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World History according to Katrina

How does Hurricane Katrina change our understanding of the United States, the lengths and widths of its history as well as its place in the life of the planet? As a catastrophe that casts into doubt the efficacy and security of the nation, what alternatives does it suggest, pointing to what other forms of shelter, what ways to organize human beings into meaningful groups? And how might these nonstandard groupings help us rethink the contours of the humanities, both in relation to world literature (a field already well developed) and in relation to world history, a field that perhaps still needs to be articulated, needs to be fleshed out?[1]

The nation-state seems "unbundled" by the hurricane in ways both large and small—not only as a system of defense but also as psychological insurance, political membership, and academic field. I want to use these unbundlings as an occasion to think about the circumference of our work: in terms of time frame and in terms of geographical borders. And on both fronts, it seems crucial to ask three interrelated questions. First, given the failure of the nation-state to defend its borders against a phenomenon such as Katrina, what adjustments need to be made to some

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of its assumed prerogatives, such as the claim of sovereignty? If it turns out that sovereignty, in the twenty-first century, is no longer claimable across the board, what exceptions might be made and in what contexts? And what chances are there that these shifts would reorient the practice of democracy itself, taking it out of its traditional mold and freeing it to address new issues, including the long-term relation between human rights and the world's climate?

It is instructive to begin with an essay on Katrina by Michael Ignatieff, published on September 25, 2005 in the *New York Times Magazine*. "When the levees broke, the contract of American citizenship failed," Ignatieff says. The breach is not just in the physical structures, or in New Orleans as a physical city, but in something even more consequential, namely, the integrity of the United States as a nation, its ability to *be* sovereign. According to Ignatieff, the most "basic term" of this sovereignty is "protection: helping citizens to protect their families and possessions from forces beyond their control." And, just as the nation is defined by its power to protect, citizens are defined by their right to demand that protection. They are "entitled to this because they are Americans." Nationality, in other words, ought to be synonymous with a guaranteed safety, an insulation from any harm that arises. It ought to be our bulwark against the storm. And the tragedy of Katrina is that it seems to have thrown that bulwark into question. Ignatieff summarizes the problem as follows:

> *In America, a levee defends a foundational moral intuition: all lives are worth protecting and, because this is America, worth protecting at the highest standard. This principle was betrayed by the Army Corps of Engineers, by the state and local officials who knew the levees needed repair and did nothing, and by Congress, which allowed the president to cut appropriations for levee renewal.*

According to this analysis, the problem is that the sovereignty of the nation has not been sovereign enough. The United States ought to have been an invincible line of defense, and it was not. The remedy, then, is also fairly simple: that line has to be firmed up, made invincible once again. The narrative that Ignatieff constructs begins and ends with the levees for this reason, because not only is the nation-state broken and then mended on their backs but to see the problem as solely a problem of the levees is already to predetermine the solution, making Katrina an event internal to the United States, an engineering failure, something that can

be fixed without changing our basic sense of what the sovereign nation amounts to, what it is equipped (or not equipped) to do, and the extent of protection it is able to offer its citizens.

Nonsovereign History

As must be clear, I find this approach unduly limiting. I would like to explore a larger set of analytic coordinates than those suggested by Ignatieff and to do so in a slightly roundabout fashion, by way of a debate that casts doubt on the sovereign claim of the nation, especially its adequacy as a unit of time, a debate that has galvanized historians no less than literary scholars. James Sheehan, in his 2006 presidential address to the American Historical Association, specifically raises this as an issue. It would "be foolish to deny the importance of states," Sheehan says, "but the state was not and is not history's natural telos. The emergence of states was neither inevitable nor uniform nor irreversible" (1–2).[2] Even though national chronology might look like the only chronology there is, a self-evident way of measuring time, we pay a steep price when we reify it and routinize it, allowing ourselves no other frame of reference. "Modern historiography is inextricably linked with the modern nation," Thomas Bender writes. "This has both given focus to historical inquiry and won for it a place in civic life. But it has also been disabling, silencing stories both smaller and larger than the nation" (vii). As a unit of time, the nation tends to work as a pair of evidentiary shutters, blocking out all those phenomena that do not fit into its intervals, reducing to nonevents all those processes either too large or too small to show up on its watch. Prasenjit Duara, historian of China—a country with a long record of just such disappearing acts—urges us to "rescue history from the nation" for just that reason. To make sovereign borders the limits for data gathering is to make it a foregone conclusion that the form of the nation is the only form that matters.[3] It is to take that form and reproduce it in the form of the discipline, "naturalizing the nation-state as the skin that contains the experience of the past" (Duara, "Transnationalism" 25).

That skin is very much the skin for those of us who call ourselves Americanists. To be sure, much of our work is critical of the nation. Still, the very existence of an "Americanist" field implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) reinforces the idea that an autonomous body of evidence can be derived from the United States, with clear dividing lines that separate it from other bodies of evidence. Neither American history nor American

literature would have been a field without this assumption. Territorial sovereignty is foundational to both in this sense: not only does it produce a database that legitimizes the field, it also institutes a cutoff line for what falls outside. As Anthony Giddens observes in a different context, "Sovereignty provides an ordering principle for what is 'internal' to states and what is 'external' to them" (281). The concept of "off limits" inversely defines the borders of a political jurisdiction; it also inversely defines the borders of a field of knowledge.[4]

This conflation of nation and field leads to a research agenda almost tautological: to study the United States, we need go no further than the United States. This makes things easier, though not everyone would agree that such a tautology is in fact valid, a good approximation of the forces that shape the world. Janice Radway, in her presidential address to the American Studies Association in 1998, makes a point of invoking this model—and rejecting it. In language strikingly similar to Duara's, she cautions us against any conception of the field as being like the territorial nation, lined with a skin:

> *[F]ar from being conceived on the model of a container—that is, as a particular kind of hollowed out object with evident edges or skin enclosing certain organically uniform contents—territories and geographies need to be reconceived as spatially situated and intricately intertwined networks of social relationships. (15)*

Radway's challenge to the "container" model turns the study of the United States from a closed space to an open network, with no sovereign borders, nothing that will keep it defensibly separated from the rest of the world. What does this mean in practice? Well, for one thing, we cannot say, with any degree of finality, that anything is "extraneous," because extraneousness is not an attribute that is cut-and-dried, antecedently given. It is a happenstance, a contextual variable, changing with the array of forces that happen to be in play, and with their different modes of interaction. This lack of intrinsic separation suggests that the analytic domain is always going to be heuristically stretched beyond any set of prescribed coordinates. The study of the United States can never be tautologically identical to the borders of the United States, because it can never keep the "outside" a permanent outside, externalized by defensible borders. The field then, according to Radway, can bear no resemblance to the territorial form of the nation. The nation is sovereign, or imagines itself to be. The field can have no such pretension.

What does it mean to write a history that is nonsovereign, with the seemingly extraneous being always ready, at a moment's notice, to morph into the un-extraneous? I would like to come back to Katrina as a test case and explore two instances of this dynamic, when a seemingly secure jurisdiction suddenly bursts at the seams, becoming a kind of flooded container, flooded by an outside that refuses to stay out. To explore these two scenarios, I would like, first, to follow the unconventional coverage of Katrina by a local newspaper, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. The *Times-Picayune* received the Pulitzer Prize for this report, so the importance of its work has certainly been recognized. But the history that it gives us is a nonsovereign history, not only because the initiative is coming from the ground up, from a local newspaper, rather than reflecting a national consensus, but also because this initiative produces a database that in no way matches the official borders of the United States. Nonsovereign history is offbeat, off-key, off-center. Its unorthodox paths jump from the micro to the macro and bypass the default center, going over and under the jurisdiction of the nation. Its scale is both smaller and larger: operating subnationally, on the one hand, as a grassroots phenomenon and transnationally, on the other, as a cross-border phenomenon, and, in this way, bringing into relief a practice of democracy significantly different from the nation-bound variety, at once dispersed and energized by a multicentric input network.

Cross-Stitching Time

What the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* does, specifically, is to send its own staff writer, John McQuaid, to a different country—the Netherlands—in order to broaden the evidentiary base, gathering information wherever relevant, tracing a series of zig-zags between two continents, two analytic poles. These zig-zags generate a cross-stitching of time, necessary because the United States is not the only country in the world having to deal with storms and the flooding that comes with those storms. The Netherlands, throughout its history, has been facing this problem, and its collective decisions shed light on the United States for just that reason. What we will eventually see, in the robustness and thoroughness of the Dutch response, is an alternative time line, a trajectory of action at once local and national, an instance of democratic politics that would have been helpful if, indeed, it had "flooded" the United States, if, indeed, its cross-currents had permeated these shores.

"The North Sea's furious winters can kick up storm surges more than 13 feet high—a lethal threat to a country where millions live below sea level, some as much as 22 feet down," John McQuaid notes. On February 1, 1953, the Netherlands was hit by a North Sea storm that lasted thirty-three hours. The storm surge—water pushed to the shore by the winds—was 150 inches higher than the normal sea level. The dikes collapsed in more than 450 places. Over 1,800 people died; some 4,000 buildings were swept away or badly damaged (Moore). Out of a population of around twelve million, 100,000 had to evacuate. Twice as many people were killed by the flood as by the German bombing of Rotterdam in 1940.

The scale of the destruction is very much comparable to New Orleans, and the preceding circumstances are also quite similar. Simon Rozendaal, a Dutch journalist writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, comments expressly on this. "As in the American Gulf states, the Dutch levee system had been neglected. It was not long after World War II: the Netherlands had just lost its colony, Indonesia; and the Cold War diverted money and attention." Local disasters are, in this sense, the almost predictable side effects of global geopolitics. They are part of a larger distributive pattern—a pattern of unequal protection that Ulrich Beck calls the global "risk society"—with the risk falling on the least privileged and being maximized at just those points where the resources have been most depleted.[5] This was true of the Netherlands; it was true of New Orleans. In both cases, the military budget was funded at the expense of domestic infrastructures, paving the way for their eventual breakdown. The Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection project, a public works project aimed at building up levees and protecting pumping stations on the east bank of the Mississippi in Orleans, St. Bernard, St. Charles, and Jefferson parishes, received less than 20 percent of the funding requested by the Army Corps of Engineers. This was not a secret; it was already public knowledge back in 2004. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* had run a story about this, reporting that it "appears that the money has been moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq" (qtd. in Dyson 81).

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* are helpless witnesses—to a time frame waved aside, dismissed as unimportant. In the unfolding catastrophe, they have the status of a tragic chorus. They come bearing knowledge, and they go nowhere. They, along with various science magazines, have been writing reports for years—useless reports—about various warning signs: the erosion of the wetlands, the subsidence of the soil, and the presence of dangerous chemicals as well

as dangerous artificial waterways such as the MRGO (the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet), which greatly increase the power of the storm surge. These warnings had absolutely no effect on government policies: this was true not only in the United States but also in the Netherlands. Six months before the 1953 disaster, the Dutch engineer Johan van Veen had calculated that the storm surge could rise up to thirteen feet relative to the sinking coast. The Dutch meteorological service made the same prediction, but only three of the one thousand water boards, which managed the dikes, had a subscription to this service (Rozendaal). In the case of New Orleans, the warnings had come from FEMA's own modeling of a hypothetical Hurricane Pam in 2004 and from dire forecasts appearing in *Scientific American*, *National Geographic*, *Popular Mechanics*, the *Times-Picayune*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *New York Times*, as well as on the PBS science program *Nova* (Dyson 77–86). But all this information came to nothing. It was not able to percolate to a higher level, not able to lead to the dismantling of the MRGO, for instance, or to the rediversion of funds from Iraq back to these domestic projects. And it most certainly was not able to reverse the unequal protection endemic in this country. Parallel to the physical levees that are in disrepair, there seems to be an invisible system of levees that work all too well: shutting out all local input and turning public policy into a closed-door affair, a strictly bureaucratic decision.

Dutch Delta Works

So far, then, a cross-stitching of time seems to show only the same pattern: a common hazard and a common failure of the democratic process itself, a kind of blockage between available information and government action. But here the symmetry ends. Flood protection in the Netherlands after 1953 diverges sharply from the United States, suggesting also that the Dutch democracy is now structurally very different from its American counterpart. It is this alternative thread of time that the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* tries to highlight by sending its staff reporter there.

Before 1953, the Dutch had tried to protect their settlements by canals lined with dikes, essentially the same as the levee system in south Louisiana. The 1953 flood revealed a major flaw in that strategy, a flaw that would now prove fatal for New Orleans. Levee-lined canals, it turns out, are fundamentally unsafe: during severe storms, they would themselves become deadly passageways, allowing the churning ocean

to penetrate far inland. After Katrina, a team of Dutch engineers went to New Orleans to study the failed system, and they repeated their previous reservations about the overreliance on levees. The Dutch engineer Jurgen Battjes points out:

> *The region's levee-lined canals were conduits for Katrina's storm surge to pour into the heart of the city. From the east, water flowed into the Intercoastal Waterway and Industrial Canal, where floodwalls were topped and then collapsed, flooding the Lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard Parish and eastern New Orleans. From Lake Pontchartrain, it flowed into the 17th Street and London Avenue drainage canals, which were breached, flooding central New Orleans. (qtd. in McQuaid)*

The Dutch Delta Works (Deltawerken), begun shortly after 1953, adopted a different strategy. Rather than building higher and stronger dikes along the canals, as they had always done, the Dutch opted instead to construct giant barriers across all ocean inlets, sealing off the estuaries, and turning them into giant freshwater lakes. The first (in the Hollandse IJssel) went into operation in 1958. This was followed by the damming of the Veerse Gat and the Zandkreek in 1961, the Haringvliet and the Brouwershavensche Gat in 1971 and 1972. These closures blocked off the invading ocean, but they also destroyed the unique ecosystem of the estuaries, a unique mix of freshwater and seawater, and the breeding ground for many species of North Sea fish. Environmentalists as well as mussel and oyster fishermen fiercely opposed the plan for just that reason (Dutch).

From the 1970s on, then, the philosophy behind the Delta Works would undergo yet another shift, this time taking into account a twofold understanding of "protection," equalizing it across the entire habitat and respecting the input from local communities. The goal was not only to protect southwestern Holland against the storm surge of the North Sea but also to protect the existing ecosystem of the river estuaries. The enormous Oosterscheldt Barrier was the result. One of the most spectacular feats of hydraulic engineering in the world, this barrier is 5.6 miles long, with sixty-two moveable flood gates, each the size of a twelve-story apartment building. This was followed by the equally immense Maeslant Barrier, which opened in 1997. These massive public works projects are the outcomes of active intervention by the Dutch citizenry. They are designed to give the Netherlands a macro policy that reflects

local input, a level of protection adequate to a flood that would come once every 10,000 years (Dutch).

The technology is certainly impressive, but even more so is the broad-based democratic process that puts it to work. Flood protection in the Netherlands—as government policy and as community effort—is accompanied by public debate every step of the way. It was this local input that led to the change in direction in the 1970s. And it was this local input, multiplied manifold, that made it possible for this small nation to commit itself to these vast expenditures and to plan ahead in terms of a statistical time frame of 10,000 years. More recently, in preparation for the sea-level rise that is a foreseeable though not-yet-realized consequence of global warming, the Netherlands has planned still further ahead, implementing a new policy called "Make Room for the River," moving populations away from some areas that, in the future, will most certainly be flooded (Palca). Democracy, in the Dutch context, means at least three things: public information available to everyone; local input having a direct impact on policy decisions; and a political will to limit vulnerability across the board, extending protection to populations both human and not human, both currently voting and not yet born.

Against the small details as well as the long-term planning of that democratic culture, what happens in the United States must be called something else. To begin with, the New Orleans levees were designed to protect only against a storm that would come once every fifty years—in other words, only against a Category 3 hurricane. And even this modest level of protection was not always maintained, as Ivor van Heerden, deputy director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center, points out.[6] In its self-study released on June 1, 2006, the Army Corps of Engineers admits to this, accepting blame not only for the flawed design and construction of the levees but also for its underestimation of hurricane strength based on outdated standards (Schwartz). This is a problem it has known for some time. "It's possible to protect New Orleans from a Category 5 hurricane," Al Naomi, senior project manager for the Corps, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on October 8, 2004. "But we've got to start. To do nothing is tantamount to negligence." The Corps submitted a proposal that year to Congress requesting $4 million to fund a preliminary study. Congress tabled the proposal, never bringing it to the floor, citing budgetary constraints resulting from the Iraq War (qtd. in Nussbaum).

Unlike the robust input from Dutch communities, decisions in the United States were made—or not made—behind closed doors, by a

legislative body acting only out of fiscal concerns, without ever opening up its reasoning to public scrutiny. Still, even if that public scrutiny had taken place, it is not clear that the Dutch time scale of the "10,000-year flood" would have been adopted. Long-term planning has never had much of a place on the federal, state, or municipal agenda: 10,000 years seem almost unimaginable. As the *Washington Post* reports:

> *In 1982, the Orleans Levee District urged the Corps to "lower its design standards to provide more realistic hurricane protection." The levee district, stocked with political appointees, could spend freely on private investigators, riverboat gambling, and a $2.4 million Mardi Gras foundation. But it said it could not afford its share of protection from a 200-year storm, suggesting that 100-year protection would be fine. ("Slow")*

This strange sense of proportions might turn out to be one of the most destructive effects of the time scale of a young nation, one that allows neither a long past nor a long future to interfere with the short but oversized centrality of the present. What does it mean never to think of time except in single and double digits? And how might these single and double digits affect a nation's ability to deal with events such as hurricanes, whose potential for harm outstrips those digits by many orders of magnitude? A nonsovereign history of Katrina shows that, beyond the broken levees, what needs to be mended is the democratic process itself and its need for a reference frame beyond the geography and chronology of the nation. The example of the Netherlands is *not* extraneous to the United States for just that reason. Indeed, it is only by not externalizing this body of evidence—not blocking it out, not seeing it as foreign or exotic—that we can begin to circumvent the short time line of the United States, embracing a democratic practice centered not on this nation, but taking its circumference from the world.

The World's Water

That circumference, in turn, radically changes the way we think about causality: the web that articulates it, the claims that can be pressed, and the responses needed as a result. The implications are far reaching, because to draw a larger input circle around the nation is also to draw a larger circle of accountability, to give a broad interpretation to the harm that it might have perpetrated at a distance, harm that might seem extraneous from one point of view. How, for instance, can we make

a nation face up to the death and destruction that it is causing hundreds and thousands of civilians, thousands of miles away, on a different continent? Justice looks very different when it is framed in this way, seen as extended rather than encapsulated. Rather than being a problem of crime and punishment contained within a single nation, it becomes another instance of the flooded container: flooded, in this case, by the causal web that links it, against the illusion of sovereignty, to cross-currents affecting the entire planet, a seascape turbulent and borderless.

World history and world literature have much to contribute to this enlarged sense of justice, for crucial to these fields are just such cross-currents, input networks with multiple sources, fluid rather than territorial. Hurricanes are very much part of this seascape: they are indexes to the hydrology of the world as a whole. Generated by air-sea interaction, this hydrology can be adequately studied only through "multi-basin indices," which is to say, by comparing data from the North Pacific, Indian, Southwest Pacific, and North Atlantic Oceans. Not only are hurricanes water-borne disasters, they are disasters unique to warm water: as long as the sea surface temperature remains below 26.5 degrees Celsius (80 degrees Fahrenheit), no hurricane will form. When oceans get heated up, they fuel a convection process that transforms cold-core tropical depressions into hot-core cyclones. Katrina itself strengthened to a Category 5 hurricane when it was passing over the Gulf of Mexico, where the surface waters were unusually warm, about 2 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than normal for that time of year (Pew Center).[7]

Sea surface temperature is the single most important factor in hurricane formation. And it was by looking at this data that the MIT climatologist, Kerry Emanuel, was able to predict what was to come. On July 31, 2005, one month before Katrina, Emanuel published his research in the online edition of the journal *Nature*. Tracking hurricanes by their "power dissipation index" (a combination of the lifetime of storms and their intensity), Emanuel shows that "this index has increased markedly since the mid-1970s," an upward trend strongly correlated with the rise in the sea surface temperature. Both the duration of hurricanes and their wind speeds have "doubled in the past 30 years" as the Pacific and the Atlantic have warmed by 1 degree Fahrenheit between 1970 and 2004. Since changing ocean temperatures are themselves indices to climate change, Emanuel sees the increasingly destructive hurricanes as "at least partly anthropogenic." He predicts "a substantial increase in hurricane-related losses in the 21st century" (Emanuel).

Emanuel's study was corroborated almost immediately in a parallel study by a team from the Georgia Institute of Technology, reported in *Science* on September 16, 2005. By looking at "the number of tropical cyclones and cyclone days as well as tropical cyclone intensity over the past 35 years, in an environment of increasing sea surface temperature," this study finds that "hurricanes in the strongest categories (4 + 5) have almost doubled in number [. . .]. These changes occur in all of the ocean basins." How to explain this across-the-board jump? J. B. Webster, speaking for the Georgia Tech team, is even less ambiguous in seeing a strong correlation between the rising ocean temperatures and the rising concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide—chief of the greenhouse gases—though they concede that "attribution of 30-year trends to global warming would require a longer global data record and, especially, a deeper understanding of the role of hurricanes in the general circulation of the atmosphere and ocean" (Webster et al.).

Whether or not hurricanes can be directly traced to global warming,[8] what seems clear is that the database needs to be planetary in scope, studying all the oceans in conjunction. Studied in conjunction, they point to a changing world, becoming daily less hospitable, looking less and less like the planet that has supported our species and other species. We take it so much for granted that we never notice that its features have grown ominous. Of the weapons of mass destruction already lined up, the most deadly will probably come not in the form of hurricanes, but as a simpler hydrology, one less spectacular though infinitely more catastrophic: namely, the rising sea levels due to the melting of the Arctic and Antarctic ice sheets.

In its 2001 report, the United Nations's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted that sea-level rise in the twenty-first century will proceed "at an average rate of 2.2 to 4.4 times the rate over the 20th century," while singling out the West Antarctic ice sheet as especially worrisome, since it "contains enough ice to raise sea level by 6 meters" (Houghton et al. 642). Meanwhile, seismic stations revealed a significant increase in "icequakes," caused by ice sheets breaking loose and lurching forward; the annual number of these icequakes registering 4.6 or greater on the Richter scale doubled from seven to fourteen in the late 1990s, and it doubled again by 2005. Satellite measurements of the earth's gravitational field showed a loss of fifty cubic miles of ice in Greenland in 2005, matched by a similar loss in West Antarctica (Hansen 13). The new IPCC report, issued in February 2007, stuck to a more conservative figure for

the sea-level rise (7.8 inches to 2 feet by the century's end), but the human cost is staggering even at this rate (Intergovernmental).[9] The World Bank estimates, for instance, that even a three-foot rise in sea level would turn at least 60 million people into refugees (Eilperin).

What would the United States look like? The fate of New Orleans would have been sealed long before then, as would the fate of many other coastal cities. Al Gore, in *An Inconvenient Truth*, gives us a computer projection of what would be left of Florida if the sea level were to increase by eighteen to twenty feet; it is a horrendous image. The century ahead will most certainly be dominated by this advancing seascape as the earth continues to heat up. Sovereign borders will be so diluted—literally—that they will be small comfort for U.S. citizens; even the world's largest military budget will not yield a credible line of defense. Yet, the irony is that, while the nation can provide no long-term protection, it is quite capable of action that has the potential for long-term harm. The balance between human history and nonhuman processes, always problematic, is now weighted more and more in the latter's direction, with a growing gap between the kind of habitat the human species has depended on and the kind of habitat the planet is becoming. The United States is ill prepared for this development, though there are signs now that the tide might be turning, that climate change might be reeducating all of us in the primacy of the planet over the sovereignty of any nation. At this critical moment, it is especially important for the humanities to rethink its space and time coordinates, to take up questions that might once have seemed far removed—coming not only from hitherto extraneous fields such as earth and planetary sciences, but also from hitherto extraneous populations not traditionally included in the discipline.

Arctic Time Line

One such population is the Inuit living in the Arctic Circle. It is here that global warming is felt most directly and most severely, since the threshold for catastrophic change is much lower at the two poles: the difference of one or two degrees can have drastic consequences for the glaciers and the ice sheets. When it comes to climate change, the Arctic is ahead of the rest of the world: it has a time line of its own. In December 1995, the IPCC issued a landmark report noting this uneven development. This was reaffirmed in 2004 by the eight-nation Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, which concluded that the Arctic is experiencing "some of the most

rapid and severe climate change on earth" (Abstract) In *An Inconvenient Truth* this is dramatized as the plight of the polar bear, and what makes the world unlivable for the polar bear also makes it unrecognizable for the Inuit. They have a word for it, *uggianaqtuq*, referring to the weather, a "familiar friend now behaving strangely" (UNESCO). In November 2000, the Inuit released a forty-five-minute video to document this fatal alienation. Entitled *Sila Alangotok: Inuit Observations on Climate Change*, it offers an extensive record of melting ice, eroding coastlines, and the appearance of wildlife never seen before, including the Pacific salmon and the robin.[10] It is this unrecognizability of the world, the unrecognizability of their habitat, that makes it necessary for the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (a federation made up 150,000 native peoples in Canada, Greenland, Russia, and the United States) to seek legal action against the world's foremost emitter of greenhouse gases.

This is not easy to do. Currently, the infrastructure for transnational legal action is still very sketchy. Just as we do not have the legal instrumentalities to prosecute nations for the long-distance military harm they incur, neither do we have the legal instrumentalities to prosecute nations for the long-distance environmental harm they perpetrate. We do, of course, have courts that operate on a transnational level. There are four of these at the moment: the International Court of Justice at the Hague; the International Criminal Court, also at the Hague; the Court of Justice of the European Communities at Luxembourg; and the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg. The first of these, the International Court of Justice, created in 1945, will hear only cases brought before it by nation-states.[11] The other three courts do in fact hear cases brought by nonstate actors,[12] but the grievance of the Inuit does not rise to the level of the International Criminal Court, and, not being a member of the European Union, its case also cannot be heard in the two European courts. However, with the help of environmental groups such as Earth Justice and the Center for International Environmental Law, the Inuit were able to file a petition against the Bush administration with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on December 7, 2005, "seeking relief from violations resulting from global warming caused by acts and omissions of the United States" (Inuit Circumpolar Council).

Almost all the deteriorating conditions of the Arctic can be traced to climate change, not only changes in the "quality, quantity and timing of snowfall" but also the destruction of coastal communities through the increasingly erratic behavior of water in all its forms:

> *Permafrost, which holds together unstable underground gravel and inhibits water drainage, is melting at an alarming rate, causing slumping, landslides, severe erosion and loss of ground moisture, wetlands and lakes. The loss of sea ice, which dampens the impact of storms on coastal areas, has resulted in increasingly violent storms hitting the coastline, exacerbating erosion and flooding. Erosion in turn exposes coastal permafrost to warmer air and water, resulting in faster permafrost melts. These transformations have had a devastating impact on some coastal communities, particularly in Alaska and the Canadian Beaufort Sea Region [. . .]. Other factors have also affected water levels. Changes in precipitation and temperature have led to sudden spring thaws that release large amounts of water, flooding rivers and eroding their streambeds. Yet, after spring floods, rivers and lakes are left with unusually low levels of water, further diminished by increased evaporation during the longer summer. These changes affect the availability and quality of natural drinking water sources. The fish stocks upon which Inuit rely are profoundly affected by changing water levels. Fish sometimes cannot reach their spawning grounds, their eggs are exposed or washed ashore, or northward moving species compete with the native stocks for ecological niches. (Inuit Circumpolar Council)*

Violent storms, floods, soil erosion, loss of wetlands—these are problems we associate with New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. It should not come as too much of a surprise, though, to see them also played out, thousands of miles away, in the Arctic Ocean, since there is, in fact, no dividing line separating these two bodies of water. This single, criss-crossing, and already damaged hydrology makes it clear that climate, geology, and human and nonhuman life are all complexly intertwined, part of the same fluid continuum. The catastrophe, already writ large in this seemingly remote part of the world, is closer to us than we think. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, received the United Nations Lifetime Achievement Award for Human Development and, along with Al Gore, was nominated for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights began its hearings on climate change in March 2007. While the commission has no power of enforcement, a finding in favor of the Inuit could be the basis for future

lawsuits in U.S. federal courts. World history here takes on its exemplary form, calling our attention to the tangled fate of the planet, and urging us toward an enlarged sense of democracy, an enlarged sense of justice. This enlargement can begin only with local knowledge, with micro evidence and bottom-up chronologies. If these space and time coordinates look unfamiliar, perhaps the study of the United States needs to become unfamiliar to itself in just this way.

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Notes

1 For two efforts in this direction, one general and one specific, see Colley; and McNeill and McNeill.

2 For other well-known critiques of the nation-state, see Gellner; Hobsbawm; and Renan.

3 For an important critique of the nation-form, see Balibar, "Nation" and "Racism."

4 For a sustained argument linking sovereignty to the conditions of knowledge, see Bartelson.

5 See also Bullard; Cutter; Kasperson and Kasperson.

6 According to van Heerden, the levees could actually offer protection only against a Category 2 storm, with wind speeds of up to 110 miles an hour. See "Levees Rebuilt." See also van Heerden.

7 Katrina weakened to Category 4 shortly before landfall in Louisiana and Mississippi.

8 Scientists who disagree with Emanuel and Webster think that the more destructive hurricanes are caused not by global warming but by a natural cycle called "multi-decadal oscillations." For a summary and documentation of the debate, see "Global."

9 For a good summary of the report, see McKibben.

10 A BBC report gives a good account of the video. See "Climate Change in the Canadian Arctic." See also Inuit Circumpolar Council, "Responding to the Global Climate Change."

11 The International Court of Justice (ICJ) was created in 1945 under the Charter of the United Nations. See http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/generalinformation/ibbook/Bbookframepage.htm.

12 The Court of Justice of the European Communities, the legal institution of the European Union, whose charge is to enforce "community law [. . .] separate from, yet superior to national law," was initially created under the Treaties of Paris and Rome in 1952. See http://curia.europa.eu/en/instit/presentationfr/index_cje.htm. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the judicial arm of the Council of Europe, started out as the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) and became consolidated as a single, full-time court on November 1, 1998. The International Criminal Court (ICC) was established

on July 17, 1998, when 120 states adopted the Statute of Rome. The statute provides for its entry into effect sixty days after sixty states have ratified it, which happened on April 11, 2002. Accordingly, the ICC went into effect on July 1, 2002.

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