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Abstract

Insights about biocultural hope emerged at the Multispecies Salon, an art exhibit in New Orleans. In a landscape blasted by Hurricane Katrina and flooded by oil following BP's Deepwater Horizon explosion, the exhibit grounded hopes in actual organisms – like goats, fish and hermit crabs – living in the aftermath of multiple disasters. At the Salon, art catalyzed discussions about catastrophes amongst plankton biologists, chemical oceanographers, microbiologists, activists and anthropologists. Departing from these discussions, we adapted the tactics of multi-sited ethnography of 'following the thing', to 'follow the species' from the art gallery into the environs of New Orleans and beyond. Against the backdrop of bleak landscapes, people engaged in intimate acts of interspecies care. Uneasy alchemy transformed toxic specters into figures of hope. Signs of advancing disaster, depictions of animals in peril and blighted parcels of land began to fuel mass mobilizations and tactical interventions. Collective hopes moved like oil in water, coalescing around specific figures only to dance away – to alight on new events, objects and lively agents.

Keywords

animal studies, Beyond Petroleum (BP), bioart, biocultural hope, Deepwater Horizon, ecoart, Hurricane Katrina, interspecies care, messianic promises, multispecies ethnography, nature/culture, New Orleans, para-ethnography, pharmakon

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Résumé

Une certaine compréhension d'un espoir bio-culturel possible a émergé du Salon Multi-espèces, exposition d'art qui s'est tenue à la Nouvelle-Orléans. Dans un paysage dévasté par l'ouragan Katrina et recouvert de pétrole après l'explosion de la plateforme BP Deepwater Horizon, l'exposition a enraciné l'espoir dans des organismes – tels les chèvres, les poissons, les bernard-l'ermite – survivant à de multiples désastres. Au Salon, l'art a catalysé les discussions sur les catastrophes parmi les biologistes spécialistes du plancton, les océanographes chimistes, les microbiologistes, les activistes et les anthropologues. À partir de ces discussions, nous avons adopté la tactique de l'ethnographie multi-située qui consiste à 'suivre la chose' pour 'suivre l'espèce', de la galerie d'art aux environs de La Nouvelle-Orléans et au-delà. Avec pour arrière-plan de mornes paysages, les habitants se sont engagés dans des actes intimes de soins inter-espèces. Une alchimie improbable a transformé des spectres toxiques en figures de l'espoir. Les signes de progression du désastre, les représentations d'animaux en péril et les parcelles de terre dévastées ont commencé à nourrir les mobilisations de masse et les interventions tactiques. Les espoirs collectifs ont progressé comme le pétrole dans l'eau, fusionnant autour de figures spécifiques pour mieux s'échapper en dansant – et se poser sur de nouveaux événements, objets et agents vivants.

Mots-clés

Beyond Petroleum (BP), bio-art, espoir bio-culturel, ethnographie multi-espèces, études animales, nature/culture, La Nouvelle-Orléans, ouragan Katrina, para-ethnographie, pharmakon, plateforme Deepwater Horizon, promesses messianiques, soin inter-espèces

Introduction

In early November 2010 the multitude of creative agents animating the Multispecies Salon in New Orleans descended on a warehouse, The Ironworks, and hastily remodeled it as an art gallery. Here curators gathered together some sixty artworks orbiting around a central question: 'In the aftermath of disasters – in blasted landscapes that have been transformed by multiple catastrophes – what are the possibilities of biocultural hope?'¹ The Ironworks became a site where thinkers and tinkerers – culture workers who were deeply implicated in sweeping political, economic and ecological transformations – cautiously explored future horizons in the wake of recent disasters that put New Orleans in the national spotlight (Marcus, 2000: 5). The opening night of the exhibit coincided with the Second Saturday Art Walk in the emerging St Claude Arts District. Hundreds flocked to The Ironworks, crowding to see a recycled fashion show by Calamity, a designer who outfitted models in post-apocalyptic garb and crust-punk drag. The usual crowd of bike-riding twenty-somethings was there in full force. A strong current of cleaner-cut middle-aged viewers and a sprinkling of out-of-towners rounded out the masses. 'I flew down from New York for this', a beaming fifty-year-old noted as she slipped on headphones to hear the buzz from a beehive that had been salvaged from a nearby blighted building by Robert Peterson, a sound artist and *bricoleur*.



Figure 1. A still from *Sunset Refinery* (2008) an HD animation by David Sullivan. (Photograph courtesy of the artist, reproduced with permission).

Dark dystopic images, a digital rendering of fugitive emissions from nearby oil refineries, flickered overhead.² Illustrations of deformed and crippled insects, collected from the shadows of nuclear disasters, covered a makeshift plywood wall.³ Images of chemical oceanographers – working to make sense of molecular and microbial transformations taking place near the site of the Deepwater Horizon explosion – fueled discussions about upcoming protests against BP and funeral processions for the creatures killed by the flood of oil in the Gulf. One might expect that this accumulated evidence of advancing disasters – a perfect storm of human follies and agencies beyond the control of gallery visitors – would dampen their revelry. Instead these signs of calamity strangely fueled a celebratory atmosphere where it seemed like anything might happen at any time.⁴

Hope contains ‘the attraction, invincible élan or affirmation of an unpredictable future-to-come (or even of a past-to-come-again)’, in the words of Jacques Derrida (1999: 253). ‘Not only must one not renounce this emancipatory desire,’ Derrida continues, ‘it is necessary to insist on it more than ever’ (1994: 74). Powerful forces have tried to appropriate this emancipatory desire.⁵ As a vacuous political slogan, ‘hope’ has bulldozed over our dreams.⁶ Yet, amidst revelry in the wreckage of natural and fiscal catastrophes, we found semi-empowered intellectuals who were embracing and tussling with the forms of desire described by Derrida. Artists, scientists and other culture workers gathered together at the Multispecies Salon to engage in strategic storytelling about Hope in Blasted Landscapes (cf. Allen, 2003: 48). Building on the critical insights of these storytellers, this essay explores the persistence of life in the face of catastrophe. Following people, and following multiple species, from the art gallery to the blasted

landscapes of New Orleans and beyond, we trace the contours of modest forms of biocultural hope.

Oil in water

The flood of oil spreading in the Gulf set the backdrop for the Multispecies Salon in New Orleans. When news of oil plumes first reached Jacqueline Bishop, an artist who teaches at Loyola University, she was hardly surprised. Some five years earlier she had created *Trespass*, an uncanny illustration of disasters looming on future horizons. First exhibited in the months before Hurricane Katrina, this assemblage of flotsam and jetsam – baby shoes and birds' nests, toys and balls of twine – contained aesthetic premonitions of the floating debris that were omnipresent after the storm. Coated in a black patina, a dark glossy finish that shimmers like crude oil, this artwork also prefigured the oil flood that came in 2010. At first blush, from far away, *Trespass* seems to be just a collection of wreckage – a dreadful rendering of disaster. When viewed from the middle distance it appears to dance about like oil in water – moving in different directions, coalescing around a heterogeneous collection of objects. Scrutinizing this aqueous landscape at close range, moving in even closer, reveals that it is populated with hopeful figures.

A figure might be regarded as 'a fashioning, a resemblance, a shape; also a chimerical vision', following Nathan Bailey's 1730 *Dictionarium Britannicum*.⁷ 'To figure' also means to have a role in a story (Haraway, 2008: 4). Gathering up desires, figures serve as anchoring points for dreams (Kirksey, 2012: 234). If, at a distance, *Trespass* seems to be a uniform black morass – prefiguring Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil flood – closer inspection reveals colorful organisms hiding in the shadows. Mushrooms, seed pods and bird's eggs anchor hopes in living forms. Like a bird's nest, built from scavenged detritus, *Trespass* nurtures hopeful dreams. The figural play of this assemblage works with shifts of scale. A sea slick with oil and wreckage, an unfathomable disaster when viewed from afar, contains anchoring points for hopeful desires that can be grasped on a molecular level. Zooming in reveals that, when droplets merge together, when they grab hold of almost imperceptible figures, they generate dynamic coalescences.⁸ Panning back out reveals the dance of oil in water. Slipping between scales in *Trespass* generates a parallax effect – bringing the contours of hope in blasted landscapes into sharp relief.

Looking to possible futures, rather than to absolute endings, Jacques Derrida draws a helpful distinction between *apocalyptic* and *messianic* thinking.⁹ While he does reclaim the 'invincible élan' of the messianic promise, Derrida's hopeful sense of expectation is not oriented towards a specific Messiah (2004: 24–25). In contrast to Christian traditions, which pin hopes to a particular figure, Jesus Christ, Derrida's notion of *messianicity* is 'without content' (1994: 167). Celebrating messianic desires that operate beyond the confines of any particular figure, he describes a universal structure of feeling that works independently of any specific historical moment or cultural location: 'the universal, quasi-transcendental structure that I call *messianicity without messianism* is not bound up with any particular moment of (political or general) history or culture' (Derrida, 1999: 253; emphasis added). In other words, Derrida's notion of messianicity is not attached to a specific figure, event, political project or Messiah.¹⁰

If the empty dreamscape of Derrida is haunted by a messianic spirit that refuses to be grounded in any particular figure, Jacqueline Bishop's imagination contains multiple specific objects of desire. In Bishop's work we found a cautious spirit searching through refuse, coalescing around specific figures, and then dancing away again on other lines of flight. When we first encountered *Trespass*, in Bishop's studio in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans, our visit became an opportunity for her to tell a circuitous story about how she found hope, without even going to look for it, in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon explosion on 20 April 2010. For Bishop this uninterrupted flood of oil was an actualization of her worst nightmares, the dreadful environmental disaster she had long imagined.

Bishop's first impulse, in the early weeks of the oil flood, was to travel to Louisiana's Gulf Coast. Initially she wanted to collect some of the oil, to use this potent substance in her artwork. Powerful fumes, a haunting cloud of toxicity, was hanging over Grand Isle – a sleepy beach town visited by Bishop that was quickly becoming the epicenter of the oil flood as well as cleanup efforts (cf. Lowe, 2010: 525). Spectatorship was officially discouraged by BP and government officials, who were rhetorically playing with the potential harm of toxic vapors and substances. Rigid codes of conduct and access restrictions were put in place to ostensibly protect the public's safety. 'They didn't want to get anybody hurt', Bishop told us with a smirk. Safety protocol kept journalists, independent researchers and curious members of the public away from the beaches. This protocol also meant that the BP contractors who took control of the cleanup were working under a veil of secrecy. People who marched past BP's cordon themselves became objects of heightened scrutiny and surveillance, Bishop told us:

The toxicity is why no one was allowed on the beaches, why the beaches were closed. I had access as long as I was with park rangers. There were some people who drifted off not abiding the rules and the signs. A couple walked down the beach and when they came back [the BP contractors] stripped them, made them take all their clothes off, completely nude. 'Check their clothes, check their bodies to make sure nothing happened to them, we have these laws for a reason.'

Forthright claims about toxicity were taken seriously on Louisiana's Gulf Coast, for the truth was immediately assumed to be in excess of the official estimation. The human-health effects of emissions from the petrochemical industry in the Gulf have been routinely low-balled or rendered imperceptible by blunt toxicological methodology. Down river from one of the more chemical-drenched regions of the country – a section of the Mississippi River called Cancer Alley – Gulf Coast residents were long accustomed to taking precautions into their own hands as a result of corporate and governmental abdication (Allen, 2003: 117). If Jacqueline was quick to understand how the specter of toxicity was functioning as a means of social control on Grand Isle, she also quickly realized that actual chemical hazards were at play. The reaction of her own body to Corexit, the chemical being sprayed on the Gulf waters to 'disperse' the oil flood, became the source of critical ambivalence about this poison that was being used as a cure:

When I went around July 4th, I didn't bring my swamp boots. I just had my forest boots, so I borrowed some swamp boots – they had a little bit of water in it. I didn't realize there was



Figure 2 (above, detail) and Figure 3. *Trespass* (2010) a mixed media piece by Jacqueline Bishop. (Photographs by Eben Kirksey; reproduced courtesy of Jacqueline Bishop and the Arthur Roger Gallery).



Corexit in this water. About two weeks later, several layers of my skin were eaten off the bottom of my feet. I had to ask, 'What's the deal with my feet? Is it just from the water and the oil?' They said, 'No, it's from the dispersants.' So I came to a realization about these chemicals. If they can affect my feet so quickly, just think what they are capable of in other species.

Abandoning her plan to collect oil for use in her artwork, Bishop began to use her camera to document the extent of the disaster and to chronicle the cleanup response. She took pictures of oiled marshlands, tar balls on beaches, as well as BP work crews – including teams of supervised inmates from Angola prison.¹¹ She also began taking an inordinate number of pictures of hermit crabs.

Bishop's access to restricted sites was facilitated by Leanne Sarco, a Ranger at Grand Isle State Park, who founded the Hermit Crab Survival Project. A recent graduate from Loyola's biology program, Sarco started her job at Grand Isle just weeks before the Deepwater Horizon blowout. As the first oil slicks began washing onto the beach, Sarco helplessly watched oil-drenched birds struggle. 'When we initially saw oiled animals we would call the Fish and Wildlife hotline. I was frustrated by their response. At best it would take them an hour or two to show up. By that time the bird had moved on, or already died.' Sarco eventually stopped calling the hotline. She began asking officials if she could clean the birds herself, but was told that several months of special training were required before she would be permitted to handle birdlife.

Amidst her frustration in dealing with the official channels regulating the care of oiled birds, she saw hundreds of hermit crabs attempting to scramble ashore, only to get stuck under the sheen and suffocate. 'BP and Fish & Wildlife were busy saving the birds as well as edible wildlife: animals with either an economic benefit or a cuteness factor', Sarco told us. 'Hermit crabs were just part of the beach. When I saw the BP workers shoveling living hermit crabs covered with oil into bags for disposal, I knew I had to at least try to help them.' Leanne was predisposed to notice this unloved species – a creature that was outside centralized biopolitical regimes – because she first encountered Grand Isle as an undergraduate, when she worked on a research project about hermit crab biology (cf. Rose and Van Dooren, 2011).

Facing a bleak future and feeling powerless as oil continued to gush into the Gulf with no end in sight, Sarco settled on a modest program of action. She called the Fish & Wildlife hotline one last time and secured permission to collect and clean the hermit crabs. Learning along the way, Sarco began to experiment with techniques and technologies of interspecies care. Falling through the bureaucratic cracks of the government's regime for managing life, being unloved in the realms of official regulation, ironically established the possibility of life for a multitude of hermit crabs (cf. Rose & van Dooren, 2011: 3). Upwards of ten thousand animals were cared for during the Hermit Crab Survival Project. Leanne and a small cadre of volunteers cobbled together everyday technologies – donated aquariums, Dr Bronner's soap, household artifacts – to create a life-support system for these creatures.

Jacqueline Bishop found hope in this initiative to care for another species. Against the nightmarish landscape of the oil slick, Bishop grounded her desire for a livable future in the figure of the hermit crab. 'We had this makeshift lab and we would collect about a thousand crabs a day.' Caring for the hermit crabs involved edging Q-tips into their shells



Figures 4 and 5. Images of the 2010 flood of oil in the Gulf of Mexico: oil stained the marsh grasses (above) and completely enveloped hermit crabs (below). (Photographs by Jacqueline Bishop, reproduced with permission).



without injuring their delicate bodies. 'I felt so comfortable cleaning the hermit crabs,' Jacqueline reminisced as we gazed at *Trespass* in her studio. 'Swabbing with the Q-tip was the same gesture as painting, except I was taking oil off instead of applying it.' As Jacqueline's seasoned hand traced the intricate recesses of hermit crab shells, legs and claws, she found modest hopes for specific animals stirring with each of her concrete, repetitive and meditative actions.¹²

As her imagination wandered from the Hermit Crab Survival Project to the fallout from the BP oil flood, Jacqueline Bishop found that the ultimate environmental disaster of her nightmares was generating order-destroying dreaming. The masses were starting to move. Out on the streets people were calling for BP executives to be jailed, agitating to disrupt the predictable flows of global capital. Out in the bayous and on the beaches thousands of people like herself were volunteering in the cleanup effort. If power previously seemed to be functioning predictably, if nothing ever seemed to change following environmental disasters, a sense of homogeneous, empty time was quickly giving way to a revolutionary time – a moment of political possibility when collective desires began to coalesce around multiple messianic figures and future events (cf. Benjamin, 1968: 261; Kirksey, 2012: 32).¹³

Hopes began to move like oil in water. As figures of desire moved about in the imagination of individual people, discrete droplets danced about on the surface of water. Bumping into one another, figural oil bubbles coalesced – becoming bigger, a glimmering sheen spreading through the sea of collective imagination. The potent toxicity of this shimmering liquid gathered together expansive desires, serving as a common object for anchoring diverse hopes. In a word, the oil spreading in the Gulf embodied the indeterminate nature of the *pharmakon* – a poisonous substance that can double as remedy, something that presents an obstacle or an opportunity.¹⁴ The figurative power of oil in water provided an opening for a multitude who desired to cure the ills of extractive capitalism. The seemingly unstoppable flood of petrochemicals became a call for a collective response, spurring a swarm of creative agents into revolutionary action (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 57).

Political openings

The Multispecies Salon brought Jacqueline Bishop into conversation with other artists, anthropologists, as well as natural scientists from multiple disciplines – a plankton biologist, an oceanographer and a specialist on crab reproductive biology. During a public event at The Ironworks gallery, these moderately empowered intellectuals each offered alternative perspectives on the political and economic forces animating the official BP oil cleanup effort in the gulf (cf. Marcus, 2000: 5). Collectively they grappled with the challenges of understanding, representing and responding to what had become popularly understood as 'the worst environmental disaster in US history'.

Matthias Elliott, then a chemical oceanography PhD student at the University of South Florida, told us that business continued as usual for oil executives in the early weeks after the Deepwater Horizon explosion. They profited as hundreds of thousands of gallons of Corexit, the toxic 'cure' for oil that ate away the skin from Jacqueline Bishop's feet, were sprayed into the Gulf. 'Look at the board members of Nalco, the company that

makes Corexit,' Elliott said. 'They have close ties to BP and Exxon. The criminals are making money off of cleaning up the crime scene,' he continued. 'By using Corexit they just swept the problem under the rug.' The only creatures hypothetically standing to wholly benefit from the use of dispersants were oil-eating microbes whose predators had been killed by Corexit, according to Amy Lesen, a plankton biologist who teaches at Dillard University. 'Even if oil-eating microbes exist, there is not usually that much oil in the gulf. A bloom of pollution-loving organisms could generate a massive perturbation of the system,' Lesen said.

While operating in a state of emergency, those in charge of mitigation strategies had lost sight of whom, or what, was being protected. Still, certain animals were flourishing in the immediate aftermath of the oil flood. 'Ironically, the blowout's most powerful environmental effect seems to be both indirect and positive: the fishing closures,' writes marine biologist Carl Safina in November 2010. With the temporary ban on fishing, red snapper populations exploded. Marine biologists were finding three times as many fish when compared to before the blowout (Safina, 2011: 287–288). But, if the spectral toxicity hanging over the Gulf was good for certain species loved by humans, certainly many others – namely dolphins, pelicans, flying fish, oysters, sargassum grass, crabs, Kemp's ridley turtles and shrimp – were not faring well (Safina, 2011: 256, 284–285).

Impacts of this disaster on unloved others – species largely beyond the political, economic and affective calculus of most Americans – were less easy to understand and represent (Rose & van Dooren, 2011). 'It's the sea turtles and pelicans that get all the press,' said Amy Lesen, who is an expert on foraminifera, among the most common plankton species. Lesen was asked to talk at the Multispecies Salon about how the disaster was impacting marine microbial ecology in the Gulf. But few studies of plankton were being conducted. With little up-to-date research to draw on, Amy Lesen found that she had more to say in response to another question posed by Eben Kirksey at the Salon: 'Who is speaking for nature?' Lesen described silences shaped by oblique powers that thrust some 'experts' into the spotlight. 'The people who tend to be interviewed are people who are not very engaged in the research, people who work for government agencies,' she said. 'And the people who work for government agencies have people behind them telling them what they should and shouldn't say.' According to Lesen, 'Our universities are funded by corporations. There is not a single university in Louisiana that is not funded by the oil industry, not one.'

If entrenched political and economic relationships dictated our early understandings of and responses to the oil flood, the situation quickly began to change. Government agents and corporate executives managing the response initially marched lock-step through the homogeneous, empty time described by Walter Benjamin – a time when no significant events seemed to happen. Growing outrage from many segments of society in New Orleans opened up new horizons of political possibility (cf. Benjamin, 1968: 261; Kirksey, 2012: 220). Ro Mayer, a real-estate agent and costume designer who exhibited work in the Multispecies Salon, told us how she unexpectedly became swept up in the revolutionary momentum generated by this disaster:



Figure 6. The Krewe of Dead Pelicans. (Photograph by Maria Brodine, reproduced with permission).

On May 23rd, 2010, I was at Jazz Fest and I could smell the oil in the air. My friends, we were all complaining to one another. Jazz Fest was sponsored by Shell Oil. We were all walking around going: ‘Ooh! ooh!, this is really creepy, this could have been sponsored by BP, then how would we feel about Jazz Fest?’ So we went home that night and we were all complaining to each other and we thought we should be marching in the streets. On Facebook there were a bunch of artists and costume designers in my particular group of friends, so we decided we should have a parade.

Mayer and her friends began planning a parade to mourn the loss of life in the BP disaster – including the eleven human oilrig workers and the lives of countless individuals belonging to other animal, plant and plankton species. The parade was a mock ‘jazz funeral’ – a traditional New Orleans commemoration of the deceased that generates a ‘collective space for the reflection on the structures that impinge on inner-city lives’, in the words of Helen Regis.¹⁵ Described as ‘determined partying when it really counts’, Mayer’s jazz funeral mourned the ending of life but also celebrated its passage into the next world. ‘In New Orleans we don’t mourn like the rest of America’, according to a post on the Humid City blog, ‘we celebrate a life when it ends. It should be no surprise that we want to honor and celebrate the lives of our lost wildlife.’¹⁶

Mass mobilizations are often unexpected by everyone, even their organizers (Jameson, 1999: 62). When Ro Mayer announced a funeral procession for Gulf wildlife by establishing a Facebook page, she was surprised as a small spark caught and set off a

conflagration. *'When you hit a nerve on Facebook, you've got these little green boxes that come up and say that someone has done something on your page,'* Mayer told us during the panel discussion with other artists and academics at the Multispecies Salon. *'Well, if 7000 of your friends do something in a week, your page looks like a slot machine paying off at Las Vegas. They line up the side, then they line up across, then they roll. The next thing you know you've got a parade and a calling.'*

As homogeneous, empty time quickly gave way to messianic time, Ro Mayer created an empty virtual space, an opening for surprises beyond the reach of her own imaginative horizons.¹⁷ *'I didn't have a goal when I started,'* Mayer later told us. Chatting with her several months after she launched the initial Facebook page for this parade, we found this loquacious real-estate agent struggling to articulate her personal dreams. Mayer said that she did not want to pin any specific goals, or political agendas, to the parade she was planning. Her dreamscape contained mysterious possibilities that were unfigurable. Still, Ro Mayer helped create an electronic architecture, a provisional opening, which was quickly populated by the imagination of a multitude.

If some thinkers anticipate changes that will occur solely as a result of patient waiting, Mayer saw that concrete action was necessary.¹⁸ *'I literally typed for two months almost around the clock until my fingers hurt, every day,'* she told us. As oil vapors continued to waft through the city of New Orleans – mixing with the sweet pervasive smell of spring jasmine to create a pungent, sickening odor – hundreds of people began to RSVP via Facebook for the upcoming funeral procession. Collective outrage, and modest hopes, settled on this future event. Ro Mayer became the drum major for a group she called the 'Krewe of Dead Pelicans'.

On the day of the event, 5 June, many dressed according to the 'Do-it-Yourself Parade Instructions' that Ro Mayer posted on her Facebook page: *'Garb: wear a blue top and a black bottom for the most visual group impact ... Footwear: shrimp boots to show support for the marsh if you have got them. Otherwise black footwear is preferred ... Dead Pelican Umbrellas: bring your pelican (or other preferred critter) on a blue umbrella trimmed with black oil (plastic bags or fabric cut to resemble an oil spill and drips stapled to the umbrella points).'* Others arrived in full-body handmade costumes representing Gulf Coast creatures – sea horses, turtles, crabs and fantasy characters such as *'the Pearly Oyster Queen'*. A parody of Sarah Palin competed for attention with fat cats who were eating oil money and Dead Pelican sandwiches.

Ro Mayer herself appeared in an ornate blue and black gown. Uniting the crowd behind a chant – *'Stop the Oil, Save the Gulf'* – she strode out front with a meticulously decorated pelican-adorned umbrella. Delegated participants carried a variety of props. A coffin containing a life-sized woman's body represented the Gulf of Mexico. The US flag, hung upside-down, was a symbol of mourning. A sea of *'Katrina tarps'* – the FEMA-issued turquoise plastic that covered the rooftops of post-Katrina New Orleans – depicted the ocean. The procession was led by John Birdsong, a retired firefighter, and the Pair O' Dice Tumblers, a band that played a funeral dirge and led the crowd in a satirical chant, *'Oh, it ain't my fault'*. Birdsong later said that this chant was aimed at generating an ironic awareness of the crowd's own non-innocence – it was a response to finger-pointing that pushed the blame elsewhere. He wanted protestors to think about how their lives and livelihoods were dependent on petroleum.



Figure 7. An image of the Oilflood protest. (Photograph by Maria Brodine, reproduced with permission).

Against all outward appearances of being a rabble-rouser, Mayer herself emphasizes that the Krewe of Dead Pelicans tried to work ‘from within the system’. Mayer, and others who helped her stage the funeral procession, certainly were complicit with and implicated in powerful institutions themselves (cf. Marcus, 2000: 5). Perhaps as a result of this position within Louisiana society, the Krewe of Dead Pelicans became embroiled in conflicts at the neighborhood level that hinged on issues of race and class, historical divisions between ‘uptown’ and ‘downtown’ New Orleans, and competing visions for what ecological and social reconstruction in the region should entail. Even the chant ‘Stop the Oil, Save the Gulf’ turned out to reflect deeper tensions with competing political projects.

On 30 May, a week before Mayer’s first parade, another group called ‘Oilflood’ rallied thousands behind the cry of ‘Fuck BP’. The Oilflood organizers also wanted to march with Mayer, but she did not agree with their message: ‘They wanted to be in the Krewe of Dead Pelicans parade. And I told them they were welcome to come. They could march after the police, because I had a parade permit and I had families. And the police weren’t going to put up with that. And I really didn’t want it. I didn’t want a confrontation with BP. I wanted to go through the channels.’

Different slogans, and differences in tactics, bespoke deeper divergences in the orientation of these two groups. The Oilflood protest was not only orienting collective anger against a single institution, BP, but also highlighting the broader injustices of global capitalism. Ian Hoch, an activist and actor who played a minor role in the HBO series *Treme*,

addressed the crowd at the Oilflood protest, saying 'I don't think it's accurate to say that BP is THE enemy. It's my belief that in the early 21st century corporations are going to cut corners whenever possible. If it means saving a dime, they are going to do the wrong thing.'¹⁹ Still, the visual landscape of the Oilflood protest was populated with graphics and satirical messages that played with the bright green and yellow BP logo. One group held signs with the phrase 'Bitch, Please' underneath a man with a gas nozzle pointed like a gun at another person's head – a visual citation of Eddie Adams's iconic photograph of a Vietcong guerilla being executed. This image depicted the oil spill as a symptom of a conflict that had spun out of control. A hand-drawn black skull and crossbones, with green-BP-flower eyes, was featured on another sign – wet with dripping oil and emblazoned with the phrase 'British Polluters'.

Reflecting on her actions, her refusal to directly confront BP and the injustices of global capitalism, Mayer wonders if she took the right course: 'At the time, I thought that it was possible to go through the channels. Maybe BP Oilflood was right. But, at the time, we were the Miss Manners of protest parades and I was trying to hold that line.' In refusing to link up with initiatives to shut down BP, perhaps Ro Mayer was also resisting attempts to make the demands of her emergent group too concrete – to preserve it as a heterogeneous, still somewhat unformed association, a gathering together of people who felt powerless in the face of a monumental environmental disaster.²⁰ Despite these local attempts to avoid a certain misplaced concreteness, BP became a figure that embodied all the ills of global capitalism and the urgent situation in the Gulf in the minds of many people around the country. Against the backdrop of broader imaginative horizons, collective outrage came to be focused on this company (cf. Crapanzano, 2004: 2).

Figures can serve as anchoring points for collaborative action. Gathering together collective hopes or feelings of outrage, figures can generate concrete victories in the world. As the will of millions bore down on BP, a moment of political possibility emerged. The existence of the company itself was endangered by the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Amidst actions on the streets of New Orleans in early June 2010, and solidarity actions in many other cities around the United States, President Obama began to exert very public pressure on the company. BP executives emerged from a meeting with the President on 16 June 2010, and told reporters assembled on the White House lawn about a new solution: they announced that a \$20bn fund would be created by BP to pay damage claims from the disaster. This fund was a rough approximation of the company's annual profits, which were \$17bn in 2009. 'For the president and the Gulf', in the words of marine biologist Carl Safina, this deal was 'a stunning coup' (2011: 168).

When concrete objects of desire emerge in the historical present, when specific things we hope for materialize from our broader imaginative horizons, these moments of arrival often contain disappointment. The \$20bn payout failed to address the concerns of Ro Mayer and a multitude of angered New Orleans residents. As BP and US government agents continued using the same tactics for responding to the mounting disaster – as they continued to spray Corexit, as they failed to plug the blowout, as the oil continued to flow into the Gulf – protests emerged on the streets of New Orleans with renewed vigor. Ro Mayer's Facebook group was only one hub of activity in a polycentric matrix of revolutionary imagining. Even as collective outrage

generated concrete victories in the historical present – punishing BP by driving down the price of their stock and extracting a huge payout of money – the collective imagination of people who had been stirred into action searched future horizons for new figures of hope.

As petrochemicals flooded into the Gulf unabated, Ro Mayer continued to organize funeral processions for wildlife, leading people behind the slogan ‘Stop the Oil, Save the Gulf’. As weeks turned into months, the force of the Krewe of Dead Pelicans’ street pageantry began to fade. Collective hopes of people who cared about the Gulf coalesced around a single future event: the plugging of BP’s Macondo oil well. Yet when this event arrived, when Admiral Thad Allen announced that the ‘well is effectively dead’ on 19 September 2010, anxiety and dread about the Gulf lingered in the air.

Collective dreams in New Orleans began to fragment. Hope continued to move like oil in water, but with dispersants added to the mix. If collective desires coalesced like droplets of oil during the early weeks of the flood, gathering crowds together at specific events, hopes were becoming more elusive, less perceptible. As a toxic specter haunted the aqueous landscape of the Gulf, the movements of oil became more mysterious. Oil embodied another principle of the pharmakon, it was defined by ‘no fixed point of reference’ (Stengers, 2010: 29). It proved difficult to recognize and understand the effects of the oil with some assurance. These pharmacological properties of oil dispersed in water endowed it with even more figural potency.

‘It’s not going to be over in our lifetime,’ Ro Mayer told us in September 2010. ‘Oil is still washing up. Corexit has sunk in the water column, it’s dissolved. It’s going to be in the food chain. It’s going to be a health issue. It’s going to be a seafood issue. It’s going to be a climate issue. I mean I know enough to know I ain’t wrong.’ But, as news of the oil disappeared from the front pages of newspapers, as people scrambled to get their share of the \$20bn payout, protesters stopped showing up to the Krewe of Dead Pelicans marches. Street theatre no longer seemed capable of remedying the long-term ecological consequences of the disaster.

The revolutionary spirit animating the people of New Orleans began to flutter off, seeking out new sites and figures. If the scale of the BP oil flood seemed too monumental for many people, if the disaster in the Gulf began to seem hopeless, more ambitious activists stepped back from images of the wreckage to rethink the scope and the scale of their future interventions. Ro Mayer began to notice postings on her Facebook page by people she started calling the ‘Green Tea Party’ – activists from an unformed heterogeneous collection of Green Party affiliates who were starting to imagine a broad-based populist alternative to the Tea Party of the right. Outrage over the irreparable damage to the Gulf began to fuel larger-scale organizing. The lingering pharmacological power of oil in water became a force animating national political imaginaries. Almost exactly one year after Admiral Thad Allen announced that the ‘well is effectively dead’, the vanguard of the Occupy Wall Street movement staged their first interventions in Manhattan. Amidst ambitious imaginings about reconfiguring the modern world-system, as people began to dream of interrupting business as usual, we found artists quietly turning to post-human figures of hope on the margins of the Multispecies Salon.

Hope after the Anthropocene

Departing from the blasted landscapes of the historical present – marine ecosystems awash in toxic petrochemicals, cities destroyed by erratic weather patterns, and cultural landscapes blasted by capital – post-human hopes are emerging as artists and scientists speculate about the distant future, looking ahead through geological time. ‘It depends on the time horizon that you are looking at,’ said Amy Lesen with respect to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. ‘So if we are looking at now, when people on the Gulf have to eat and make a living, this is a total disaster. If you value what is going to happen in the next 20, 30, 50, 100 years, then there is something to be concerned about. But, if you’re talking about a 2-million-year time horizon in the Gulf, sure, everything is going to be fine eventually.’

Amidst revelry in the wreckage of natural and fiscal catastrophes at the Multispecies Salon exhibit, many visitors failed to notice an unassuming wooden box resting on the floor of The Ironworks. This box, Bryan Wilson’s *Monument to the Future*, contained a dark vision of a time when ‘everything is going to be fine’ for certain species, even if human life has ceased to exist. A field of cratered black glass is housed in the box. Devoid of all plant and animal life, this miniature scene prefigures a possible future after nuclear winter. At first glance, this landscape blasted by nuclear warheads appears to be bleak and desolate. More careful attention reveals that this imagined desert wasteland could be a place where barely perceptible creatures will flourish. Even in the aftermath of a global anthropogenic disaster, even if we humans have killed ourselves, Wilson reasons that there will be other forms of life that outlive us. ‘This is a blank petri dish,’



Figure 8. Bryan Wilson’s *Monument to the Future* (Specimen 1), cast and carved glass within a wooden box. (Photograph by Eben Kirksey).

says Wilson; ‘microbial life will survive and thrive after humans have made the earth uninhabitable for the life forms we love.’²¹

Wilson’s artwork offers a point of entry into the lifework of Penelope Boston, a microbiologist at New Mexico Tech who specializes in extremophiles – microbes that thrive in extreme cold, dryness, heat, pressure, radiation or in vacuums. Following lines of flight from Wilson’s imaginings about possible futures, we became captivated by Boston’s research while attending a conference in Amherst honoring the life of Lynn Margulis, the microbiologist who popularized ideas about symbiosis. Early in her career Boston authored a series of reports for the United Nations about the environmental consequences of nuclear war. She found that many different kinds of microbes can thrive in radioactive landscapes. Her research suggested that some animals – like certain species of nematode worms and tardigrades, small eight-legged arthropods popularly known as ‘water bears’ – would also likely live through nuclear war. ‘After major catastrophic events, like the eruption of Mount Saint Helens,’ Boston told us, ‘we have all been surprised about how quickly these disaster zones have been colonized by new organisms.’

Boston’s latest research involves the study of microbial communities in caves. It is well known that microbes are ubiquitous underground in low-temperature environments, but she began to surprise her colleagues as she started finding even higher microbial biodiversity in deeper and hotter caves. A ‘geological genome bank’ is trapped underground, in Boston’s words. She has discovered bubbles of air inside huge calcium sulfate crystals, inside extremely hot and abyssal caves, with living microbes inside. ‘Time capsules have been entombed in rocks for millions of years,’ she told us. ‘These microbes are the living dead. They have likely reintroduced their banked genes to the surface microbiosphere many times in the earth’s history.’

The blasted landscape memorialized in Bryan Wilson’s work offers an opening to think about the life forms that will flourish in the aftermath of apocalyptic disasters for humans. Wilson’s cratered wasteland, imagined to be ripe for colonization by the extremeophiles studied by Penelope Boston, offers us a vision of a future that ‘is only a possibility’, in his words. This future is conditional, not inevitable (cf. Harding, 2010: 361). ‘The scales are tipping from the possible to the probable,’ says Wilson. At the intersection of dread and hope, he sees the potential for tiny actions – like Jacqueline Bishop’s gestures of care towards hermit crabs – to make the world a more livable place. Against the bleak backdrop of one possible future, where concrete hopes for life on earth can only be grounded in tenacious microorganisms, the historical present is ripe with open-ended biocultural possibilities.

The blasted landscape created by Bryan Wilson, and his imagining of future possibilities, stands in sharp contrast to Jacques Derrida’s writings about hope. Derrida regarded the future as an ‘abyssal desert’ (1994: 28). Rather than dream about the terrifying specter of a literal desert landscape, Derrida suggests that we should literally expect the unexpected by waiting for mysterious possibilities that are beyond our imaginative horizons (see discussion in Kirksey, 2012: 44). The desert of Derrida’s writings is devoid of all figures, empty of any objects of desire. Rather than pin his hopes on something concrete, Derrida worked to harbor contentless dreams (1994: 167; 2004: 24–25). Waiting in a bleak desert – refusing to affix his desires to specific programs of action, events or political projects – Derrida would have us cultivate expectations that are literally empty (1994: 28).

Waiting for nothing in particular resigns the future to fate (Kirksey, 2012: 53). Contentless messianicity, Jacques Derrida's empty promise, goes nowhere.²² Rather than wait in an imaginative desert, rather than evacuate all content from our dreams in the face of large-scale disasters, we found intellectual allies in artists who were illuminating lively figures of hope. We found a hopeful spirit playing at the limits of their imaginative horizons, moving like oil in water, searching for figures around which it might coalesce. Prefiguring livable futures, and quickly refiguring possibilities amidst changing contingencies, thinkers and tinkerers in biocultural worlds were generating surprising becomings. Against the backdrop of the bleak future imagined by Bryan Wilson, we found hopes being generated by people, living beings and other agents already in our midst.

Hope for whom?

Amidst imaginings of catastrophic possible futures, competing dreams and schemes played out at the Multispecies Salon in detritus from disasters of the recent past. In the opening pages of *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) Naomi Klein sketches the free-market dreamworlds that emerged in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (cf. Buck-Morss, 2000). Imagined as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, the city became an ideal site for implementing policies of privatization during a moment of profound crisis. The storm became an open invitation to experiment with the traumatized local economy – an opportunity to shut down public housing, to privatize public schools, to suddenly implement a host of plans for remaking society. Amidst the visions of a new world, images of clean breaks and blank slates, the rubble lining streets betrayed a different, gritty reality. The ruins of New Orleans, a place that has long been styled as 'The City that Care Forgot', became habitat for multiple other species. Mould burrowed down deep into the frames of houses. Cat's claw, a rapidly climbing vine with yellow spring flowers, netted picturesque architecture – digging into roof shingles and wood siding, claiming 'blighted buildings' as its own.²³

While city planners fantasized about a clean opening in the aftermath of this disaster, and tenacious forms of life proliferated, young artists at the other end of the American political spectrum began flocking to New Orleans after the storm. White folks in their mid-20s and 30s, many recent college graduates, reveled in the wreckage. Settling in neighborhoods that had previously been largely African American, these newcomers began to remake local cultural geographies. The Multispecies Salon took place in the St Claude Arts District, an emerging zone along a main thoroughfare connecting the French Quarter with the Lower Ninth Ward. The neighborhoods along St Claude Avenue became contact zones where recent migrants were living alongside long-time residents.²⁴ Finding hope in the neglected city, many artists inhabiting the underground art world of St Claude began exploring the possibilities contained in decomposition, decline and deterioration. 'New Orleans wasn't on the same grid of power as Boston, where I was living. In the decay there was possibility,' one recent transplant said at a backyard barbecue. Thriving, or at least surviving, in the detritus of a collapsing system, St Claude artists were celebrating the aesthetics of blight.

While many of the hipsters and crust punks animating the emergent St Claude Arts District imagined themselves as living outside of capitalism, they were also figuring into the schemes of New Orleans city planners and real-estate speculators. Recently arrived



Figures 9 and 10. *The Bench* (above) and *Workshop* (below), both part of Elizabeth Acevedo's Disconnect Series (2010). (Photographs by Elizabeth Acevedo, reproduced with permission).



white youth were finding hope at the intersection of multiple worlds, harboring dreams that were not entirely their own. The Arts District was helping transform poor neighborhoods into up-and-coming fashionable places. Plans for a streetcar, which would bring tourists from the French Quarter to St Claude, promised to bring income to neighborhood businesses. At a lavish dinner party thrown for the Multispecies Salon curators by a local patron of the arts, a celebratory meal where the themes of the exhibit were the subject of spirited conversation, the wife of a local real-estate magnate enthusiastically proclaimed: 'You all are bringing hope to blasted landscapes.'

The hopes that real-estate agents were finding in the emerging St Claude Arts District presented both opportunities and problems for locals with deeper roots. Many tensions, fractures along lines of race and class, underlay the re-imagining of this neighborhood as a space for arts revitalization. 'As soon as I saw the St Claude Arts District start to bloom, I was supportive but I also had my reservations,' said José Torres-Tama, a performance artist and a homeowner in the St Claude area. 'There could be a potentially brutal gentrification process developing here over the next five years, one that excludes many of the current residents of color,' Torres-Tama continued. Skyrocketing property taxes were already hitting long-time residents hard, prompting many to move. 'I am supportive of the streetcar, but I'm not interested in making money off the raised property values and flipping my house. Where would I go? I want to see an integrated arts community here.'²⁵

Temporary alliances with hegemonic institutions and external funding sources enabled the curators of the Multispecies Salon to explore the contours of hope in a social landscape structured by social inequality. Making practical engagements and staging tactical provocations, the curators – who were all migrants to the city or temporary interlopers from New York City and San Francisco – worked with long-time residents and newcomers on issues of common concern. Exposing, subverting, and rearticulating dominant regimes for managing life, they identified common interests among humans and other species – engaging with members of other social worlds and neighboring ecological communities (cf. Da Costa & Philip, 2008: xviii). In a situation of seeming hopelessness – as a definitive solution to the ongoing ecological disaster in the Gulf was beyond reach, as images of apocalypse and decay proliferated – the curators illustrated very personal and somewhat peculiar visions of biocultural hope.

Nina Nichols, an artist, and Amy Jenkins, an administrator in Tulane University's Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department, were key members of the curatorial team that brought the Multispecies Salon to New Orleans. They used happenings in the gallery as an opportunity to show off three goats – Molly, Bunny and Sylvie – from their urban farm, the Pretty Doe Dairy. While the goats chomped on plants springing up between askew sidewalk slabs, Nichols told us about how these animals were involved in what she called 'a guerilla bioremediation scheme'. When not on display in art galleries, the goats were living on vacant lots surrounding her house in the St Roch neighborhood, where they were slowly clearing blighted properties of poison ivy. The goats were not only transforming the neighborhood's overgrowth and refuse into milk, but, according to Nichols, they were also helping humans inhabit an otherwise inhospitable landscape. 'After my goats eat poison ivy,' she claims, 'their milk has a prophylactic effect against this noxious plant.' If you drink the milk, or eat the cheese they make, you simply won't have a problem with poison ivy, Nichols avers.²⁶



Figure 11. Milking a goat at the Pretty Doe Dairy. (Photograph by Eben Kirksey).

Twisting a poison into a cure, the Pretty Doe Dairy was playing with the alchemy of hope. Rather than uncritically celebrate the aesthetics of decay, Nichols and Jenkins used unloved plants to sustain lovable life forms. As a riotous diversity of weedy plant-life proliferated in New Orleans alongside *laissez-faire* dreamworlds, as cat's claw claimed buildings and poison ivy made people wary of wandering through blighted lots, they generated new urban lifeways. Making life-and-death cuts in entangled ecological worlds, distinguishing enemy species from allies, they were thriving in alliance with others in a zone of abandon. While other artists in the Multispecies Salon searched their imaginative horizons for elusive possibilities, this pair of urban farmers grounded modest hopes in living figures – individual animals capable of living in neglected places.

Caring for actual beings – attending to the interests and needs of Molly, Bunny and Sylvie – offered an opportunity to form alliances with other people who were deeply rooted in the local environs. Negotiating access to blighted lots – parcels of land owned by the city, at least on paper – meant entering into dialogue with neighbors. Grazing in abandoned properties became an opportunity to hear about histories of landownership, to learn about past agricultural ventures in the neighborhood, to explore new ways of living together in the present and the future. While feeding their goats, Nichols and Jenkins



Figure 12. Logo of Nina Nichols and Amy Jenkins's urban farm, the Pretty Doe Dairy. (Photograph by Eben Kirksey).

were able to save at least one elderly neighbor's property from being designated as 'blighted', a status that generates a hefty monthly fine from the city. With mounting tax bills, the added burden of being blighted was pushing many long-time property owners over the edge – towards the brink of foreclosure.

Nichols and Jenkins began to develop a more ambitious vision for the Pretty Doe Dairy – to not just use overgrown lots as pasture for their animals, but to also start cultivating plants that humans love. They began working with their landowning neighbors to help keep property out of the cycle of foreclosure and real-estate speculation. Toiling alongside their goats in the weeds, Nichols and Jenkins quickly discovered that starting community gardens would demand sustained work – more of a commitment than they could personally manage. Hauling trash from yards that had been used as dumpsites, they also discovered diverse artifacts – among them a headless doll, a piggy bank, an alligator skeleton and an automatic pistol. Reanimating these forgotten relics, they brought their visions for forming community gardens to the people of New Orleans in a mule-drawn carriage made out of tin roofing, wood scraps and theater curtains. Tessa Farmer, a British artist, fashioned tiny webbed daemons for this project. Dana Sherwood, a prominent member of New York City eco-art networks, created theatrical maquettes to tell stories of New Orleans in conversation with fantasy and local legend. In Nichols's words this mobile museum brought together 'mystical local history, secrets of the soil, and community participation'.

Touring her neighborhood with the mule carriage, and giving talks at local elementary schools, Nichols helped generate a community to sustain her garden initiative. Exposing and destabilizing failed government initiatives for managing biological life in zones of abandon, Nichols imparted a sense of pleasure about being in the world with multiple other species (cf. Da Costa & Philip, 2008; Foucault, 2003: 240). Deploying 'low to no maintenance agricultural techniques', she began gardening with neighbors who had very limited resources for fresh food. While working hard in the historical present – building

and sustaining alliances with people and multiple species – the playful dimensions of her project remained open to surprises from the mysterious beyond.²⁷ Figures of daemons played with goats and soil microbes in Nichols's imagination – animating dreams about possible futures to come.

Endings/beginnings

Flickering specters from another dimension, the future, haunted the Multispecies Salon. Ghosts from the past also lurked on the margins. Affirming an unpredictable future-to-come, or even a past-to-come-again, the artists who animated the Salon thus harbored emancipatory desires kindred to those celebrated by Jacques Derrida (1999: 253). The promise of the messianic is spectral, for Derrida, in contrast to the apocalyptic, which 'announces the end of spectrality'.²⁸ Amidst hauntings by figural daemons and toxic specters, we found intellectuals in New Orleans who were joining Derrida in pushing past the definitive endings that underpin apocalyptic thought, but also parting ways with him in understanding the spectral promises of messianic beginnings.

Artists who gravitated to the Multispecies Salon claimed the promise of the messianic by grounding their hopes in living figures and enlivening specific places. These tinkerers found hope in blasted landscapes by entwining their dreams with particular plots of land, specific neighborhoods and small stretches of coastline. Being present with significant others in the world – learning to live with goats, hermit crabs and multiple other species – artists forged connections with the native soil and shorelines of the City that Care Forgot. Avoiding these sorts of attachments, the spirit of Derrida's thought instead dances alone in an imaginative desert.²⁹ Derrida is infamous in animal studies circles for standing naked in front of his cat, incapable of responding to and having regard for an actual animal. Rather than follow this philosopher, we instead cast our lot with thinkers who have articulated tangible political positions and forged concrete proposals for novel ways of being with others (Haraway, 2008: 19–22).

Working uneasy alchemy with the messianic spirit, visionaries transformed toxic substances into cures, they changed figures of apocalyptic endings into signs heralding new beginnings.³⁰ Rather than join Derrida in hoping for nothing in particular, rather than literally expect the unexpected, organic intellectuals who swarmed to the Multispecies Salon used figuration to animate the field of biocultural possibility. With hopes moving like oil in water, with desires congealing around specific figures and then dancing away, these thinkers generated lively coalescences and remained open to possible becomings. Forging concrete alliances among social and environmental worlds, caring for other beings and things, these creative agents also generated openings for more audacious hopes.

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Notes

- 1 We are indebted to Anna Tsing for the notion of ‘blasted landscapes’. Her essay ‘Blasted Landscapes (And the Gentle Art of Mushroom Picking)’ will appear in a forthcoming book *The Multispecies Salon: Gleanings from a Para-site*, which is edited by Eben Kirksey.
- 2 This piece, *Fugitive Emissions*, was a digital animation created by David Sullivan, an ecological artist local to New Orleans. ‘The government doesn’t watch, the industry is self regulating,’ said Sullivan when we asked about the title of this piece. ‘Fugitive emissions’ is a technical term for leaks from refineries or other irregularities that are not expected. Ironically, the industry’s own language also implies that they are renegade criminals, elusive and on the run. Sullivan has focused on refineries in light of the lack of federal oversight. Keeping track of ephemeral toxic belches, he suggests, should not just be done with technical testing equipment but rather with dark images of the emissions and their manifold effects. Microscopic toxins are magnified and occasionally stutter across the screen. Chemical compounds morph into tumors. A dark object, perhaps a blackened lung or dying plant root, drifts in and out of focus as Sullivan brings together multiple scales and spaces.
- 3 Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, a meticulous illustrator of mutant bugs committed to strict principles of realism, says that she ‘loses herself in the animal’ when she is outside collecting insects, in fields, at roadsides and at the forest edge. Hugh Raffles reports that Cornelia feels ‘very connected, extremely connected’, a deep bond, as if, perhaps, she herself had once been such a creature – a leaf bug – ‘and had a body remembering’. Gradually accumulating evidence of disfigurements rendered by uncontainable radioactive isotopes, Cornelia’s illustrations are figures of growing and expansive disaster (Raffles, 2010: 13).
- 4 ‘From a millenarian perspective, things are always getting worse,’ writes Donna Haraway. ‘Oddly, belief in advancing disaster is actually part of a trust in salvation, whether deliverance is expected by sacred or profane revelations, through revolution, dramatic scientific breakthroughs, or religious rapture’ (Haraway, 1997: 41).
- 5 The 2008 Obama campaign worked to embody the messianic spirit – rallying the masses behind *hope*, quoting Martin Luther King’s famous plea about ‘the fierce urgency of now’. Obama promised to close the gap between the imagined and possible future real, in the words of John Hartigan (2010: 7; Kirksey, 2012: 207).
- 6 Danilyn Rutherford has written about the slippery pronouns in President Obama’s 2008 campaign slogan. In this sentence, and throughout this article, ‘we’ are reclaiming ‘the pleasure and potency entailed in inhabiting the slippery “we” of “yes we can”’ (cf. Rutherford, 2012: 209). Bregje van Eekelen and colleagues have written a pamphlet full of other words that bulldoze over our dreams (van Eekelen et al., 2004: 1).
- 7 Donna Haraway has argued that we are all chimeras – products of technological, linguistic, cultural, political and biological fusions. ‘By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time,’ writes Haraway, ‘we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs’ (1991: 150). The chimera – a fabled fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpent’s tail – also has served as a way for biologists to think about how tissues of genetically different individuals coexist as a result of grafting or an analogous process in nature (Haraway, 2008: 304, n3).
- 8 ‘A coalescence is a historical force that derives from an unexpected connection,’ write Anna Tsing and Elizabeth Pollman. ‘The connection transforms the parties involved’ (2005: 109).

- 9 Reviewing Derrida's work, acclaimed literary critic Frederic Jameson writes: 'We ought to be able to distinguish an apocalyptic politics from a messianic one, and which might lead us on into some new way of sorting out the Left from the Right, the new International in Marx's spirit, from that in the world of business and state power' (1999: 63–64).
- 10 Derrida also regards messianicity 'as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design' (1994: 28, 74).
- 11 These prisoners and the other cleanup workers were almost exclusively African-American men in a region where nine out of ten residents are white, according to an article in *The Nation* magazine. They were paid low wages and exposed to chemical toxins (Young, 2010). Certainly there was little 'hope' for these people who were laboring on the frontlines of this disaster in conditions not of their own choosing. Deep fissures along lines of race and class structure a long legacy of environmental racism in Louisiana (Allen, 2003). Against this backdrop, we open up the question of 'hope for whom?' in the concluding sections of this article.
- 12 To paraphrase Donna Haraway, the Deepwater Horizon explosion (and the inadequate response by official agencies) prompted a rethinking of what taking care of this country, taking care of future generations of hermit crabs, might entail. The Hermit Crab Survival Project was an initiative to re-ground responsibility and accountability to others in a way that might lead to ecological and social restoration and reconciliation (2011: 98, 100). Speculation about the hopes and desires of the individual animals who found themselves captured, and subjected to the ambivalent grace of salvation, is beyond the scope of this essay. Elsewhere one of us, Eben Kirksey, is exploring the contours of biocultural hope for animals trapped in situations not of their own choosing (Kirksey, in prep.)
- 13 National *imagined communities* are often stuck in long periods of homogeneous, empty time – eras 'marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar' (Anderson, 1991: 21). Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding describe how right-wing American nationalism, in the runup to The Year 2000, pushed beyond this empty temporality to rest 'both on the millennial claim that American-style democracy and technological progress will save the world and on an apocalyptic paranoia that imagines external enemies, "thems" who are out to get "us"' (Stewart & Harding, 1999: 293). We suggest that dramatic changes to the political landscape of the United States after September 11, an actualization of earlier right-wing dreaming, prompted a rekindling of a populist messianic spirit on the left. The BP Deepwater Horizon explosion ignited latent imaginings. Alternative revolutionary dreamings began bubbling to the surface.
- 14 The material properties of crude oil embody the ambivalences of the pharmakon. Classically, the pharmakon is any drug whose therapeutic effect can suddenly shift to its deadly opposite – depending on the dose, the circumstances or the context. The pharmakon 'defines no fixed point of reference that would allow us to recognize and understand its effects with some assurance', writes Isabelle Stengers (2010: 29). Is oil the source of power or an irredeemable poison, a panacea that cures all ills or a pervasive toxin that is generating a plague of cancers and industrial disasters?
- 15 The jazz funeral's cultural cousin, second-line parades, are moving block parties with brass bands that are convened on annual dates by more than fifty black benevolent societies on Sunday afternoons from August to April. A second line is a 'dynamic participatory event in which there is no distinction between audience and performer', according to Helen Regis. These events seek to 'actualize the values of participants: respect, fiscal power, order, solidarity, peace, community uplift and beauty'. When jazz funerals grow large enough to evoke wide-ranging participation – such was the goal of the Krewe of Dead Pelicans – the distinction between these two celebratory staples of New Orleans erodes. Both second lines and jazz funerals have long been appropriated as vehicles for an array of agendas, from HIV awareness to promoting the launch of an Anne Rice novel (Regis, 1999: 754–5).

- 16 Humid Beings, 'Krewe of Dead Pelicans and the Tar Ball', <http://nola.humidbeings.com>.
- 17 Vincent Crapanzano suggests that we can take pleasure in the unreality of imaginary hinterlands – the possibilities and the play it facilitates (2004: 100–102).
- 18 Peter Worsley, who studied messianic movements in New Guinea in the aftermath of World War Two, distinguished 'movements which anticipate that the millennium will occur solely as a result of supernatural intervention, and those which envisage that the action of human beings will be necessary' (1957: 12).
- 19 Certainly Hoch, with his work in the entertainment industry, was not an 'innocent'. Like Mayer, and the protestors who were hailed with the satirical chant, 'O, it ain't my fault', he was deeply implicated in the very economic and political structures he was critiquing. A video of his speech is available on-line: Ian Hoch at BP Oil Flood Protest, at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-DOULVKrj0>, 30 May 2010.
- 20 Here we are writing in conversation with Jacques Derrida, who celebrates social movements that are 'heterogeneous, still somewhat unformed, full of contradictions, but that gather together the weak of the earth, all those who feel themselves crushed by the economic hegemonies' (Derrida, 2004).
- 21 Unloved others, those who are disregarded by humans, may well survive mass extinction events on future horizons (cf. Rose & van Dooren, 2011).
- 22 Derrida tried to protect the notion of *messianicity without messianism* from the tools of deconstruction that he helped create with his early work. If the messianic spirit is emptied of all content, Derrida reasons, then it remains undeconstructable – it cannot be taken apart. 'The figures of messianism would have to be ... deconstructed as "religious", ideological, or fetishistic formations,' writes Derrida, 'whereas messianicity without messianism remains, for its part, undeconstructible, like justice' (1999: 253).
- 23 Doreen Piano describes packs of abandoned dogs roaming the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans: 'Out-of-towners, primarily men – manual laborers, contractors and white-collar professionals – descended on the city, camping out in abandoned parking lots' (2011: 201).
- 24 James Clifford has described museums as contact zones. The notion of a 'contact zone' as first developed by Mary Louise Pratt in the context of European colonialism was extended by Clifford 'to include cultural relations within the same state, region or city – in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic. For most inhabitants of a poor neighborhood, located perhaps just blocks or a short bus ride from a fine arts museum, the museum might as well be on another continent. Contact perspectives recognize that "natural" social distances and segregations are historical/political products: apartheid was a relationship' (Clifford, 1997: 204).
- 25 These quotes are from José Torres-Tama's interview with *The Pelican Bomb*, an online platform dedicated to the growing Louisiana arts community. 'State of Affairs: José Torres-Tama', at: <http://pelicanbomb.com/home/post/160/>, 31 August 2011.
- 26 A peer-reviewed experiment found that dairy goats eating poison oak do not pass detectable amounts of the plant's principal toxins in their milk or urine. We could not locate any studies of goat milk acting as a prophylactic against poison ivy (Kouakou et al., 1992: 4).
- 27 Elsewhere Eben Kirksey has explored the interplay of hard work and expansive dreams. 'Imaginative dreams bring surprising prospects into view when translated into collaborative action,' he writes (2012: 1).
- 28 'The messianic is spectral, it is the spectrality of the future, the other dimension, that answers to the haunting spectrality of the past which is historicity itself. The apocalyptic, however, announces the end of spectrality' (Jameson, 1999: 63–64).
- 29 Evading concreteness, Derrida refuses to connect spectrality with 'the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general'. Rebuking constructions he identifies as *ontologies* – a linking of

'present-being [on]' with *topology* – Derrida rejects political, ethical or cosmological projects that are grounded in particular places. Ontopological constructions, in Derrida's mind, 'have no future, they promise nothing even if, like stupidity or the unconscious, they hold fast to life' (1994: 248). Derrida's dismissal of ontopology is too hasty. The same stones that he threw at the carefully built projects of others can be used to shatter his own ephemeral glasshouse. Hoping for nothing in particular, harboring the empty promise of Derrida's messianicity, has no future – it is literally pointless and goes nowhere (see also Cheah, 1999: 248).

- 30 Certain strands of messianic thought contain a misplaced concreteness. For example, Kaushik Sunder-Rajan (2006) has identified biocapitalists who harbor a fetish logic – entrepreneurs who pin expansive dreams and schemes on particular pharmaceutical compounds in hopes of attracting investors (see also Kirksey, Costello-Kuehn & Sagan, forthcoming 2014). When collective desires congeal around a specific figure, and bring it into contact with the field of historical possibility, these moments of arrival often contain profound disappointments. The clinical trials studied by Sunder-Rajan involved some drugs that were too toxic to market to the public. Perhaps all messianic figures contain the ambivalences of the *pharmakon* – concreteness placed in them can be poisonous, but in the right doses they can cure (see also Allen, 2003: 48).

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Author biographies

Eben Kirksey coined the phrase ‘multispecies ethnography’ (with Stefan Helmreich) to characterize novel approaches to writing culture in the Anthropocene, an era when the agency of *anthropos* has been scaled up to embrace and endanger the entire planet. His first book chronicles how the interplay of expansive hopes and pragmatic strategies of collaboration generates *Freedom in Entangled Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2012). Kirksey currently teaches in the Environmental Humanities program at UNSW in Sydney, Australia.

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