My motivation for the topic of this issue was instigated by the succession of natural disasters witnessed in early 2011, and my personal perplexity in coming to terms with (that is, naming, signifying) the visual display of the suffering of others. It began with the January floods in South East Queensland, followed by the February earthquake in Christchurch, and concluded with the 11 March Japanese tsunami resultant from the 8.9 magnitude quake which struck off the east coast of Sendai, and which continues to be newsworthy based on the consequential Fukushima nuclear catastrophe. As spectator to trauma—exacerbated by the television media's choice to continuously loop the scenes of devastation—bearing witness to these events engendered a peculiar form of private trauma in itself. Even the phrase ‘to bear witness’ implies transference in the act of witnessing, that not only is the visual ‘held’ by the eye for the duration of the image, the subject of that witnessing is in some way ‘carried’ by the witness. There is an associative load. But the spectator's position is, of course, a privileged one. I am not the subject in agony captured on camera. I am not the body in the water. I am not this calamity. However, in my memory recall of these events I have imposed (transposed?) myself into the foreground of the viewing frame, witnessing myself in the third person, as the subject sitting forward on the lounge or pacing as he witnesses the broadcast images. He hears no words. There is no sound. He is thinking only of punctuation: an ellipsis; a question mark. The questions do eventually arise. What narratives do we construct in response to catastrophe? What are the relative ethical considerations and the political outcomes? How do we navigate the tensions between public instances of catastrophe and personal expressions of the trauma associated? How are words and images used to express/contain disaster of such scale?

While the media is usually the arbiter determining the initial form of an event's representation, it is the various formations of narrative which thereafter become central to representing disaster in a manner which engenders meaning. This issue of Social Alternatives aims to explore those narratives and the tensions they express. The scholarly papers and short prose collected here under the theme of 'Disaster Dialogues' demonstrate the diversity of narratives—both private and public—we create in response to catastrophe.

Responding to 'Lost and Found', an exhibition of personal photographs salvaged from debris following the March 2011 Japanese earthquake and consequent tsunami, Anne Collett discusses the tensions and differences between viewing iconic photographs of public disaster and private photographs taken pre-disaster; photographs which capture memory, community, and that which has become irrevocably 'lost'.

In my own paper, I explore the use of photography and comic illustration in two illustrated books which seek to represent personal trauma experienced during and after the World Trade Centre attacks of 11 September 2001. In analysing their combinations of word and image, this paper argues that Jonathan Safran Foer (Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close) and Art Spiegelman (In the Shadow of No Towers) create narrative 'spaces' which provide a mediated authentication of such trauma.

Continuing the focus on 9/11, Kate Wilson explores poetic elegy and 'mediatised' experiences of mass death in relation to Simon Armitage's Out of the Blue, a written elegy which originated from a television documentary of the same title broadcast on the fifth anniversary of 9/11. Wilson discusses Armitage's poem as an exemplar of how contemporary elegy emphasises our 'mediatised' experience of public catastrophe, while using this experience as a means to engender meaning.

Lesley Hawkes reflects on literary tourism and how it has been used to ‘re-imagine’ the Somerset region in the United Kingdom following the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic; a catastrophe which saw the widespread destruction of livestock and communities, and the creation of a negative perception of the area. Hawkes walks in the steps of Romantic poetry along the Coleridge Way Walk and considers the apparent transformation of the region's image.

Turning to the 2011 Queensland floods, Rose Williamson considers the rhetorical dimensions of the then Premier...
Anna Bligh's 'North of the Border' speech in which Bligh appealed to Queensland residents by way of a 'narrative of resilience' and heroism, a common rhetorical practice employed by political leaders post-disaster. Williamson observes this commonality and interrogates Bligh's application of the 'Queenslander' archetype.

Returning to images of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and the resultant Fukushima Daiichi nuclear catastrophe, Upendra Choudhury provides an overview of India's nuclear programme, the formation of anti-nuclear groups, and the impact of the Fukushima Daiichi disaster in reinforcing anti-nuclear sentiment.

Madeleine Rowland discusses community division and the influence of media discourse in attributing blame for the 2003 Canberra firestorm and the 2011 Mitchell chemical explosion. Concerned about the role the media plays in society's understanding and perceptions of disaster, Rowland argues that the emotionally driven blame attributed to the emergency services negates more constructive discussion regarding disaster cause and prevention.

These scholarly papers are interleaved with short prose by Deborah de Groot ('Letters, and the addition or subtraction thereof'), Amy Mackelden and Laura Tansley ('Black Out'), and Sandra Arnold ('Moments of Magnitude'). These stories seek to express the voices of disaster, disaster as past, present, and as potential event. Overall, this issue of Social Alternatives aims to blend the personal with the public, the poetic with the political, and to form a dialogue between its readers regarding the representation of catastrophe in word and image.