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FOR JAMES A. WU

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INTRODUCTION

The Practice of Sustaining Attention to Climate Change

WHENEVER I THINK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE, which is often, I struggle to make sense of its enormity. So much seems to be at stake. Maybe everything. And there's not a lot of time to try to blunt its most destructive impacts. Yet I don't know if anything I do matters. I feel powerless. I run through the routine of my days, scurrying from one activity to the next while one thought gives way to another in an unrelated jumble, and this is all that my existence seems to amount to, a blur of mere busyness in the shadow of a colossus remaking shorelines, altering the seasons, transforming planetary hydrologic cycles, ending the evolutionary pathways of billions of living beings, and changing the very quality of the air and water. I don't want to dwell on the topic of climate change. I want to focus on the tasks right before me and the easily graspable texture of my immediate surroundings. These seem so much more manageable. It's not that I don't care. I do very much. I just don't know what good thinking about it all the time will do.

Maybe you feel this way too. Maybe, like me, you too want to retreat into the everyday as a kind of refuge. If so, why do you and I feel this way? So much of it comes down to the fact that you and I lack strong models of a *shared agency*. Your ability to act in ways that have the intended effects is in doubt. You don't know how to connect with others and find ways to expand

what you can do alone, so that together you can act in a way that makes a difference. Every such act would embolden you more, putting you in a loop. You can feel a power growing as you connect with more and more people and as ideas gain a solidity that you find irresistible. Others feel their pull too. More and more people line up alongside you, as you line up alongside them, to keep pushing to make those ideas real. They are not just full of potential, nor have they entered the realm of the possible. They exist as something more tangible, and you will not be satisfied until they are fully realized.

I want to find ways to democratize agency that break the spell of powerlessness, so that thinking about climate change emboldens rather than leads to a shrinking back. The models of shared agency I am after focus on collective approaches to problem solving. They are mindful of constraints and limitations, because they must be. They are aware that any one form of agency is not the only source of action in the world, and they work actively against notions of a preordained progress and mastery. They decide their own goals and test them out constantly to see if these are the destinations they want. And they keep pushing toward these goals and hopefully in the process become more effective. What I am calling *climate lyricism* refers to this self-conscious working through. It is the striving for a practice that insists, as the philosopher and activist Grace Lee Boggs insisted, that thinking should not be separated from doing.[1] Thinking is itself a form of doing, and doing is a form of thinking. Unfortunately, the two separate easily from one another, as in an idyllic thinking or a mindless doing, and so what is needed in response is a consciously created routine that makes each partner to the other.

Such a practice has to be *sustaining* because momentum needs feeding to keep an activity going. *Attention* itself has to be cultivated again and again, not merely given to an object in a moment of abrupt realization. The practice of sustaining attention to climate change that climate lyricism seeks to build up thus refers to a perpetual project of making yourself and others aware of the changes occurring in the physical world in its myriad manifestations. In the process, you and others together physically and mentally work out how to survive, and even flourish ?, in the midst of such changes.

Climate lyricism begins by turning anthropocentric habits of expression (especially the kind developed alongside the growth of European settler colonialism) back on themselves, so that the nonhuman is given human characteristics and asserts the kinds of powers that humans are traditionally thought to be the only ones capable of possessing. In this way, the distinction between human and nonhuman becomes fuzzy and challenges the usual hierarchy of

value that always privileges the well-being of the human over the nonhuman and that overrepresents some humans at the expense of others. Climate lyricism is also an attention to expression itself, to consider how innovations in speech, address, image, sound, and movement call forth shifting ways of apprehending a phenomenon that eludes familiar scales of comprehension. It is finally—a criterion that I hadn't thought of when I first used the phrase but that has since become essential for me—a demand for a response. Whatever knowledge any reading might produce is engaged in a practice that requires collective engagement and a commitment to what is shared. For this last reason, I want to focus on the idea of human agency as needing nurturing. While it is obviously dangerous to overestimate the power of human agency, there is also grave danger in underestimating it.

As I have tried to develop this concept, my ambitions for it have grown. Much is known about climate change, but much more remains a mystery that everyone has a role in figuring out. Even in the presence of such a mystery, mitigation and adaptation are required, both actions that are as much about making meaning as they are about making dramatic social, political, economic, and infrastructural transformations. Paying attention and sharing what has been observed are actions, just as much as scientific research, activism, and the Hydra-like task of reorganizing how human societies operate. *Climate lyricism* thus names both an active mode of making (trying to write literature that is relevant to an understanding of the environmental troubles plaguing the present) and an active mode of attending (making sense of how literature, regardless of its manifest content, might have something relevant to say about these troubles).

I am thus claiming for the study of literature a prominent role in developing a practice of sustaining attention. Climate change operates in a temporality that is not synchronous with human habits of thinking about time and in a space that is not commensurate with human inhabitation. It is occurring everywhere and nowhere in particular and in both short durations and impossibly long expanses of time. Also, many powerful bad actors are poisoning what is said and can be said about the subject. They deny it is happening, impugn those who want to call attention to it, and work against the solutions that are most likely to address its many challenges. These factors gum up familiar strategies for maintaining attention, many of which are associated with the art of fiction and as a result require creativity, experimentation, and a deliberate willingness to wrestle with existing forms in order to imagine new ones.

At the risk of sounding reductive but with the advantage of providing clarity, the strategies for holding attention associated with fiction can be described as including the following steps:

- Create a handful of compelling characters.
- Put them in a unique situation, and place before them a challenging dilemma.
- Differentiate between characters who are driven to overcome this dilemma and characters who (or situations that) exacerbate that dilemma or pose new dilemmas.
- Allow conflict to play itself out in patterns of defeat and triumph, betrayal and collaboration, despair and hope.
- Hold out the promise that some final resolution is coming.

The promise of resolution, in particular, is important, because no matter what the dilemma, there is always an attainable goal toward which the characters can work. As pleasurable and as compelling as these narrative elements are (especially in the surprise breaking of these conventions), these strategies are difficult to maintain when protagonists and antagonists are mixed up, and the divide between them is hard to perceive; when the situation is diffused and involves billions of unique individuals; and when no actions so far have succeeded in dramatically lowering greenhouse gas emissions and keeping them trending in that direction.

In the scrambling of such habituated attention, concerns about economic precarity and feelings of cultural dislocation dominate, with little incentive to consider how they might be connected to worsening ecological processes. Anger is thus directed elsewhere, and there is no shortage of others who can—more easily than wealthy and well-connected executives—be made the villains of present-day morality plays, such as undocumented immigrants or Black criminals or Muslim foreigners. If everything feels as if it is unraveling, and life for many is becoming impossible to live, it must be the fault of some menacing, shadowy racial Other. This is the shout of the demagogues to willing ears.

In opposition to such lines of thought, I single out the lyric because it is a mode of literary attentiveness with special properties—such as compression of expression, a heavy investment in apostrophe, the careful observation of what is observable in language, a probing of what comprises the human—that many writers are taking advantage of, and remaking, in productive ways. I focus especially on what I call a *revived lyric* (inspired by Hoa Nguyen's poem "Up Nursing"), which is not concerned with the spotlighting of an individual "I" or

the exploration of a profound psychic interior, with which the lyric is often associated, but focuses instead on the space between a first-person speaker and a second-person addressee.[2]

Cathy Park Hong touches on this notion of the revived lyric in her book of personal essays on being an Asian American and a poet when she observes, "The lyric, to me, is a stage, a pedestal from which I throw my voice to point out what I'm not (the curse of anyone nonwhite is that you are so busy arguing what you're not that you never arrive at what you are)."[3] While this might sound like the exploration of psychic interiority, especially in the parenthetical "what you are," the emphasis is emphatically on the apostrophe: "I throw my voice." This leads to a difficult exchange, often one sided, because the apostrophe isn't always answered, and often irresolvable, because so much work is required to fend off characterizations of the self that are meant to demean. Nevertheless, the "I" and the unspoken "you" to whom the voice is thrown are in a relationship. The "I" and the "you" seek to discover what they have in common, what forms this commonality can take, what aspirations they want to work toward and even fight for together, and what kinds of shared agency are possible. The lyric, moreover, stages such explorations with a focus on wreckage. It recognizes loss and absence as constitutive rather than aberrant. As Hong writes when she returns to the topic of the lyric, "The lyric as ruin is an optimal form to explore the racial condition, because our unspeakable losses can be captured through the silences built into the lyric fragment."[4]

The development of a revived lyric has been led by poets and fiction writers who are *minor* in some way—characterized, that is, by what Sianne Ngai describes as a "deficit of power."[5] Their works aren't always the obvious choices for a discussion on literature and climate change, because more often than not they are focused on the topic of race and related subjects. For me, what makes them interesting for a study on literature and climate change is that they demand attunement to the everyday in original, and often-estranging, ways that made me, when I read them, more aware of the extraordinary that is all around me. Too often, climate change is imagined as happening somewhere far away and in an always deferrable future, and as a result it is difficult to grasp the ways in which it is occurring in the here and now.

For instance, the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Elizabeth Kolbert's thoughtful book on the science of climate change, first published in 2006, begins with the observation, "Such is the impact of global warming that I could have gone to hundreds if not thousands of other places—from Siberia to the Austrian Alps to the Great Barrier Reefs to the South African fynbos—to document its effects. These alternate choices would have resulted in an

account very different in its details, but not in its conclusions."[6] She leaves out the possibility that she could have just stayed at home. The effects of global warming (which is what climate change in the present is) are everywhere, and no one has to go far to find them, much like the effects of racism, and yet the choices Kolbert offers for where she might have gone to report on her story are many far-flung places, which—no doubt unintentionally—reinforces the idea that this phenomenon is largely happening elsewhere, distant from a largely U.S.-based readership.[7]

The distant and the close-by are imagined anew in the many works I discuss in this book, and the past is never just past. These works are multitudinous, multiracial, and multimodal, and operate as an archive for thinking with climate lyricism on what is shared and the power that can come from sharing. This archive includes poets like Claudia Rankine, Craig Santos Perez, Sally Wen Mao, Ilya Kaminsky, Tommy Pico, Ed Roberson, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, M. NourbeSe Philip, Layli Long Soldier, Li-Young Lee, Frank O'Hara, Bernadette Mayer, Ada Límon, Solmaz Sharif, and many more; novelists like Amitav Ghosh, Richard Powers, Kazuo Ishiguro, Teju Cole, Kim Stanley Robinson, N. K. Jemisin, Jeff VanderMeer, Jenni Fagan, Jenny Offill, Pitchaya Sudbanthad, George Saunders, J. M Coetzee, Han Kang, Khaled Khalifa, and, again, many more; and David Bowie.

Reading their poetry and fiction (and listening to their songs) *for* climate change can act as a powerful mnemonic for attention. This mnemonic—a way of fixing in memory what I should always be on the lookout for—grows more powerful by closely attending to specific works and examining large numbers of them, each reinforcing the other and adding to an ever louder claim on thought. This is why I make it a point to name so many authors here and to refer to many more in what follows. Their multitude offers occasion after occasion for readers who are purposefully attuned to the topic of climate change to reflect on what is happening to the physical world around them and how these changes affect the very fabric of their everyday experiences. They help create a hum that pierces perception, intertwines with daily activities, and makes living with climate change not only perceptible but a matter of what Kandice Chuh, following Immanuel Kant's lead, calls a "sensus communis."[8] This living is built into the very act of breathing and moving through space and social interaction. It depends on what Ronak Kapadia describes as making "sensuous what has been ghosted by U.S. technologies of abstraction."[9]

I make it a point as well to move back and forth across racial, ethnic, and national divides in my readings. I do so *not* because I believe such divides are insignificant. They reflect long histories of struggle, unrest, and abuse

that tie the present and the future to the past in ways that can't be ignored—in ways that make the past alive now and in the time to come. I want to think with these divides, to consider how they yield surprising moments of contact, occasions for collaboration, recognitions of likenesses. This doesn't mean that such alliances come easily. It does mean that conditions exist for some form of conviviality to be nurtured, with *conviviality* naming a lowered bar of experiencing social togetherness and working alongside one another that enhances the power I can exercise alone.[10]

Julie Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* dramatizes how this can happen. It links Native American–led activists protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline in the name of water protection with the residents of Flint, Michigan, afflicted by a lead-poisoned water supply. Next, Sze considers the parallels between the majority African American population in Flint and the largely Latinx residents of California's agricultural Central Valley, both struggling for the right to clean water, greater political control over their local communities, and corporate press coverage, which is needed but can be fickle and simplifying. And then she considers how the state responded to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Maria. The former, Sze observes, "set the template for how race and class sharpen the negative impacts of environmental disasters, both in disaster planning and in the racialized aftermath of privatized 'recovery.'" As a result, Katrina "opens the era" of devastating Atlantic storms made worse by negligent housing and retail development, destruction of wetlands, and environmental racism, while "Maria mirrors and exemplifies it."[11] As these examples suggest, divisions don't just divide. They also make solidarities possible. They make the distant and the close-by look contiguous on a map. They enable recognition of a shared struggle in ways that at first might not be apparent.

Just as important, the literary works I discuss in this book, especially those written from minor perspectives, lead me to consider how attention to the everyday itself is not possible without recognition of the legacies of conquest, racism, exploitation, and extraction that are everywhere. The phenomenon of climate change does not exist in isolation from these histories but is very much an inextricable product of them. Reading for climate change, then, continues work in race and ethnic studies and in particular in Asian American studies, which are the academic fields I have long been a part of and have learned the most from.

Consider the work of Mel Chen, for instance, which foregrounds how humans are curtailed by the animacy of objects that scramble the assumed hierarchies of human language. The *human* does not name a simple cate-

gory; humans are set off from one another in fundamental ways: "Animacy hierarchies slip and give, but they do not do so willy-nilly; I have suggested that they slip in particular privileged terms of sexuality, race, and ability."[12] The centrality of these issues resists a flattening of ontology.

Consider as well the work of Dean Itsuji Saranillio, who, in a carefully researched account of how Hawai'i became a state, is keenly aware of how his understanding of history haunts dominant accounts of the human in narratives of progress: "Extreme weather patterns, rising sea levels, the warming of the planet, and nonhuman extinctions all tell us that the fail-forward pattern of settler colonialism and capitalism has hit a limit. . . . This calls for a critical engagement with the past and present as a means to produce alternative futures to the settler state. It means to understand economic crises as an abstraction that makes the primacy of the ecological crises seemingly secondary."[13] This analysis gestures toward the need both to prioritize environmental concerns *and* to understand how they trouble powerful forms of narrative that are constantly trying to organize history as the chronicle of an unavoidable movement from a primitive past to an ever more civilized future (with *civilized* defined in very narrow prescriptive and proscriptive terms). Such narratives of progress rob people of their sense of agency, for they insist that the flow of historical events follows a fixed path that cannot be altered by those in that path. That some, like the Kānaka ʻŌiwi, or native Hawaiians, are trampled by such progress becomes, then, sad but unavoidable. Against this kind of narrative arc, Saranillio's approach seeks to find in the past alternatives to the world as it is now. Such alternatives speak to a potential that remains active. They refuse foreclosure and claims of inevitability and carve out opportunities for more groups of people to have more influence on the shape of their lives.

At stake in such a narrative is the image of "Man" as both the main protagonist and the destination of a narrative of progress. Chuh describes this propensity as accepting "the sovereignty and autochthony of the human even as—or precisely because—it justifies the conquest and dispossession, enslavement and eradication that constitute the course of liberalism in its intimate partnership with capitalism."[14] If so, what ideas of the human emancipated from "liberalism's grasp" and not defined by Man are possible? Aimee Bahng focuses on members of the "undercommons" who "refuse to participate in, and are denied access to, the ladder of corporate productivity and take comfort instead in forms of kinship and occupation that survive alongside and below the radar of freewheeling global entrepreneurialism."[15] All of this is to say that, as LeiLani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams insist, "race is inextricable from our understanding of ecology, and vice versa."[16]

I worry, however, that the notion of the undercommons does not do much to build up a sense of shared agency. I am fascinated by the idea that those who are disenfranchised can find ways to extract back from institutions that hoard resources the means necessary for their survival, but *how* can the disenfranchised do this? And how can they share and maintain such resources so that more people can benefit and become more empowered? It seems to me that for the idea of an undercommons to find material shape, it needs purposeful exertion, and so I find it noteworthy that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, who first coined the term, do not have much to say about agency, nor do they seem to have a high opinion of the idea: "What the beyond of teaching is really about is not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing; it's about allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood, and one cannot initiate the auto-interpellative torque that biopower subjection requires and rewards."[17] Some subjects certainly have access to agency in a way that other subjects do not. But the recognition of such dramatic inequality seems to lead to a prizing of passivity and a suspicion of all agency. The undercommons, then, names a desire to disengage from existing institutions.

Maybe these institutions are beyond repair (there is a lot of convincing evidence), but what is the vision for what will replace them if they must be dismantled? In the preface to Harney and Moten's book, Jack Halberstam claims, "We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming."[18] I have no faith that an ideal set of social relations will magically be imaginable only after the existing institutions have been taken down. A surer path, it seems to me, is to work to build the structures you want and to see where these structures lead you. I am inspired by the work of the community organizer Mariame Kaba, who describes her efforts toward the abolition of the prison-industrial complex to be profoundly creative. Such efforts, she writes, constitute "a positive project that focuses, in part, on building a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it." The question that guides this work, then, is, as Kaba continues, "What can we imagine for ourselves, and the world?"[19]

The skepticism that surrounds this kind of positivity is where race and ethnic studies (alongside queer studies) might find too much overlap with

prominent scholarly and literary work on the human as inextricably entangled with the nonhuman. Elsewhere I describe the *new materialisms* as a "loose confederation of intellectual trends" that grow out of "frustration, if not hostility, toward arguments about a reality that is merely a consequence of our linguistic and cultural mediations."[20] This loose confederation addresses what Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe as "fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world."[21] Led by figures like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, and Stacy Alaimo, who represent significant differences in foci and a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, the intellectual movements of the new materialisms have emphasized the existence of a physical world separate from human perceptions of it and in the process have questioned the power of human agency.

Things are understood to exert their own kind of agentic power. The human, as a result, has to be humbled, so as not to be the sole source of mastery and dominion—which is why, perhaps clumsily on my part, these two sentences have been written in the passive voice. Humans are kin to a dazzling variety of living forms (Haraway); are constrained by the small power of multitudinous actants (Latour); are enmeshed in networks of distributed agency that confound attempts to lay blame (Bennett); are caught in hyperobjects that are so unfathomable in scale they can barely be apprehended, if at all (Morton); and are dissolved into their surroundings in ways that defy mapping (Alaimo).[22] The variety of these arguments is tremendous, but they trend toward a way of thinking that returns the human to a world of animistic possibilities, of limited control, and of a will—usually alienated from itself—that must constantly negotiate with a complex being for what it needs and wants.

Arguments like these have gained substantial prominence. Consider *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, a widely cited book on climate change, literature, history, and politics by the celebrated author Amitav Ghosh. "Who can forget those moments," he asks on the first page, "when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?"[23] Such moments lead people to glimpse a world where human action occurs in intimate collaboration with the objects and things around them. This world also tempers claims of human mastery with the realization that these objects and things have an animacy that constrains, redirects, and exerts force over action of any kind.

This is the very world that the narrator of Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*, which was published after *The Great Derangement*, is plunged into. Deen is a dealer

of antique books who is somehow asked to track down the origins of an obscure Bengali folktale; the tale focuses on a seventeenth-century trader who was forced from his home in the Sundarbans by environmental calamities (explicitly associated with the Little Ice Age) and who traveled the northern regions of the Indian Ocean and the eastern regions of the Mediterranean in search of refuge.[24] Several people help Deen in his quest to make sense of the origins of this tale, but none so much as Cinta, a famous retired Italian historian of Venice.

Cinta gets the most important lines in the novel, as she connects the old folktale to what's happening in the present. The novel is not shy about chronicling some of these effects. Climate change makes extreme weather events—like Cyclone Amphan, which occurred just a year after the publication of the novel—more commonplace, renders the Sundarbans an ever more precarious place to live, sets afloat an increasing number of migrants, and expands the range of dangerous animals and insects. She says to Deen:

> Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a livable place, if our homes are not to be invaded by the sea, or by creatures like that spider, and yet we are powerless, even the most powerful among us. We go about our daily business through habit, as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will; we see shocking and monstrous things happening all around us and we avert our eyes; we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power.[25]

This passage makes explicit the kind of thinking that seems to be gaining ground in literary discussions about climate change and resonating beyond its disciplinary borders, as if the study of literature is an amplifier of such ideas. Humans ramble through their days, stuck in patterns they can barely perceive through a somnolent gaze, aware at best that they are witnessing one extraordinary event after another but unable ultimately to integrate this knowledge into their daily lives and, worse, unable to intervene in any way. The extraordinary and the daily are incompatible. They lack control even over their own lives.

Gun Island imagines the glimpsing of this state of being as a violent experience. Cinta again explains, "That is why whatever is happening to you is not a 'possession.' Rather I would say that it is a *risveglio*, a kind of awakening. It may be dangerous of course, but that is because you are waking up to things that you had never imagined or sensed before."[26] This idea of an awakening is old, already ancient when Henry David Thoreau invoked it in *Walden* ("To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How

could I have looked him in the face?"), and remains integral to the view of the world that the new materialisms offer.[27] Eyes must be opened, and it is the work of literature in particular to make such an opening possible so that readers may comprehend more clearly what there is to be comprehended rather than the illusions that ordinarily occupy their senses.[28]

I've learned a lot from these arguments, some more than others, but I am deeply concerned about the political implications of a way of thinking that depends so much on the turn away from human agency. This way of thinking tends to assume humans have too inflated an idea of their power, which leads them to make reckless decisions and enact changes to their environment with a careless disregard for consequences. For those who have made most of the decisions that have led to the current moment of environmental danger, a humbling would be beneficial for the environment. Ironically, this same humbling can be highly reassuring for the same people. Agency itself is so complex that responsibility becomes impossible to adjudicate. Thus, if humans lack agency, they can't be responsible for the outcome of their decisions and actions.

One result of this attitude toward human agency is, as Heather Houser puts it, a decoupling of "responsibility and agency."[29] Eva Haifa Giraud makes a similar point when she reasons, "Though it might be important to recognize the nuances of a given situation, this can also make it difficult to determine where culpability for particular situations really lies, let alone offer a sense of how to meet any ethical responsibilities emerging from these situations."[30] For the vast majority of humans, then, many of whom have fought ferociously for the basic right to be called human and have questioned what this right might mean, an inflated idea of their power is not a problem they must overcome. The idea that, as Houser again puts it, "some actors are more accountable than others" is also an important prerequisite for political struggle as humans seek to understand why the world is the way it is and who has helped to create and uphold its inequalities.[31] Similarly, the insistence on a weak human agency leads to the very compelling question, What's the point of knowing if what needs to be done can't be done?

From the latter, much more populous vantage point, the attitude toward human agency that Anna Kornbluh dubs "anarcho-vitalism" does not seem very appealing. This attitude treats formlessness as "the ideal uniting a variety of theories, from the mosh of the multitude to the localization of microstruggle and microaggression, from the voluntarist assembly of actors and networks to the flow of affects untethered from constructs, from the deification of irony and incompletion to the culminating conviction that life springs forth

without form and thrives in form's absence."[32] For Kornbluh, what is most troubling about this exaltation of formlessness is its implicit idealization of powerlessness. This exaltation encourages people to take on the role Ghosh's novel assigns to Deen. As mostly spectators, they do not participate in the making of the scenes that are unfolding around them, of which they are inextricably a part, for attempts to make seem to lead to unforeseeable human-inspired destructive consequences. Human agency is wielded in one way, available to specific classes of persons, and is as a result suspect. The only ethical role for anyone, then, is a sad witnessing of events as they unfold—if, that is, they are even lucky enough to attain such a level of awareness—and, at most, a tearing down of everything.

The belief that drives this prizing of powerlessness grants nature, or some idea like nature, the ability to repair what humans have damaged. In Richard Powers's acclaimed novel *The Overstory*, the much-respected scientist and widely read author Patricia Westerford, a character who seems modeled after Rachel Carson, tells an audience, "The 'environment' is alive—a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other."[33] Nonhuman life maintains itself, and so what is the human role in helping this life regain a health that human activities have damaged? Westerford writes in one of her books, "The best and easiest way to get a forest to return to any plot of cleared land is to do nothing—nothing at all, and do it for less time than you might think."[34] Near the end of the novel, as if following this way of thinking to its logical conclusion, Westerford gives a talk about the "single best thing you can do for the world." As a finale, she plans to kill herself.[35]

Against the idea that, to address the environmental crises human activity has wrought, humans should "do nothing" and maybe even cease to exist, Kornbluh proposes a different approach, one that gives literary studies a significant role:

> We live in destructive times, on an incinerating planet, over institutional embers, around prodigious redundancy between the plunder of the commons and the compulsive echolalia "Burn it all down." Theory must prepare to build things up, and literature models that building. . . . Our skills of understanding the composition of made things must be turned to the work of celebrating making. Humanists, too, are makers, equipped for the task of constructing new togetherness, new compositions, new orders, and to sustaining those formations in time and space.[36]

It's weird for me to observe this, given my focus on feelings of powerlessness, but it should be obvious. Humans collectively wield an enormous—though

not absolute—agency. This agency, derived from the highly complex organization of human labor (its purposeful form), has transformed the physical world again and again and is now transforming it in a way that might make large parts of the planet uninhabitable for humans and many other life-forms because it serves the single-minded pursuit of generating profit. The signs are everywhere of the power of this agency, and of its abuse, so much so that the very claim that there is a wilderness that exists somehow beyond the reach of human intervention should seem ideologically suspect.

And yet for many people—if not most people—agency *is* weak; the ability to direct this agency, like capital, has itself been concentrated among a small number of powerful individuals and institutions. While some have more agency than others, contingent on factors like race, class, nationality, region, gender and gender identity, and sexuality, most people's power is much weaker than the power commanded by a few. It's also possible that much greater exertions of a collective human agency are required as environmental damage increases and the climate is thrown more wildly out of balance, so no matter how powerful human agency is in the aggregate, it may not be powerful enough to respond to the forces it has unleashed.

To realize that collective human agency is strong, if increasingly hindered, while personal human agency is often very weak and distributed in a heavily lopsided manner, and to strategize ways of redistributing an overly concentrated human agency so as to democratize it does not require a startling risveglio, as Cinta insists in *Gun Island*. Rather, it requires a practice of doing and thinking, which together "build things up," to borrow Kornbluh's phrase. The practice of sustaining attention to climate change that I want to *build up*, then, seeks to found habits of thought and action that together contribute to a strengthening of shared agency.

In the chapters that follow, I court overfamiliarity and prescription by addressing the reader as "you," *as if* you are here before me, across a table, preferably in a pleasant room or even in an outside café on a sunny cool day, possibly drinking some coffee or "having a Coke," to borrow a phrase from the title of Frank O'Hara's famous poem.[37] It's also *as if* you and I are chatting with each other, and I am saying, perhaps obnoxiously, ruining the moment, making it a lot less fun: Look at this novel or this poem, consider how it relates to your experience of the everyday, feel how fucked up the everyday has become, even more so than before; of course, the everyday has been this way for a long time, the very mention of a Coke should remind you of this, but climate change is making everything worse; don't shy away from how bad this makes you feel, stay with it, stay with the full range of all of your

emotions, live your life as if all of this matters, linger over how marvelous the experience of living is, and try to find others to share this experience, so that you can take some comfort in not being alone, so that together you and others can find ways to make a difference.

I write in the second person because I am asking, alongside the lyric, what you and I have in common. This commonality is forged in recognition of a shared struggle and not in trying to ignore entrenched divides in the name of a universal sameness. This commonality is founded on the belief that my well-being, and maybe even my very survival, is bound up with yours. I am asking, What kinds of shared futures can you and I imagine and bring into the realm of the possible, despite a highly organized investment in business as usual? I am asking, How can you and I together make more livable worlds by making use of an agency that gets stronger the more use it gets and the more people find ways to make use of it?

These are not easy questions to address for many very compelling reasons. I avoid using the first person plural as much as possible (it's used once in the middle of the book and again at the end) in order to foreground the challenges of answering these questions and to take seriously all the impediments that exist in striving to form publics, coalitions, and sustaining bonds of solidarity explicitly around the topic of climate change. I advocate for engaging the struggle as a daily practice.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 See the documentary *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, directed by Grace Lee (2013), in which Boggs makes this point emphatically during one of her interviews. Boggs contributes to a similar point in J. Boggs et al., *Conversations in Maine*, 306. They write, "A philosophy is not some sort of abstraction that one discovers like a crocodile as one is going up the Nile. It is the culmination of experiences and thoughts about those experiences." For more about Boggs herself and the extraordinary life she led, see G. Boggs, *Living for Change*; and G. Boggs and Kurashige, *Next American Revolution*.

2 H. Nguyen, *Red Juice*, 101.

3 Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 103.

4 Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 196–97.

5 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 18.

6 Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, 2–3.

7 An interesting companion to Kolbert's book is Richard Primark's *Walden Warming: Climate Change Comes to Thoreau's Woods*, in which the author, after doing fieldwork in Borneo, comes home to the Boston area, where he is employed and grew up, to look for signals of climate change and finds them in the detailed notes Henry David Thoreau left behind in his notebooks.

8 Chuh, *Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 3.

9 Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics*, 10.

10 For more discussion of "conviviality," see Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 121–52.

11 Sze, *Environmental Justice*, 77.

12 M. Chen, *Animacies*, 234.

13 Saranillio, *Unsustainable Empire*, 21.

14 Chuh, *Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 3–4.

15 Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, 170.

16 Nishime and Williams, "Introduction," 4.

17 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 28.
18 Halberstam, "Wild Beyond," 4.
19 Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 3.
20 Song, "New Materialism," 52, 53. In that article I used the term *new materialism* in the singular because I thought of it as being highly organized around a response to the cultural turn, but I have since decided—following the lead of others—that the response moves in many different directions and is therefore so heterogeneous that it is more accurate to use the plural.
21 Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 3.
22 See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*; Latour, "Networks, Societies, Spheres"; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Morton, *Hyperobjects*; and Alaimo, *Exposed*.
23 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 3.
24 There has been a lot of interest in the Little Ice Age in recent years. See, for instance, Mann, *1493*, 38–47. In Ghosh's novel, a speaker at a conference Deen attends focuses on the Little Ice Age and its destructive consequences. See Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 134.
25 Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 237.
26 Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 237.
27 Thoreau, *Walden*, 96.
28 It's not entirely accurate to say that the scholars I've named so far would agree with my summary of new-materialist ways of thinking as expressed by Cinta, for several of them maintain deep skepticism that such a risveglio is even possible, while others are not at all concerned with epistemology, which I'm using here to refer to the question of how one knows what one knows. Indeed, as a group, they seem more interested in ontology, or the focus on being. As Ian Baucom explains, "While the questions the interdisciplinary humanities have been asking have been fundamentally epistemological or representational, the questions the life sciences are now forcing are fundamentally ontological, questions of the nature of being, questions above all, of the nature of *human being* as a particular form of life among other forms of life." Baucom, "Human Shore," 6. Also, see Sonya Posmentier's response to this point when she insists "that black diasporic writers have been theorizing the 'nature of being' for some time." Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, 266. Nevertheless, implicit in these arguments is the sense that a proper way to perceive the world exists. They favor an onto-epistemology that requires a shrinking of the human's role in it and an understanding of the human as deeply imbricated in its stitching rather than as somehow self-woven and apart.
29 Houser, *Ecosickness*, 18.
30 Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*, 2.
31 Houser, *Ecosickness*, 18.
32 Kornbluh, *Order of Forms*, 2.
33 Powers, *Overstory*, 454.
34 Powers, *Overstory*, 460.
35 Powers, *Overstory*, 466.
36 Kornbluh, *Order of Forms*, 156.

37 O'Hara, "Having a Coke with You," in *Collected Poems*, 360. See Gravely, "Having a Coke with You." This article helped me to think more concretely about my use of the second person and its connection to the lyric—particularly, the way the lyric lends itself to a desire to share with others the extraordinary aesthetic objects I've come across.

CHAPTER ONE. WHAT IS DENIAL?

Parts of this chapter appeared under the title "The Artful Things of Climate Change," in LeiLani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams's edited volume *Racial Ecologies* (University of Washington Press, 2018).

1 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 13.
2 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 287.
3 For instance, 2010 witnessed the publication of Naomi Oreskes and Timothy Conway's *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoking to Global Warming*, a landmark study that focused attention on the deliberate corporate-funded spread of falsehoods about climate change that built on past misinformation campaigns.
4 Cohen, *States of Denial*, 7.
5 Cohen, *States of Denial*, 7.
6 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 175; emphasis in original.
7 I'm describing the news report about the 2018 Hurricane Michael published in the *New York Times*. Richard Fausset, Patricia Mazzaei, and Alan Blinder, "Storm Charges North, Leaving Destruction in Florida," *New York Times*, October 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/us/hurricane-michael-live-updates-florida.html.
8 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 81.
9 Cohen, *States of Denial*, 8.
10 Jacquelyn Ardam, "*Never Let Me Go* and the Human Condition," *Avidly*, October 9, 2017, http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2017/10/09/never-let-me-go-and-the-human-condition/.
11 Ardam, "*Never Let Me Go*."
12 For more discussion of allegory, see Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*; and Quilligan, *Language of Allegory*. I am also drawing directly from my own writing about allegory in Song, *Children of 1965*, 152–78.
13 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 40.
14 Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 12. Also see chapter 3, where Norgaard systematically critiques attention deficit explanations for inaction and explains why she prefers sociological approaches that emphasize an informal but powerful organization of emotions.
15 Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 12, 4.
16 Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 93.
17 Cohen, *States of Denial*, 24; emphasis in the original.
18 Sturken, "Absent Images of Memory," 692. Sturken ends this essay with a discussion of the extraordinary film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, directed by John Sturgess