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Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives

Yanoula Athanassakis



Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives examines post-1929 US artistic interrogations of environmental disruption. Tracing themes of pollution, marine life, and agricultural production in the work of a number of historically significant writers including John Steinbeck, Ruth Ozeki, and Cherríe Moraga, this book outlines a series of incisive dialogues on transnational flows of capital and environmental justice. Texts ranging from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to *Body Toxic* (2001) represent the body as vulnerable to a host of environmental risks. They identify "natural disasters" not just as environmental hazards and catastrophes, but also as events intertwined with socioeconomic issues.

With careful textual analysis, Athanassakis shows how twentieth- and twenty-first-century US writers have sought to rethink traditional understandings of how the human being relates to ecological phenomena. Their work, and this study, offer new modes of creative engagement with environmental degradation – engagement that is proactive, ambivalent, and even playful.

This book contributes to vital discussions about the importance of literature for social justice movements, food studies, ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities. The core argument of the book is that artistically imaginative narratives of environmental disturbance can help humans contend with ostensibly uncontrollable, drastic planetary changes.

Yanoula Athanassakis received her PhD in English (American literature), with a global studies emphasis, from the University of California at Santa Barbara, USA. She is Co-Founder of the Environmental Humanities Series at New York University (NYU) and Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, NYU, USA.

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Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives

Yanoula Athanassakis

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1 Bodies interrupted

> To think we've gone and created immortality and the problem is how to mortalize it again. That we've not been able to make immortality for our bodies but have given them growths, splotches, sarcomas, melanomas, blastomas, calcifications, lesions – things to cut away and look for and then cut away again. We grow superbacteria, retroviruses, breastless women. But we've bombarded simple ores with atomic bits and filled them with radioactivity, something that lives as close to forever as we can imagine. We've made immortality for our waste, which grows larger and more important and more alive, and bulks itself out to inhabit the spaces we dwindle ourselves away from.
>
> Susanne Antonetta, *Body Toxic*

> Just like other rural areas around the country, the Pine Barrens have been victimized by immigration-driven population growth, yet the region is still beautiful. I have no doubt the author of this book has the medical ailments she claims, yet perhaps they have more to do with her lifetime of drug abuse than with living in New Jersey. My father grew up in the industrial badlands of Bayonne, New Jersey; he is 61 and has no major medical problems. In fact, my family is entirely from Jersey City and Bayonne, two cities that are far more industrialized than Ocean County, yet nobody in my family has ever had cancer. This book is another example of junk science giddily peddled by leftist Manhattanite editors who probably haven't been outside of Manhattan in years.
>
> Dan, Amazon.com

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives is about bodies that are interrupted and whose normal and natural trajectory is somehow short-circuited by unnatural and toxic forces. This book asks that we reevaluate and look anew at US-based narratives of the interrupted and derailed human body, a body that no longer seems to function like other bodies or whose path – when it does – we cannot help but register as an aberrance. Here, bodies are deeply material entities whose vital signs writers and artists channel in their environmentally conscious artworks. Here, the vital infrastructures of the body communicate with intensities that disturb habitual perceptions. *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* focuses on "interrupted bodies" that exert their own agency, challenging the somatic containment intrinsic to the molar body.

Attentive to global capitalism and imperial states in projects of somatic containment, *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* emphasizes the molecular and planetary scales of the distributed subject.

In all the chapters, we encounter interrupted bodies: one is a head without a body and a couple are disease-ridden and disfigured bodies. This is a time to recognize what we might consider to be rebellious bodies that disobey our standards of conduct. Just as the bodies have short-circuited, they cause a feedback loop in our ability to understand them, and they disrupt our perception of reality. As the characters in the stories ahead become unhinged and untidy, they shatter our world order and our ideas of somatic boundaries.

Bodies take up space and are, insofar as we conceptualize them, bound by that space. The further back we go, the more we see that humanity has always questioned the boundaries of bodies in space, and herein lies some of the most radical thinking of the twenty-first century.[1] In 1986 Mary Douglas noted "current gaps in research in risk perception" and stated that such research is by definition always reactive (3). The twentieth century witnessed concerted efforts to rectify such gaps: for example, Ulrich Beck's work (1992) has been taken up by scholars in the environmental humanities to investigate the idea of risk as experienced in everyday human life. What if our bodies are not in fact as hermetically sealed as we might think, and what if they are not obedient to the mind and subordinate to its wishes? The motivation to encourage humans to believe that our exposure to risk is spatially bound and can be mitigated by what we do with our bodies is growing exponentially and is monetarily incentivized. Messages to the public loudly proclaim that we can mitigate risk, but also increasing – and in direct relation to a unilateral push to ignore connections between communal risk and individual agency – is the static of such messages.

The tactics of resistance to official stories about necessary by-products of technological and industrial progress have become more sophisticated and they exhibit parasitic behavior: they feed off of denial and complacency. The fear of shaming and scaring the public becomes secondary to laying bare truths about our collective agency and the possibilities for meaningful change.[2] *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* considers numerous texts that have become savvier, more urgent, and more complex than their predecessors in their responses to instances of corporate malfeasance and the orchestrated production of public skepticism of such malfeasance. These works speak frankly and creatively to their audiences about what, in one of my favorite quotes of all of the texts in this book, Susanne Antonetta blithely refers to as "separation and separation and separation" (2001, 11). A later discussion of this quote will illustrate its fuller context; for now, I offer it as both an epigraph and a coda. That is, it is the beginning and end – and even the middle – of *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives*.

The forced separation between ideas of biological and abiological matter (more than simply the separation between humans and their surroundings) shuts down emerging and productive discourse. "Separation and separation and separation" of mind from body, of inner from outer, and of toxic from

clean are just a few of the examples that trouble the imaginations of the writers discussed in this book. What would it mean not only for mind and body to be less clearly demarcated but also for the body to have a material wisdom that the mind cannot compute? According to writers such as Susanne Antonetta (2001), John Steinbeck ([1939] 1976), coauthors John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts ([1941] 2009), Bich Minh Nguyen (2007), and Cherríe Moraga (1994) (to name a handful), it would mean the eradication of much of humans' harmfully politicized behavior. It would mean, in fact, a profound reconsideration of the predatory environmental practices that are repackaged as necessary markers of progress. And finally, it would mean that an estrangement from our realities and usual practices of knowledge production would essentially force us to question how we go forward from here.

Body Toxic

Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic* (2001) narrativizes toxic harm from a material perspective. Antonetta spent part of her childhood in the Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey in the 1960s, and only later realized that the beauty of her surroundings was surpassed by its poisonous potential. Lurking not beneath but inside things like fresh-picked berries, fresh fish, and the water she both swam in and drank was a lethal combination of nuclear waste and pesticides that metastasized and surfaced in her body as spontaneous abortions and cancerous growths. Antonetta's "environmental memoir" is, by definition, also a corporeal one, demonstrating that the traditionally separate spheres of nature and human are in fact enmeshed. The mixing of these categories defies conventional binaries and points to the gap between industrial development and our ability to measure its cost.

In the Amazon.com comments about Antonetta's book, the divisive nature of the politics of the body is clear. Readers are incensed by what they see as Antonetta's *choice* to be ill by ingesting recreational drugs. Citing her illicit drug use as the cause of mental and physical illness becomes a manner not only of moral but also, strikingly, political balkanization. One reviewer, Dan (2004), points out that his own family does not have cancer but is from an area "far more industrialized than Ocean County" and suggests that it is Antonetta's "lifetime of drug abuse" that is at fault for her illness.[3] The reviewer's teleology depends on a direct relationship between visible industry and invisible illness. As Dan points out, Jersey City and Bayonne are "far more industrialized" than the geographic locations Antonetta identifies as places where she lived. What Dan is missing, however, is the manner in which visible industry in large urban centers often sends its means of production (and thus its pollution) elsewhere. Further refuting Antonetta's claims, Dan racializes pollution as the problem of "immigration-driven population growth" and declares that this memoir is yet "another example of junk science giddily peddled by leftist Manhattanite editors." Regardless of partisanship, the reviewer demonstrates the politicized nature of the body as matter in the twenty-first century.

Antonetta's story is one of extremes: her body is devastated, her mental faculties are foggy because of manic depression, and she uses recreational drugs to escape reality until her eighteenth birthday. Her tone does not elicit readers' empathy and although it is bleak and unsentimental, it manages to incite passionate responses from its audience. In her review of the book, Victoria Kamsler writes that Antonetta's "family is not admirable or even particularly likeable" and notes that, to her credit, Antonetta manages "to impart the sense that, nevertheless, they matter" (2002, 196). Not only does this family matter, but as Kamsler rightly states, this memoir also "expands our moral sensibility by showing us how to be concerned for people with whom we are *not* meant to identify" (2002, 196; emphasis in the original). Yet what Kamsler calls an "obsessively readable contribution to environmental ethics" (2002, 194) might make average ecocritics squeamish. We pay keen attention to readability and there is a distinct way in which this text is in fact not "obsessively readable" because it refuses to enable our wishes to engage with the people in it.

Body Toxic is one of three books that all examine areas where New York borders New Jersey and wherein greed trumps morality. Antonetta's text is uninviting and unsentimental; the narrative voice appears to march on and will do so whether or not the reader stays with the author. Certainly if we read this text with a focus on the ethics of corporate wrongdoing and companies' willed ignorance of the cost to human and nonhuman lives, we will read it with the same fervor with which we might read Dan Fagin's *Toms River* (2013). Fagin's sweeping and crushing study of villainous corporate practices is summed up by one of his shortest sentences, "Many waste handlers simply conclude that compliance doesn't pay" (2013, 176). Proving Ciba-Geigy's criminal intent produces the kind of cloak-and-dagger suspense that drives the reader to keep turning the pages of this spectacularly written piece of investigative journalism. While Robert Sullivan's *The Meadowlands* (1998) is written in a comparatively jocular tone, the purpose of that book is similar: to unearth tawdry histories of corporate and governmental negligence evidenced by buried chemical drums.[4]

An important distinction between the narratives of Fagin and Sullivan on the one hand and Antonetta on the other hand (besides the fact that she is author, narrator, subject, and object of her book) is that Antonetta does not include geographical coordinates and maps and she presents herself as unconcerned with details of time and place. Both Fagin and Sullivan illustrate what our collective dependence on a synthetic existence is doing to us and the spaces we inhabit. In *Contaminated Communities*, Michael Edelstein observes that such epiphanies are "lifescape changes" that require "cognitive adjustments" in five major areas ([1988] 2004, 65–71). When people begin to realize that they have been exposed to toxic substances and that the half-life of chemicals within them will be far longer than their own lifespans, what is needed is more radical than a mere cognitive adjustment. Fagin's and Sullivan's books begin with maps of the Meadowlands and Toms River areas, but Antonettas' first chapter, titled "First Words," begins with a distinct lack of clarity: "In nineteen question-mark question-mark my silent grandfather came to the United States" (2001, 3). Her

Barbadian grandfather haunts this text and skulks through its shadows with an uncanny ability to unsettle her and thus also readers. The figure of the grandfather is typically silent beyond comprehension, and when he does speak, what he says appears to only make matters worse.[5] *Body Toxic* commences with vague indications of time ("nineteen question-mark question-mark") instead of with coordinates and orientation: there are no maps, no timelines, nothing to grasp onto. Her memoir is deliberately slippery and diaphanous.

Body Toxic not only begins with a lack of specificity of time and space but Antonetta perpetually refuses to grant the reader perspective. In literary representations of embodied risk, materiality – especially when compromised – is often expressed as a crisis in representation. The natural state of bodies is disrupted, and as a result the stories they tell engage in a kind of civil disobedience, defying chronological order and traditional narrative structures. As Stacy Alaimo eloquently points out, a cross-section of US literature "dramatize[s] the onto-epistemological ruptures that occur when people must contend with the invisible dangers of risk society" (2010, 72).

For Antonetta the break with reality and known structures of understanding probably began in utero, caused both by a hereditary predisposition to mental illness and environmentally induced mania and depression. Antonetta stopped using street drugs at age seventeen and a year later she was on a list of prescription drugs that she complains have "less truth in advertising" (2001, 206). The street drugs at least gave her the sense that she could control how she felt and what the letdown would be: "I'd quit street drugs at seventeen, and began facing the drugs I could not control. My brain chemicals, and the chemicals given by legal prescription. Before I had swallowed a mind, a place to be and a way to be: *goofy pills, silly-cybin, ups, downs*. I missed that – the absoluteness of the claim, of the follow-through" (2001, 206, emphasis in the original). The prescription drugs she ingests leave her feeling like a blundering version of herself. Though people remark that she seems like a different person and mean it as a compliment, she feels that the drugs she takes for manic depression make her not herself: "when I say 'myself' I lie by simplification" (2001, 207). Antonetta believes that the drugs are reducing the breadth of her emotional register, but I read her observation also as a comment about the lack of "separation and separation and separation" between her interior and the exterior, between her body and its surroundings, and between the toxicity we note in pills and that which we cannot identify and is already in us.

The caginess of Antonetta's text is not haphazard, and it cannot be fully attributed (as some wish it to be) to her transition from poet to prose author. She continually refuses to accept her readers as allies, not trying to win them over or hand them what Dana Phillips might term a "quintessential ecocritical experience" (2003, 5). In Phillips's musings about environmental critic Lawrence Buell – whom he rightly names the "de facto spokesman" of ecocriticism, the study of literature of the environment and of literature linking humans to their physical surroundings (2003, 5) – Phillips comments that one of the most powerful ideas that Buell adopted from risk theory, environmental history, and sociology (among other disciplines) is that ecocriticism is a rapidly shifting field

that responds to a demand for answers but does not offer them in expected ways, or even at all. In a similar way, Antonetta's text refuses reduction to a story of "good" nature versus "bad" humans. The murkiest moments of her memoir are those during which she tries to distinguish truth from fiction and good from bad. Her ambivalence appears to be the result of a disconcerting history of psychosomatic violation and deep shame. Although one could say that the passages in *Body Toxic* that create consternation in the reader are due to postmodern pastiche and an authorial penchant for poetry over prose, in the end it is content rather than form that creates the sense that the world has become unhinged.

Bodies in "anti-place"

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives recognizes the immense potential in recent movements that question the human-constructed and oppositional spaces between human and nonhuman, inner and outer, and us and them. I note an emerging trend in ecocritical and environmental justice movements to explore how humans by and large unwittingly contribute to their own disenfranchisement while feeling as if they are actually improving their existence. It is this false sense of self-legitimization and security that propels some of the most harmful and partisan environmental practices. While we are undercutting the possibility of a healthy and happy future for humans and other species and harming the ecosystems of our planet, we feel as if we are actually doing our part to mitigate risk and govern our own future and the future of those around us. *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* analyzes texts that overturn notions of bound and predetermined risk, or of predictable and manageable outcomes. Instead, I detect a trend in literature and films that actually aim to reschematize troubling dualisms (between mind and body, for example) and thus also the audiences' understanding of their participation in the production of – and contact with – different types of harm.

Antonetta's memoir is particularly interesting because it lays bare the contradictory relationship that humans have to their bodies. The management of risk in the form of exposure to toxins has increasingly been framed as a question of individual choice and ability. We are theoretically able to control the food we eat, the water we drink, the location of the house we buy and the purity of its surrounding elements (air and water), the car we drive, the paint we use, and so on. People are beginning to realize the lack of control that we have over our individual exposure to risks, but we are more reluctant to conceptualize this lack of control as a collective undertaking.[6] Such an ideological shift – from notions of individual exposure to ideas of collective exposure – requires a change in how we think of communal harm and thus also responsibility.[7] I would argue that particularly for US citizens, the right to privacy trumps most other rights. Other cultures and languages do not have the same understanding of the words "personal" and "private"; instead, those words often connote a private company or something that is for individual use.[8] Part of what becomes disempowering about the spatialization of a model

that clearly delineates between personal and communal is that it will always by definition become a battle of a few individuals against a larger collective. It is a predetermined and failed model of discourse on risk and injury, which translates to an autonomous and personal battle, or what Wendy Brown has argued are wounded identity attachments that rule out the possibility of alternative futures and subjects as "potentially in motion" (1995, 75; see also 52–76). We cannot shake the lingering sense of victimization attached to our individual bodies, even if a number of injured bodies come together. Brown identifies potential in the possibility of reclaiming emotional attachments and sentiments as connected to agency. That agency relies on the understanding that identity is "deconstructable" and not "fixed"; it is not completed or wholly formed (1995, 75).

The public is evermore beginning to doubt answers that have clear boundaries and clean edges. Feigning control over anthropogenic catastrophes such as nuclear waste in the soil and water is exactly what has led to the continued tragedy of the Toms River region – Antonetta's childhood stomping grounds. According to Beck, risk is no longer spatially or temporally constrained; instead, it is disseminated through global threats such as nuclear war and global warming. Beck suggests that the main challenge for nation-states in a new global order is their inability "*to feign control over the uncontrollable*" (2002, 41; emphasis in the original). Toms River is located in Ocean County, which in turn is in the middle of New Jersey's shoreline and was the subject of one cover-up after another for a period of sixty years. In 2001 three companies – Ciba Specialty Chemicals Corporation, Union Carbide Corporation, and United Water Resources, Inc. – reached an agreement with sixty-nine families for an undisclosed amount and with a no-fault clause. The settlement came days before a report was set to go public about whether or not cases of childhood cancer in the region were linked to polluted groundwater from dump sites and plants (Avril and Moroz 2001; State of New Jersey Department of Public Health 2001; Sucato 2001).

Antonetta's memoir tests our ability to differentiate between our bodies and our waste, and it becomes clear that in economic terms we privilege and support the health of our waste over that of other human bodies, especially if we think that our own bodies are not made vulnerable by our waste. When describing her grandmother's conservative child-rearing practices in stark contrast to said grandmother's skinny-dipping revelry, Antonetta writes:

> (Every morning first thing my grandmother crossed the gravel road. As she crossed the road her spirit rose and kited out of her life. She threw off her cotton shift and the hydraulic system that was 1930s women's underwear, and skinnydipped for a long time in Barnegat Bay. Still her children weren't allowed to use the words "pregnant" or "God.")
>
> Separation and separation and separation.
>
> (*Body Toxic*, 11)

While her grandfather "had little feeling for nature" and Antonetta "never knew him to go outside without a reason" (2001, 5), her grandmother wanted

to give the family a sense of a countryside existence. Maybe her grandfather knew that the great outdoors in which he had "jury-rigg[ed]" two cottages (land that was available only because of the economic collapse of 1929) was not the best place to explore (2001, 11). Antonetta's tone implies that he somehow knew or is at fault for trying to take advantage of the economic destitution of others: her grandfather habitually arrived "on the heels of disaster" (2001, 10), but the disease clusters that later surfaced in the surrounding area were something he could not have predicted, especially since according to his granddaughter he did not like going outside. Certainly, he could not connect and quantify the different kinds of disaster around him. As numerous reports and exposés have since revealed, he was unknowingly putting the family on a sure path of exposure to radioactive waste.

Startling and more recent revelations demonstrate that much of the toxic matter we fear is already a part of our bodies, not something that can be expunged and exported. Antonetta's grandmother feared illness but did not believe in its hold over the physical body and was expert at separating body from mind and sickness from health. Antonetta's grandmother and mother (a "quasi-Christian Scientist") firmly believed in the docetic body and thus made distinctions between two worlds: one in which the body is material, the other in which it is not (2001, 60). As Stephanie LeMenager explains, Antonetta groups together a blind faith in industrial progress with an unquestioning belief in Antonetta's family's version of the docetic body: "Like Mark Twain, Antonetta recognizes Mary Baker Eddy's faith as deeply complicit with American ideologies of progress" (2014, 192). Antonetta names people who worked at Ciba-Geigy and Denzer and Schafer who were also Christian Scientists and who, according to Antonetta, believed in a split between the material and immaterial. To Antonetta's mind, it was the people in power at the companies that recklessly dumped hazardous waste who believed that, like Christ's body at times, their bodies were immaterial and impervious to earthly hazards. It was the same group of people who believed "we lived in two different dimensions," who were able to pour "sludges in the ground we drank from and the river we swam in" (2001, 61).

The splintering of matter from bodies is key to Antonetta's memoir, as she alternates between thinking that the body is phantasmal or illusory, to feeling its weight when undergoing various bouts of identifiable illness. Her writing reminds us of the same belief that we see in many ecocritical texts and more widely in public discourse about climate change: that we have lost the right to live in a good and clean world, "I love my grandmother's religion: I believe it in a way and yet I believe I'm sick. Maybe we did live bodiless. Maybe by treating ourselves as impregnable we've somehow renounced the privilege, incarnating ourselves slowly in the world we've fouled" (2001, 61). As further proof of how we have laid waste to our world as an inhabitable space for humans, Antonetta recalls the movement to collect physical evidence from human bodies (baby teeth). People were seeking to understand if there was a connection between Oyster Creek's nuclear reactor in Ocean County and the cancer clusters later discovered in the surrounding areas (2001, 25). The rounding up and mailing

of "old baby teeth" (2001, 25) for the Radiation and Public Health Project – also known as the Tooth Fairy Project – mixes fantasy with the grotesque in uncomfortable ways. The gothic nature of much of Antonetta's memoir, which commingles idyllic childhood dreams with gut-wrenching moments of harsh violence, keeps both dreams and violent moments contained to the penumbra of reality. This cannot have happened, we think – not here in the United States, and certainly not to average people. Antonetta toys with the readers' hope that this is a story about degenerates who have received a just punishment, not a tale of environmental and corporate injustice. She shares events that are hard for us to look at and she dares us to look away.

The connection of one's body to one's natural and national borders is a global phenomenon, but it is particularly tied to the bodies of US citizens. Arjun Appadurai writes that the lines between "American bodies, American cultural glitz, and the known power of the American state" are elastic (2006, 120). American studies scholars have long wondered about the borders of American identity, and with increased focus on global terrorism such questions gain urgency. Not only are US bodies linked to national borders, but they are also, as Appadurai points out, imaginatively subsumed into the fabric of US imperialism. Imagine how difficult life is for Antonetta, who feels that her body is perpetually violated and deemed useless. Antonetta states that her family emigrated and found an "anti-place," and that her mixture of Barbadian and Italian ancestry has robbed her of the chance to be either American or normal. She writes that her family found "an America that seemed less like a place than an anti-place, a not-Barbados, not-Europe, not Asia or Africa. . . . Not this, not that" (2001, 3).

The sense of an anti-place is inseparable from her sense that her family's dreams of America have been violated, as have the bodies and minds of their progeny. Antonetta's brother, Mark, also "became one" (that is, he was diagnosed as bipolar), and Antonetta's "being also a diagnosed manic-depressive" further disgraces her in her family's eyes. But it is her cousin, Helen, who disappoints the Barbadian side of the family most by leaving "the husband her mother selected for her in order to live with one of her patients, a man with thirty-odd personalities" (2001, 45). Nobody in the family is allowed to exhibit signs of mental or physical illness, much less act in ways that fly in the face of the dream of success that Antonetta's grandfather clung to after he arrived to America. Similarly, "Dan," the Amazon.com reviewer, needs to racialize and invalidate Antonetta's right to be ill because it threatens his sense of control over his personal risk and familial safety.

By denying the legitimacy of Antonetta's story, Dan treats it as a combination of mistruths and "junk science" (Dan 2004). His response exposes three points of intervention for *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives*. All three are based on my main premise: that we need to urgently consider the forms of individual harm and violence leveled against human bodies on an everyday basis in the United States and to consider how these forms have been shaped by US industrialization and conservation efforts since World War I. The first point

of intervention is that as imagined by the writers, artists, and directors whose work I read, corporeally anchored moments of contact and interaction with foreign bodies – not just with human bodies but also with toxins, pathogens, and parasites – disrupt accepted notions of US citizenship and challenge US neoliberal ideologies. The second point of intervention is that the renderings of palpable harm, I argue, imply that what hovers inside and below official ideology of US progress is a disturbing history of violent colonial and corporeal domination. Recent debates about representing the body at the cellular level as both biological and abiological matter lead to a third intervention in the material turn. I identify a common tactic of subversion: the reclamation of disfigured and sick bodies in these texts serves as a trope for the larger project of artists and activists, in which the markedly foreign body becomes a revisionist subtext in the narrative of the US body politic. Nonnormative bodies are synecdochic of the ecological destruction inherent in rampant – and markedly American – global capitalism.

The material turn

A number of texts in *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* center on bodies in space that labor to have a right to be recognized in that space and also for the surrounding space to be read as a part of their somatic makeup. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann poignantly state in their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, "bodies, both human and nonhuman, provide an eloquent example of the way matter can be read as a text" (2014, 6). Narratives of climate change, human rights, food justice, and environmental justice evermore converge at the level of the body and of "things." The recent revival of material studies, or "new materialism," reinforces the importance of an ongoing discourse on how our lives take shape in harmony with our surroundings, sometimes in tension with them, but always in relation to and with them. The emerging conversations on human agency and objects is creating a shift from thinking of the "less-than-human" world to the "more-than-human" world as a universe that demands further consideration. David Abram first coined the term "more-than-human" world (1996, 5–7) in his writings on ontology, nature, and the work of (among others) René Descartes, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His description of nonhuman agency, based in large part on French existentialist Merleau-Ponty's work, is arguably the first example of eco-phenomenology. Much has developed since 1996 in the "more-than-human" world as people's awareness of its relevance was necessarily heightened on the heels of natural disasters, environmental inequity, oceanic and air pollution, climate refugees, wealth disparity, health crises, and the near certainty of human extinction in the not-too-distant future.

Materiality as a discourse requires that we think about the enmeshed ways in which the somatic and nonsomatic and the biological and abiological all interact, and it has continued to gain traction since the 1990s. Feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz argues that Western thought has been underwritten by a

conception of somatophobia, a fear of the body and its materiality (1994, 5).[9] Grosz employs Merleau-Ponty's work ([1945] 1962) and posits that the experiences of the lived body are key to knowledge formation. Grosz's dialectic of corporeal feminism, similar to Judith Butler's (1993), concerns itself with performativity and the inscription of the body as meaning-making. Butler, more than Grosz, is interested in materiality insofar as it seems constricting to postmodern feminism. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman note in their introduction to *Material Feminisms*, Butler's two most relevant books to materiality studies (*Gender Trouble*, 1990; *Bodies That Matter*, 1993), are more of a "retreat from materiality" than an engagement with the body as matter (2008, 3). Alaimo and Hekman eruditely add that although postmodernists react negatively to material ecofeminism and new materialism as a misreading of the poststructuralist blueprints of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Deleuze and Foucault "do, in fact, accommodate the material in their work" (2008, 3). Butler, along with philosophical inquiries like those of Deleuze, Foucault, and Luce Irigaray, created the perfect foundation for neo-materialism, or new materialism, to become its own discourse. Strikingly, the mid-1990s is also when Manuel De Landa (1995) and Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2000) began to use different versions of "new materialism" as a term in order to think through posthumanism, subjectivity, and ontology.[10] These related but independent publications on how objects might be as theoretically rich as subject and subjectivity were the precipice of the material turn. The post-Cartesian interpretations and expression of bodies (human and nonhuman) mark a new moment of thinking of the body as networked matter, matter that is interrelated to objects and biological matter on the other end of the dermal divide. Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Andrew Pickering, and Karen Barad engage in similar theoretical projects of what Haraway might refer to as the "material-discursive" or Barad as the agential realism made up of "intra-actions." Barad proposes "intra-action" as a neologism that "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, 33). As opposed to "interaction," which signifies "separate individual agencies," Barad envisions an emergent discourse of possibility in the treatment of the "more-than-human" as crucial to our understanding of humanity and a kind of ethical corporeality.

The threshold between the body and its surroundings, especially the "polluted" external world, is a matter of much interest to the writers I discuss in this book. Their renderings of toxic and intoxicated bodies not only force the national body politic to grapple with the waste of its excesses, but they also articulate an emerging politics of disruption. Stacy Alaimo's definition of the "trans-corporeal" challenges accepted representations of human bodies and examines how the body interdigitates with its environment (2010, 2). Jane Bennett argues that matter holds vitality and can act as an influential force (2010, 94). She observes that the nonhuman runs "parallel" to the human because "the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (2010, xi). The models of the trans-corporeal (Alaimo) and the vitality of things (Bennett)

interact in productive ways and push ecofeminist thinking to directly address new materialism as the radical yet logical next step in exploring the agency of objects that we have hitherto ignored.[11] Alaimo revisits the genealogy of new materialism and notes that even though object-oriented ontology (OOO), "speculative realisms," and "new vitalisms" (2014, 193) are all forms of "thing theory" that in some ways advance the case for new materialism, it is actually at the crossroads of ecofeminism and materialist studies that material ecocriticism was formulated.

Most of the writers, artists, and directors in my book find visibility in the least visible and least legible bodies, which are normally occluded from society's vision. The politics of perception and reception gain importance for environmental scholars and activists. We are at a precarious time of information overload, and environmental destruction is an ominous subject that tests our limits of empathy. In a field that appears to be vision deficient and that finds other forms of apprehension and expression similarly challenging, it might be time to reconsider not only that which is invisible but also more largely undetectable. In their introduction to *New Materialisms*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost point out that the "reprisal of materialism must be truly radical" (2010, 3) and that in order for new materialism to resonate and gain traction, it must concurrently shift from subjectivity to "subject objectivity and material reality" (2010, 2). Coole and Frost's collection highlights the relevance of new materialism to discourses of agential corporeality, ones that do not depend solely on subjecthood but rather subject objectivity. The material turn beckons humans to reimagine their relationship to pollution as a self-induced part of our cellular existence, but this turn also offers a new lens through which material agency has potentially transformative powers.

Interrogating texts

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives does not ignore the colonial and imperial overtones of the roots of American studies, but it builds on a new area of research: it looks at US texts through an ecological lens and uses them to investigate the criticisms of elitism leveled against the ecocritical movement within American literary studies. For example, Steinbeck's elegiac *The Grapes of Wrath* ([1939] 1976) mourns a preindustrial time in US farming, while Cherríe Moraga's play *Heroes and Saints* (1994) tackles the ills of a postindustrial American landscape. These divergent narratives of industrial agribusiness are significant in their differences. Steinbeck writes of a period when World War I, the Homestead Act, and ecological damage combined to produce the Dust Bowl, which Rolland Dewing refers to as the "most extreme natural event in 350 years" (2006, 5). My book aims to show that such moments of natural disaster are inherently global and universal, and by definition also homologous. Many of the texts discussed in this book grapple with the fierce struggle between retaining state and somatic boundaries and the concurrent traversal of both by corporate-sponsored environmental hazards.

In tackling issues of globalization, corporate interests, and government complicity, *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* foregrounds the biopolitical violence that accompanies the corporate-driven division of global capital inside and outside of the United States. Historian T.J. Jackson Lears writes extensively about the antimodern push against the "efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare" (1981, 7). The natural and unnatural catastrophes discussed in this book indicate the way in which we continue to rationalize violence and harm as an inescapable part of life. In the twenty-first century in particular, the avoidance of risk has instead become its cause. Beck distinguishes between personal and public risk in meaningful ways. Identifying modernization as itself the vessel of risk, Beck proposes that in premodern times there were risks like those that Christopher Columbus took on, which "were personal risks" and "not global dangers like . . . nuclear fission" (1992, 21). Risks are a consequence of the ebbs and flows of modernization and "are politically reflexive" (1992, 21). Beck suggests that humans are secure in their knowledge of the mastery of nature, and thus they have become insecure and highly susceptible to risk. Increased production has hitherto been a sign of success, but the mining of nature has led to a false sense of security.[12]

As the theatrical nature of any nation's attempt to contain and control risk increases along with messages to the public that we can control and mitigate risk, so too do the sophistication of creative responses by activists and artists deepen. Andrew Szasz states that particularly in the United States people are privileging personal over shared risk and consuming products in a manner that ignores the inherently communal nature of events such as global warming and toxic dumping. Szasz's diagnosis that modern urbanites are participating in a race to purchase products and use methods of "inverted quarantine" (2007, 18) speaks to the fear and paranoia that enmeshed materiality brings when it is accompanied by environmental degradation.

The authors, directors, and artists I discuss in *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* attempt to communicate risk to those who consider themselves to be free of it. Fictional stories based on the nonfiction of environmental injustices possess the power to move people in ways that statistics and risk assessment reports cannot. Postcolonial critics – Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley (2011, 14), and Rob Nixon (2005, 2011, 3–39), to name a few – express a well-founded anxiety that US ecocriticism will present environmental concerns as originating in the United States and being dominated by US researchers. My aim in this book is to broaden the treatment of US-centric ecocriticism through readings of stories about bodies. The texts in my book depict global and planetary risks in ways that go far beyond national boundaries, demonstrating that ecocriticism and the environmental humanities already think and act globally.

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives is chock-full of bodies that do not obey and that behave in unexpected ways, and their creators (the writers and directors who give life to the bodies through stories about them) are asking their audiences to reconsider their understanding of the place of

the body in relation to its environments. Oppositional constructs like "body" and "environment" actually encourage self-reflexive forms of violence. Bodies are sorted as clean or dirty, healthy or ill, and the tipping point for such divisions appears to be a murky set of coordinates on a spectrum that rapidly shifts. In an essay titled "The Ecocritical Insurgency," Buell suggests that if the twentieth century was indeed defined by what W.E.B. Du Bois termed "the problem of the color line," (quoted in Buell 1999, 699) then surely, writes Buell, "the twenty-first century's most pressing problem will be the sustainability of earth's environment" (1999, 699). Priscilla Solis Ybarra traces and builds on the lineage from Du Bois to Buell, and ecocriticism at large, and "extends Buell's observation: the most pressing problem of the twenty-first century may be that racism, homophobia, and sexism continue alongside – and are exacerbated by – the shrinking sustainability of the natural environment" (2009, 176). Yes, as Ybarra suggests, human life on earth is becoming less sustainable. Yes, "racism, homophobia, and sexism," as well as speciesism, are strengthened by the human-created problem of unequal access to clean resources.

All of the above are supported by a xenophobic mentality that has been so deeply ingrained in our political systems that we hardly notice our own participation in it. Samuel Huntington's ideas about the clash of civilizations (1996) expose a teleology of the modern nation-state that easily enables predatory environmental practices because it reduces space for dissent. Huntington's work further elucidates why the "separation and separation and separation" that Antonetta notes is such a successful modus operandi in the United States and for other first-world powers. As Rita Raley writes, in unpacking what it means to protest the neoliberal binary of "friend and enemy," Huntington's theory teases out how the "imaginary of the new world order maintains territorial divisions as metaphysical" ones and thus "naturalizes" lines like the US–Mexico border (Raley 2009, 37).[13] With that naturalization and the acceptance of the present as inevitable comes a type of personal and political paralysis that is as debilitating as it is undetectable.

The undetectable nature of the naturalization of false inevitabilities gives way to fear: both the fear that leads to a retrenchment behind false borders and the fear of what would happen without those borders. *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* begins and ends by discussing the public's response to ideas of bodies as being inseparable from their environment. The public responds with great doubt and fear to ideas of individual and communal exposure to – and responsibility for – planetary ills and risks. This fear often manifests itself as a fear of other bodies, leading us to read the bodies of others as representing illness, aberrance, difference, impurity, and contagion. All of these things are seen as different from the qualities we assume that healthy and good bodies possess. Here, the majority fears that a minority will overtake it. As Appadurai lyrically states, "minorities do not come preformed" (2006, 42). In fact, in the spirit of Huntington, and with the hindsight of post-9/11 US politics, Appadurai goes on to say that minorities are not preformed but "produced in the specific circumstances of every nation and every nationalism" (2006, 42). I find it telling

that he considers a minoritarian practice or movement to be "the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states about their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few megastates, of unruly economic flows" (2006, 43). If, as Appadurai writes, minorities are "metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project" (2006, 43), then we can stretch our imaginations enough to see that what we apprehend as minority bodies operate in the same way.

National conservation and laboring bodies

The writers, artists, and directors discussed in this book engage in imaginative and subversive methodologies to turn our attention to a material corporeality. *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* focuses on post-1929 works that attempt to highlight the ills of a system gone awry. Taking first the Roaring Twenties and then the Great Depression as temporal markers, I argue that the New Deal policies that followed the Great Depression significantly shaped present-day understandings of our relationship to the outdoors. While the early twentieth century appeared to be closing the gap between US citizens and their natural resources, it in fact fostered a strained and profit-driven connection between people and the land. In the United States after World War I, "conservation" became synonymous with "cultivation," and therefore it also distanced humans from their surroundings. President Calvin Coolidge ushered the United States through the Roaring Twenties – a decade of excess, materialism, grand industry, and the development of farming and agribusiness in ways that the world had never imagined. In a stark departure from his predecessors, Coolidge overhauled the touchstone of America's symbolic agrarian backbone: the yeoman farmer. The most patriotic behavior was defined as the most prodigious and the least individual, and farming became a way to network capital and create a stronger national economy (Bentley 1998; Carruth 2013). This great boom was followed by a huge crash in both the stock markets and the quality of America's landscape. The New Deal era is remembered as a time that stood apart in US history, one when private citizens worked toward the public good. The inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) as president in 1933 was followed by the so-called one hundred days of dramatic legislation that included the National Recovery Act and the formation of the Public Works Administration. It marks a moment when US ideology connected conservation to natural resources and the development of these resources to improve the living standards of those closest to them.[14] Rural areas and their inhabitants – the people closest to the land – became a symbol of unity in a fractured time.

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives is unique both because of its approach to environmental justice media and because it takes up new efforts by academics to strengthen the ties between literature and the social sciences.[15] Many of the following chapters examine literary and visual manifestations of natural resources and the manner in which national and cultural boundaries are forcibly mapped onto them. Environmental literature labors to

present on the page both the scope and sense of nature – that is, to communicate sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and touch in their entirety. In *Ecology Without Nature*, ecocritic Timothy Morton writes extensively on what he terms "eco-mimesis," which is "above all a practice of juxtaposition" (2007, 143). Eco-mimesis conflates the representation of things/nature with the things themselves and is another way of querying and overturning traditional ecocriticism through "*dark ecology*" (2007, 143, emphasis in the original). Since Morton coined it, dark ecology has been used to deepen and expand forms of ecocriticism to move beyond juxtaposition and metaphor and into what Morton later termed "the mesh" (2010, 15), requiring a "radical openness to everything" (2010, 15) and demanding that critics pay particular attention to the interpenetration not only of things but also of philosophies of thought. In their coedited volume *Material Ecocriticism*, Iovino and Oppermann point to the necessary turn away from dead and flat metaphors and the necessary embracement of "anthropomorphizing matter" in order to close the gap of human perceptions between subject and object, person and thing: "We are well aware that 'stories' or 'narratives,' if applied to matter might be read as metaphor . . . anthropomorphism can even act against dualistic ontologies and be a 'dis-anthropocentric' stratagem" (2014, 8). This is a crucial pursuit for environmentalists worldwide as they attempt to communicate the erosion of the ozone or deforestation, as well as microscopic harm.

Environmental literature threatens to destabilize the foundation of US citizenship in complex and as-yet-unexplored ways; it makes visible not only deep-seated class-based strife but also the roots of US capitalist-driven progress that has quietly mutated into ecological violence. In the epilogue to *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon uses the case of the Maldives to demonstrate the problem of the public's perception of violence. Next to a 2009 photograph of then president Mohamed Nasheed holding an underwater cabinet meeting to draw attention to the dark future of his country because of global warming, Nixon poses two related questions: first, how do countries facing immediate repercussions from environmental pollution make up for the "drama deficit of climate change," and second, how do smaller "minnow" nations like the Maldives gain a powerful global voice to "render visible the slow violence" that threatens to destroy them (2011, 264)?

Scholars and activists have recently begun to grapple with the idea that unrepresentable, nonvisual – indeed, unphotographable – violence and harm will go unnoticed. In American studies, argues Nixon, the environmental justice movement has remained subordinate to the general greening of the humanities, which privileges a US-based agrarian sense of the environment (2011, 235). But I wonder whether working with US-based texts necessarily furthers the agenda of an elitist greening of the humanities. In her wildly popular *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein suggests a theory and history of "disaster capitalism," in which a "fundamentalist version of capitalism" grows at an exponential rate only when preceded by "shock" (2007, 6).

In the literature before us, the trope of tangible scarring of the earth accompanied by intangible shifts in psychosomatic intelligence is repeated again and again. The shock to a land, whether by natural or unnatural causes (such as Hurricane Katrina or the United States's invasion of Iraq, respectively), goes hand in hand with the swift manipulation of the land's crippled state for capitalistic economic gain. Klein argues that these surreal moments become an opportunity for the public mining of personal disasters and that the stories of these disasters are often told through a group of families sharing their grief or images of dead animals (take, for example, the image of a pelican covered by crude oil). The stories are rarely, if ever, communicated in terms of collective harm, and almost never in terms of state-driven violence. Elizabeth Kolbert avers that her well-known *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* was about "watching the world change" and was written "to convey, as vividly as possible, the realities of global warming" that she connects absolutely to human interference (2006, 2). Here, too, personal stories are used to give perspective to national disasters, but they are offered as unscientific memories to balance dry data and obscured dates. Yet again we are faced with a question of framing – in terms, as Nixon has pointed out – both of national boundaries and spatiotemporal ones.

Environmental justice and American studies

This book and works like it are nodes that form a network to demonstrate how US-centered texts have an important role to play in recalibrating the conversation on ecocriticism, environmental justice, and literature through a specifically materialist lens. Ecocriticism and environmental justice have become increasingly intertwined. Buell refers to this as the "second wave" of interest from the field (2005, 22–3). The first wave proffered romanticized idealizations of a pure or true natural beauty, while the second wave queries both the relationship between urbanization and pollution and the permeable membranes between humans and nature. The green movement was initially considered to attract only the elite and predominantly whites, but second-wave ecocriticism – with its increased attention to environmental justice, deep ecology, toxicity, and the different meanings of "the natural" – works against monolithic configurations of nature.[16]

While the green movement is still considered by many to be a hierarchical, top-down movement, the shift in American studies toward transnational concerns is changing this dynamic. Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic respond to such concerns in their 2009 coauthored introduction to a special issue of *MELUS*. They identify a "*third* wave of ecocriticism, which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries" (2009, 6; emphasis in the original).[17] Critics are increasingly taking note of people like Leo Marx and using the relationship between literature and the environment to narrativize and clarify much of what is going on in our contemporary moment.[18]

The complaint by many ecocritics that American studies has turned its back on ecocritical concerns since its inception should be dispelled by the earlier work of figures like poetry specialist F.O. Matthiessen and Marx. Marx identified a nineteenth-century allegiance to the pastoral in a time of rapid industrialization and modernization (Adamson and Ruffin 2013). Matthiessen's coinage of the term "American Renaissance" (1941) has proven controversial because of his focus on canonical (that is, white male) writers and his exclusion of Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe. Finally, American studies is not a narrowly nationalistic field. Rather, it is informed by and includes studies of the global South and its practitioners are well aware of the hazards of thinking of all things in terms of how America affects them. The environmental justice movement is a vibrant part of an ongoing dialogue in American studies between ecocriticism and more traditional literary studies. As someone who worked at the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* for a number of years, I am particularly sensitive to the dangers of co-optation of American studies, then transnational American studies, and finally global studies as different versions of American exceptionalism.

A quick glance at the website of the Natural Resources Defense Council (n.d.) demonstrates the trajectory of the environmental justice movement from the 1960s to the 1980s, and the way in which the movement was a reaction to the tacit complicity of the government in cases of toxic dumping, dangerous labor conditions, and the denial of a voice to the most disenfranchised. The environmental justice movement was spurred on by the zeitgeist of the civil rights movement and began as an antiracist call for equal human rights to a clean environment. While Buell has pointed out that environmental justice has become an "increasingly heterogeneous movement" (2005, 1), debates continue about whether it is centered on the United States or whether it is becoming more transnational. Whereas the romanticized notions of bucolic nature as inherently pure and just are now thought of as outdated, even earlier grassroots movements tended to ignore the common ground between man and nature while constructing a paradigm of man versus nature. Raymond Williams astutely argues that "the idea of nature is the idea of man" (2005, 56). Man constructs nature, Williams continues, because "it allows us to look, with unusual clarity, at some quite fundamental interpretations of all our experiences." In other words, all "that was not man" became nature (2005, 56). We can now recognize this as furthering the anthropocentric view that humans are the peacekeepers of nature. Writing on death in the Anthropocene, Roy Scranton explains why his individualistic story is actually a planetary one. He eloquently observes that "climate change is too big to be reduced to a single narrative" (2015, 24) – but, like many of us, he attempts to do just that. If we do away with the idea of a natural backdrop to the stories of humanity (à la Williams), thus dispensing with nature as something on which we can project our hopes and fears and the complexities of our lives, then we have to step back and consider the idea that nature is not monolithic, not a narrative that we can co-opt and control, and not something that humans can remake in

their likeness. Environmental justice critiques are exploratory as they cover complicated terrain and include stories that do not seem like ones anybody would want to hear. But there is an audience for the stories, and that audience is growing.

Transnational American studies

One aim of *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* is to tie the transnational vein in American studies to the ecocritical one both inside and outside the field. More than an international approach to American studies, the "transnational turn" was coined by Robert Gross (2000) and defined as the undoing of an American imperialist gaze. Gross likens a transnational perspective to "looking through the reverse lens of a telescope" (2000, 384). American studies scholars like Stefan Brandt, Winfried Fluck, and Ingrid Thaler generally agree that transnational American studies began to grow in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War (please see Fluck, Brandt, and Thaler 2007). International voices within the discipline cite transnational American studies as the answer to complaints that American studies reinforces the idea of American exceptionalism and is solipsistically concerned only with domestic affairs. American studies scholar Alfred Hornung contends that transnational American studies "is by definition political" (2005, 69). Although scholars have written eruditely about the reversal of the gaze back into the United States from outside its physical borders, the material turn is a fairly recent movement that gives us a wider vantage point – one that is not a reversal but an interrogation (see, for example, Rowe, Robinson, and Hornung, n.d.).

While American studies has been faithfully revising its aims and working to rebut the claim that it echoes US imperialism, its transnational turn has also worked to expose international ties to the manipulation of human and nonhuman resources in the interest of US corporate gain. Shelley Fisher Fishkin's call for a "transnational turn" (2005, 17) in American studies has been accepted, and scholars are thinking through what that might look like in the future. In Emory Elliott's American Studies Association (ASA) presidential address, he similarly lauded transnational American studies as a step toward "thoughtful citizenship" that increased diversity both inside and outside US borders (2007, 6). Six years later, Priscilla Wald's presidential address to the ASA not only partially answered Fishkin's call, but it also generated a new one: for scholars across the humanities to address an "increasing turn in American studies from the familiar grounding terms of the citizen and the nation to the human and networks" (2012, 186). Using the real-life biomedical history of Henrietta Lacks and Foucault's notions of biopower, Wald further interrogates the threshold of American studies by welding together the pieces of Lacks's story (institutionalized US racism, class inequity, and capitalist greed in the name of science) to suggest that the "distribution of power through which the state regulates life is a form of violence" (2012, 191). Citing Johan Galtung's work on "structural violence" (1969, 171) – the institutionalized violence that lives beneath the surface of things – Wald wonders

about endemic and veiled violence in the United States, and she employs Galtung's term to whittle away at the binary distinction between natural and unnatural disasters (2012, 190–3).

Indeed, the multivalent entanglements between what is deemed to be at fault for natural catastrophes and what buttresses everyday, systemic violence in the United States lie at the heart of Wald's exploration of structural abuses of power. In the introduction to their edited volume, Joni Adamson and Kimberly Ruffin delineate the lag time in American studies and beyond from the early nineteenth century until Hurricane Katrina (2013, 2–3). Adamson and Ruffin's volume is a testament to the work being done to continue the greening of the humanities while drawing attention to global discourses of race, class, and gender. Even critics who tried to avoid US-based work while researching global environmentalism have found it important to query the way that Americans have framed their relationship to nature. Ursula Heise questions "whether localism is indeed a necessary component of environmental ethics, as much as U.S.-American ecodiscourse leads one to believe," or if it is a product of US-specific traditions (2008b, 9). Using her experiences with German culture as a contrast to US culture, Heise finds that there is, indeed, something singular about the American conception of environmental concerns as radiating out from the local to the universal.

The turn to the material and the theoretical may have been identified as a new phenomenon in American studies or literary studies more generally, but scholars have long been working through the ties we build between the human and nonhuman. We find ourselves looking ahead to the remainder of the twenty-first century and beyond, wondering what the future holds and how we can shape it. If the twentieth century was, as Evelyn Fox Keller has called it, the "century of the gene" (2000), then how are we to conceive of the twenty-first? A number of theorists from various academic disciplines – including Sarah Franklin (2007), Ian Hacking (2006), Donna Haraway (1991), N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Keller (2000), Paul Rabinow (1996), and Nikolas Rose (2007) – have made important headway in studying the emerging dialogue on postgenomic subjects. New discoveries at the molecular level have opened up possibilities for a different understanding of the subject, one that moves away from genetic predetermination and is instead, as Rose suggests, "probabilistic not deterministic, open, not closed" (2007, 161). This discursive shift away from genetic determinism delineates postgenomics as an opportunity for the redefinition of life itself. Franklin, an anthropologist, cautions that in the postgenomic sciences of agriculture and tissue engineering, "the questions of what the biological *is* has become inextricable from what the biological *does* or can be made to do" (2007, 33; emphasis in the original).

This is precisely why critics such as Wald and Franklin are looking at case studies such as Henrietta Lacks and Dolly (the cloned sheep) – because they make clear the manner in which a focus on end results and futuristic, probabilistic invention ignores a politically and ecologically fraught present and past. What happens to a word like "bioethics" when the definition of the "biological"

includes abiological matter and ceases to equate "life" with the image of a newborn (human) baby? As Alaimo points out, the shift from "scientific" and "objective" writings like those of Rachel Carson (1951, 1962) to personal, "materialist memoirs" delineates "a sea change of sorts – a broad consciousness or, at least, an anxious, nearly conscious awareness – that late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century citizens may not imagine ourselves as separate from the risky environments we inhabit" (2010, 95). The very idea of citizenship becomes contested territory. Alaimo implies a type of global citizenship whose subjects are aware of their shared materiality and thus their shared vulnerability and culpability. The ideology of global citizenship obscures the very disparate ways in which notions of citizenship have developed, particularly in the United States. Given the country's colonial histories and geographic isolation, American citizenship is intensely complicated. Post-1918 American environmental politics, American liberalism, and New Deal conservation policies have collectively shaped the contours of our sense of entitlement and belonging to a US landscape.

Material fictions

Germane to this book is the lively discourse in the environmental humanities on the nature of materiality and somatic-centered narratives, and the ongoing debates about how to communicate truths to readers and viewers – particularly truths that traverse national boundaries. Heise concludes *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* by addressing the drama deficit of terms like "global warming" and she states that "imagining how such planetary transformation might affect particular places and individuals, therefore, amounts to a paradigmatic exercise in 'secondhand nonexperience'" (2008b, 206). She indicates that if people can be mobilized through "secondhand nonexperience" they might be able to form transnational communities through an idea of shared – if only imagined – risk. Heise underscores the fact that environmental movements seek anchors and roots in places: "certain features recur across a wide variety of environmentalist perspectives that emphasize a sense of place as a basic prerequisite for environmental awareness and activism" (2008b, 33). *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* identifies one such anchor as an attachment to bodies and corporeal borders rather than land-based locations. Thus, this book is a response to the charges of elitism that are made against any US-based ecocritical ventures. While we might argue that US bodies are marked by first-world privilege and thus reinforce ideas of elitism within the greening of the humanities, the texts I discuss in this book argue for a collective, transnational questioning of structures of power and violations of human rights.

Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives traces the sense of first-hand experience that is possible through reading materially inflected fiction and argues for the centrality of the body in US texts, films, and other artworks of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Through their disruption of traditional knowledge systems, these works reveal the porous and uncontainable

nature of the environment and lend agency to both human and nonhuman actors. Significantly, they all imaginatively represent the immaterial as material on the page and on the screen. The writers, directors, and activists I discuss in the book demand that we take seemingly disparate fictions about food production, labor, and ecology and add them to the larger commentary on contemporary global flows of capital and US politics of belonging. From the works of John Steinbeck to those of Karen Tei Yamashita (1997), fictional renditions of American culture collectively offer a powerful commentary on US environmental practices and biopolitical citizenship. While literature is often seen as reactionary – that is, responding to shifting political landscapes – in this book I highlight the manner in which it can shape public opinion about humans' place in the world and our complicated relationship to it.

Chapter 2, "Laboring Bodies," takes as its starting point John Steinbeck's Depression-era writing. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* ([1939] 1976) is a well-known work of US literature about the labor movement and a touchstone of literary history, but its deep ecological implications are less often considered. If we examine this novel together with Steinbeck's coauthored scientific travel narrative *Sea of Cortez* ([1941] 2009) and its later reworking, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* ([1951] 1995), the shift in focus from the land to the sea and in genre from fiction to nonfiction demonstrate Steinbeck's prescient – and ethically fraught – environmentalism. I argue that *Sea of Cortez* and *The Grapes of Wrath* work together in significant and exciting ways to reveal both Steinbeck's nostalgia for preindustrial agriculture and his anticipation of Cold War anxieties that are linked to notions of national scientific progress in oceanic spaces. Steinbeck's sea writing alternates between complicity with, to criticism of, human meddling in the environment, and perhaps because of this it has been unfairly ignored in ecocritical discourse. Taken together, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Sea of Cortez* articulate a sharp critique of the forced separation between humanistic and scientific study, and between the ways readers apprehend fiction and nonfiction.

Chapter 3, "Embodied Consumption," presents an ecocritical, postcolonial reading of Bich Minh Nguyen's memoir, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007). Through examinations of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series (1932–43), which was a leitmotif of Nguyen's childhood, I show that the intoxicating culinary and literary discourse Nguyen longs to be part of as a child becomes a toxic landscape of alienation. Her simplistic reading of homesteading obscures its real purpose: to settle uncivilized territories and claim land that was seen by whites as US territory that had not yet been developed as such. In many ways, Nguyen's romanticized version of American life was necessitated by the fact that to fit in she needed seamless stories of growth and success, even if those stories and their complexities eventually required her to exit their plots. Nguyen's experiences of growing up as a Vietnamese refugee and immigrant in the 1980s in Grand Rapids, Michigan, center on her longing for assimilation. Her interactions with nature and the surrounding environment are almost exclusively through fiction. She admires the connection between

local, small-scale food production and consumption in the texts she reads, but this connection does not exist in her real surroundings. The intoxicating falseness of American junk food and the contrived narratives of US expansionism and imperialism lead Nguyen down an unsettling path of processed identity. In pursuit of the ghostly tracks of displaced indigenous peoples that are obscured by tales of fictional pioneer families, she tries to eat her way into existence and map herself onto the heartland of America. Through her food choices she dissociates herself from both nature and her cultural roots. Although at first Nguyen imagines that if she eats like the pioneer families she reads about she will be Americanized from the inside out, she becomes uncomfortable with the colonial and ecological implications of her eating practices. In this chapter, I wed ecocritical discourse to debates about indigeneity and ethnicity in the United States.

Chapter 4, "Toxic and Illegible Bodies," turns to the voice of technologically poisoned female bodies across genres (drama, novels, and documentary films) and asks how bodies speak. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* immortalized California's San Joaquin Valley, but one might argue that it is returned to a state of mortality by Moraga's 1992 play, *Heroes and Saints* (1994). This is a postmodern play based on the cancer cluster in 1978–88 in McFarland, California. In following the thread of the human body and its interaction with nature from Steinbeck to Moraga, and from the earlier part of the twentieth century to its end, we see that the body as matter takes on new significance in Moraga's play and revises the relationship between humans and nature so that discourse about workers' rights becomes a cry for environmental justice and women's rights. In examining first-person accounts of toxic poisoning, archival footage of protests, and US fiction, this chapter navigates the uneven terrain of race and environmental justice in the San Joaquin Valley. I pair Moraga's work with Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) and employ them as a frame through which to look at the nature of corporeal representation in disease-based narratives. Ozeki's popular fiction is based on the real-life poisoning of humans by the hormone diethylstilbestrol (DES). DES is a plant-based synthetic estrogen that was widely used in women and livestock to produce supposedly healthy pregnancies and offspring. Whereas in Ozeki's work environmental degradation becomes a background to human suffering caused by the ingestion of medications and meat, in Moraga the sinister and scientifically unknowable nature of chemical poisoning is underlined.

Chapter 5, "Bodies on the Border," focuses on stories of ill and chemically charged bodies that indicate not only the permeable nature of the human form but also the inverse relationship between visibility and harm that has been increasingly expressed since the mid-twentieth century. By putting Alex Rivera's science fiction film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) in dialogue with Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), I examine literary and visual manifestations of natural resources and the manner in which national and cultural boundaries are violently mapped onto them. These works address such realities as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Department of Homeland

Security's continuing efforts to build a wall between the United States and Mexico. In both *Tropic of Orange* and *Sleep Dealer* environmental degradation and corporate greed manifest themselves most clearly along the border. Both works attempt to make audiences ask themselves why violence against certain bodies is accepted and who dictates its distribution. Representations of nature in film and literature within the framework of post-9/11 US politics of national security and globalization reveal that the fluid mediums of water and air defy the logic of uniform, normalized borders and corporatization. But there are real and material dangers to the manifestation of bodies as flesh: the very bodies that take a stand against US imperialism and ecological degradation are symbolically subjected to violent and painful confrontations. The creators of these texts and films do not avoid issues of race, gender, and speciesism. The multiple disturbing ruptures, when bodies are violated or violate our conception of reality, lead us to question our complacency about what has been peddled by powerful heads of industry to the public as inevitable consequences of the growth of global capital. The directors, writers, and activists in my book employ imaginative and subversive methodologies to focus our attention on material corporeality. My coda, "Environmental Interplay" examines new manners of environmental protest and engagement that is no longer purely reactive but rather proactive, ambivalent, and playful.

Notes

1 The ideas in this paragraph will be fleshed out throughout this chapter. They owe much to the work of Joni Adamson (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 2002; Adamson and Ruffin 2013), Stacy Alaimo (2010), Lawrence Buell (1998, 2005), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (2011), Mary Douglas (1966, 1986), Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), Donna Haraway (1991), Ursula Heise (2008b), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Rob Nixon (2005 and 2011), Andrew Szasz (2007), and Julie Sze (2002, 2007). These thinkers have helped shape my work, and their research continues to move forward in surprising and creative ways.

2 For two cutting-edge meditations on climate change, activism, and the possibilities inherent in the use of shame and hope, see Jacquet (2015) and Shewry (2015). I do not think it is a coincidence that both books have to do with oceanic spaces and liquidity, which lend themselves to imagining a more malleable future of change. I was delighted to see a draft version of Una Chaudhuri's paper on oceanic performance (2015). Chaudhuri deftly handled the complexities of converting sea spaces into places of protest that reject anthropocentric ownership of both the ocean and its creatures.

3 As of January 6, 2016, Antonetta's *Body Toxic* had fifteen customer reviews on Amazon.com, including the one by "Dan." Another reviewer was equally incensed by what he or she refers to as the "flagrant errors in her [Antonetta's] geography and chronology" and goes on to post that Antonetta writes about things that "could not have occurred." The review is titled "Antonetta Is Talent-Less and This Book Is Full of Lies" (Customer 2001).

4 I thank Robert Nixon for suggesting that I read *The Meadowlands.*

5 One discussion of Antonetta's interactions with her grandfather is particularly confusing. In the chapter titled "The Jersey Devil," she writes that she doubts she can remember things exactly as they were, but she describes her naked grandfather trying to get her into bed with him. According to Antonetta, he "threw the covers back. Then I saw nude skin and my head blurred. Time became space and swam past me physically, through and

around" (2001, 170). The traumatic implications of this passage are many and I do not give it the full attention it calls for in my reading.

6 Bruno Latour suggests that people have always expanded the borders of the sciences to extend into the humanities, and the borders of intuition to extend into the place of factual evidence (1993). Latour proposes that these expansions are a kind of miscalculation. See also Latour's *Politics of Nature* (2004), where he more fully develops a discourse on nature as an assemblage of agency and continues to query the human–nature divide.

7 For an erudite discussion of the commons and its connection to the field of American studies, see Adamson and Ruffin (2013, especially pages 3–5).

8 In Modern Greek, for example, a language I grew up speaking, it is rare to use the words "private" and "personal" to refer to not sharing something (either material or immaterial).

9 Elizabeth Grosz's introductory chapter briefly outlines a definition of somatophobia (1994, 5). She argues that Western philosophy, working from a Cartesian mind/body duality, has regarded the body as a type of threat to reason.

10 See for example, Manuel De Landa's "The Geology of Morals: A Neomaterialist Interpretation" (1995) and *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997); see also Rosi Braidotti: *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994) and her essay, "Teratologies" (2000); lastly, Braidotti's interview in *New Materialism* (2012) and the work in general in that collection give a good overview of new materialism and the freshest developments.

11 For more on new forms of material agency and discourse on vital matter, see Dana Phillips and Heather Sullivan's coauthored introduction to *ISLE* (2012). It speaks further to the central importance of new materialism in studies of waste, agriculture, and aquaculture; their special issue is one of a growing number of publications that draw attention to environmental concerns, ecocriticism, and new materialism. See also Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin's *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (2012), a collection of interviews and writings that feature groundbreaking research on inanimate versus animate agency. Finally, Andrew Pickering's book (1995) on the production of scientific knowledge and "the mangle" of intersections emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinarity and how ontology is a coauthored undertaking.

12 Beck argues that "in contrast to all earlier epochs (including industrial society), the risk society is characterized essentially by a *lack* . . . the sources of danger are no longer ignorance but *knowledge*; not a deficient but a perfected mastery over nature" (1992, 183; emphasis in the original).

13 I must thank Giles Gunn for encouraging me to audit a course on globalization that thoroughly discussed Huntington's ideas. Similarly, it was in teaching a section of Rita Raley's course on "Narratives of War" that I was walked through Carl Schmitt's work and the genealogy of which he is a part, and for that I will be forever in her debt.

14 For a thorough analysis of how FDR's legislative actions in his first one hundred days as president defined this period as a critical one in the terms of future presidents, see Badger (2008).

15 Rob Nixon makes a similar argument – that the "less developed . . . bridgework between environmental literary studies and the social sciences" needs further development. See also Alaimo (2010), Buell (1998, 2005), Dimock (2006), Heise (2008b), and Houser (2014).

16 In Buell's categorizing of first- and second-wave ecocriticism, he allows for existence of more waves in the future. Cheryll Glotfelty writes: "Ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion" (1996, xxv). There is ample evidence that ecocriticism has indeed become a more diverse movement.

17 Parts of this paragraph and the previous one are taken from Athanassakis (2009).

18 Marx's classic *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) has remained in print and is of great importance to American studies scholars and ecocritics alike.

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