

Ashley Dawson

Delta City Blues

Representing Resiliency in an Urban Estuary

Abstract

How the climate crisis gets represented, who gets to speak, and how their speech is rendered—these are all key questions in the conflictual process that is urban adaptation to the climate crisis. This essay offers an analysis of the conflict over the East Side Coastal Resiliency project. The ESCR, and the broader Rebuild by Design process out of which it grew, are particularly significant examples of efforts to adapt a major global city like New York to the climate emergency. Will efforts to adapt or abandon coastal cities to the climate crisis entrench or ameliorate the soaring social stratification that characterizes most of the planet’s megacities? This essay turns to the controversial redevelopment process surrounding the East Side Coastal Resiliency project to explore these and related questions.

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In November 2019, I and some comrades from the Climate Action Lab, a militant research group founded the previous year, organized an event at the People’s Forum in New York City. Our goal was to draw public attention to the city’s changing plans for the East River Park, a 57-acre public park located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Residents of the area had been devastated seven years earlier, when Hurricane Sandy sent a storm surge rushing into the Upper New York Bay. The city’s naturally protected harbor, a site of confluence of waterways such as the Hudson and the East Rivers and an estuary once teeming with life, played a key role in the city’s rise to prominence as a global hub of trade and finance during the 18th and 19th centuries. When Hurricane Sandy struck, however, the bay concentrated the wall of water that was driven off the ocean and through the Verrazzano Narrows by the hurricane. Lower Manhattan was inundated, producing now-iconic images of flooded subway stations, upended taxis, and a city partially swathed in darkness after the flood knocked out a power station in the East Village.

Hurricane Sandy was one of the most potent events to notify the general public that the climate crisis was unfolding here and now, rather than in some distant future. Sandy hit a site of

unparalleled symbolic significance, laying low the capital of capital, the financial center of US empire, which had spent the previous decade girding for terrorist attacks that never materialized. In the years after Hurricane Sandy, New York City became an important laboratory for efforts to adapt to the rising tides and savage storms provoked by global warming. The Lower East Side played an outsized role in these resiliency-building efforts: the neighborhood hosts many important environmental and social justice organizations, and residents of the Lower East Side advocated zealously for community-empowering flood protection infrastructures like water-absorbing parks. The outcome of the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Rebuild by Design process seemed to affirm the idea that building resiliency to the climate crisis should also involve rectifying historic inequities in the urban fabric that disproportionately affect New York's working-class communities of color. But now the city was scrapping the carefully negotiated plan and moving ahead with a \$1.45 billion East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) project involving the closure and total demolition of the East River Park. At our People's Forum meeting, community members broke into tears of frustration, saying that they felt totally betrayed by the city and the real estate barons backing the new plan.

This essay offers an analysis of the conflict over the East Side Coastal Resiliency project. The ESCR, and the broader Rebuild by Design process out of which it grew, are particularly significant examples of efforts to adapt a major global city like New York to the climate emergency. New York is important not just because of its financial and cultural heft, but also because it offers an instance of broader efforts to adapt coastal cities to the climate crisis. New York, that is, is not alone in its striking vulnerability to flooding and other climate-related crises. Indeed, a remarkable number of the world's great cities are located on or near bodies of water. Thirteen of the world's twenty largest cities are port cities, for instance (Dawson 2016, 5). There is a long history of global circuits of maritime trade and imperial power that has led to the now-perilous geographical contradiction that nearly two-thirds of humanity lives close to the coast.

How will nations deal with this increasingly dire situation? Will efforts to adapt or abandon coastal cities to the climate crisis entrench or ameliorate the soaring social stratification that characterizes most of the planet's megacities? Can architecture, design, and planning more broadly be harnessed for the common urban good, or will they serve—as all too often heretofore—as the gaudy baubles of the world's real estate elites and plutocratic financiers? This essay turns to the controversial redevelopment process surrounding the East Side Coastal Resiliency project to explore these and related questions.

The ways in which the climate crisis gets represented, who gets to speak, and how their speech is rendered—these are all key questions in the conflictual process that is urban adaptation to the climate crisis. These issues of representation all play out in relation to resiliency-building efforts in the city, but before delving into these questions the essay explores the genre of creative writing that has come to be known as climate fiction or Cli-Fi. I am particularly interested in Amitav Ghosh’s arguments in *The Great Derangement* (2016) about the generic handicaps of fiction when it comes to representing the climate crisis, or what Ghosh calls “the unthinkable” (2016). Ghosh’s arguments may not be the most insightful—in many respects, Mark Bould’s *The Anthropocene Unconscious* (2021) is a far more convincing account of contemporary culture—but Ghosh’s book is one of the most broadly influential takes on climate and culture today. As I explain, Ghosh’s arguments derive in part from his own generic biases, but also from the geographical location of much climate fiction in the parched landscapes of the settler colonial imaginary.

Thinking climate crisis in the world’s port cities and estuarial ecosystems—as Ghosh actually strives to do in his recent fiction—involves representing a wholly different set of circumstances and political potentialities from those that have tended to dominate the climate imaginary. Even when not adopting an explicit settler colonial geographical imaginary, the vast majority of contemporary Cli-Fi narratives are set in the Global North and maintain the nation-state as a geographical frame for narrative action and consciousness. This all too often forecloses consideration of how the climate crisis is playing out in the nations of the Global South, a particularly damaging elision given the fact that formerly colonized nations are the frontlines for the climate emergency, experiencing its impacts first and hardest despite their relatively meagre carbon emissions.

The enduring nation-centric framework of Cli-Fi obscures the significant similarities that link coastal cities the world over. Such cities are connected not just by histories of imperial trade and global shipping but also by the fertile estuarial ecosystems and polyglot cultures that have arisen in such places. To account for climate crisis in an urban estuary or delta city is to think through the ecologically fecund and socially fractious circumstances of places like Kolkata, Venice, and, yes, New York City. Representing such places adequately requires what I call Climate Justice Fiction, forms of representation dedicated to active decolonization of the environmental and social imaginary, and with it to innovations in literary genre. To help explain what I mean by the term Climate Justice Fiction, I discuss texts that embody its antithesis, as well as Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a novel which offers an alternative imaginary to those animating mainstream efforts to build resiliency in the city.

1. The location of climate fiction

In his collection of nonfiction essays *The Great Derangement*, the novelist Amitav Ghosh speculates on the paucity of novelistic treatments of the climate crisis. For Ghosh, to represent climate change as a novelist is to court almost certain eviction from the precincts of serious fiction:

It could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel. (Ghosh 2016, 7)

In response to Ghosh's argument, one might well ask what's so wrong about science fiction. His account of being "relegated" to the "genre" of science fiction smacks of a certain literary snobbery, as if Ghosh has bought into the hierarchy of literary value that awards coveted prizes like the Nobel to "serious" fiction and deems other forms of writing such as crime fiction and science fiction to be minor genres of lesser worth. But if we assume that Ghosh is writing against the literary establishment rather than allowing its hierarchies of value to seep into his account, if we assume that there's a certain sarcasm in his words about "serious literary journals," we are still left with a perplexity: is it really true that climate change is "unthinkable," that dominant cultural forms make it impossible to represent, let alone reckon with, the unfolding atrocities of the climate emergency?

What if we took the genres of representation that the literary establishment disparages seriously, exploring the ways in which the climate crisis is actually represented rather than trying to explain why it gets short shrift from elite writers? After all, writers of what the establishment might call science fiction have long been grappling with climate crisis; think, for example, of the series of post-apocalyptic novels with which the British writer J.G. Ballard initiated the so-called New Wave of science fiction, including *The Drowned World* (1962), a saga of rising seas and social collapse. Ursula K. Le Guin's novella *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), another early example of the genre that is now known as Cli-Fi, though set on another world, is a transparent allegory for European colonial violence against Indigenous people and the nonhuman world. In most cases, in other words, representations of climate crisis are not located on distant planets, and do not employ imaginary technologies of the distant future. They are not focused on "talking squids in outer space," the derogatory account Margaret Atwood gave of science fiction, a genre with which she had long been associated (Mancuso 2016).

Instead, they explore what might be called not-too-distant futures. We don't need to go particularly deep into genre fiction, in other words, to see that what's really going on is a form of temporal displacement: representations of the climate crisis have tended to represent a proximate future in order to raise an alarm. They function as a kind of proleptic exploration of a world laid ruin by unabated fossil capitalism. As such, climate fiction serves as what E. Ann Kaplan calls a form of pre-trauma, a working through of fears about the dystopian future that global elites' tenacious refusal to curtail carbon emissions is helping bring into being in the present (2015).

Yet if there is a consistent form of spatial displacement associated with the imaginary of climate change, it is not into outer space but rather from the urban settings where the majority of human beings now live to rural landscapes whose most prominent feature is that they are strikingly devoid of people. Take the *Mad Max* series of films, which helped define the popular imaginary of an environmental hellscape. Filmed in the arid Australian outback and heavily influenced by the energy crisis of the 1970s, each installment of the *Mad Max* series features a loner protagonist who battles savage gangs of hooligans ruled over by a monstrous and brutally authoritarian overlord. *Mad Max* retreads the plots and desert settings of Spaghetti Western films like *A Fistful of Dollars*, with a taciturn and apparently amoral protagonist eventually siding with small groups of innocent survivors of the apocalypse who are threatened by the brutal ruler of the wasteland and his gangs of demented, barely human minions.

Why the desert setting, so important not just in *Mad Max* but in myriad other post-apocalyptic wasteland texts, from Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) to the film *The Book of Eli* (2010)? The assumption in such texts is that environmental crisis has led to civilizational and demographic collapse, leaving small groups of survivors to eke out a living in the wilderness. Wittingly or unwittingly, such texts replay a settler colonial imaginary in which the barren landscape offers a form of *terra nullius*, a landscape devoid of people where settlers can build up putatively new, utopian forms of society. Although this is, of course, a mischaracterization of desert ecologies, the physically impoverished character of the landscape in settler colonial texts acts as a metaphor for its social emptiness, making it an ideal destination for settlers seeking to reboot social relations. International law upheld these ideas through formal legal doctrines expropriating Indigenous people by rendering their land *terra nullius*, thereby making it easy to appropriate by European settlers. The dispossession of Indigenous peoples and their lands across the globe is not a relic of ancient history, but, as Jessica Namakkal emphasizes, continued in the utopian back-the-land communes that became popular in the 1960s (2021), and continues today at the behest of extractive capitalism. Post-apocalyptic Cli-Fi reenacts these

settler colonial tropes, using the figure of a monstrous and often faceless dictator as a foil to cement emotional bonding with a white, male anti-hero like *Mad Max*.

Things get more complicated when the protagonist of the Cli-Fi narrative is not male and white. Superficially, Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels share much with the post-apocalyptic narratives I have been discussing. *Parable of the Sower* (1993) begins, for instance, when a small community of people living on the outskirts of Los Angeles is threatened and then destroyed by violence-addicted, drug-addled gangs. Faced with annihilation at the hands of these gangs, the community of survivors must take to the road, fleeing through relatively unpopulated parts of California to find a suitably isolated location where they can reestablish their community. As in *Mad Max*, the survivors are led by an initially unwilling but ultimately galvanizing leader. What makes *Parable of the Sower* so different from dominant post-apocalyptic narratives is that the protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, is a young Black woman.

The gangs that menace Olamina and her comrades are not just exemplars of some generalized atavistic human desire for power, as seems to be the case in the *Mad Max* series, but rather are explicitly represented by Butler as embodiments of the white supremacist militias that have become an increasingly prominent aspect of US politics since the 1970s (Belew 2019). Other differences abound: Olamina cross-dresses as a man to survive during her travels northward; she travels with a group of mixed-race survivors, people whose identities provoke not just stigma but also violent attacks. In addition, Olamina is depicted as struggling with "hyper-empathy," a condition that leads her to vicariously experience the pleasure and pain of those around her. This empathetic condition, which may initially strike readers as an odd and somewhat arbitrary plot device, gains meaning when one contrasts Lauren Olamina with the rugged individualism that characterizes Cli-Fi protagonists such as Mel Gibson's *Mad Max*. In contrast with such isolated characters, Butler's protagonist is intimately and even painfully connected to the sensations experienced by others. When Olamina stabs a man who is trying to rape and kill her, she is wracked with pain and nausea as she feels his tissues torn apart. Hyper-empathy is thus the crucial ingredient that prevents Olamina's necessarily violent acts of self-defense from tipping over into the kind of spectacular aggression that typifies narratives like *Mad Max*. Olamina embodies a kind of affective commons. Her sensitivity to others is the diametrical opposite of the processes of Othering that typify dominant post-apocalyptic narratives. The affective commons experienced by Olamina should be seen as the necessary foundation for the community of survivors that she helps found near the end of the story. It is a community based on empathy and solidarity, an embodied alternative to settler colonial sociality founded on genocidal violence and dispossession.

2. Resiliency is a branding strategy

Apocalypse is not just happening in deserted futures. It's happening now, in the cities where the bulk of humanity live. In 2012, for example, Hurricane Sandy decimated the New York region: 117 people are reported to have died in New York City alone, mainly by drowning in flooded homes; 7-8 million people in the metropolitan region lost power; and 20,000 people had to be moved to shelters (Centers 2012). The storm caused tens of billions of dollars in damage in the region. All the cement bollards and other militarized measures put in place after 9/11 did absolutely nothing to shield the city from this natural disaster. After the debris had been cleared—and in some places it never actually was cleared—city authorities realized that something needed to be done to insulate New York City from the rising tides unleashed by climate change.

Enter the Rebuild by Design competition, which leveraged funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to establish a collaborative process of research and design. The competition culminated in a series of jury-based awards for design projects to make hard-hit portions of New York City better able to withstand future natural disasters. As Rockefeller Foundation president Judith Rodin argued, the Rebuild by Design competition turned NYC into a laboratory for building urban resiliency in the face of climate change (2014). The competition received a great deal of publicity for its efforts in New York, and is now working in multiple cities across the US.

Rebuild by Design consciously sought to avoid the kind of steamrolling of community opinion that has long typified real estate development in New York City (Stein 2019). Rather than setting up one or two community hearings at a time of the day when no one could attend, as is usually the practice in making decisions about rezoning and redeveloping parts of the city, Rebuild by Design sent teams of architects, ecologists, anthropologists, and sociologists fanning out across the city over an extended period. As the organization's website trumpets the inclusivity of this process, "The strongest solutions come from those who know their communities best: the residents." I attended some of these research meetings and was impressed by the Rebuild by Design teams' attentiveness to the fears and desires of disaster-affected communities across the city. What, research team members asked, are your main concerns for the future? How would you like us to rebuild your community? What does resiliency mean to you? This process looked like real participatory design, in which external experts listened to community residents and adjusted their proposed solutions to respond to the

embedded knowledge and carefully articulated needs of community members. As the Urban Institute wrote of the process:

Rebuild by Design broke the mold of traditional design competitions with its approach to teamwork and encouragement of creativity... Including the public in the early stages of design development and continually incorporating their feedback was vital to creating proposals that represented the needs of large groups of stakeholders and gathered support from a number of different sectors of society. (Bisker 2015, 239)

It's useful to contrast this process with the imaginary of post-apocalyptic climate fiction, where, as we have seen, a single protagonist is represented as emerging from the anarchic world created by disaster to lead a small group of followers to salvation. This top-down approach to social transformation finds literal embodiment in the figure of Robert Moses, the urban planner who almost single-handedly transformed New York during the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s. The Rebuild by Design competition was intended to be the antithesis of such a dictatorial process.

Nowhere was community consultation and inclusion more intensive than in the city's East Village and Lower East Side neighborhoods. As I learned from interviews with community activists such as Goldi Guerra (2015), existing community organizations like the Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) served as hubs for organizing during and after Hurricane Sandy. During Hurricane Sandy, with the city's bureaucracy in shambles and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) nowhere to be found, organizations like GOLES played a crucial role as communities sought to establish mutual aid efforts. These mutual aid efforts should be seen as a form of disaster communism, a process of activating and intensifying social bonds in the almost total absence of state power to cope with dangerous circumstances (Dawson 2016). In the weeks and months after the disaster, a coalition of 26 community groups formed LESReady!, an umbrella organization founded to coordinate long-term recovery efforts in the neighborhoods on the city's Lower East Side. LESReady! worked closely with members of the flamboyantly named BIG architectural firm, which developed a proposal for an earthwork berm on the East River as part of the Rebuild by Design competition. The project was called the Big U, and was slated to extend all the way around lower Manhattan.

Bjark Ingels, principal of BIG, sees himself as an inheritor of the mantle of Jane Jacobs, who famously fought against Robert Moses's community-pulverizing plan to build a highway through lower Manhattan. Jacobs's famous appreciation of the ballet of the city's sidewalks, its emergent qualities of self-organizing community association has been a key intellectual influence on designers and architects in the decades since the publication of *The Death and Life*

of *Great American Cities* (1961), even as the city has grown ever-more homogeneous and subject to the gargantuan appetites of real estate capital. For Ingels, the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Rebuild by Design competition promised to help the city build back better.

Ingels described his proposal for a “Dry Line” around Lower Manhattan to complement the now-famous High Line in the city’s former Meatpacking District as being “attentive to the fine-grain scale of the [city’s] neighborhoods. It shouldn’t be about the city turning its back on the water, but embracing it and encouraging access” (Wainwright 2015). The images of BIG’s Big U around lower Manhattan that emerged from the collaborative design process depicted a raised park with much-desired urban amenities, including spaces for recreation, a promenade for walking and socializing, and attractive landscaping to give residents access to green space. Residents I interviewed such as Goldi Guerra attested to the important role community organizations had played in insisting that what is essentially a defensive earthwork also serve a community which had for decades been ignored by the city bureaucracy. After 9/11, for example, relief money that poured into downtown Manhattan went almost exclusively to the wealth neighborhoods around Wall Street, totally bypassing working class communities of color in Chinatown and the Lower East Side (Gotham and Greenberg 2014).

The Big U called for the placement of berms and flood walls along the FDR Drive, a Moses-era 4-lane highway that snakes along the East River waterfront, dividing the East River Park from a wall of apartment buildings (many of which are “projects” or working-class social housing) and the rest of Manhattan. Six years passed after Hurricane Sandy and no ground was broken on the Big U, despite a large grant for the project from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. In the autumn of 2019, however, the New York City Council scrapped the Big U and instead approved an alternate plan, dubbed the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) project. ESCR is projected to cost \$1.45 billion, roughly twice what the Big U was supposed to cost.

The most controversial feature of the new project is the city’s plan for the East River Park: in order to build a natural floodwall, the city will raise the park eight feet. To do this, the city will have to shut the park for at least three years, a period during which it will totally demolish the park by dumping thousands of tons of landfill on the existing park. The goal is to create a 16-foot-high floodwall capable of withstanding future storm surges (the surge created by Hurricane Sandy was 14 feet high when it flooded the Lower East Side).

These plans to demolish the park sparked strong protest from community members. The group East River Park Action (ERPA), for example, argued that the city’s plan to decommission 45 acres of public green space was a betrayal of the collaborative planning process overseen by

Rebuild by Design. Particularly odious to these community activists was the city's plan to build resiliency by chopping down roughly 1,000 mature trees in the East River Park. T-shirts worn by ERPA members at public protests against the city's planned demolition include a green tree with the words "Save the East River Park" inside the foliage, and the moto "Demand True Resiliency" in the earth out of which the tree grows. ERPA slapped the city with a lawsuit, alleging that it lowered quotas for ethnic diversity in its hiring practices to find a construction firm willing to carry out the demolition of the East River Park. As I write these lines, activists are engaged in direct action protests to obstruct the park's demolition (Moses 2021).

It should not be surprising that the East River Park and the East Side Coastal Resiliency project more broadly has become a flashpoint for social discontent. As the geographer Neil Smith wrote in his book *The New Urban Frontier* (1996), public spaces like the East River Park and, before it, Tompkins Square Park, crystallize the economic forces tearing apart contemporary cities:

As the site of the most militant anti-gentrification struggle in the United States, the ten acres of Tompkins Square Park quickly became a symbol of a new urbanism being unleashed on the urban "frontier." Largely abandoned to the working class amid postwar suburban expansion, relinquished to the poor and unemployed as reservations for racial and ethnic minorities, the terrain of the inner city is suddenly valuable again, perversely profitable. This new urbanism embodies a widespread and drastic repolarization of the city along political, economic, cultural, and geographical lines since the 1970s, and is integral with larger global shifts. (Smith 1996, 6)

Smith's account of the Lower East Side as ground zero for real estate capital and gentrification highlights the way that elites described the neighborhood as an "urban frontier" or as "Indian country," a settler-colonial discourse that conveniently redeployed the rhetoric of *terra nullius* through which colonists had dispossessed Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. We have seen how this settler-colonial imaginary lives on in dominant forms of Cli-Fi, but it is important to note that discourses of *terra nullius* also play out in struggles around real estate capital in extreme cities like New York.

Given the now decades-long history of struggle against gentrification in the Lower East Side, the plan to demolish one of the neighborhood's scarce public parks was certain to raise questions about who really benefits when the city builds "resiliency." As the t-shirts worn by members of East River Park Action suggested, resiliency has become a hollow discourse, a slick marketing label that has replaced the patently racist discourse of the urban frontier. Rebuilding the East River Park is certain to drive up real estate prices in adjacent neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, but to what extent do such projects really benefit the community's poor and working-class communities? What if such project build resiliency against climate disasters that threaten

the city in coming decades, but in so doing contribute to the displacement of economically vulnerable communities over the next few years? How do we define resiliency in such patently contradictory circumstances? Or, rather, who is resiliency really for in contemporary cities?

As I show in much greater length in *Extreme Cities* (2017), and as colleagues of mine such as Melissa Checker have also demonstrated, resiliency under current conditions is exclusively for elites. But it's not just that it only benefits a small slice of the city's residents, that tax money collected from the many goes to projects that benefit the few. It's also that these projects actively intensify and entrench gentrification. When you hear someone talking about resiliency today, it's best to start looking around for the men in suits, the billion-dollar property developers, fast-talking lawyers, and starchitects.

3. Conclusion

How can we establish what Miriam Greenberg and E.M. DuPuis call "The Right to the Resilient City" (2019)? If there are any lessons to be drawn from the battle over the East Side Coastal Resiliency project, it is that resiliency cannot be defined exclusively in environmental terms. Such a narrow definition of the term leaves it all too susceptible to appropriation by real estate capital, for whom sustainability is just the latest branding strategy.

In place of such ersatz and cynical uses of the term, urban climate justice movements are fighting to ensure that resiliency denotes the building of social equality and the construction of enduring networks of social connection. Resiliency certainly points to the durability of physical infrastructures, their ability to bounce back from stress and to weather disasters intact. But resiliency is ultimately a social characteristic, an index of the density and strength of human solidarity. Without this social dimension, and the aspiration to equality that makes it possible, resiliency will only be for the rich.

Resiliency for the privileged few means that there is no real resiliency, for there are no places to hide for very long on this increasingly stressed planet, no satellite spas for the super-rich orbiting our tattered world.

It is this quality of interconnection that works of Cli-Fi such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* body forth. In the hyper-empathy of the novel's protagonist, we are vouchsafed a glimpse of the form of humanity necessary to get us through the gathering storms of our environmentally disrupted era. Lauren Oye Olamina sometimes feels weakened by her empathetic capability, by her visceral experience of others' corporeal and emotional sensations, but it is this capacity that sets her apart from protagonists not just of post-apocalyptic fiction but of contemporary political discourse. The perceived threat of the Other, of immigrants, people of color, women, queers,

etcetera is the foundation of a demagoguery that is tilting nation after nation towards explicit fascism as the climate crisis bites ever harder.

In place of such forms of popular authoritarianism, we need precisely the kind of empathetic capability that figures in what I have been calling Climate Justice Fiction embody. Cultivating this capacity is the key to building real resilience.

Ashley Dawson is Professor of Postcolonial Studies in the English Department at the Graduate Center/City University of New York and the College of Staten Island (CSI). He served as chairperson of English at CSI from 2010 to 2016. His latest books focus on topics in *Environmental Humanities*, and include *People's Power: Reclaiming the Energy Commons* (O/R, 2020), *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* (Verso, 2017), and *Extinction: A Radical History* (O/R, 2016). He is currently at work on a book entitled *Environmentalism from Below*, and is co-editing a volume of essays called *Decolonize Conservation!*

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