

Archive Earth: Ambiguous Conversations and Conversions

Jamie Allen

*Woman a wail (lead vocals)
di eart is in labour (back-up vocals)
woman a wail (lead vocals)
creation in danger (back-up)
and what shall she bring forth from her travail?
— Afua Cooper (2007)*

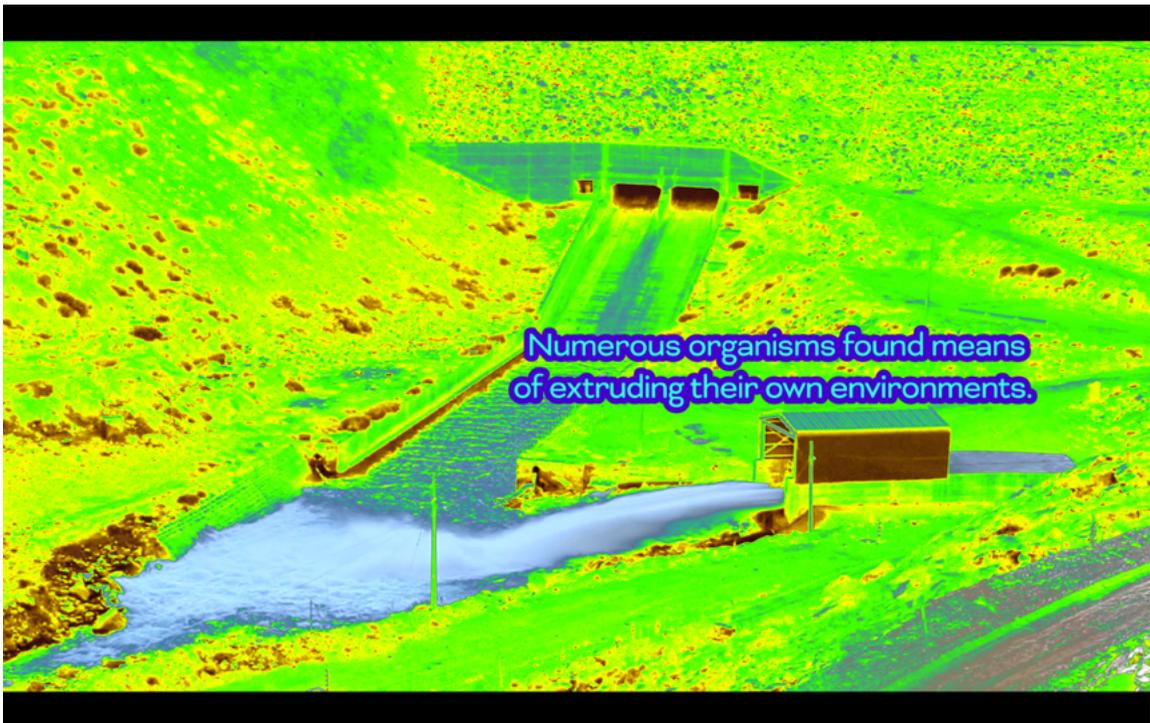
On 3 September 2014, a tender and mischievous *immortel*¹ angel gave a lecture to a community of people gathered in a church in Utrecht (Serres 1995). Michel Serres' address was a [pre-recorded video](#), spoken in his native French from his kitchen table at home, somehow presaging the 2020 pandemic's necessary preference for disembodied encounters. Serres, then 83 years old, had not been feeling well enough to make the journey to the Netherlands. What he offered that day was a brief and memorable orientation on nature, information and thought, the essence of which, to my memory at least, turned on the phrase: "I have already said that we think like the world; now I am saying that the world thinks like us" (Serres 2017).



*The nightmare is that there are two worlds.
The nightmare is that there is only one, this one.*
— Susan Sontag (2012)

It would be something of an understatement to say that ‘a lot’ has happened since the day of that lecture in autumn 2014. Then came an onrushing of interest in nonhuman expressivity, and an inexhaustible succession of ‘-cenes’ (Capitalo-, Anthro-, Plantationo-, Urbano-, Chthulu-, among other important suggestions [Haraway 2015]) were posited, which affected ideas and practice in scholarship, activism and policy. Numerous excursions, research and artistic field trips, group processions and collaborations by researchers, artists and collectives comprising geographers, geologists and geoscientists have sought to map new terrains of thought and action. ‘Terrain’, here, offers an apt metaphor for what is always in some way a continuation of the colonial knowledge-grab – extruding information from appropriated regions, extracting value from other ways of thought and life.

Michel Serres passed away in the summer of 2019. The following summer, a coronavirus, spread through acts of respiration, speech and physical contact, caused widespread disruption – restricting lives and, and in far too many cases, ending them. Yet there were awakenings too, as scientific imperatives and material realities once again provoked revisions to our presumptions and practices of proximity, mobility, and social, political and personal life.



All of these changes feel important, and each needs its own registration and recognition. The pandemic response seeks to keep things distant, while sensitivities to contact embroil everyone and everything in intimacies and proximities that go beyond delimitations of spatial geography. The vestiges of each little interaction seem more readily traced, processed and archived than ever before. As in all such moments in which material and infrastructural awareness makes a step-change, recursive, revelatory histories unfurl. We are called to acknowledge the sub-alterity of peoples, their heterogenous labours and alterlives that are both forced and chosen (Murphy 2017). Also acknowledged, in a much different way, are those biological and material subalternates that do the bulk of all work (Wynter 2015). All these subspecies of planetary alterity, still-silenced by the feigned distance of power-biopolitics, Western objectivity and capital-driven abstraction.

*Why do I have so many thoughts, they are driving me crazy.
 Why am I always going anywhere, instead of somewhere?
 Listen to me or not, it hardly matters.
 I'm not trying to be wise, that would be foolish.
 I'm just chattering.
 — Mary Oliver (2014)²*

These sub-alterities *can* be heard; they grow louder and more tumultuous – unmutable chatterings between Earth and world. A conversation between beings from everywhere, and those from somewhere in particular, creates transfers and frictions, lessons in “how to look around rather than ahead” (Tsing 2015: 22). All-too human, globalist projections become impossible; everything is re-localised, reattached and re-grounded.

Thompson and Harney (2018: 125) find these touchdowns and touchpoints in the multiple rhythms and arrhythms of the *procession*, a “living archive of the life-giving arts performed together in the ongoing ensemble of blackness.” The smallest of interactions, the practical, processional activities of making lives – and of trying to make sense of them – also create worlds (with further gratitude to Anna Tsing).

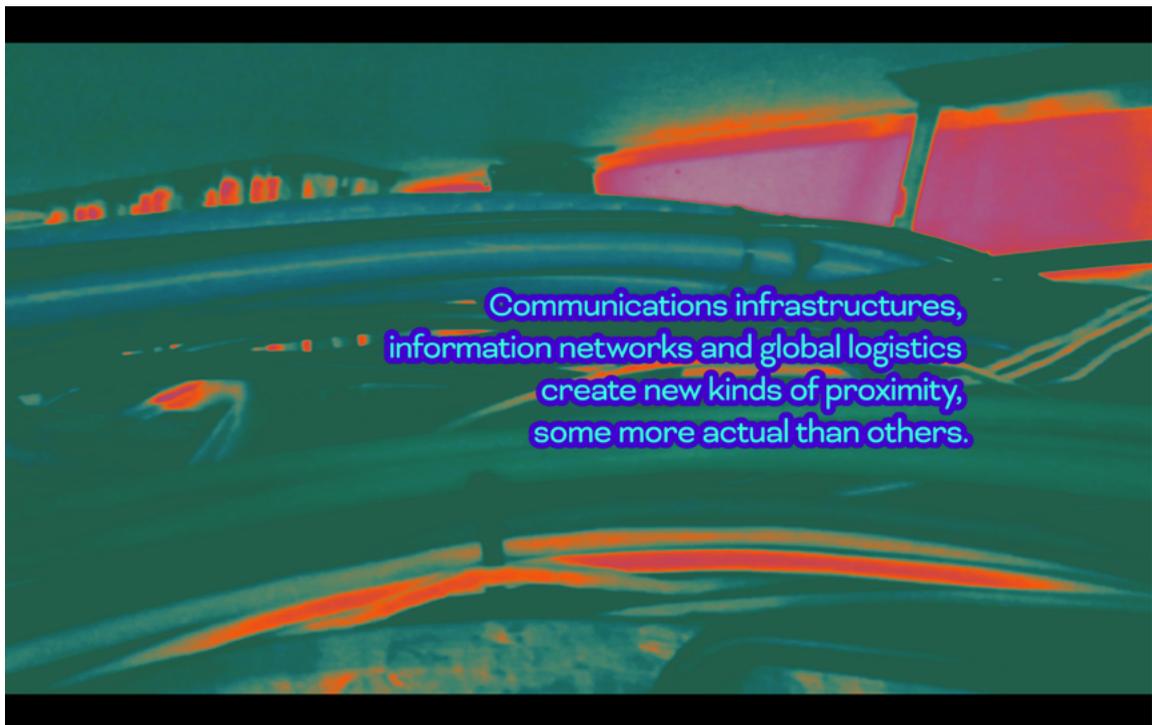
*To be human is to be intended toward the other.
We provide for ourselves transcendental figurations
of what we think is the origin of this animating gift:
mother, nation, god, nature.
These are names of alterity,
some more radical than others.*
– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003)

Archive Earth (11m 40s, 2020) is a dialogue between Earth-world positionalities, moving images and material circulations. It acknowledges multiple micro- and deep-times in scattered conversation, given as interchange between ‘us’ and ‘them’. It is not at all certain what this division has ever meant. However, it is very clear that such voicings are constructs – conceits that allow expressions to unfold.



This footage derives from numerous fieldwork excursions that I undertook in the years that followed Serres’ provocative Utrecht lecture. Each encounter was a profound worldview-changing privilege... To ride the claustrophobia-inducing elevator up the 213-metre-high guyed meteorological mast in the Meteorological Institute at Cabauw, the Netherlands. To hear family stories intertwine with stories of revolutionary families

over a lunchroom conversation at the Codelco copper smelter outside Valparaiso, Chile. To witness the measuring of wild bird eggshells at Kilpisjärvi, Finland, with their thickness inversely proportional to global warming (Jarvinen 1994). Every such excursion seemed to promise a collective grounding, enacted for different reasons and toward different political, creative, research, personal and social means, ends and media. Each experience of scientific outposts and infrastructural sites reveals places where peculiar worlds meet the Earth we all share, even as they resist such neat contrasts (Spivak 2011). From these meetings people produce archives of alliances and frictions, traces of personal interactions that are rendered public, published and post-produced.



On the various portable hard drives that I have stacked around me, there are reams of media tracing the movement of people through places, places that they transform as they traversed. These sounds and images now seem to me like found footage, captured by someone else, in a bygone era. Here is an archive that traces psychic erosions and decaying memory and, in the way of *fûkeiron* cinema, composing a forensics of anthropocenic landscapes.³ That is, these landscapes are edited: cut and recomposed first by infrastructural intervention, and then again through the chopping and splicing of a digital timeline.

The Earth is one but the world is not.
 – WCED (1984)

If these images were indeed captured in another era, it was one in which attempts at understanding planetarity were made, in part, by going around and trying to introduce ourselves to various parts of the Earth. This bumptious style of inquisition is wrought with contradictory desires for intimacy and forced meetings of substance that may sometimes do more harm than good – reminiscent of the presumptuous and fiercely curious Professor Challenger in Conan Doyle’s story “When the World Screamed” (Negarestani 2008; Parikka 2014; Doyle 2015; Allen 2018). Such closeness, between world and Earth, should in any era be enacted as a simpler kind of witnessing, or as moments for listening. We all know that is how you keep a good conversation going.

*If the subaltern cannot speak,
 he or she is obliged to listen,
 and acts of listening and responding
 inevitably place us in a condition
 of momentary subalterity,
 whatever our designated social,
 racial, gender, or class position.*
 – George Lewis (2020)



Notes:

¹ The informal name for the forty members of the Académie Française; the highest honour and office for an intellectual in France.

² Thanks to Nell Gehrke of Minneapolis, Minnesota, for a 2019 reading of this poem that continues to mark me deeply.

³ *Fûkeiron* is a theory of landscape cinema that emerged at the end of the 1960s in Japan. Thanks to Merve Bedir for pointing me to this idea and its framing (Furuhata 2007).

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Author:



Jamie Allen is a Canada-born researcher, artist, designer and teacher, interested in what technologies teach us about who we are as individuals, cultures and societies. He likes to make things with his head and hands, and has been an electronics engineer, a polymer chemist and a designer with the American Museum of Natural History in New York. His work is mostly collaborative, acknowledging how central friendship, passion and love are to knowledge practices like art and research. His PhD (*summa cum laude*) was supervised by Siegfried Zielinski and Avital Ronell. He is Senior Researcher at the Critical Media Lab in Basel, Switzerland.

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