Clearly, for these artists and those who engaged in these bodies of work, Harvey provoked a need to remember the primary existence of this watery land we live in, asking us to re-understand and resituate the ways we relate with it.

Body of the Snake

I turn to Deborah Bird Rose to define “aesthetics” as embedded in particular ways a way of life. These life-modality aesthetics are sensual and culturally produced/producing, – appealing to the senses, evoking or capturing feelings and responses (p. G53). Where we seek pleasure, what we label as the pretty shiny things, shapes and is shaped by what we consider shiny and pretty in the first place (p. G53). This seeking matters more than what is sought, for it is in the seeking of pleasure that we find opportunities to encounter and change our human relationship with our multispecies surroundings. This labeling matters as much as what is labeled, for labels signify that something is pleasurable or desirable; in making this linguistic determination, we participate in a value system and actively enmesh ourselves within a particular politics.

Using the analogy of the ouroboros, Tim Morton lays out a further logic of these semantics for the kinship between humans and the things we find pleasurable as acts of sharing that take place between permeable present and porous, plastic future. Both present (for the sake of illustration, the mouth of the snake) and past (the snake’s tail) rely on language – thought, understanding, cognition, a modicum of label-ability – in order to exist and to change (Morton, 2018). Language codifies and categorizes how we understand and discuss materials and can come to dictate how they are used and perceived. This can be helpful, but also narrow and problematic – language can only capture so much of our experience with and relationship to a given material. It Language is of the utmost importance, as it is through recognizing the pliability and limits of language that we can recognize the equal pliability of existence. understand and begin to change how we define and shape our aesthetic experiences, moving towards a greater embodiment of pleasure further co-opted outside of capitalist ideology.

Included in the semantic logic for coexistence are imperative epistemological shifts in the way we imagine humanity’s relationship to the earth and all its creatures. Stacy Alaimo frames this relationship as “posthuman pleasures.” She argues that, instead of what many assume is a necessary ascetic approach to climate change, what’s actually needed is a re-alignment of where and what we find most pleasing. This process of transvaluation newly emphasizes bodily, tactile relationships to the spaces surrounding us, rather than our current version of cultural capital that prioritizes finding pleasure in the transactional, disposable, and replaceable (pp. 17 – 39). By getting back in touch with the body and its plasticity, Alaimo in her own way creates a pathway akin to Morton’s linking aesthetic experiences (imaginative matterings embodying new locations and types of pleasure) and causality (de-centering the Human).

In touch with Alaimo's plastic, enmeshed pathway is the view of aesthetics as sensual and culturally-produced/producing, particularly the notion of bir'yun – a term developed by the Yolngu people in the Arnhem Land region of North Australia. Translated as 'brilliance' or 'shimmer,' Deborah Bird Rose connects the vibration of bir'yun in aesthetic practices of art, music, and dance to the fluctuation of natural, ecological rhythms:

One of the most obvious patterns is the pulse between wet and dry seasons. The desiccation of the dry season dulls the landscape in many ways (although the country is always beautiful): there is a winding back of fertility, a loss of water, and thus loss of the possibility for sun to glint on water. But then, things begin to move toward brilliant again: the lightning starts to spark things up, the rains start to bring forth shiny green shoots, and rainbows offer their own kind of brilliance. Shimmer comes with the new growth, the everything-coming-new process of shininess and health, and the new generations (p. G54).

In an abstracted, yet similar way, Houston is vibrating post-Hurricane Harvey. Hurricane season brought the storm – the rains, floodwater, and ensuing detritus muddying our already muddy city. There was a fullness, an overflowing. Then, as floodwaters drained and damage was assessed, things began to move and grow again. It's worth stating that movement and growth have happened at different rates across the city, as Houston has an extremely uneven distribution of resources based on neighborhood. Many suffered, and continue to suffer, from the flooding, in Houston and across the Gulf Coast. Without ignoring that suffering, the project of this paper is to propose the embodied archive as a potential site for grappling with collective memories of calamitous events, while also opening the door for a newly embodied, ecologically co-existent relationship between humans and disaster events. Such events are, by definition, natural in the way Bird described the changes of seasons in Australia. What is different, though, is the intensity and frequency of these events; they're still natural but have become mutated to deleterious ends. In relation to my archival project conducted here, I argue that this mutation is largely a result of forgetting; we have trained ourselves to so tightly focus on and trust in the rebirth and return of shimmer, narrowing our relationship to the natural world so much that we have forgotten how to care for it in all seasons. Like bad city infrastructure, we are caring for our environment only when it fails us.

The works that I curate in this paper as part of my embodied post-Harvey archive visualize a version of bir'yun in Houston, and can be read as moments at different points along our city's post-Harvey season.

What follows will be an examination of how aesthetics become (dis)embodied, interwoven with readings of several projects working to form an actively aesthetic understanding of climate change through the lens of post-Hurricane Harvey Houston. Each body of work does its own imaginative mattering, broadening the scope of disaster response to include imaginations not only of preparedness and recovery but also of developing more ecologically-aware (relational, pliable, embodied) modes of living.

To be further examined momentarily, I briefly introduce each of the three art installations here (Michel Blazy's *We Were the Robots*, Natasha Bowdoin's *Sideways to the Sun*, and Lily Cox-

Richard's *Berm*) first, as bodies of work that can be viewed as the sides of this coin. Blazy's post-human landscape in *We Were the Robots* is a moment of that desiccation visualized, as humans have vanished and green things are just starting to re-emerge. Natasha Bowdoin's lush interior jungle, *Sideways to the Sun*, is the shimmer that comes from the desiccation, where fertility is back at its fullest. What's most poignant about these two ecologically imaginative matterings is that they remain ambiguous as to whether or not, or to what degree, humans are in the picture. At the very least, human movement and placed-ness is subjugated and directed by the new material forms of the natural environment. In addition, Lily Cox-Richard's *Berm* choreographs viewers' interaction with her aggregate forms – a literal flipping on its head of the way we are used to moving our bodies, used to receiving visual information. Engaged in such aesthetic vibrations, this collection of shows opens viewers up to the brilliant bir'yun that invites us into a heightened awareness of and kinship with our 'vibrant and vibrating world' (Rose, 2017).

These projects have the power, through subtle (or not-so-subtle) acts of transvaluation to change epistemologies in favor of ecological coexistence. As with Nicolas Bourriaud's assessment of "modern" artistic practices, the goal of each work presented here is not to form a naïve or utopian representation of reality – rather, each work engages in creating and performing a model of action "within the existing real" (13). In such a practice, we are first invited to examine current modes of living/being, and "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2017). Each exhibition makes material an imagined yet familiar landscape. In so doing, each exhibition then requires us to develop a better understanding of ecological processes and non-human beings and, subsequently, of humanity's relationship to those processes and beings. We are no longer at the top of the hierarchy; perhaps, amidst our new findings of pleasure rooted in aesthetic experiences of increased kinship, we have found a path towards undoing such hierarchical ways of being in the world.

MouthTail/TailMouth

Michel Blazy, *We Were the Robots*



Blazy, Michel. "Michel Blazy: We Were the Robots." *Moody.rice.edu*, 2019, moody.rice.edu/.

Offering a humorously dire imaginative mattering is Michel Blazy's *We Were the Robots*, presented in early 2019 at Rice University's Moody Center for the Arts in conjunction with Natasha Bowdoin's *Sideways to the Sun*. In a traditionally windowless gallery space, Blazy's work displays a future after humans have eliminated ourselves through our acts of environmental destruction. What's left behind, in this recent future, are remnants of the structures in which we lived, relics of trash, and the beginnings of new, green life. Our detritus has become mulch for new kinds of growth.

Inside the large, high-ceilinged room, Blazy has created a pool filled with black mulch, bits of new green growth that currently looks like weeds, a trashcan filled with overflowing soap bubbles/foam, a refrigerator that gurgles and spits out ice cubes every five minutes, and a stacked structure made out of shipping palates that operates as a little apartment building for small plants. The white walls are covered in a peeling, blue plastic-looking material, reminiscent simultaneously of a plastic bag and being underwater. Several feet of space are left around this "pool" on all sides, and viewers are able to walk all the way around it on a dystopian grey-brick-road. As most of the piece is close to the ground, I found myself crouching down periodically to get a closer look. The room was warm and permeated by scent of the mulch. That encompassing, earthy humidity, combined with the high blue walls, made it feel as if the gallery had flooded. The bodies of the viewers were drowning in the debris, floating out of existence.

Blazy's *We Were the Robots* doesn't shy away from human culpability in how this imagined future came to be. In a contrast to Bowdoin's synthetic jungle that still has space for humans, Blazy's display seems to place the earth within bounds of the fenced-off mulch. In so doing, humans (the viewers) are relegated to the ambiguous grey space between earth and plastic-bag-underwater ephemerality. Blazy directs and limits our movement about the space – perhaps as a nod to the current political and economic self-control needed in order to stave off impending climate doom. That being said, *We Were the Robots* does not feel interested in regulation from an austere or ascetic point of view. Rather, its pre-determination of viewers' movements about the space highlights the limits with which we have allowed our current political system and modern, Western epistemology to restrict, limit, and fix our cultural and imaginative movement. This attention to current constraints deepens the call for the very creative freedom and embodied pliability that the installation denies all those who enter it.

Natasha Bowdoin, *Sideways to the Sun*



Bowdoin, Natasha. "Natasha Bowdoin: Sideways to the Sun." *Moody.rice.edu*, 2019, moody.rice.edu/.

On display at the Moody Center simultaneous with *We Were the Robots*, Natasha Bowdoin's *Sideways to the Sun* offers a compelling perspective on bringing the outside in. Bowdoin's work is a large-scale installation in a first-floor gallery – located in an open space, with an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. Approaching the space from the outside, one can easily see the bold, graphic blooms that fill the installation. This visibility is uncharacteristic of many art spaces. Throughout much of the lineage of art history, there has been a desire to “protect” the artwork – from sun damage, but also from un-regulated – or un-ticketed – viewing. Here, Bowdoin's show can be seen in its entirety from outside these windows. Placing an ecologically-based show in this type of viewing space signals an institutional generosity and, more significantly, questions the relationship between “in” and “out,” as well as the need for physical and social barriers to interaction.

Though Bowdoin draws on a fascinatingly wide variety of references to create her forms, the most interesting inspiration is her use of Victorian flower culture – a tradition in which different kinds and colors of flowers are given to convey various, hidden meanings, often to a secret lover. These Victorian references work with the synthetic, modern, yet “almost poisonous” color palate to conflate time, touching on the fact that these newly imagined environmental forms actually come out of a longstanding relationship with human history and patterns of behavior (Gosnell p. 5). Perhaps the fact that those florals were used to convey often messages of love, or lust, displays a modicum of optimism – there is still love to be found in and with the natural world, and maybe Bowdoin still has a modicum of hope for an ecologically coexistent future.

Standing in the gallery, one gets the sense that inside and outside are not as separate as they might seem. As one weaves through the movable gator board forms and treads carefully over wood floors covered with seemingly dense underbrush of cut paper, through the cutouts and over the edges of towering, monstrous blooms, you catch glimpses of other viewers and of the life outside the terrarium-like gallery. The highly synthetic color palate creating the sharp edges of the blooms signals that all is not “natural” or “organic” in this human-sized fish tank. The outside that has

come (been brought?) in is the most affected, perhaps infected, by human-made materials. These synthetic-cized blooms continue to grow, their scale engulfing the humans who walk among them. Perhaps this speaks to an imagined future where new forms of life, created by our current ecological moment, will grow to dwarf human beings. We will have inadvertently created the very environment that will soon rise up to consume our current concrete jungles.

Lily Cox-Richard, Berm



Cox-Richard, Lily. "1 / 4 Lily Cox-Richard, Study for Berm, 2018." *Diverseworks.org*, 2018. www.diverseworks.org/in-the-works/exhibition-performance/lily-cox-richard.

In the fall of 2018, across town from the Moody Center, a new imagining of debris took place at Diverseworks, housed at MATCH in Houston's Midtown neighborhood. Titled *Berm*, in reference to an artificially raised bank or ridge that may act as a fortification or separation barrier, the show was humble, delicate, and dangerous. Lily Cox-Richard's sculptures, which she refers to as concrete aggregates, are made from old bricks, oyster shells, and other debris, that have been ground down and worked away at to reveal facets of industrial and provisionally disembodied systems.

Each piece lived on the floor of Diversework's gallery space. Using a creeper and periscope, viewers were invited to roll along on their backs down the sidewalk outside of the building, to view the pieces through low windows running along the ground. To observe the work inside the space, viewers were encouraged to get down on the ground in some way, so they could be up-close and personal with each piece.

In a panel discussion, Cox-Richard invited a writer, an anthropologist, and an architect to speak with her and the audience about their areas of expertise, commenting on natural resources, climate change, material, history, care, and constructed environments. Cox-Richard spoke to objects' ability to transfer energy through touch, alluding to a relational aesthetic between person and thing, perceiver and perceived. With her pieces, sharp shells and fragments of glass created an equal

opportunity for harm – viewers could damage the works through rough handling or carelessness, but the materiality of each piece was such that it would pierce skin if touched the wrong way (Cox-Richard, 2018). It is easy to imagine this reciprocal relationship as positively as it was cast dangerously – the works imply that the reciprocity itself is neutral. What becomes pleasing or damaging is determined by behavior.

This imagined reality, materially manifested and humbly displayed, offers what I referred to earlier as an epistemological leap of faith, both in Cox-Richard's creation of it and in viewer's engagement with it. As you roll along your back down the midtown sidewalk, cars rushing by and the horn of the Metro light rail blaring, it's easy to understand that anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence (Morton, p. 160). It's terrifying, it's fun, it's funny-looking, it's dangerous, it's new, it's uncomfortable, it's weird. All at once, your body is more in touch with the earth and more aware of our built environment than it possibly ever has been – the very “earth” of Houston the paved swamp whose pavement is always crumbling, always on the edge of washing and being washed away. All at once, your body rediscovers its awareness of the dangers and opportunities that can come from this “new” interaction with thing, place, self, and others.

Chomp

Blazy's imaginative mattering grapples with the mouth of Morton's ouroboros – a version/vision of dystopian present, what Morton calls “horror and depression” and “tragic melancholy and negativity” (Morton, p. 160) This melancholy, though dire, is not without its humor – the refrigerator that spits out ice cubes every five minutes and the towering pile of foam vibrating out from the depths of a plastic trash can are darkly comedic vignettes that allow us a moment for ironic laughter that these are the things that have outlived us.

Bowdoin's and Cox-Richard's imaginative matterings, the tail, work out of the shit and into the epistemological and creative potentialities of faith – what Morton calls “sadness and joy,” the arrival at an “anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence” (p. 160). Bowdoin's synthetic blooms – gigantic, monstrous versions of a minor art form from the period of empire and industry that built the world in which we live – envelope and entice us like a Venus fly trap. We don't realize that the blooms have made us subordinate to themselves until we're already trapped behind the glass of the terrarium-like gallery. This moment of being in the leafy space estranges us from that history because its linearity is broken. – Victorian past is conflated with comic-book-colored present and we are plucked from the timeline, thrust instead into an alternate-yet-simultaneous reality where blooms rule and humans are the ones trapped behind glass. It's absurd, and it's releasing.

As Bowdoin makes us realize the in, Cox-Richard leaves us with a sense of on: on the street, on our backs, on the planet. Berm is total anarchy of the white cube – mud on the walls, art on the floor, audiences rolling along on the ground outside of low gallery windows. In asking audiences to engage in this way, she subverts what we are used to doing with our bodies in these spaces/institutions. As the movements of our bodies transition from the expected to the unexpected, our sense of how to live as embodied persons follows suit.

This sense of embodiment changes with a move away from linear, historicized temporality. Each of these exhibitions are vital instances of imaginative mattering that work to kick off the blanket of boredom under which we have allowed ourselves to be stifled and our abilities to conceive future modes of embodied, relational, pliable living to be smothered (Gardiner, 2012). In making such a change, each exhibition engages the notion of temporal experience. *Berm*, in its combination of natural and artist-made aggregate forms, foregrounds the time it takes for material processes of accumulation and decomposition to occur. *Sideways to the Sun* plays simultaneously with the Victorian language of flower gifting and bold, graphic comic book styles of coloration to acknowledge human relationality with the natural world throughout epochs (in so-doing, conflating past and present and disrupting western notions of a history pure in its linearity). *We Were the Robots* uses trash, foam, and tenement-like planters enmeshed in a bed of mulch to examine the future of what gets thrown away – the lifespan of plants and plastics extending vastly further into the future than the lifespan of you or me.

The materiality of each installation – paint, rocks, vinyl, a refrigerator, etc. – operates dually to assert the value (cultural capital?) of the non-human through its direction of a human audience. As each of these artworks is located within a relatively conventional art institution, each has an immediate and obvious cultural value as a type of “high art.” For these institutions to give space and placed-ness to each of the works adds material and social value, and in so doing adds to the value of each work’s conceptual interests. It’s politically relevant and important that space is being taken up by non-human things that cannot be consumed or purchased in simple, transactional ways; in their complicated enmeshments, the installations also critique the capitalist relationship to all non-human things as objects for our delectation. The works are embodied as weighted cultural objects valued by institutions interested in social critique, as well as being embodied in their own material manifestations of form, shape, color, and composition.

In addition to conceptually re-aligning cultural capital through materially manifested transvaluation, each work physically re-aligns the bodies of its viewers. *Berm* encourages viewers to literally get down and dirty with glass, rocks, shells, rubber, and cement, rolling down a midtown sidewalk on our backs. *Sideways to the Sun* engulfs its viewers into its technicolor floral folds, the provisional stage-setting construction of the floor pieces nodding to the ever-present possibility of a change in arrangement, a kind of growing expansion and contraction that has the viewer watching where they step. *We Were the Robots* keeps humans on its outskirts, restricting our path to the room’s perimeter. The worlds of the artworks come to take charge – the audience is no longer calling the shots.

This change in hierarchy creates a new kind of aesthetic experience – imaginative matterings asking us to redefine and relocate both pleasure and our bodies as we are made increasingly aware of the relationality, pliability, and embodiment of the Human as it relates and supplicates itself to our surrounding environment(s). This awareness, if we can imagine optimistically for a moment, is a window into fostering kinship with other-than-human beings and priorities. Such a kinship-based shift in priorities negates linear conceptions of history and the need for aggressive modern “progress.” In so doing, the blanket of boredom is (at least temporarily, as evidenced by *We Were*

the Robots, Sideways to the Sun, and Berm) cast off, replaced by the ecological flow of Rose's shimmer.

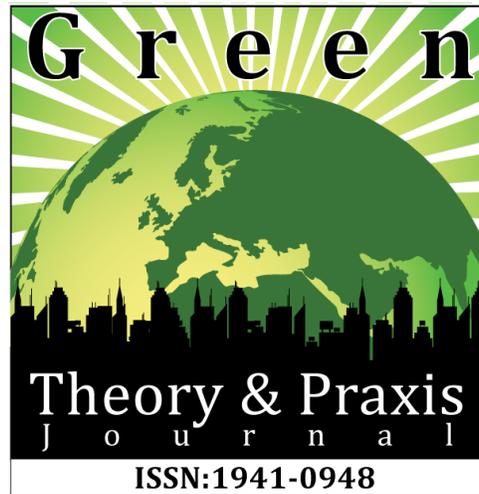
As each body of work vibrates, the notion of pleasure derived from aesthetic experience shifts beyond capitalist experience of unequal and exchangeable pleasure accumulation, making room for the memory of what it means to live as a participant within an environment. Each of the exhibitions here are placeholders, markers, to which we can return time and again when we find ourselves beginning to forget, or to which we can turn to locate information when it is too traumatic to be held in active memory. In reorienting our bodies in the ways each exhibition asks of us, we may begin to reorient our relationship to not only floodwaters, but to the environment of Houston, Texas in all its forms.

This work is about creating new knowledge out of the things we have forgotten we already know: what the air smells like before it rains, the color the sky turns when a tornado is on its way (green), the texture of silty water rushing past bare knees. Knowledge of these things is in our very nature as human beings; but we have become so separated from the "being" part of "human being" that we forget these embodied wisdoms – to the detriment of ourselves and the earth with which we are enmeshed. These wisdoms live not in books or peer reviewed articles; not in stock market reports or city council meeting notes; not on Twitter or the radio. Rather, they are material. They live in our very skin, and in everything with which we come in contact.

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Future-Facing Folklore

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Abstract

From post-Hurricane Harvey Houston, this essay intervenes in the emerging fields of emergency preparedness and disaster management. Sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have rightly pointed out how disaster survivors are marginalized in recovery efforts, and they discuss the need for novel, participatory recovery methods. Following the example of Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston—an original program of survivor-survivor ethnography and storytelling—I argue that novel, participatory recovery begins with survivors empowered in the very process of understanding and documenting the disaster they suffered. Working from the scholarship of

folklorists Carl Lindahl, Pat Jasper, and Kate Parker Horigan, I encourage scholars of disaster to consider survivor-survivor storytelling both as a research methodology and simultaneously as one way to address the problems they identify for community rebuilding that leaves survivors behind. After discussing the many benefits of survivor-survivor storytelling, I develop what it means to be a survivor in our particularly disastrous times, and I argue that we need to expand our conceptions of survivorship and storytelling to build resiliency in neighborhoods before, rather than after, the next particularly brutal climate crisis event.

Future-Facing Folklore

I've had a car ruined by a flash flood, and I've also had a friend almost take the wheel to turn us down a side road where we wouldn't float; a quick left from Bissonnet onto Hazard, appropriately enough. But I was powerless when the receptionist at the Jewish Community Center (JCC), in Meyerland (Houston, Texas), described watching the security-camera footage of water slowly rising or when the arts program director told me she didn't realize she'd had thirty years of memory lying vulnerable in her closet. It was at that JCC, while leading a storytelling workshop post-Harvey, that I was stopped short in a model interview with survivor Marian Bell. She startled me when she said, vehemently, "I'm the expert, I'm the expert," though I had explained before the interview that she was the expert (M. Bell, personal communication, July 1, 2018). It was hard for me, as an outsider, to truly experience or offer the power of shared survivorship.

Disasters Follow a Script

After a disaster, journalists and government officials expect and enforce narrative coherence. They look for "legitimate victims," and legitimate the social structures that facilitated their victimization. What we end up with are stories about suffering that can be consumed and safely sequestered. As folklorist Kate Parker Horigan (2018) notes, "Dominant discourses tend to absorb or appropriate the particularities of survivors' stories, with the result of making them familiar to audiences, but also of upholding the interests of powerful groups by reifying those narratives that bestow power on them" (p. 12).

This is a problematic cycle where the representation of the most vulnerable survivors gives policy-makers no reason to prioritize adequate compensation for those survivors' losses or to improve protections for those communities before future disasters. Disasters reveal structural problems related to wealth: wealthier neighborhoods, for instance, flood at far lower rates. During and after those floods, the poor are often scapegoated for their suffering. Our particularly climactic times demand we adjust how we discuss the intersection of those structural problems and disasters, otherwise we will continue to watch disaster mitigation and recovery best help those who least need that help. Folklore offers alternative ways of representing vulnerable survivors.

Narratives structure our experience of the world, and this is most evident during disasters, events which show the seams in our physical and cultural infrastructure. Disaster narratives reduce complexity in ways that reinforce inequality: we find unsettling patterns that reinforce pre-existing hierarchies such as heroes vs. victims, rescuers vs. looters, nature vs. culture, and these divisions encourage solutions that reproduce conditions that exacerbate disasters, driving up pre-existing inequalities and injustices.

How can we practice recovery and mitigation in order to build resiliency not after, but before disasters? We can apply lessons from folklore both to our most obvious catastrophes (Harvey, for one) and our slower, on-going disasters: our commons knowledge—our infrastructure of the local and natural world—is being erased, replaced. What solutions can attempt to address these compounding crises together? How can we create interactive contexts for stories of disaster? We should think of folklore not as recovering a lost past, but as holding onto a future that is trying to be born, but which, when we separate survivors and reinforce hierarchies and outmoded stories, kills that future again and again.

Folklore offers techniques to reduce our reliance on simplistic narratives and to reintroduce democratic complexity to the narrative (and very real) structuring of disaster preparedness, mitigation, resilience, and recovery. Folklore teaches that we should value community knowledge by prioritizing the voices of community knowers. It shifts centers of authority to those who should have it most but who have been afforded it least. A folklorist ideally spends significant time in the community, practices solicitous listening, and gives each narrator the opportunity to critique their narratives. If a folklorist does speak during an interview, ideally that folklorist is saying something like, “And then what happened?”

Survivor-survivor storytelling—the particular practice of folklore I discuss in this contribution—turns community storytellers into folkloric interviewers. Field schools offer researchers a model of ethnography that flattens hierarchies of story creation and collection, fighting our tendencies to reproduce dominant narratives and to allow them to shape our research questions. Folklorist Carl Lindahl (2012) discusses how even well-intentioned outsiders “cultivate distance as part of their posture of scientific objectivity,” especially when struggling with the “impulse of self-preservation” (p. 144). Social scientists may strive for objectivity but “interviewers tend to feel threatened by people who have suffered intense trauma” (ibid.). Survivor-survivor storytelling better facilitates and records insider accounts that reveal emotions circulating in the community. The resulting archive of local memory and legendry can demonstrate that all kinds of communities are sites of knowledge production, and transform the discourses from which their knowledge is missing.

Stories are like roads. We need maps that accurately represent where we are going, stories that fully account for the hazardous conditions ahead. In a time of crisis we should hear from experienced drivers, people who have been down these roads before. We are in danger otherwise of falling into path dependency, of playing out scripts whose end we could have seen coming if only we'd listened to directions from a local.

Folklore—in particular survivor-survivor storytelling—gives us the opportunity to re-think both our relationships with disaster and with survivorship. We can begin by listening more closely to disaster survivors, and by better facilitating those survivors' tellings of their stories. We might also realize that none of us can take care of ourselves alone, or wait to be saved.

Disaster Solutionism

It is surprising that we continue to struggle to recognize that disasters make things worse. A brief summary of that problem might begin by foregrounding sociologists Jeremy Pais and James Elliott's (2008) understanding that natural disasters are at "the intersection of environmental hazards and vulnerable people," both because "historical processes...generate social inequalities in the capacity to anticipate, resist and recover from hazards when they occur" and because those hazards are "reproduced in the recovery process" (p. 1416).

In sprawling and perpetually re-building Houston we need to be especially mindful of this cycle. We want to avoid what Pais and Elliott refer to as the "'treadmill of destruction,' whereby disaster zones reproduce larger, more socially divided versions of themselves as they rebuild and await the next major disaster" (p. 1448). How can we maintain optimism and avoid the neoliberal twist that turns good intentions into disaster capitalism? We need the voices of those who have been displaced and have been preemptively displaced through the exclusion of their local knowledge from money and expertise-driven conversations about planning for the next big storm.

The growing literature of emergency preparedness and disaster management includes specialists from disciplines as close-quartered as sociology, anthropology and psychology, and as divergent as urban planning and mass communication, a variety of disciplines that reflects the escalating multitude and complexity of dangers we face. Throughout this literature we find rich documentation of uneven distribution of mitigation and recovery, but because these studies and papers are still locked into paradigms of expertise, they often pose questions that are, from a humanistic perspective, their own solutions. How to foster a sense of community, to build resilience, to make the rebuilding process more effective and efficient for the entire community? How to combine social ties and place? How to remember and recover neighborhoods. These scholars would benefit from considering survivor-survivor storytelling both as a research methodology and simultaneously as one way to address the problems they identify. Researchers are right to ask philosophical questions like these, but survivor-survivor storytelling better empowers disaster survivors to participate in the recovery and rebuilding process by creating an infrastructure for them to find their voices.

It is true that community has been undermined and that we don't know where we live, that commons and local knowledge is challenged by anti-democratic technocratic solutionism, but people want to know the neighborhoods that they live in. Community is always about to be formed, and survivor-survivor storytelling encourages and enlists community members in the conversation about how that process should evolve.

Experts in Dispossession

The method of survivor-survivor storytelling was first practiced through Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston (SKRH), a program of folkloric story-collection organized by folklorists Lindahl and Pat Jasper in which they empowered survivors by training them in a method for listening, recording, and processing stories. The program also provided those survivors with equipment and—crucially—funding, and they encouraged survivors to recruit interviewees among family, neighbors, and friends. SKRH, as well as later work in Haiti—*Survivor to Survivor: Haitian Memory*—asserted that the people who know the most about a disaster are the survivors. When the dispossessed have had so much taken from them, they become experts in dispossession. Though they may not be able to tell you how or why a levee broke, they can tell you about the conditions on the ground, heroic neighbors, months of bureaucratic inertia, the material and immaterial violence they've witnessed, suffered, or confronted.

Especially with regards to poorer areas, outsiders shape narratives that often misrepresent what happened, and those narratives affect how we rebuild. Dominant narratives and popular beliefs focus implicitly and simplistically on individual competence. Since we don't want to fail nice or good people, disaster narratives often foreground criminals or assume people have a "victim mentality" or are "too stupid to live" for not leaving, or have "no gumption," as Horigan (2018)—a colleague of Lindahl and Jasper—reports (p. 3). Though survivors are occasionally presented as brave heroes (people who deserve help), they are more likely to be portrayed as passive and helpless or irresponsible and criminal. Lindahl (2012) points out how such false dualities are often racially tinged and stereotyping, with white authority figures labeled credible in contemporary media reports and early historical accounts, while Black citizens' stories are doubted or disbelieved (p. 144).

Horigan (2018) explains that "Narrative inequality"—legends circulating among authorities that survivors are threats to potential rescuers, or among survivors that authorities are coldly blowing up levees—"translates directly to ineffective disaster response," which then results in "blaming those most in need of aid for its deferral." (p. 33). But when survivors are given a chance to shape how a disaster will be remembered, they often foreground compassion and competence. Interviewing workshops and trainings make space for organic community; interviewers volunteer at every level they solicit, and survivors bond. Lindahl (2012) explains the SKRH training encouraged a "kitchen table environment," because "when the narrator and the interviewer break through the technical and legal impediments to achieve a kitchen table situation, they can tap dimensions of the survivors' experience that seldom emerge through other documentation techniques" (p. 157).

If you are curious what makes a survivor, it's important to note that definitions are messy and complicated. Who decides? Do you consider yourself a survivor? Does the community consider you a survivor? Again, this theoretical problem is its own practical solution, when looked at from

a non-hierarchical perspective. These are questions that can be worked out at field schools, when interviewers share their own stories. Lindahl discusses how “those who feel unheard can make extraordinary listeners—or extraordinary narrators, when they finally find willing ears. This was the survivors’ common condition, and this was what made them not only the best, but virtually the only choice to conduct documentation at this depth” (p. 158).

Stories are harder to get than information, and potentially more important via persuasion, as we are emotional creatures, but a larger interest in wide and deep story collection is not always apparent. “Next we told the survivors that they were the experts” Lindahl writes, and they are surprised to hear this affirmed (p. 155). Many of us have become accustomed to the narratives of an economy of virtue, and when our circumstances cause us to feel that our vulnerability is ours alone, we forget that our voices have value.

An important benefit is that survivor-survivor storytelling—talking to someone who’s been through what you’ve been through—is as much about process as it is about product: telling your story can be a healing act (p. 159). The inclusion of these stories and empowerment of their tellers militates against the cultural logic that excluded them in the first place, and begins to repair the knowledge lost in the exclusion of these survivors, experts in dispossession. As discussed above, the funding aspect of this project has its own advantages for recovery and rebuilding efforts, as it offers both employment for people at a particularly opportune time and facilitates greater interviewer participation.

Methods for Survival

SKRH demonstrated the practical benefits of survivor-survivor storytelling both as a project and a methodology; as such it could be applied to enhance any number of similar responses to climate events, our more immediate disasters. Sociologist Timothy Haney (2018) notes a number of problems in contemporary disaster response:

- “Data collection in post-disaster communities is notoriously difficult” (p. 113).
- “Experiencing flooding and evacuation both work to erode attachment to place, even as they motivate greater civic engagement” (ibid.).
- “By contrast,” Haney writes, “for those residents less materially affected by the flood, there was less need to experience nor participate in the reinvigoration of community” (ibid.).

All of these problems describe the subject-matter of survivor-survivor storytelling. That we find our disaster management experts’ tools failing us all is unfortunate if unsurprising, but that we find them reaching out for solutions that we actually have in stock (if they could re-formulate their approach and reevaluate their standards for data, i.e. allow for messy data) is encouraging. Folklore provides data that has been otherwise excluded at a time when we need more and alternative narratives, data that these researchers are struggling to find.

Folkloric story-collection also helps re-establish attachment to place through an insider approach to civic engagement. Commons knowledge is local but it breaks down boundaries. Many

interviewers speak with neighbors and friends of friends who they wouldn't otherwise engage with in nearly as much depth. Haney concludes,

Understanding how affected residents rekindle their existing social networks and generate new ones is of critical importance to building more resilient communities. Results of this study indicate that it is not simply the social capital that residents bring with them into the disaster that matters. Rather, disasters are events that have potential to bring people together who otherwise may not interact. Those forged bonds can strengthen communities and potentially lead to various forms of community engagement, volunteering, and altruism. (p. 113)

This observation leads Haney to call for “novel, participatory methods” that “both allow residents to participate in discussions of community problems, and also to build connections to others in their community” (pp. 113-114)—survivor-survivor storytelling seems one obviously novel and participatory method.

Where Haney focuses on the people who make up a community, other researchers focus on the place that is home to a community. Psychologist Robin Cox and anthropologist Karen-Marie Perry (2011) argue that we must better understand place as a bulwark against the disorientation and disruption caused both by disasters and recovery efforts, and they emphasize “the critical importance of place not only as an orienting framework in recovery but also as the ground upon which social capital and community disaster resilience are built” (p. 395). Cox and Perry's place might be best realized by the people who know it best. Locals know what institutions matter, what corners and intersections have histories. Neighborhoods are complex, and a multitude of voices reflects that reality. There is no single place to be realized, and folklore is fortunately epistemologically modest because of its minoritarian status. Folklore doesn't offer one master narrative or single rebuilding plan.

Cox and Perry also seem to indicate that arming vulnerable communities with something like survivor-survivor storytelling is a necessary defense against “a discursive construction of recovery [that] tends to individualize and privatize the psychological and emotional distress associated with disasters, contributing to a social denial of the depth and duration of survivors' distress...” (p. 408). “[S]hared reflection” affirms this distress, even in articulating a sense of place in its absence: “like fish out of water he and his fellow survivors were suddenly conscious of that which, until that point, had been largely out of their awareness. Reorientation, the individual and collective negotiation of identity and belonging in the wake of disasters can be painful, stressful, and confusing, but it can also be transformative” (p. 409).

Within this framework, individual and community transformation is at its most positive when it grows from the ground up. The top-down alternative is seen in the cruelly optimistic proclamations that we are ‘Houston strong.’ Recognition of displacement and awareness can help us change our own narratives, and to be more aware of the narratives being presented to us. This variety of knowledge production is important if we hope to rebuild differently than we built.

Variations on Participatory Methodologies

People often don't know where they live as more than lines on a screen, pins on a map. The kind of expertise and knowledge I have laid out above is precisely what has been excluded in order to make interfaces "interactive," "responsive," and "clean," and it has crowded out our sense of place with a sense of abstract space. The participatory method we find represented in survivor-survivor storytelling is part of a broader movement to create feedback loops between producing knowledge and strengthening community ties. Certainly we already sense that belonging, and the desire to strengthen place, in the individuals who have previously volunteered to share their stories in survivor-survivor workshops. Marian Bell, for instance, concluded her interview with Meyerland Storm Stories (MSS), a post-Harvey workshop in the lineage of SKRH, with the affirmation that she needed to be near her community center and friends and neighbors along Braes Bayou, in Meyerland, a boundary distinction she insisted on pre-interview while discussing her neighborhood with fellow workshopers. "I don't care that we flood. I don't care if we flood another hundred times. It doesn't matter to me" (Levy, 2018). Making visible that feeling of belonging might be one way to encourage policies that protect belonging and place even if we can't live where we have lived as we have lived.

Outside of folklore, an interest in alternative, community-empowering approaches most frequently appears now under the aegis of qualitative research methodologies in public health literature. Health scientists Roberta Woodgate, Melanie Zurba, and Pauline Tennent describe this shift towards "facilitating the authentic expression of the complex realities of people engaged through research ... as well as the more affective connections between people, their environments, and life situations" (2017, p. 1).

Photovoice is another prominent example of this embrace of the radical potential of qualitative methodology. Developed by public health researcher Caroline Wang and Ford Foundation Program Officer Mary Ann Burris, a pilot project in rural China facilitated women photographing their field work, after which the Chinese government—presented photos of children playing alone amidst their mothers' labor—began funding childcare in the area. Wang (2006) summarizes her project politically, 'targeting' politicians, business people and journalists: "The inter-generational Flint Photovoice and other projects have created "guidance groups" of policy makers and sympathetic community leaders who serve as the influential audience for participants' images, stories, and recommendations" (p. 149).

Public health researchers Robert Strack, Cathleen Magill, and Kara McDonagh (2004) praise Photovoice for its aim to prioritize the engagement of "persons with little money, power, or status to enhance community needs assessments, empower participants and induce change by informing policy makers of community assets and deficits" (p. 49).

Environmental justice and anti-racism researcher K. Animashaun Ducre discusses the benefits of Photovoice as “an innovative participatory research strategy” (pp. 7-8). As with survivor-survivor storytelling, Photovoice operates by including community members in the documentation process and training them as participant researchers in their own neighborhoods: “participants learn the basics of photography” during a series of workshops, “and discuss issues related to their community” (p. 8). Those participants select images, write captions, and plan towards a community exhibition, “during which invited community leaders and policymakers have a critical dialogue with Photovoice participants” (ibid.).

Though SKRH or MSS did not focus on communicating needs up the political hierarchy but exclusively on strengthening community ties and knowledge horizontally, these projects share goals, methodologies and assumptions. Ducre discusses “experiential knowledge” and recognizes how the typical research process prioritizes “the researchers’ and social scientists’ perspective as the most important,” where “Photovoice distinguishes itself as an approach that democratizes knowledge” (p. 84). Ducre refers to Paolo Freire’s insistence on de-emphasizing the teacher or workshop leader. “Photovoice methodology...seeks to balance those relationships, between photographer and subject, between researcher and subject, by shifting the power to the subjects or community members. They dictate what’s being photographed, and the researcher facilitates discussion around those photographs” (p. 85).

In addition to Photovoice, Ducre discusses community mapping, “a broad term to describe a process in which individual stakeholders come together to create a visual image of their environment, highlighting its assets and deficiencies” (p. 7). Community mapping is similarly purposed as “a tool in urban planning, crime prevention, resource management, health promotion, and asset-mapping” (p. 8), but here, Ducre focuses less on policy advocacy than on the agency of cartography, which she uses to “make an empirical case for Black women’s spatiality. This methodology characterizes the South Side mothers as agents, rather than victims of those external forces that shape their community. In doing so, we can see how they actively shape their environment and assume control of their surroundings, a concept that I refer to as place-making” (p. 48). In such a schema, the richness of the maps, and the agency of the women making the maps, becomes quickly apparent without immediately channeling it into existing political power structures.

The advantage of hesitating to immediately politically instrumentalize these methods is that it broadens the horizons for political imagination and the problems that can be conceptualized within the projects. For instance, Ducre follows epidemiologist Beverly Xaviera Watkins, whose “case study of Central Harlem in the latter part of the twentieth century (2000), offers another example of understanding dislocation and displacement from an ecological perspective” (p. 50). In particular, ecology and policy meet as the impact of economic marginalization, epidemic diseases and discriminatory policies “led to anomie, or rootlessness, characterized by weakened ties between leaders, neighbors, networks, and families” (ibid.). In short, the uncertain approach of survivor-survivor storytelling shares with Ducre’s experiments in place-making the insight that the community we are trying to save might not really exist yet.

There are a few crucial differences beyond the oral, durational medium of storytelling and the static, visual medium of photography or cartography; or the act of telling your story to someone who understands, compared to crafting a story for potentially sympathetic policymakers. But survivor-survivor storytelling need not be a lone resource for community empowerment, especially as it seems that community responses are the only ones we are capable of pursuing. As researchers seek methodologies to combat the actions of political systems damaged by rootlessness, we should be mindful of how alternatives, like survivor-survivor storytelling, or Photovoice, or community mapping can combat the rootlessness itself, while bearing witness to environmental injustice. Indeed, shared philosophies might make Photovoice, community mapping, and survivor-survivor storytelling attractive as complementary strategies.

Requirements and Obligations

One misconception surrounding participatory methodologies is their perceived inexpensiveness. No matter how available recording technology becomes, these workshops are not only for, but are really about the workshop participants. Funding matters: we didn't have it at MSS, and our interviewers were too busy re-constituting their lives to volunteer without financial compensation. MSS was small and intimate, and as a workshop it had tangible benefits for the people who finished, but we were limited by competing teams: UH Oral History, Houston Flood Museum, and a lack of funding.

It is therefore important when we turn to participatory methodologies both to tailor these to the often limited resources made available to community projects, and to militate against these funding shortfalls by dedicating more time and effort to the projects and insisting on their necessity. Lindahl (2006) reminds us that “the need for survivors to tell their stories—and for the rest of us to hear them—is at least as great now as it was in the days immediately following the hurricanes,” (p. 1528) because “exiled survivors” often fall out of continued media coverage unless there is some “newsworthy” reason to feature them. Continued emotional distress, as professors of social work Loretta Pyles, Juliana Svistova, Suran Ahn, and Tom Birkland discuss, can hinder community participation in recovery efforts (2018, p. 513).

Many of the Photovoice and community mapping workshops have been situated within communities that are marginalized politically and economically. SKRH similarly served refugees from New Orleans at a time of particular vulnerability, and a later workshop ran in Haiti after the Port-au-Prince earthquake. MSS was situated in Meyerland, which is on balance a wealthier and politically active suburb of Houston, though Houston's lack of zoning makes these generalizations ambiguous. Meyerland is also emblematic of our how our rootlessness is accelerating. A seemingly stable, newer suburban neighborhood, and despite the area's real estate being quite valuable, Meyerland's struggles with flooding have increased tremendously as Houston's floodplains alter with increasing development. Storytelling's inherent uncertainties are well-matched to the complexities of such situations.

One of the remarkable aspects of organizing MSS was witnessing neighborly ties strengthened by workshops who knew each other in other capacities. Many of the women involved—all of the

interested participants were women—recognized their overlapping connections in the community before, during and after training sessions; one of our recurring discussions revolved around how people were talking with their neighbors more after Harvey, re-forging bonds.

Drafting New Scripts

While stressing the benefits of increased survivor-survivor storytelling both as it is currently practiced and in the context of current research where it might further be applied—which we consider an important intervention post-disaster—we must also broaden our sense of disaster and of survivorship. Survivor-survivor storytelling offers obvious benefits when responding to climate events, but we are suffering slower disasters as well: vanishing species, failing ecosystems, and the dizzyingly myriad consequences of climate change. Storytelling in folklore and oral history has for a long time captured complicated commons systems as well as commons knowledge, and been used to document commons epistemology: to create communities of knowers, and to make more obvious the unnaturalness of ‘unexpected consequences’ of contemporary technological expansion. Commons knowledge especially is an infrastructure that’s not noticed until it’s gone, and because it begins invisible it is sometimes not even noticed then.¹⁴ Stories collected from the ground up help to demonstrate that environmental violence is class violence. Cultural commons and natural commons overlap, as we see in coal-country songs about a countryside in danger of mountaintop removal mining.¹⁵

With a broadened sense of disaster and survivorship, the threats to our various commons appear even more extreme and challenging, but they also become clearer as they are linked together. The development of a knowledge base and its corresponding sense of injustice can begin to shift our sense of what is “extreme” away from the actions of activists and towards the extremity of “the problems they seek to address” (Pellow, p. 59). Pellow also reminds us that “social movements do not form spontaneously” (p. 23). Within this framework, it is possible to connect storytelling and the environment: “sustainable knowledge as a necessary foundation for the development of sustainable communities. That is, knowledge must be produced not just for profit or personal gain, but also for the purposes of nurturing all members of society and the ecosystems upon which we depend” (ibid., p. xv).

We should be mindful of the expansive possibilities of considering ourselves as being all in this together. The narrative that people can afford refuge with enough money, or Noah’s Ark as expensive gated community, prevents more active and well-financed mitigation and recovery efforts. Our world increasingly resembles a dystopian sci-fi novel: our most popular stories tell us what a disaster-filled future looks like because they simply reflect how we’re already living it; we find it to be too much work to imagine an alternative. Our disastrous times demand that in addition

¹⁴ For more on these ideas, see the work of Ronald Rudin, Kathryn Newfont, Debbie Lee, Ronald E Doel, or Lu Ann Jones, presenters at the 2018 Oral History Association Conference, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, panel discussion: “Oral History and Forms of Environmental.”

¹⁵ See Kathryn Newfont’s work in particular, from her presentation: “Knowing the Appalachian Woods: Oral History and US National Forest Management.”

to survivor-survivor storytelling as a model, we need creative interventions of similar but more radical ethnographic practice. Even as we expand our practice of folklore I propose expanding beyond folklore here as well: we need additional future-oriented methods to counter dominant narratives that justify inequality and hierarchy. These interventions might also be rooted in folkloric ethnographic methods, though they will ask not only, ‘and then what happened?’ but also to imagine, ‘and then what will have happened?’¹⁶

More immediately, remembering what the neighborhood looked like after the fact builds resiliency, while recording the neighborhood before the disaster can encourage its flourishing. We might call something like this pre-disaster survivor-survivor storytelling. Our goals in encouraging such an interview-based project as infrastructure might be to expand our individual scopes of attachments, both to our neighbors and our communities. In expanding sense of place and sense of planet, we might consider the stories of fellow creatures such as companion animals¹⁷, or with the guidance of expert locals: natural wildlife and larger ecosystems.

In addition to stories of beloved place-as-community, we can experiment further with imagined stories, stories we want to see, the stories of our hoped-for future. We might call this speculative community storytelling. Not just animals and environment, but a community storytelling of where you are, what will this look like in 5 years, 25, 50?¹⁸

Oral historian Steven High (2010) points out that these projects should be multi-faceted in collection and presentation, as archives can be “ponderous to use and take 'real time' to access - and are therefore largely inaccessible to researchers and to larger publics” (p. 102). It is important to note that we can find the beginnings of creative expression in this vein. Examples of art and storytelling, though smaller-scale than proposed here, include: The Shoreline Project, of endangered ocean life: <http://theshorelineproject.org/#!/endangeredocean>

and Walking With, a storytelling-in-place project: <https://www.walkingwith.ca/artists>. The tools of location based storytelling might be especially useful for similar projects, such as

- <http://geomedialab.org/>
- <https://www.tripline.net/>
- <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/en/>
- <https://cartodb.github.io/odyssey.js/>
- <https://mapstory.org/>

These projects will likely require partnerships across disciplines. Sociologists and psychologists

¹⁶ See another version of aesthetic and imaginative possibility in Marley Foster’s section, “The Art of Living with Our Damaged Planet.”

¹⁷ See how Lesli Vollrath grapples in her section with “Rethinking Human and Non-human Bodies in Disaster” via her embrace of “Shared Vulnerability.”

¹⁸ For an example of how this speculation might be made more vivid and present, see Joseph Carson’s section, “The Theatre of Climate Change; Or, Mold Humanities.”

and anthropologists, urban planners and communications specialists, but also GIS experts and writers, political scientists and hydrologists, artists and climate historians, environmental groups and everyone. Not only is this expansive cross-disciplinary bridge-building necessary, it is part and parcel of a methodology built on expanding community. One radical possibility is to imagine these communities as already existing, but not realizing it. It's one thing to propose walking tours on watersheds with activists and knowers (meet your local Jeremiah), it's another to imagine those groups emerging not from the Arboretum, but from the local civic center.¹⁹

Parents and children, neighbors and friends will be disadvantaged by worsening conditions. Rather than ignoring this, we must begin thinking about them, to have a map for what to be worried about. A large-scale mobilization of storytelling in the manner proposed here assumes moral authority, political authority, and scientific authority. But its last authority is imaginative, and expanding the scope of what Houstonians see as desirable or necessary policy would be a worthy goal and stepping stone towards realizing that policy.

That disasters result in the ratcheting up of pre-existing inequalities and injustices should make us more mindful of how disasters uncannily resemble capitalism in their effects. How bereft we must be of common sense, common knowledge, for this to surprise us. We need different stories, and different storytelling approaches, we need roads that talk about where we are going, and how. These roads can break, they need to be built and maintained, sometimes they flood. Folklore, and in particular survivor-survivor storytelling, can help change the script. Building on that infrastructure of survivor-survivor storytelling can help us to live the future we are already in. We must circumvent problematic cycles of preparation and management, working further to preemptively strengthen and interconnect communities, solutions that stakeholders would do well to consider as disasters become increasingly commonplace.

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¹⁹ See Kevin MacDonnell's "Hydrological Citizenship after Hurricane Harvey" for more on intersecting the watershed and civic identity.

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