

WORLD CHANGE/ SEA CHANGE



Lowell Duckert and Steve Mentz

BIRD FUTURES

In the future I want, I am a cormorant. A screeching sea-crow, I perch on a high branch on the Tree of Life overlooking Paradise. My eyes flare with greed, and with two senses of the word “want.” Things appear down there, spread out below me, things that I lack (“want”) and things that I desire (“want”).

“Various” is the word for what I see. “A happy rural seat of various view” (4.247) is the full line in *Paradise Lost*, but it’s just “various” that I crave.¹ These three syllables roll around inside my bird’s mouth. Various. All of the things that inhabit this Paradise, laid out before me. Not

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005), 4.247. Satan sits “like a cormorant” at 4.196.

just one thing, but another.

COLD WAR OF THE WORLDS

The world change I imagine happens where the world is changing the fastest: the Arctic Circle. In September 2008, the MV *Camilla Desgagnés*, the first commercial ship to sail through the Northwest Passage, did so almost entirely unobstructed. At this current rate of climate change, scientists at UCLA predict an ice-free passage by mid-century.² Such an opening opens up a series of geopolitical problems: to whom do these shipping lanes belong? What of the resources yet to be discovered underneath the ice? The express mission of the Arctic Council, formed in 1996 and comprised of eight nations and several indigenous groups, is to preemptively tackle these issues—or else face another cold war.³ I am reminded of another passage forged six years before the *Camilla*'s voyage: Bruno Latour's argument in *War of the Worlds: What about Peace?* “[W]hat is needed is a new recognition of the old wars we have been fighting all along—in order to bring about new kinds of negotiation, and a new kind of peace.”⁴ For Latour, it is better to be at war and to think about diplomacy than to imagine that there is no war at all and to hold fast to modernity's progress. One recognition of the old war occurred in the summer of 2012 when record amounts of Arctic sea ice melted. Cold comfort for world change. But what else can we learn from this war zone? Can peace ever be ensured? And are there new kinds of negotiation to be found in what is predicted to be one of the world's most *negotiable* passageways?

AVIAN TRUTHS

From my crow's mouth I scream three horrifying truths:

² Laurence C. Smith and Scott R. Stephenson, “New Trans-Arctic Shipping Routes Navigable by Midcentury,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Plus*, March 4, 2013; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1214212110.

³ Paul Arthur Berkman, “Preventing an Arctic Cold War,” *The New York Times*, March 12 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/13/opinion/preventing-an-arctic-cold-war.html>.

⁴ Bruno Latour, *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 4.

Truth #1: Change fractures our desire for wholeness. It will break, all of it.

Truth #2: A better name for this planet would be Ocean, not Earth.

Truth #3: Salt water tastes bitter, flavored with the recognition that nothing lasts.

These truths send me searching. Can I find passages through the sea ice?

My view from the Tree is wide and broad. In the tangled thickets, I find what I am looking for. I see Heteronyms.

The term “heteronym” refers to a member of a large group of imaginary personae, numbering over 70, in which the great 20th-century Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa wrote. These authors, each of whom has an individual name, style, biography, and physical characteristics, collectively represent a rage for variety amid the poverty of identity. Multiple names and multiple selves become ways to navigate our over-abundant world, the too-many Paradises over which we look. Author-ness and its *authoritee* become various, and the original self appears one of many voices, and not the most important one. The most influential heteronym, Alberto Caeiro, also overlooks Paradise when he writes poems. “I don’t pretend to be anything more than the greatest poet in the world,” Cairo claims. “I made the greatest discovery worth making, next to which all other discoveries are games of stupid children. I noticed the Universe.”⁵ Noticing is what I do, too, on this high branch. Seeing things in their differences and variety.

My question for the future is: how can we become heteronyms? Through what not-yet-opened passage must we pass? My future does not yet break open icy seas, but sits here, high on my branch, peering out at the world’s change. Variously.

⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Penguin, 2006), 6. This quotation appears in Zenith’s introduction.

RING THEM BELLS

Return again to the sea change happening at the top of the world, for here you might find different Arctic counsel, here is advice about how to shape the humanities and the sciences simultaneously in a changing world. I am reminded of (yet) another passage, this one unfurled before us by Michel Serres: “[This new map] transports us, in fact, from one major body of knowledge to the opposite one through the North-West passage. In geography, the carillon of the hard sciences finally falls silent, when that of the human sciences is barely beginning. In this almost silent space lies the landscape.”⁶ For Serres, the Northwest Passage is less a physical location and more an interchange between the local and global, the geological and political, the human and exact sciences. In this heteroscape of wet and dry, geography actively transports; like ice that hardens, melts, and carves, nothing is constant here except fluctuation itself. Passages ceaselessly emerge; maps must continually be redrawn. The Northwest Passage offers a way to think about being *between* (like a solid and a liquid, like a poet and a scientist), about being endlessly connective. Let us not only ring the bells of alarm—iceberg, dead ahead!—but also strike up a carillon call of collaboration between disciplines, beings. Peals never quiet in the almost silent seascape.

DISQUIET WATERS

My crow’s eyes snatch more quick glances down from the Tree of Life over icy vastness. I’m on the lookout for more heteronyms, and I find two.

The first glance finds Bernando Soares, technically a semi-heteronym because of his close resemblance to the biographical Pessoa, and *The Book of Disquiet* (*Livro de Desassossego*), his “factless autobiography.” In a fragment that may or may not have been intended for the final work, he writes about human encounters with hostile oceans:

Shipwrecks? No, I never suffered any. But I have

⁶ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (New York: Continuum, 2008), 274.

the impression that I shipwrecked all my voyages,
and that my salvation lay in interspaces of uncon-
sciousness.⁷

The whirl of heteronyms teaches shipwreck as identity and “salvation,” demonstrating that no voyage arrives without disaster. Therefore we embrace suffering and seek “interspaces.” In the sprawling mass of *The Book of Disquiet*, Soares slogs through failure and anonymity toward the partial and difficult consolations of art. “I don’t sleep,” writes Soares. “I interexist.”⁸ From my perch in the Tree I want to go down to him, light on his shoulder, nibble on his ear. His interspaces and intermixing structures my future.

I also spy another salty one, my favorite, Álvaro de Campos, crying out from the wharf-side or water’s edge, looking for passage or arriving after a long journey:

Wharf blackly reflected in still waters
The bustle on board ships,
O wandering, restless soul of people who live in ships,
Of symbolic people who come and go, and for whom nothing
lasts,
For when the ship returns to port
There’s always some change on board!⁹

Campos sings what the sea lures us into accepting. Even music won’t hold us in place. There is no stillness in the future I want.

And now I hear him cry out again, he who wants what I also want, who craves what I crave—

To have the audacity of sailcloth in the wind!
To be, like the topsails, the whistling of the winds!
An old guitar playing a fado about seas rife with
dangers,
A song for sailors to hear and not repeat!¹⁰

⁷ Fernando Pessoa, “A Voyage I Never Made (III),” in Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Penguin, 2001), 463.

⁸ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, 242.

⁹ Pessoa, “Maritime Ode,” in *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe*, 168.

¹⁰ Pessoa, “Maritime Ode,” in *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe*, 178.

The music helps, even as it vanishes. Campos's ecstatic lines burrow into the variety of this visible Paradise, moving from sharing "audacity" with rippling sailcloth to becoming that same cloth "whistling" in the winds, to nestling finally inside an old guitar's dreams. For an instant, in the poem's no-time, bodies slough away and self is nothing more than sound. With no repeating when we're done singing.

THIRD COAST

Before the mid-morning panel at which the first instantiation of this joint future was performed, we drove fifty miles West from Kalamazoo to the shore of Lake Michigan for an icy immersion. The intensity of that experience echoed in the presentation and continues to vibrate. Here, at the center of our shared future, is what it felt like—

When you dive into cold water, it pushes the wind out of you. The icy shock holds you still, just for an instant. You slide beneath the waves into water's slippery grip, and then lurch back up onto unsteady feet. Now everything's different. The air bites exposed skin, but it isn't just the cold or even the wind raking the lake into ragged swells. Something else. Your breath comes in near-frantic wrenches, and you can nearly feel some hidden motions inside your body, some awakened fire, constricted now inside loose ropes of cold. The lakewater has encircled your body, taken you whole—that's what immersion means—but after you stand up it gradually sloughs itself away. Second by second your breathing reasserts its rhythm. You plunge under a second time, and the cold comes back, but nothing like the first shock.

The shock of immersion becomes the shock of emersion. When you dip into the Great Lake, you realize that the cold does not sedate your senses; it propels you to compose, to make passage to a lecture hall, to present the future you want, the future with the water you were within that morning and that you still carry on your skin. The dip is an emergence that signals a *mergence*—a watery interchange between human and nonhuman, an ice-

cold interspace inherent in Lake Michigan's very name: a Chippewa Indian word, *meicigama*, "great water," an overflowing vastness that the earliest colonizers could not comprehend, only absorb into their language. To these early swimmers, this place, like the newfound geopolitical Arctic of today, must have had its share of councils. What negotiations were made? What wars? What peace? You imagine the figures that have passed through, like you, the littoral zone of the lake, this inland sea. Heteronymous convoys. Conveyances.

MARY MAGDALENE

Crows are voracious. I spy another glittering one, this time a saint with many names and identities, a medieval precursor to Pessoa's plural auto-piracy of selves. She swims in the icy waters with us. This is how Jacobus de Voragine begins her story in *The Golden Legend*:

The name Mary, or Maria, is interpreted as amaram mare, bitter sea, or as illuminator or illuminated. These three meanings are accepted as stranding for three shares or parts, of which Mary made the best choices, namely, the part of penance, the part of inward contemplation, and the part of heavenly glory.¹¹

It's the "or" that gets me, Miltonic devil-bird that I am. The sudden shift from bitter seas to illumination, or to illuminator: is the saint the means or the end? Or is it precisely her plurality that sanctifies, her shifting bitter salt-tasting light that shows and tells?

As the story continues the name proliferates:

Mary is called Magdalene, which is understood to mean "remaining guilty," or it means armed, or unconquered, or magnificent. (1:375)

Again later:

¹¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1:374. Further citations noted parenthetically in the text.

Mary's cognomen "Magdalene" comes from Magdalum, the name of one of her ancestral properties. (1:375)

So many stories attach to these names, from sin to cleansing to evangelical voyages without sails, God propelling our saint from the Holy Land to the south of France. Plays are written in a late-fifteenth century East Midlands dialect of Middle English.¹² Dan Brown gets in on the act.¹³ The point is: change attracts. Everyone wants variety.

KARL BUSHBY



Figure 1. Karl Bushby on the Alaskan coast. Photo by Dimitri Kieffer.

¹² This manuscript play is part of Bodleian MS Digby 133. For a recent study, see Susan Carter, "The Digby *Mary Magdalene*: Constructing the *Apostola Apostolorum*," *Studies in Philology* 106.4 (2009): 402–419.

¹³ Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), relies on conspiratorial fantasies about Mary Magdalene and Jesus widely circulated in Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

“Passage” comes from the Latin *passus* meaning “pace,” and the Northwest Passage asks us to keep up the pace with the changing world. Over two weeks in March 2006, the British pacemaker Karl Bushby walked almost sixty miles on ice across the Bering Land Bridge from Alaska to Russia: an impossible feat because the Bering Land Bridge no longer exists (Fig. 1); it disappeared over ten thousand years ago, we are told, buried under the Bering Strait.

Not for Bushby, however; the crossing is just one leg in his ongoing Goliath Expedition in which he is to walk with “an unbroken footpath” (meaning, unassisted by vehicles) nearly forty thousand miles from Chile to England.¹⁴ He passed through an interstitial space of freeze and thaw to tell us that we do not need to bridge divides between two giant continents, like the humanities and the sciences, that sit opposed along their straits of demarcation. We are already passing through.

CUSTANCE

Does the cormorant want always to be a cormorant? Might this, too change? Can I find a singularity in the worldsea, a still point, anchoring me to some piece of Paradise? I want some peace in my future.

In Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale” there is a woman who represents variety amid the paradox of the singular at sea. Alone like Bushby, she voyages into variety:

And in a ship al steereless, God woot,
They han hir set, and bidde hire lerne saille,
Out of Surrye agaynward to Ytaille. (439–441)¹⁵

Later, after many travels, she returns home:

“I am youre doghter Custance,” quod she,
“That whilom ye han sent unto Surrye.
It am I, fader, that in the salte see
Was put alone and dampned for to dye.
Now, goode fader, mercy I yow crye!” (1107–1111)

¹⁴ See the Goliath Expedition’s website: <http://www.odysseyxxi.com/>.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Man of Law’s Tale,” *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Citations given by line numbers in the text.

To be still the same after so much sea! “It am I,” she tells her father. Still Custance after all these years. That’s what the tale tells: some names survive at sea. Does her constancy invert heteronymity? Does she assert a constant *I* as a hedge against the too-much variety flowing all around her, its winds and currents? I don’t think so. She’s looking for passage, like all of us, and finds it, eventually, everywhere.

GUIDO VAN DER WERVE



Figure 2. Guido van der Werve, *Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright* (2007). Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

What change do I want from this passing interchange? Why, *peace*. So what about it? I suggest that we pass . . . and trespass. Bushby’s passage also teaches us that even a mistaken divide remains *divisive* nonetheless. Russian authorities ultimately halted his pace, detaining him for entering the country at an unauthorized entry point (the latest update as of April 2012 is that the Russian government has denied him a visa). For them, the “pass” bordered too close to the “trespass” (literally “passing across”). Yet what if we thought of trespassing not as an act of passing across a series of predetermined (and policed)

borders frozen in place, but a process that shows how these contingent borders are constantly being re/defined by beings, like Bushby, who are passing through? We begin to recognize *how* we do it—and thereby imagine new ways of negotiating future interactions. The choice to dip in or dip out of Arctic space (for example) is a false one; we are dipping, we are passing through, *always*. Consider the Dutch artist Guido van der Werve walking slowly in front of an icebreaker that pushes its way through Finland's Gulf of Bothnia (Fig. 2).¹⁶

Nummer Acht conveys the relationships between humans, technology, and ice that need to be renegotiated; nothing walks alone, unaided by the others. Even more significantly, "Acht" communicates an image of protest. What would it mean to walk in front of the multitude of commercial vessels as they plunge into the open/ing seas of the Northwest Passage, ships that might be the harbingers of cold war? To impede the "progress" of modernity, to trespass in the name of ethics, in the name of peace?

Walk on: the world change I propose here is not easy, and it certainly does not require a world without ice—or any "impediments" (anything which "shackles the feet") for that matter. We actually need impediments to pace: those things that attach to our feet like ice bridges underfoot, that give us freedom *because of* their bonds, and that direct our pace into new passages, into new maps of knowledge. (Ernest Shackleton was the world's greatest trespasser.) The future I want starts by rethinking the "trespass" not as the illegal endeavor it has come to be but as a "passage across" that is full of potential—for the humanities-sciences interchange, for the ecocritics who explore these interstices like pacing Bushbys and van der Werves, and for those of us who ponder ways to keep up the *pace*, to keep the *peace*, with a changing world.

SEA CHANGE AND/AS WORLD CHANGE

Can we sing it again, that old anthem? All together? The way we did at Kalamazoo:

Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change

¹⁶ Thanks to Karl Steel for directing us to this image.

Into something rich and strange?¹⁷

In our future we will sing it once more, and not repeat it.

In our future we will sing the carillon of the various, and pass it along disquietly.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Arden, 2011), 1.2.400–402.