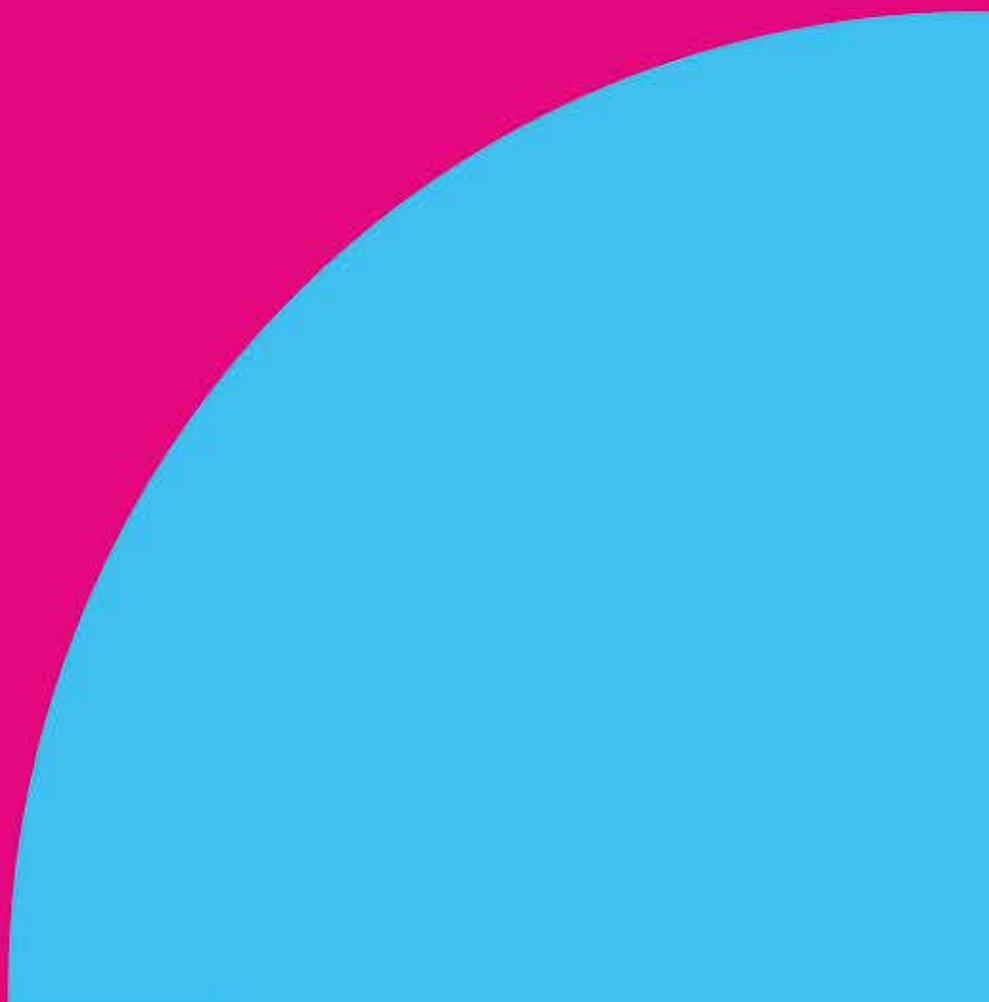


# THE PHILOSOPHER

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Over four issues to be published in 2022, *The New Basics* will consider 50 “keywords” on four themes: 1) Planet, 2) Society, 3) Person, and 4) Philosophy, providing a provocative introduction to central concepts, one that excavates the seismic intellectual and social changes of the past half-century. The keyword entries will emphasize the shifting and conditional nature of the vocabularies we are generating, eschewing the individualistic “brain in a vat” search for universal, ahistorical truths. They will retain the open-ended quest for meaning specific to the best of the philosophical tradition.

This opening issue on “Planet” offers new possibilities for thinking through and living in the “Anthropocene” – the term that is increasingly used to define a new planetary era in which humans have become a planet-changing force through inflicting geologic intrusions, biological disturbances, or climatic alterations. The short, accessible essays in this issue offer powerful snapshots of what it means to live in a time of seismic change. To adapt a quotation from Travis Holloway’s new book, they are all “a response to the end of the world as we know it against the spectre of catastrophic climate change”.

Planetary questions are richly philosophical ones. The essays that follow cover ontology, ethics, political theory, feminist philosophy, and decolonial philosophy, as well as branching out into history, economics, and physics. In the opening essay, **Jeff Sebo** asks: “If our treatment of animals is worsening global health and environmental threats, how are we to treat them?” **Alexander Douglas** asks: “We are told that capitalism is destroying the planet, but what *is* capitalism?” **Malcom Ferdinand** asks: “Upon which stories of the Earth do we rely when we talk about the ecological crisis?” **Michael Marder** asks: “What does the emerging ethical ideal of connectedness do to actual and possible relations?” **Erin R. Pineda** asks: “In a world on fire, is there time for disobedience?” **Simona Capisani** asks: “How is the right to being in a livable space hindered by a shifting human climate niche?” **Thomas Nail** asks: “What are the planetary consequences of philosophy’s preference for stasis over movement?” **Pierre Charbonnier** asks: “What are we to do now that our traditional political categories are no longer fit for purpose?” **Romy Opperman** asks: “Do planetary ethics require us to reappraise the concept of racism?” **Nancy Tuana** asks: “What are the sensibilities we need to cultivate in order to change our ways of living?” **Simone M. Müller** asks: “What kind of collectivity is possible in an age of the toxic commons?” Finally, **Travis Holloway** asks: “Are stories about catastrophic weather contributing to a reinvention of epic or grand narrative?”

Other highlights in this issue include: **Jana Bacevic** explores lived experience via Simone de Beauvoir and Sara Ahmed; **Donovan Irvén** enters into the debate over free will from an Existentialist perspective; **Paul C. Taylor** discusses the evolution of race-thinking; and **Jason Blakely** is none too impressed by Steven’s Pinker’s *Rationality*. It has been a great honour to work with artist **Blane De St. Croix** and I am grateful to him for permission to use his stunning images in this issue.

**Anthony Morgan, Editor**

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# WEATHER

The “storm of the century.” Again. Another “hottest year on record.” Today’s weather is interrupting our sense of normalcy and announcing a new political regime.

By now increasingly violent weather is everywhere and all around us, swinging back at us like a pendulum. Along with the melting of the Earth’s polar ice caps, droughts, fires, and other changes to the Earth’s atmosphere, there is broad scientific agreement that storms, typhoons, and hurricanes will continue to become more intense, more frequent, and more catastrophic in the coming years. The weather is one of the more significant ways human beings *experience* climate change beyond abstract scientific data. Even those who do not “believe” in climate change experience it.

Strange weather is also perhaps the most common story about climate change that we are telling one another. Today, and at least since the great flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the weather is one of the first things human beings talk about with one another or share. In stark contrast with a neoliberal culture of confessional and entrepreneurial narratives, and well beyond the so-called *petits récits* of postmodernity, stories about catastrophic weather are contributing to a certain reinvention of epic or grand narrative in our time.

## STORIES ABOUT CATASTROPHIC WEATHER ARE CONTRIBUTING TO A CERTAIN REINVENTION OF EPIC OR GRAND NARRATIVE IN OUR TIME

On the rooftop of a hotel in New York City, for example, visitors live-forecast the weather through an art installation that takes inspiration from the 1996 blockbuster *Twister*. Elsewhere, a chunk of glacial ice melts outside the Tate Modern. It has been placed there by Olafur Eliasson, who is known for another installation at the museum, *The Weather Project*. A play called *Mr. Burns* – an apocalyptic epic named after a Simpsons episode – opens with multiple nuclear power plants in meltdown; the survival of the human species now depends *on the*

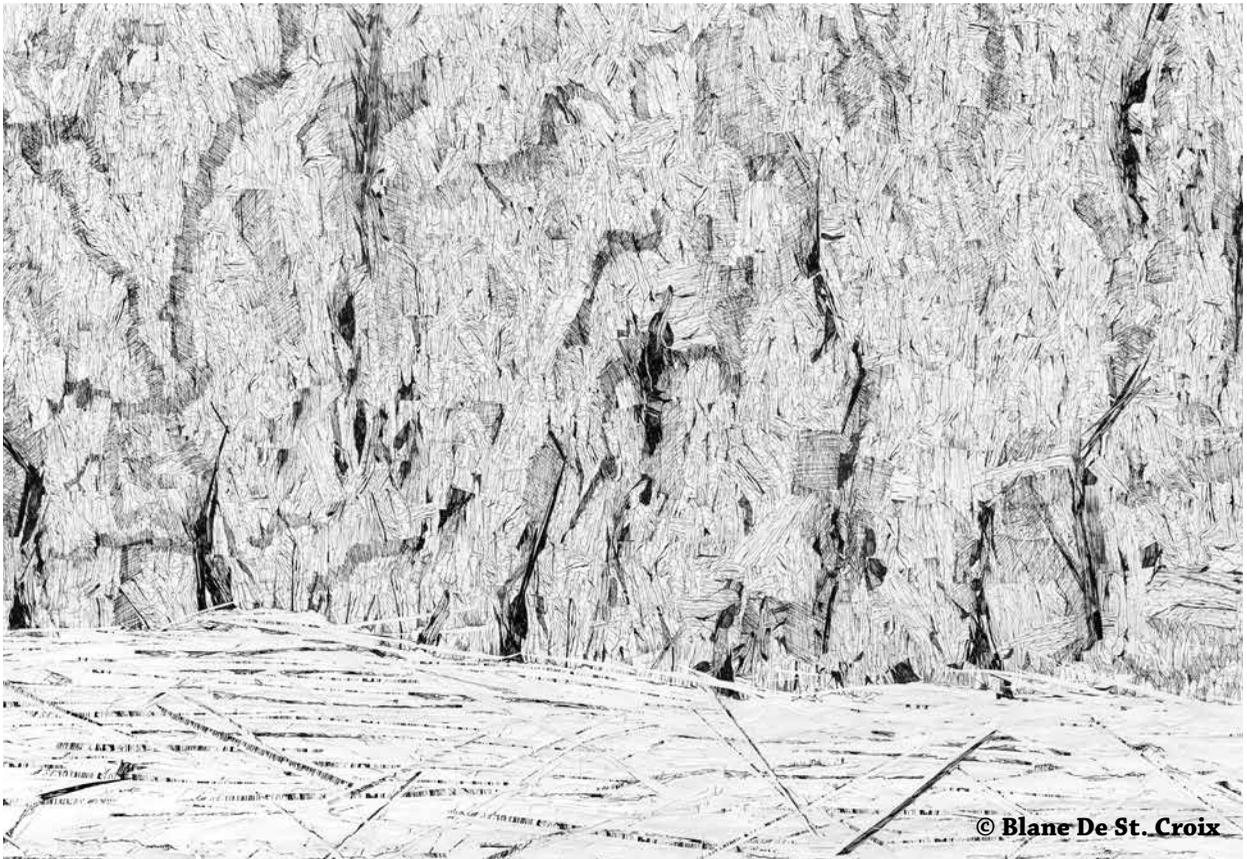
**by Travis Holloway**  
*SUNY Farmingdale*

*weather*. The artist Tezi Gabunia simulates the flooding of the Louvre – an archive of civilizations under water – based on the Paris floods of 2018.

These stories about the weather tell us that the Holocene – a period in our planet’s history in which human civilizations enjoyed a relatively stable relationship with the climate – is over. As Isabelle Stengers has put it, our old narratives about a “wild and threatening nature” or a “fragile nature to be protected” seem obsolete. This is because our planet has entered into an era of climate instability for the first time in about 11,500 years, destabilizing life itself. Our experience of the weather thus differs from the threat of nature imagined by those before us. The elements no longer seem to confront us as individuals, but as a species. They do not turn us inward, but leave us exposed. They do not suggest an individual’s triumph over nature, but a coming blow to any or all of us. Instead of Atlas holding up the sky, the sky is advancing upon us. Instead of returning to an idyllic state of nature in the manner

of Rousseau, we are fleeing from nature’s disastrous advances. There is no triumph over thunderstorms by virtue of an enlightened human understanding or scientific progress. Instead, we are living in the face of what Kant once called nature’s “might,” but suspended in the moment before we can, according to Facebook, be “marked safe.”

Whether we know it or not, the weather has also been transitioning us away from many of the cultural, philosophical, religious, political, and economic systems of thought and practices that are most responsible for climate change. Each time we hear about strange weather or watch a movie about an archetypal human being overcome by the elements, we take part in a new epic that directly contradicts our entrenched narratives of individualism and human exceptionalism. The story now goes that human beings were never separate from nature, nor do they live as individuals. Rather, life has never been more shared. One is forced, as the reservoirs recede or the smoke blocks the sun for



days, to think about history after “the end of history.” Beyond individual “self-capital” or “human capital,” one considers the role and effect of our entire species in the larger web of life, even as one knows that human beings are not all equally responsible. One understands increasingly, through the weather, that a change in outcome depends on collective, not individual, action. As Dipesh Chakrabarty put it in his 2009 essay “The Climate of History,” there is a new sense of history that “arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe,” a sense of history that destroys “the distinction between natural and human histories.”

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My interest in these stories or encounters with the weather is the *kind* of narrative they are stitching. These stories collectivize and historicize human beings in the face of catastrophic elements, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea, as Foucault might put it. When confronted with violent storm clouds, it is as though our culture is once again passing “beyond man and humanism,” as Derrida once said, albeit in a different way – not just “in the [...] terrifying form of monstrosity” of something like threatening weather, but in a new kind of catastrophe that feels collective and collectivizing. Instead of inviting us to reflect on our inner selves or our own moral sentiments like certain Romantics, these narratives invite us to reflect on the geological effect of our species across deep time. Rather than finding in nature what Wordsworth described as “thoughts of a more deep seclusion” or “the anchor of my purest thoughts,” these stories about the weather are challenging and discrediting human reason instead of refining or exalting it.

## THERE IS NO TRIUMPH OVER THUNDERSTORMS BY VIRTUE OF AN ENLIGHTENED HUMAN UNDERSTANDING OR SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS

Consider, for example, two very different encounters with storm clouds. The first is exemplified by Immanuel

Kant’s 1790 description of “thunderclouds piling up in the sky” and humans’ “superiority” over them. In his discussion of the experience of the sublime in nature, Kant famously writes in *The Critique of Judgment* of “thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps... hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up...” The later Kant, like many of his fellow Romantics, tells us that such experiences of weather “raise the soul’s fortitude” so that “we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence.” For “we [find] in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity,” Kant writes.

Now consider another type of encounter with clouds that more aptly describes our present age. At the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, one is confronted with *Untitled (Schooner and Fireworks)*, a 2012 installation by Sarah Anne Johnson. Johnson’s piece arose from her residence on a ship in the melting glaciers of the Arctic. The installation depicts a centuries-old, colonial-era ship beneath a large coral and jellyfish-laden storm cloud. Johnson’s storm cloud surrounds the outmatched vessel below as if to devour it, yet her approach is very different from Kant’s approach above. Whereas Kant calls thunderclouds *sublime* since “we are in a safe place,” Johnson’s vessel finds no safe refuge from them. We are out at sea, after all. Our ship, a symbol of the technological apparatus of colonialism and early free trade, is no match for the much larger, ominous storm cloud above it. The installation suspends us in the moment before disaster strikes, standing before a different kind of thunderstorm entirely – one that evades any human ability to master it.

We also notice how Johnson’s storm cloud does not entertain a pure vision of “nature.” This storm cloud is a *mélange* of weather and human-made chemicals (fireworks above the Arctic); it is composed of polyurethane foam, plastics, and LED lights; and it is modelled after a *copy* or photograph, and not directly on nature. It indicates a certain departure from something like Monet’s process of setting up an easel in a field and directly observing the way light fell on haystacks. Here, the elements are not inferior to human beings and in need of cultivation, nor are they separate from them, superior to them, or transcendental. They are, in a certain way, a product or child of human beings. But they are, if anything, antithetical to them. It is



as though a tidal wave, full of plastic, crashed down upon a city of human beings, even those who were not primarily responsible. This contaminated “nature,” which threatens human existence instead of attuning it or serving the human subject’s purpose in the end, might be called “postromantic” if we begin to understand this term as a kind of discord rather than a “reciprocity” with nature, or simply, as the end of the Holocene itself.

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The failure of political thought throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and prior, of course) was to limit the political “space of appearance” to “the lifeblood” or “web of human affairs,” as Hannah Arendt formulated it after Aristotle, instead of thinking a space of appearance for the greater web of life, including the *weather*. The weather is, however, already announcing a new political and climatic regime. In contrast to the project of Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, humans will have to learn how to appear with it *en masse* in a public space that was never divorced from its environs. They will

be forced to cultivate forms of association that are not based upon a separation between the human species, the Earth, or other forms of life.

The weather will force this new regime upon us whether we act or don't, whether we want it to or not, and sadly, whether we are more or less responsible for climate change, and more or less able to shelter ourselves from it. As the weather becomes increasingly strange and violent in the coming years, it will introduce a profound sense of time and history – an eschatology that collectivizes, historicizes, and politicizes the public before the growing threat of climate change, offering what some believe is a new approach to solidarity at a time when solidarity has been difficult to find or produce. This new sense of time and narrative begs for a specific form of politics to address it. And it will be all too easy to respond with borders, war, ethnonationalism, and allowing the most vulnerable to suffer without aid or migration.

## THE STRANGE WEATHER THAT WE'VE BEEN HEARING ABOUT IS NOW HERE, SPEAKING IN A NEW POLITICAL FORUM THAT HUMANS HAVE YET TO JOIN SERIOUSLY

In my forthcoming book *How to Live at the End of the World*, I argue that a radical form of democracy must not only be conceived of and won, but transformed into something like a zoocracy, a rule or assembly of all of the living. What I mean by zoocracy is a rule of *zōē* or life itself – a rule that would be more than a rule of a people or *dēmos*, and more than a rule of human beings or *anthrōpoi*, i.e. more than a rule of a specific and superior form of life or *politikon zōon*, as Aristotle described it. This would require organizing towards a form of power that would be possible only if millions of humans begin to *appear with* the full and monstrous force of their environments. A “multitude, appearing ... in broad daylight,” as Arendt put it. In *daylight* itself. A new environmental commons is more than a romantic

pipedream. It is becoming more and more possible today against the prospect of intensifying climate change and due to a shared sense of impending catastrophe. In fact, we don't even have to envision a “democracy ...extended to things” or a “parliament of [nonhuman] things,” as Latour put it in 1993. Increasingly strange and violent weather is already in our midst, in our neighbour's trembling voice, intruding on our politics, disrupting it, and reconfiguring it. The strange weather that we've been hearing about is now here, speaking in a new political forum that humans have yet to join seriously.

*Travis Holloway grew up queer and working class in a rural factory town affected by free trade and globalization. He is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at SUNY Farmingdale and a poet and former Goldwater Fellow in Creative Writing at NYU. This is an edited excerpt from his forthcoming book, How to Live at the End of the World: Theory, Art, and Politics in the Anthropocene (Stanford, 2022).*

