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## The Crisis of Environmental Narrative in the Anthropocene

The public is very familiar with declensionist narratives about the environment, with stories about extinction, degradation, contamination, deforestation, and climate change, even if declension as a term has circulated primarily among environmental historians and literary critics. Environmental scientists, including in my own field of soil sciences, perhaps think less often about the narrative structures through which our work is communicated and gains wider influence. Geologists are debating whether the contemporary geologic epoch of the Holocene is to be renamed the Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup> To many, the Anthropocene will promote the declension narrative to a global scale. Indeed, the Anthropocene presents all sorts of problems, not the least of which is that if declension is our sole environmental narrative, human beings are but agents of planetary destruction. While scholars today freely discuss post-Holocene problems, consider schoolteachers in the Anthropocene who must motivate their students in the face of nature's loss! New environmental narratives are needed to counter and enrich that of environmental declension.

The need for new environmental narratives is hardly new. Ted Steinberg's "Down, Down, Down, No More" cried out for an alternative to that of declension.<sup>2</sup> In fact, when geographer Carl Sauer wrote in the 1930s he tried to motivate by boldly asking whether human beings would ever be able to distinguish "loot from yield."<sup>3</sup> The late Thomas Berry wrote explicitly for people in the Anthropocene.<sup>4</sup>

Here, I make a Georgic narrative to counter that of declension. Derived from Virgil's *Georgics*, a cycle of poems that frame Earth as the home of nature and human beings, Georgic narratives frame the natural world as a home not only highly vulnerable to human action but one entirely dependent for its survival on the quality of human beings' "toil, relentless

- 1 Jan Zalasiewicz, et al., "When Did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level is Stratigraphically Optimal," *Quaternary International* 383 (2015): 196–203; Matt Edgeworth et al., "Diachronous Beginnings of the Anthropocene: The Lower Bounding Surface of Anthropogenic Deposits," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 33–58.
- 2 Ted Steinberg, "Down, Down, Down, No More: Environmental History Moves Beyond Declension," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004): 260–66.
- 3 Carl O. Sauer, "Theme of Plant and Animal Destruction in Economic History," *Journal of Farm Economics* 20, no. 4 (1938): 765–75.
- 4 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (New York: Sierra Club Books, 1990).

toil.”<sup>5</sup> Simply put: if declension narratives separate human beings from a natural world we loot, the Georgic has human beings intimately working constructively with the natural world, *no matter the future prospects*.

As a case study, I would like to apply the Georgic narrative to think about large-scale environmental degradation and remediation, using the Southern Piedmont of the United States where my work on soil has focused. In the Southern Piedmont, cultivation largely for Old South cotton led directly to some of the most serious land and human degradation in North America. While the agricultural economy of the early nation benefited greatly from Piedmont cotton, often raised by enslaved laborers, the region’s erosive rainfall, erodible soil, and farming practices over only around 100 years combined to eliminate about 15 centimeters of soil from nearly 25 million acres.<sup>6</sup> Farming transformed the region and its people, according to Fisk University Professor Charles Spurgeon Johnson, into “a miserable panorama of unpainted shacks, rain-gullied fields, straggling fences, rattle-trap Fords, dirt, poverty, disease, drudgery, and monotony that stretches for a thousand miles across the cotton belt.”<sup>7</sup> Soil historically mobilized from Piedmont cotton farms will pollute the region’s streams and rivers for decades, centuries, and even millennia. The region’s riparian wetlands are inundated with up to a meter or more of what is technically called “legacy sediment.”<sup>8</sup> Following about 1920, countless Piedmont farm families, most poverty-stricken, abandoned their farms in a painful exodus to cities or to regions with more promising agriculture.<sup>9</sup> This human-natural history fits well into a declension narrative.

Yet the Earth and its peoples are nothing if not dynamic. Nearly 100 years have now passed since the peak of soil erosion and farm abandonment. Forests have regrown on much former farmland; eroded fields have been converted to other uses including new home sites. Most impressive are the many small Piedmont farms and gardens that are recultivating formerly eroded lands to supply food to local farmers’ markets, restaurants, and grocery stores. A new narrative is growing in the Piedmont, a narrative we

5 David Ferry, translator, *The Georgics of Virgil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

6 Stanley W. Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion on the Southern Piedmont: 1700–1970* (Ankeny, IA: Soil & Water Conserv. Soc., 2008).

7 C. S. Johnson, E. R. Embree and W. W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (Chapel Hill, NA: UNC Press, 1935).

8 L. A. James, “Legacy Sediment: Definitions and Processes of Episodically Produced Anthropogenic Sediment,” *Anthropocene* 2 (2014): 16–26.

9 Daniel deB. Richter and Daniel Markewitz, *Understanding Soil Change: Soil Sustainability over Millennia, Centuries, and Decades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

can rightly call Georgic because it only arises from persistent human labor aimed at renewing or regenerating the land.

On Duke University's campus in Durham, North Carolina, a 50-year-old Blomquist Garden and new Duke Campus Farm are today both growing on eroded farmland. While the campus farm is only moderately eroded, gullies that deeply scar former farm fields make up the Blomquist Garden, with some three meters deep. The eroded soil of the campus farm produces food for the campus and a growing community. At the Blomquist Garden, natural regeneration of pines is encouraged and a large collection of the South's native flora is tended directly on the gullied old fields. Thousands of visitors each year are attracted to the Blomquist Garden and campus farm, yet remarkably few yet appreciate the full meaning of what they are visiting. Both are presented mainly within the declension narrative, as a celebration of nature and plant life, as a rustic and natural refuge and welcome respite from the hectic industrial business of human affairs. How much more compelling and significant would these places be if they were presented with a Georgic narrative and experienced explicitly as human-natural creations with their characters derived not only from their celebrated plant life but also from their long-laboring gardeners and farmers?

What makes Duke's Blomquist Garden and campus farm invaluable is hardly their Duke financial endowments but the Georgic narrative that tells us that skillful human labor over decades and "relentless toil" can promote aesthetic and ecologic values even on severely degraded land.<sup>10</sup> While the rain that waters the Piedmont's soils may still run off through old farm field gullies, today's runoff carries far less eroded soil than that in the past, owing to blankets of organic matter and the anchorage of human-assisted plant roots. If aesthetic values, prolific plant life, and cleaner water can spring from the deeply scarred Southern Piedmont, a Georgic narrative can run counter to that of environmental declension, and reinforce the important, long, and hard work that will be required to sustain our planet in the Anthropocene.

10 J. F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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