

Rachel
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Perspectives

Beyond Doom and Gloom

An Exploration through Letters

Edited by

ELIN KELSEY



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RCC Perspectives

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Elin Kelsey

“Dear _____”: Writing Our Way Beyond Doom and Gloom

“How do you feel when you think about the environment?” I’ve been asking the same question for years. I ask it of women in airports and kids in poor rural villages. I ask it of scientists in Antarctica. I ask it at conferences and in bars and in preschools. What I have found is that people always have an answer. And, those answers reveal how hopeless so many of us feel about the state of the planet.

Our worries about the environment are not only academic. They affect us personally. They influence what we choose to eat or how we get to work. They keep us awake at night. They make us grieve for the world we are leaving to our grandchildren. They stop us from choosing to have kids. They trigger depression. “I don’t want to live under the thumb of despair anymore,” a man recently wrote to me. “Not only is it a terrible way to live, it’s not productive and results in disengagement and total loss of agency. I may not be able to fix the world, but I want to go on trying through positive actions and not hiding under the bedcovers.”

Yet there is a strange silence about the emotional impact of the ways in which we talk about the environment. The environment is so enmeshed within a narrative of doom and gloom that we no longer separate the issues from the way they are portrayed. Environmental issues are real and urgent. I am in no way saying that we’ve exaggerated the scale of environmental problems, or that nature, when left to her own devices, will somehow heal herself. I spend my days working on biodiversity issues; I am all too familiar with the Anthropocene and the pressing magnitude of the problems we face. But the way we communicate about the environment is so negative and overwhelming that we are fueling a culture of hopelessness that threatens to seal the planet’s fate.

By bombarding people with issues at scales that feel too large to surmount, we inadvertently cause them to downplay, tune out, or shut down. We have media ratings to protect children from sex or violence in movies but we think nothing of inviting a scientist into a second grade classroom and telling the kids the planet is ruined. According to the *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, “a quarter of (Australian) children are so troubled about the state of the world that they honestly believe it will come to an end

before they get older.” There is growing evidence from a range of countries of children and adults feeling overwhelmed and hopeless about the state of the environment. Global dread, eco-anxiety, environmental grief—despair about the future of the planet has garnered many labels in recent years. The environmental crisis is also a crisis of hope.

Whenever we straightjacket an idea or an issue into a single, monolithic story, whether it’s “environment” or “Africa” or “gay” or “terrorist,” we lose the nuance and specificity of context. We miss positive developments and shifts in perception. We are left with an over-simplification that is so generalized it becomes inherently inaccurate. Because we are told that the planet is doomed, we do not register the growing array of scientific studies demonstrating the recovery of nuclear zones and the acclimation of baby corals to ocean acidification. The media that covered the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill do not return to profile the astonishing return of life after a catastrophic event. We continue to preach “Save the Whales” despite the recovery to historic levels of many populations of whale species, and tweets from scientists like this one: “Continual increase in North Atlantic right whales since 1980. Time to stop saying they are going extinct.”

I have taken to collecting conservation successes: hopeful solutions that pass the scientific criteria of peer review. At first they were difficult to find because even our scientists have been more focused on recording losses than gains. As Nancy Knowlton, a preeminent marine scientist puts it: “An entire generation of scientists has now been trained to describe, in ever greater and more dismal detail, the death of the ocean.” A few years back, Nancy started hosting what she called “Beyond the Obituaries” meetings at major international scientific conferences. Scientists were invited to come and share only conservation success stories. She thought they might get a few people showing up, but they were inundated. In 2014, she and I, along with Dr. Heather Koldewey of the Zoological Society of London teamed up to launch a social media campaign to crowd-source hope. The #OceanOptimism hashtag we created went viral, reaching 1.7 million accounts. Log on and you’ll see dozens of hopeful marine conservation successes emerging all over the globe each day.

Yet mainstream environmental message-makers continue to hammer home the dire state of problems as if nothing has shifted and no progress has been made since the movement began. Programs like the 2014 Emmy award-winning series *Years of Living Dangerously* load up their arsenal of horrifying statistics and gut-wrenching images

to scare us straight. Is it any wonder so many of us oscillate between guilt, frustration, and powerlessness? We are, they tell us, locked in a battle to save the planet. In battle, one does not have time for emotion; one does not have time for ambiguity. Environmental solutions are emerging and maturing all over the world. But they are often ignored or trivialized or underreported and thus the likelihood of replicating them is reduced because they do not fit the battle cry we constantly hear—the Earth is doomed.

Recognizing the collateral damage of apocalyptic storytelling is vital to the future of the planet—and to our emotional health. But how do we shift beyond doom and gloom?

The letters in this volume are responses to that dilemma. They emerged from a workshop generously hosted by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in the spring of 2014.

To help us “hack” the boundaries of our thinking, we drew on the historic inspiration of Der Blaue Reiter (*The Blue Rider*) group of artists who lived and worked in the early 1900s in Schwabing, a borough in Munich where the RCC is based. The beautiful image on the cover of this publication was painted by Franz Marc, one of the group’s founding members, entitled “In the Rain” (*Im Regen*). Der Blaue Reiter was a loose-knit group of individuals whose creative aims varied widely. It welcomed women and others who challenged the norms of the artistic establishment of the time. The RCC has a similar culture of avant-garde thinking and broad inclusiveness. We situated ourselves in the spirit of “movement” by conducting the workshop as a “walking colloquium” in which we shared ideas while physically exploring. We began the day at the Lenbachhaus museum, opening the discussion of the workshop theme at the museum café and then briefly exploring the Blue Rider collection. We walked and talked our way through the streets and parks of Schwabing where Blue Rider artists worked and lived, letting the following provocative questions guide our conversations:

- How do we overcome the pervasive belief that if we speak of hope, we must not know how bad things are?
- How do we address the fear that if we acknowledge the capacity for resilience, we risk feeding the rhetoric of environmental skeptics or the mistaken perception that we don’t have to change?

- How might we “hack” our rational response to shifting environmental narratives in order to embrace more holistic, integral, emotive, perceptive, creative ways forward?
- If our academic credibility and advancement is based on our capacity for critique, how can we risk shifting towards solutions-based orientations?
- How do we bring the Digital Age, new stages and structures of collective consciousness, the capacity for agency in the other-than-human world, and other emerging trends into the ways in which we imagine and invent new environmental narratives?
- How can we best influence and enact a shift beyond “doom and gloom”?

As we are interested in bridging the academic-practitioner divide, and recognizing the power of letters to shape new narratives, Christof Mauch put forward the wonderful idea of creating this publication as a series of fictional letters. We were free to choose to write to whomever or whatever we wished. Interest in the project was so great that we decided to mount a collaborative, digital exhibition on the same theme on the RCC’s Environment & Society Portal (www.environmentandsociety.org). We hope that this journal will stimulate your own emotional exploration into environmental narratives and that you will consider contacting us about contributing to this work.

The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) offers an unparalleled culture in which to explore ideas from an international range of academic and practitioner contexts. Many fellows, myself among them, equate the experience of working at the RCC to paradise. Thank you to Christof Mauch and Helmuth Trischler for their remarkable leadership and the supportive, invigorating culture they inspire. I greatly appreciate Marielle Dado and Katie Ritson for their editorial talent and their unwavering energy in bringing this volume to life.

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Between People





Mr. Appachan, a follower of the Zero Budget Natural Farming method in Wayanad, India, proudly presents a cabbage that was cultivated entirely without pesticides and fertilizers and grew to perfection with only the application of the fermented preparation *jivanmirta* (Photos courtesy of Daniel Münster).

Thomas Princen

A Letter to a (Composite) Student in Environmental Studies

In class you said you ask yourself time and again, is it worth it? You're studying all this environmental science and policy, you know you'll get a decent job with the degree, but is there anything one can really do to "save the planet" given the enormity of the challenge? In reality, aren't we doomed?

My answer—no one can change the world, but only strive to live well, and responsibly, in this world—was inadequate, to say the least. So let me try here to do better. Three points.

One, there was actually a certain truth in what I said (which was adapted from mythologist Joseph Campbell). No one inhabits the entire world, only that which one attends to (William James). We can "attend" to the drop-down menu's "Latest Headlines" and inhabit a world of bombings and coups, gadgets and personalities. Or we can attend to the people around us, to the institutions that shape us and that, to an extent, we shape, to the river that flows constantly but with great variability, to the buds that open every spring. We can attend to the language we speak: asking ourselves, is this the language of reductionism, domination, expansion, extraction, mechanization, separation, abstraction, commercialization, consumerism and hence part of the problem? Or is it the language of holism, pluralism, co-creation, restraint, tending, ecosystems, inclusion, connection, place, community and hence a move in the right direction?

In this sense, then, each of us can choose our world and, partly, create it.

Two, to change the world requires power. Not necessarily the classic form, "power over"—armies, bombs, gold, money, tribunals, tear gas, jails. But "power with"—a good idea, a powerful story, collaborative problem solving, social mobilization. Yes, power with doesn't make the headlines but it arguably is what makes a real difference, especially over the long term. This is especially true for those of us who aspire to be agents of change and dare confront otherwise powerful ideas (e.g., growth, efficiency, consumer sovereignty) and powerful actors (e.g., financiers who fancy themselves masters of the universe or a court that says corporations are persons).

The challenge, as I see it, is not to “make” these ideas and actors change; that is playing the power over game and no one I know in the sustainability business has that kind of power. Even if some did, playing that game would just recapitulate the same dynamics—us versus them, good guys and bad guys, winners and losers. Rather, the challenge is to see and to take opportunities to confront the powerful ideas and actors, reject them, and create alternatives to them. Creating the space for such opportunities is, as I see it, what you are doing here—studying, acquiring new knowledge and skills, framing problems in different ways, posing questions, especially hard questions like, as you said, is it worth it.

So my third and final point is that you and I can do no more, no more than choose the world we inhabit, employ appropriate language (that of, say, sustainability, justice and peace), confront powerful actors and ideas, and be open to opportunities as they arise. But that may not be enough. At risk of cliché, it also requires courage, the courage to recognize and act on those opportunities. I can tell you from personal experience doing these things is not comfortable, not convenient, not easy when it challenges ingrained social norms. One can lose friends quickly, even, for example, in a very liberal, sympathetic community by suggesting in a parent-teacher meeting that children can walk to school or in a university faculty meeting that growing enrollments, bigger classes, and a larger faculty is not necessarily a good thing. These instances are of course trivial. But this is the world I inhabit, or part of it anyway. So this is where I “change the world,” my world, one step at a time. It isn’t much, I admit, but it’s all I can do; it’s all any of us can do. Again, we can do no more.

But we can easily (and comfortably and conveniently) do less. We can speak the language of growth and efficiency and make our own world cleaner. We can go along with the extractive and exploitative and make a donation to a good cause. We can consume more and more to “support the economy,” and make sure the stuff is “green.” We can denounce policymakers for failing to act as we continue to supply them with “sound science.” We can ridicule the polluters and boycott their products, and buy other products. We can accept the prognostications of doom and gloom and resign ourselves to lives of comfort now, misery later.

So doing more than business as usual is the challenge, changing our world, not everyone else’s, finding opportunities to be powerful in ways that afflict the comfortable (and

privileged and entitled and vocal and those with a seat at the table), speaking and acting as if there is only one planet, one place to live, one community to live in.

Sherilyn MacGregor

A Letter to James Lovelock

Dear James (if I may),

You are not one to mince your words, so I expect you will appreciate it if I will get straight to my point. You have been called a “prophet of environmental doom” who is more interested in selling books than saving the planet. You get a lot of flak for the things you say about climate change, nuclear power, fracking, and environmentalism. People think what you say is excessively pessimistic and downright dangerous. I started to write you a letter of complaint but then it occurred to me. I think I know what you’re up to: yours is a cunning strategy of *reverse psychology*.

I’ve done a bit of reading (well, “Googling” actually) about reverse psychology. Social psychologists think it works because people don’t like being told what to do or think. We are compelled to do/think the opposite of what we’re pressured to do/think simply to re-establish what psychologists call “autonomy,” a very powerful motivator of action. I have reasons to suspect that your polemical pronouncements are actually designed to provoke people to prove you wrong. Let me explain.

You are best known for developing the Gaia hypothesis, a theory that presents the Earth as a self-regulating organism. Correctly or not, some have interpreted your theory to mean that the planet can withstand humanity’s destructive ways and that nothing we do will destabilize its life support systems. It is this aspect of your theory that has been said to invoke feelings of apathy, but the opposite also happens: it inspires a sense of reverence for the planet. I have observed this effect first-hand as a teacher of environmental studies. Far from adopting scientific neutrality or the fatalism of deep geological time, I have known students to pursue careers in ecological conservation precisely because they believe, thanks to you, that they have a responsibility to take care of the wonderful living being called Gaia.

The Gaia hypothesis has been a source of scientific controversy for forty years. I’m sure you’ve heard that the latest view in the scientific community is that the direct opposite hypothesis to your Gaia is probably right. Maybe you’ve read Toby Tyrell’s 2013 book

On Gaia? He argues pretty persuasively that the balance of scientific evidence supports the view that human actions actually do have highly detrimental impacts on planetary conditions. This got me thinking that maybe by proposing Gaia, you actually wanted to provoke the scientific community to prove the anthropogenic nature of the environmental crises. Scientists certainly know a lot more about the earth's complex systems today than they did in the 1970s when you first started making your claims. I wonder whether this might have been your plan all along.

I suspect a similar strategy of reverse psychology may be at work in your political hypotheses. To say, as you have done, that “humans are too stupid to prevent climate change” is a pretty dangerous claim. To some it might inspire fatalism, but I think you really want to goad people into proving you wrong. Telling someone she is too stupid to do something usually has the opposite effect, like when a teacher told a twelve-year-old me that I didn't have what it took to go to university, I worked damned hard to prove him wrong. Turns out, proving wrong your misanthropic assessment of humanity is not difficult. One need only think about all the people who devote their time and energy to mitigating the damage caused by human actions. It is easy to prove you wrong by pointing to the thousands of environmental movements around the world that are struggling to defend the earth. From the Brazilian Amazon to the Canadian Prairies, people are putting their lives on the line to stop the extraction and exploitation that is changing the climate. According to Global Witness, more than 700 environmental activists have been killed since 2001 for doing what they believe in. In light of this dismal fact, I think your proclamations of human stupidity will make many more people angry enough to roll up their own sleeves and get active. Who are you calling stupid? I daresay a new generation of eco-warriors will be created in response to your bold claims.

You have said we may need to “put democracy on hold” because we don't have time for it in the face of climate change. And you've argued that perhaps it would be better to have a few people running the show rather than letting the (stupid) people have a say in environmental governance. Here again, my outrage is tempered by my suspicion. I think what you really intend with your hyperbole is makes us want to defend democracy and justice—longstanding pillars of ecological politics since the 1970s—all the more. I believe your challenge has inspired people (myself included) to review and improve their reasons for believing that the only viable path to a sustainable future is a democratic one. Your call for eco-authoritarianism is just the kind of provocation we need in this post-political age.

On the day before the release of a landmark UN report on the impacts of climate change, I read an interview with you in which you said that “environmentalism has become a religion that does not pay attention to facts.” Criticisms of your badly-timed comments flourished on Facebook, but could it be that you chose your moment wisely? Your outrageous statement served as a reminder that we greens need to think more carefully about our messages and strategies. We know environmentalism is internally diverse, scientifically rigorous, and eschews the kind of “group think” that can be characteristic of organised religions. But maybe we haven’t been as aware of our external profile as we should. Sometimes it’s easy to forget about reputation management when you have more pressing things on your plate, like stopping oil exploration in the Arctic or protesting the use of bee-killing biocides, but I expect your claims will make environmentalists work even harder to communicate our points more effectively.

So I guess not outrage but thanks are in order, James. Thank you for keeping the green movement on its toes. I hope you will write many more of your gloom and doom books and give more newsworthy interviews condemning environmentalism and all the people who support it. I hope you sell so many books you can’t possibly spend all your money. I say, keep it coming! And about your cunning plan, don’t worry: your secret is safe with me.

Yours,
Sherilyn

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Daniel Münster

A Letter to Subhash Palekar, Natural Farmer

Dear Mr. Palekar,

I write to you today to express my deep gratitude and admiration for your work of tirelessly propagating your system of natural farming to famers across India. I hope you remember me. We met last February in the South Indian town of Nilambur, where you were giving a five-day workshop on your farming method of Zero Budget Natural Farming. I remember those days fondly as both strenuous and fascinating. I recall the summer heat as almost unbearable during these many long hours that I spent sitting on a plastic chair listening to your teachings in a crowd of 600 farmers from all over Kerala. Sometimes during the midday heat, I must confess, I dozed off to your inimical Maharati-inflected English speech which was followed by translations into Malayalam which always seemed to take almost double the time. Sometimes I may have gotten bored during this long week when your teachings were very technical instructions, such as how to prepare insect repellants out of fermented cow urine or how to properly space banana plantations. But you, Palekarji, never seemed to tire; you constantly called your audience to order by shouting “Are you understood?” or by making us repeatedly take a vow, by raising our hands and repeating after you to never ever use a single gram of chemical fertilizers or pesticides again. Despite the hardship of sitting long hours in this overheated multi-purpose auditorium, your workshop was one of the most fascinating and hopeful events I had participated in during the many years that I have worked as an anthropologist in India.

I had first heard of your farming methods in Wayanad, a district not far from Nilambur, where I had conducted fieldwork on one of the most drastic manifestations of agrarian crisis in India: farmers’ suicides. You are of course very aware of the suicide epidemic among Indian farmers, hailing yourself from the Vidarbha region in Maharashtra, which is an infamous suicide hotspot in India. The story of farmers’ suicides in Wayanad is a story of settlers cultivating commercial boom crops such as pepper, banana, or rubber. Globalizing market forces and the green revolution replaced Kerala’s old traditions of mixed homestead farming with speculative monocropping.

We have thus both seen rural angst and know what doom and gloom looks like for small-scale farmers in India: degraded soils, debt traps, pest attacks, declining yields, dependence on chemical inputs, speculative cash cropping. Many farmers claim that agriculture is over, that it is all gone, or “elaam poyi,” as they say in Malayalam. However not everybody in Wayanad shared these feelings of “futureless-ness” as my colleague Esha Shah called it. There was a small group of enthusiastic and hopeful farmers, who were very well aware of the environmental and human costs of capitalist farming but who had found their way of dropping out of its destructive logic and were looking at a future of abundance, autonomy, and sovereignty. You may have guessed it: these were the first Zero Budget Natural Farmers I had met and who introduced me to your teaching and who later encouraged me to participate in your workshop.

Listening to you and your followers I realized that the hope you plant in the minds of farmers rests on two pillars. One—the Zero Budget pillar—encourages farmers not to buy any farming inputs and food from the market and thus to maximize autonomy from market forces. “We do not take a single Paisa to the market,” you repeated over and over again at the workshop. I remember you shouting at exploitative “input industries,” which you identify as a prime cause of debts and ultimately suicide. You explained how these external inputs hinge on an erroneous (chemical) theory of soil fertility that sees soil as inert and deficient matter. You instead taught us to conceive of soil as *Annapurna* (mother earth) a living part of what you like to call “nature” and an abundant “ocean of nutrients.” As a consequence, you claim that everything a farmer needs for building soil fertility can be found on the farm if the farmers keep a native Zebu cow. Cutting ties with the market also involves a return to the cultivation of food crops (*baksha krishi*) rather than cash-crops that have dominated smallholder cultivation.

Your second pillar—natural farming—aims to restore and manage soil fertility through the redesign of cropping patterns and, most importantly, the application of a fermented preparation, which you call *jivamṛta* or, Nectar of Life. *Jivamṛta* is your core invention. It is prepared by mixing the urine and dung of native cows, pulse powder, and a sweet component such as jaggery or fruit with water and letting it ferment for several days. The importance of the native Zebu cow, you claim, is due to the super-abundance of micro-nutrients in their dung and urine, as compared to high-yielding hybrid cows. *Jivamṛta*, when applied to the soil, does not act as a fertilizer. That means it is not ab-

sorbed by the plants. Instead it enhances microbial activity in the soil, which in turn attracts earthworms, which bring nutrients from lower levels of the earth to the topsoil.

Palekarji, you have no idea what a hopeful paradigm shift it is for farmers to learn that their soils are naturally fertile and have an abundance of nutrients that only need to be activated with the help of *jivamṛta*. It is a great liberation for them to conceptualize fields, as one farmer put it, as “self-sufficient forests”. After applying *jivamṛta* and following your recommendations, farmers report highly increased yields, healthier plants, less need for irrigation, and reduced labor costs. Among your committed followers, Zero Budget Natural farming even entails a change of personality and of the culture of farming. My natural farmer friends in Wayanad express a new “mindset” (*manobhavam*), as they call it, which involves a curiosity about ecosystems, renewed pride in being a farmer and a focus on a good life. Is this what you mean by an “easy natural life style,” a lifestyle that is focused on the joy of working with nature and one in which human dignity does not depend on conspicuous consumption?

Dear Palekarji, please allow me in closing, with all due respect and admiration, to raise some concerns about your movement. Your glorification of all things Indian, Vedic knowledge, Indian cows, Indian earthworms, and your demonization of all things foreign or Western, I fear may overstep a line between reviving heritage and supporting nationalist and chauvinist forces that are on the rise in India. Nativist tendencies may also keep you from appreciating the numerous other experiments in agro-ecology and food sovereignty across the globe. And finally, your movement could inspire hope not only among farmers of Wayanad but also in the skeptical anthropologist, if you better addressed persistent inequalities in terms of class, caste, and gender within rural communities. A dialogue with progressive forces across the globe may push your movement from being a regional agro-environmental success story to an important building block for a necessary planetary agro-ecological transition.

Yours truly,
Daniel Münster

Seth Peabody

A Letter to Yvon Chouinard

Dear Mr. Chouinard,

Think of this letter as critical fan mail. I have been interested in your career as a businessman, climber, and environmentalist since I first read about your work with Patagonia in 2005, in an *Outside Magazine* article containing excerpts from your book *Let My People Go Surfing*. In this article and others, you have repeatedly called attention to your pessimism regarding the fate of the natural world. I am writing now because I think this pessimism is based on disappointingly conventional reasoning and does not align well with the innovative spirit that you, and your company, have come to embody.

While portraying Patagonia in a very good light, your comments in the 2005 article repeat the standard rhetoric that business is bad for the environment. The article describes feelings of guilt about being a businessman, a profession you see as being largely responsible for environmental damage. In a key turning point, you describe an epiphany during one of the company's growth spurts. In a conversation with a consultant, you stated that you didn't actually care about the company; you just kept it running for the sake of the money the company gave to environmental organizations. The consultant called your bluff, pointing out that you could give away much more money by selling the company and using the sale money to create a trust. The upshot, you claim in the article, is that in fact you really were invested in the company, not just its environmental mission (as if the two must necessarily be separated).

The article also states that you, like most serious and well-informed environmentalists, are pessimistic about the future of the planet.

Here is where I disagree with your self-assessment. I think your stance is one of ironic and radical hope, not of pessimism.

A comparison helps to make this point. You are surely more acquainted than I am with the life and career of Douglas Tompkins, founder of The North Face (and, from what

I've heard and read, a long-time friend and climbing partner of yours). From my very scant acquaintance with his life story, Mr. Tompkins had a similar outlook on business to yours, but took a different path: years ago, he sold his company, and now uses the profits to buy land for national parks in Chile. In essence, he did what you decided not to do when you kept Patagonia after your meeting with the consultant. To my thinking, Mr. Tompkins's (albeit laudable) goal is in fact the more pessimistic one, since it doesn't attempt to change the larger process of environmental destruction, but rather focuses on preserving national spaces against the inevitable decline that will befall those spaces that aren't explicitly preserved. His is a conservative position; yours has the potential to be a radical and transformative one.

In describing the potential for irony and radical hope in your company, I draw on the ideas of Jonathan Lear, a professor at the University of Chicago. Lear writes about his work as a process of continually questioning and honing his practices as a teacher. But in addition, he describes a more fundamental question that, I would suggest, can lead to more freedom and cutting-edge innovation. Lear writes in his book *A Case for Irony*:

In ironic existence, I would have the capacity both to live out my practical identity as a teacher—which includes calling it into question in standard forms of reflective criticism—and to call all of that questioning into question; not via another reflective question, but rather via an ironic disruption of the whole process. . . . Done well, this would be a manifestation of a practical understanding of one aspect of the finiteness of human life: that the concepts with which we understand ourselves and live our lives have a certain vulnerability built into them. Ironic existence thus has a claim to be a human excellence because it is a form of truthfulness.

Statements of pessimism regarding the environment are often grounded as statements of realism: only naivety could lead one to have hope. But reality and truth can be viewed ironically; an entire truth system can be called into question. Further, hope need not be mundane: Lear uses “radical hope” to refer precisely to hope within a situation of irreparable loss. In his book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Lear starts with the example of Plenty Coups, chief of the Crow Indian tribe, who famously stated that “nothing happened” for his tribe after the buffalo disappeared. Yet Plenty Coups continued to serve as a tireless leader and advocate for his people in their new life on the reservation. This strikes me as being a remarkably

similar standpoint to the perspective revealed by your comments about Patagonia's environmental commitment. The natural world as we know it is doomed, but you still run the company as well as you can. This is an ironic position, a perfect scenario for radical hope.

You have been extremely successful at running a socially and environmentally responsible clothing company. But you have also repeatedly said that it is still a business, and no business is sustainable. If you truly aren't afraid to lose the company (as also comes up repeatedly in your interviews), and if you approach the company through the lens of radical hope and ironic disruption—that is, if you have no fear to let the company become something altogether from what it is, to question the premises upon which it is based and all of the systems within which it functions—what new possibilities could you imagine?

Don't get me wrong, I love the Patagonia catalog. I have been a huge fan of every Patagonia item I have owned, and I have warm feelings toward the company's environmental commitments. And of course, I understand that it is precisely Patagonia's success as a clothing company that has given you the authority to speak to other companies about environmentalism. But I'm also a bit impatient with statements of pessimism. Transformations and reinventions are necessary, not merely refinements.

Your company's past record and your own commitments put you in a strong position to do this kind of thought work, to find forms through which ideas of radical hope might become realized. You have been a leader in the trend of companies looking to become "green." This usually means a slight reduction of environmental impact (often measured per unit of production, so that a company's impact can increase significantly during growth, but as long as the per-unit impact decreases, the company still appears to be doing its environmental duty). I suggest a new career phase, built not on reduction of impact within the current destructive system, but rather on transformation to something different. What is new might be related to what you have already begun—recycled shirts, repairing rather than replacing, the post-consumer society, etc.—but thus far, these have all been innovations within what still looks from the outside like a company turning a profit, less toxic than many other companies in part because it is high-end enough to use the more expensive sources that are certified as less toxic. Stop focusing on transitions to lower-impact practices, and move toward transforma-

tions. In the post-nature, but also post-consumer and post-toxic world, what new entity might occupy the space previously filled by a high-end, high-profit, well-respected clothing company? Radical hope requires radical imagination.

Sent by a fellow pessimist, searching for hope,
Seth Peabody

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Anna Mazanik

A Letter about the Letter to Prison: Russian Environmental Activism, Political Protest, and the Value of Participation

Some time ago, after we had agreed that this issue of *RCC Perspectives* would be a collection of letters, I received a message from Greenpeace Russia entitled “Write a Letter to an Ecologist.” It urged me to write a letter to a Russian environmental activist named Yevgeny Vitishko, imprisoned for his attempts to defend the woods in the North Caucasus from illegal enclosure and logging for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the appropriation of the areas along the Black Sea coast by regional officials. A member of the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus, Vitishko was accused of damaging the fence of a property linked to the governor of Krasnodar, Alexander Tkachev; he was sentenced to three years in a penal colony.

What can one write to a person in prison? Words of support and gratitude—because he stood up for something that is dear to us all but he alone was punished? The words of guilt—for letting his imprisonment happen? The letter to prison should be one of hope, although taking a prisoner as a role model might only bring you to a state of despair. Because if this is the result of your efforts to care for your country and planet and to prevent the destruction of natural landscapes, why would you even try? Where would one find hope here, in this gloomy situation, where elections are falsified, officials are corrupt and almost omnipotent, and the courts are dependent on politicians?

But can it be that the source of hope is hiding right here? Russian post-modernist writer Victor Pelevin, in his recent novel *Batman Apollo* created an image of the “motherland’s shield”: provocative as he is, Pelevin suggests that the oppressive Russian state and invincible corruption are actually a blessing and not a curse. The constant presence of the immediate and visible threat gives you the illusion that suffering is not an inherent part of human nature, but is caused by that particular political regime, and thus brings a hope that it can be changed. The identifiable problem is in itself a source of hope because it brings an answer to the eternal human questions about the meanings of life and shields your mind from, let’s say, the unbearable heaviness of being human. It sets a goal to your efforts, and even if that goal cannot be reached, it stimulates emotional and intellectual commitment; it makes you act and gives some subjective value to that process.

Leaving aside the axiological aspects of Pelevin's idea and admitting that he was not writing about the environment, I think that environmentalists can take something from his point. If there is anything truly global, it is climate change, ecological crisis, and the anthropogenic destruction of natural environment. Conquering nature—or, in other words, destroying it—is what human culture has been built upon, and all of mankind contributes to it every day—through consuming, producing, eating, wearing, driving, and so on. Everybody knows it, and this is where the pessimistic narrative of doom and gloom comes from.

We have heard about it in Russia too, but our gloom is more concrete and immediate. Russian environmental activism is closely linked to political protest—both historically and strategically—and has absorbed many centuries-old attitudes and practices of the oppositional intellectuals—for example, seeing the current political system, “regime” as the root of (most) evil, believing in the worth of “small deeds” and placing a particular moral value on the process of resistance regardless of results. “Do what you ought to and do not care what comes next” is a very popular motto in the oppositional circles, shared by the environmental movement too. Certainly, it is wonderful if you succeed, but what counts is not the victory but the participation, not the goal but the game. At least you tried.

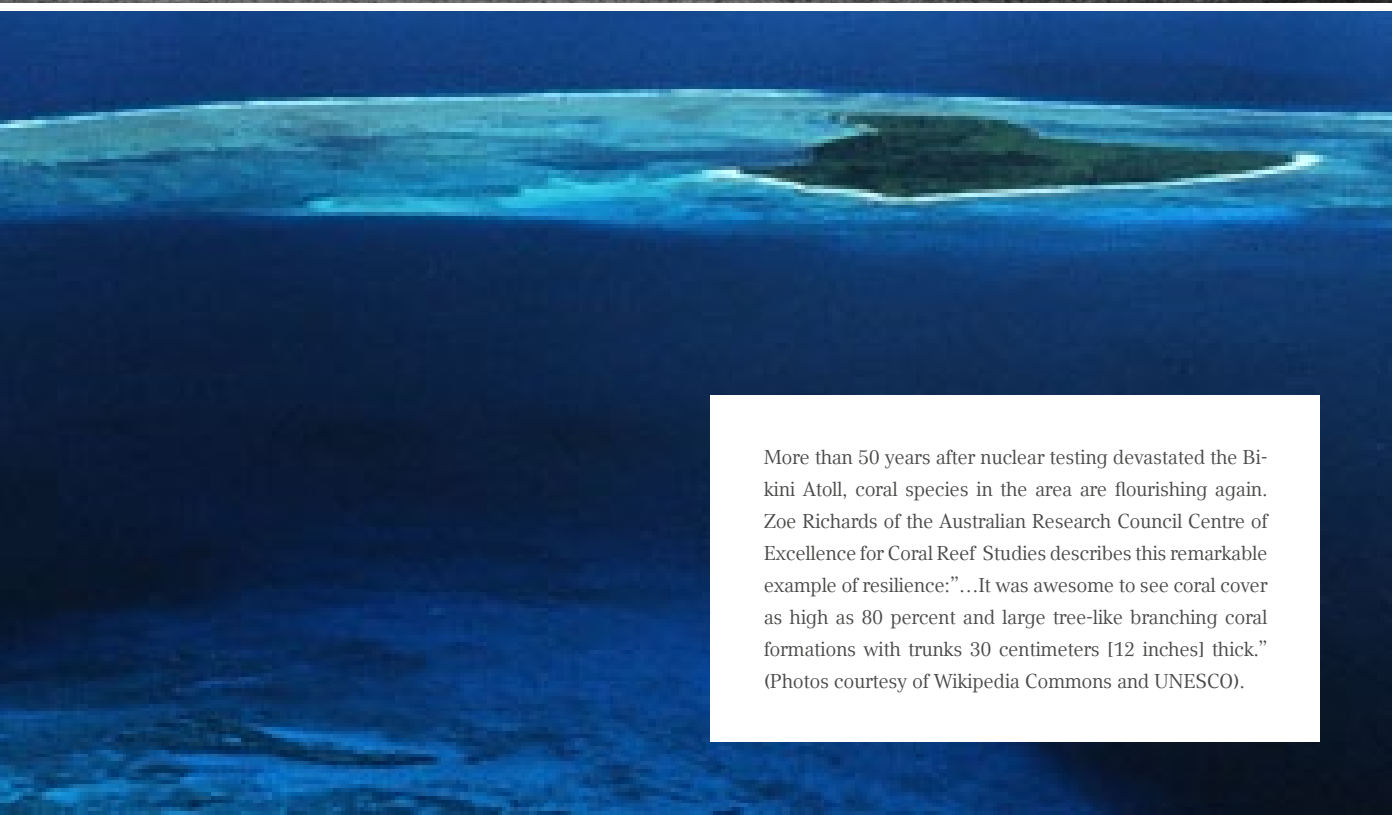
Although the destruction of nature is an inescapable reality of human culture and exists in “totalitarian” and “democratic” countries alike, although the feeling of despair connected to it can be universal, we have defined our Russian gloom in political terms. This state corporation drills oil in the Arctic, this oligarch wants to convert fertile black soil area into a nickel plant, these officials get enormous profits from the construction of infrastructure for the Olympics which damages the unique landscape, this parliament wants to approve a law that abolishes ecological expertise. . . . We tamed our gloom and we claim to know who is to blame—and this is indeed a blessing. Perhaps, it does not allow us to see the key problem—that the human civilization as such is anti-environmental—but it also shields us from the pervasive pessimism. It makes us angry, excited, and hopeful. And even if nobody could reach the goal, we at least enjoyed the game.

Maybe not seeing a broader picture is actually an advantage. If you have that shield of immediate goals, concrete opponents, and “small deeds” that you can accomplish—

even if you are mistaken about the true essence of things—it brings you hope and motivation, it helps you believe that there is value in participation, it makes you act as if what you do matters. Doomsday is coming nearer anyway, but you just do what you ought to. And if you eventually fail to save the world, you can at least try to free the imprisoned environmental activist.

Crossing Space





More than 50 years after nuclear testing devastated the Bikini Atoll, coral species in the area are flourishing again. Zoe Richards of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies describes this remarkable example of resilience: "...It was awesome to see coral cover as high as 80 percent and large tree-like branching coral formations with trunks 30 centimeters [12 inches] thick." (Photos courtesy of Wikipedia Commons and UNESCO).

Nicole Seymour

Dear Little Rock: The Ironic Plot in Civil Rights and Environmental Historiography

Dear Little Rock,

It's been more than a year since I last saw you. When the semester ended, I sold most of my belongings, packed the rest in my car, and hit the road, barely glancing at you in the rearview mirror because I felt so strongly that I was making the right decision.

There were a lot of reasons I never felt at home with you. For one thing, I struggled to reconcile your incredible legacy of civil rights victories—including that of the “Little Rock Nine,” a group of black students who braved physical and social violence to enroll in Central High School after the federal ruling on desegregation—with the present realities of entrenched poverty among your African-American population. And while I was excited to see some of the transformations taking place in my neighborhood—a “white flight” castoff that has been slowly growing white and middle-class again—I was also disgusted with many of them. For example, since I left, you welcomed a highly anticipated, 15- to 24-dollar-a-plate, 10- to 12-dollar-cocktail restaurant that obnoxiously touts its “sophisticated but unpretentious atmosphere and a creative and accessible menu.” Before this opened, there was not a single place in my neighborhood to go out to dinner. Going from nowhere to eat to 24-dollar plates—an (arguable) neo-segregationist tactic—is just an example of one of the many reasons I grew to actively dislike, maybe even hate, living in you.

But I'm not writing to hash out old grievances. I want to acknowledge an important set of ideas that came to me when I lived in you, a set of ideas I've only recently begun to appreciate. When riding the bus home from work at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock one day, I happened upon a local newspaper article in which an African-American community activist declared that he did not believe racism and inequality will ever go away. It wasn't so much the idea that struck me—for I, too, maintain similar cynicism—as the fact that someone who actively works for change would publicly express such cynicism about that work.

Since that day, I have done some digging around in civil rights political theory, and I think I now understand that expression of cynicism a little bit better. And, perhaps most surprisingly, I think I understand more clearly of the kind of work I want to do, and to see, in the environmental humanities.

So let me turn now to the political theorist Brandon Terry, who has identified an “emergent [ironic] discourse in civil rights historiography ... whose claims are perhaps best encapsulated by the phrase, ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same.’” This discourse, as he argues, functions as “a response to the romantic narrative of redemptive drama”—of “overcoming,” to use a phrase from the 1960s civil rights era. “Fundamental to the ironic emplotment of the civil rights movement,” Terry explains, is the idea of “the ineradicable permanence and deep logic of systemic white supremacy as the foundation of American (or world) society.” As Derrick Bell, Harvard’s first black tenured law professor and the “father” of critical race studies, bluntly put it—not unlike the community activist I had read about—“Black people will never gain full equality in this country.” Gloom and doom, indeed.

Or, maybe not exactly. We have to remember Terry’s focus on irony, as well as its close cousin, absurdism. Theorizing Bell’s interest in the absurdist French novelist Albert Camus, Terry concludes that Bell “wants us to learn ‘the need for struggle even in the face of *certain* defeat’ ... The significance of the civil rights movement, therefore, becomes its illumination of the illusory nature of racial liberalism and its trove of exemplary figures.” Struggle, in other words, has multiple functions, multiple goals other than “victory.” In addition to the illumination to which Terry refers, he also adds “communicating with universal humanity” and “preserv[ing] dignity under domination”—and he specifically does so in relation to politicized art such as Black Arts poetry and hip hop, not just obviously “political” acts such as protesting. We might also add “witnessing” and “building community” to this list of the functions of struggle, and of art that emerges from struggle.

As a white, middle-class academic, I cannot speak from the social positions that concern Terry. Not only do I have the luxuries of white privilege, I had the luxury of packing up and moving away from you—and to a wealthy city where inequality is not part of the dominant daily reality. I vastly prefer to live here, in a place where people are doing well and happiness is almost palpable in the air, and where I therefore feel happier, too.

But then again, my colleagues and I grapple with profoundly sad topics in our everyday work here: species extinction, environmental racism, climate refugees. And, like Terry, I also see an ironic discourse emerging—though, in this case, in contemporary environmental art, including movies, novels, and performance art. And so, despite all the impossibilities of paralleling civil rights struggles with environmental struggles, I think that the kind of irony Brandon Terry speaks of is both where we are and what we need—in environmental humanities scholarship; in the art, stories, histories, and movements we study; in the movements of which we are part. For one thing, irony can ensure that the stories we tell of environmental resilience and recovery—stories that lift us out of gloom and doom—still maintain a critical edge; that they are not naïve or Pollyannaish, that they do not license further environmental destruction.

Irony, I think, also describes the position of many environmental activists who *struggle nonetheless*—as various climate-change tipping points approach and then pass, while governments and pundits deny and citizens remain paralyzed. Indeed, considering the unprecedented environmental catastrophes we currently face, we might actually invert that crucial phrase from Terry in terms of climate change, without losing any its essential meaning, or any of its ironic edge: “The more things *stay the same*, the more *they change*.”

So, Little Rock, while I don’t think I like you any better now than I did before, I think at least I understand you better. And, maybe, myself. See you around some time.

Sincerely (and ironically),
Nicole

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Katie Ritson

A Memory from the North Sea Coast

Dear Elin,

I remember the time I stood in the mudflats along the North Sea coast near Husum, in Germany. It was low tide and I had to keep shifting my weight to stop myself from sinking into the velvety sands. I was standing on a moment. As a place, it was nowhere, neither sea nor land—soon it would disappear beneath the waves, the surface scoured and sucked and formed anew by the departing tide for the visitors who came after. But on that moment, it was mappable. It existed. I was standing on a spot between the rotations of the Earth and the orbit of the moon that pulls the waters to and fro in its wake.

The crawl and pull of the tides reminds me that time moves in circular patterns. The water comes and goes and comes and goes in an endless rhythm. These coasts are amongst the most fragile in Europe: they have been eroding for centuries, and human life has retreated behind ever higher dikes. You asked me for narratives of hope to counter the dominant ones of doom and gloom that characterize our age of global warming and habitat loss. I've been thinking about this a lot, and it's a hard thing to do. The years of past terrible floods are remembered around the coast—1206, 1262, 1634, 1703, 1953—and fabulous and terrible stories are told, of houses floating into the sea with people clinging onto their pitched roofs, of receding tides casting off the bloated corpses of cattle, of church bells ringing out a warning from their watery graves beneath the sea. Now, the predicted rise in sea levels will put an even larger swathe under water. Storm floods are increasing in frequency. Where is there hope in this landscape?

It is much easier to see decline.

W. G. Sebald explored patterns in nature and in human civilizations in this very place in his book *The Rings of Saturn*. In his eyes, they are permanently doomed to decline and self-destruct:

As I sat there in Southwold overlooking the German Ocean, I sensed quite clearly the earth's slow turning into the dark. The huntsmen are up in America, wrote

Thomas Browne in the Garden of Cyrus and they are already past their first sleep in Persia. The shadow of the night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since almost all creatures, from one meridian to the next, lie down after the sun has set, so, he continues, we might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if leveled by the scythe of Saturn—an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness.

There is not much hope in Sebald, more an exploration of the perversity of the human spirit. Sebald echoes the poet Charles Algernon Swinburne, whose poem “By the North Sea” captures the ephemeral nature of human endeavour:

Like ashes the low cliffs crumble,
The banks drop down into dust,
The heights of the hills are made humble,
As a reed’s is the strength of their trust;
As a city’s that armies environ,
The strength of their stay is of sand:
But the grasp of the sea is as iron,
Laid hard on the land.

Both Swinburne and Sebald in their works draw on the imagery of Dunwich, which serves as a *vanitas* motif for this landscape and its troubles. Dunwich was a thriving port in the early Middle Ages, until catastrophic storm surges destroyed most of it with great loss of life.

Most of Dunwich now lies on the sea floor. Divers can make out the last of its stones and timbers in the murk of the North Sea, but it has almost completely disappeared, and the tides are erasing the last traces of it on land. Below the stones of Dunwich are even fainter remains of Roman dikes and harbor arms. Below that, possibly, Anglo-Saxon burial sites, maybe even ship burials, like the glorious one at Sutton Hoo. And somewhere below all that is the Mesolithic landscape of Doggerland.

I am thinking again about my feet sinking into the sand off the coast of Husum, and imagining that if I had been around seven thousand years ago, this would have been dry land. Robert MacFarlane, a contemporary writer who, like Sebald and Swinburne before

him, is interested in the eastern coast of England, wrote of the landscape as it must have been 12,000 years ago:

Doggerland, then exposed, would have been harsh tundra. But as global temperatures rose, melting ice sent freshwater rivers spinning through the tundra, irrigating and fertilizing it, such that it developed into a habitable, even hospitable, terrain. We know that there were trout in the rivers of Doggerland, wild boar and deer in its oak and ash woods, and that stinging nettles grew amongst its grasses.

MacFarlane paints a picture of a clement Doggerland, a pre-human Eden. He does not refute the melancholy of Sebald or the morbidity of Swinburne, but opens out the perspective on the landscape to draw in its pre-human and geological past. His image of Doggerland pushes me to look forward into the future—a much longer way into the future, far beyond the *vanitas* motif of Dunwich and its meditation on the bleak prospects for human settlements on these coasts. Dunwich represents a past we know, at least partially; buildings we can recognize, lives we can imagine. Doggerland and the humans and non-humans who lived in it are beyond. And the same goes for the future—the near future, of managed retreat from the shorelines, eroding land, crumbling buildings and tidal floods, this is what we can imagine easily, and it is a gloomy prospect. But beyond that, far beyond the reach of our experiences today, is something different, something much harder to make out—perhaps Doggerland will arise out of the water once more. Perhaps our ancestors will understand better than we do how to live within the constraints of our planet.

Is this hope, Elin? I'm not sure. I just note that the geological past is beginning to be written into our present-day stories of the Anthropocene. It requires a stretch of thinking on our part, but if we can begin to see the fleeting nature of human life on earth, and the dynamism of the landscape over time, then the watery ruins of Dunwich become diminished in significance. We are a small part of a far bigger history. Humans are, after all, standing in a very short moment on the shifting sands of time. The story neither began with us, nor will it end without us.

Katie

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Fei Sheng

A Letter to the Citizens of Hangzhou

Dear Citizens of Hangzhou,

As an environmental historian, I present my warmest greetings to every citizen of Hangzhou that participated in the massive protest against the construction of a waste incinerator.

I was born and raised in this lovely city. Although I have been away and hardly re-visited for almost 15 years, I dream about it frequently. Hangzhou is located in the Yangzi River Delta, close to the East Sea where monsoons blow periodically. You, its citizens, have always been proud of the old folk saying that praises its beauty: “in China there is paradise in heaven, while there are Suzhou and Hangzhou on Earth.” Moreover, Hangzhou has been one of the most prosperous cities in China since the sixteenth century. In the last hundred years in particular, it has had close economic ties with Shanghai. Therefore, Hangzhou is expanding quickly and its population is skyrocketing. With urbanization, you are enjoying rapid improvements in living standards and the convenience of modern facilities. It is understandable that you cherish your precious environment. It is also honorable that you are different from other Chinese people, who disregard the environment in their search for economic growth.

The recent protest reflects clearly that you are increasingly anxious about your environment, in spite of China’s snowballing economy. When the local government proposed the construction of a waste incinerator in Hangzhou, public opinion was divided. Some asserted the incinerator would pollute the air with toxic chemical matter, especially dioxin, which could be fatal to people living near the facility. Others argued that incineration is not rare in cities in Europe, and one is even established downtown in Tokyo. All these places are well known for the good health of their citizens and their habitable environment. But these arguments did not reassure concerned citizens nor stop rumors about the negative effects of the incinerator. In addition, local residents did not trust bureaucratic procedures which may be corrupt. A protest march soon turned into a series of stalemates between citizens and the police. Many citizens were wounded or arrested, but the incinerator was provisionally suspended. This incident is just one among others

that has occurred in this country in recent years. Social unrest has been more widely noticed because of environmentally sensitive projects.

The local citizens may have obstructed the project; however, the waste problem continues and Hangzhou's environment is still threatened every day. The protest against waste incineration is a dramatic but ironic event—the building of facilities for waste incineration is a response to the trash problem afflicting almost every urban site in China. The event in Hangzhou stands out because the city is historically famous for its ecologically livable environment and relaxed pace of life. It is understandable that the Chinese—including you, citizens of Hangzhou—are sometimes furious over projects threatening their environment. However, you have to face reality: one would never wish to live in an unchanging environment. Ecosystems are continuously changing, and we human beings have been interacting with—and altering—our environment all the time. For you, the question should not be about keeping a “pure” habitable environment, but about how to balance economic development and environmental protection. Although environmental degradation can occur as a result of ambitious industrial projects, economic growth and protection of the environment are not necessarily incompatible. Modern technologies do sometimes result in environmental damages, but they also have the potential to resolve these problems. Waste incineration is a typical case of modern technology curbing the pressure of rubbish from modern cities. If we effectively reduce waste and successfully establish recycling, incineration could even be eco-friendly, not a ruthless monster that swallows our health and wealth. It is possible to sustain our quality of life and elegant environment at the same time. Whether our environmental change will be gloomy or delightful depends on our own intelligence and management. The transformation of urban environments in the industrial era is not necessarily doomed.

In fact, as citizens of Hangzhou, it should be particularly familiar to you that environmental change can be amazing and joyful. West Lake, one of the most well-known Chinese scenic spots in Hangzhou, was a result of unexpected environmental transformation by our ancestors. In approximately 800 AD, West Lake was still a muddy water hole left by the flooding of the Qian Tang River. To resolve flood disasters, Bai Juyi, the governor and one of the most outstanding poets of the Tang Dynasty, gathered local people to dig out mud and cut tunnels connecting West Lake to the river. In the end, people piled up the mud to form a long dam with two stone bridges. Then, on snowy days it was found to be the best site for overlooking the freezing lake. Moreover, many touching fairytales

originated from this place. Four hundred years later, Su Dongpo, another local administrator and famous poet, launched a similar project that resulted in another long dam with seven bridges. By springtime, this dam soon became famous as people planted hundreds of willows along the trail on top of the dam.

My dear fellows, West Lake would have been a nameless place if the environment had never been changed by these ambitious people. Yet, the original aim of these programs was only to improve irrigation systems to make Hangzhou a more reliable city in which to live and produce. So, citizens of Hangzhou, our ancestors recognized the harmony of nature and culture. To create the West Lake, some had to abandon homes, while others worried about disturbing the “devils” that lived beneath the mud. However, in the end, everyone received a nicer place to live. Just like the worries about the incinerator, if we manage the environment project properly, it will not necessarily result in a gloomy future.

I miss you and the city all the time. I hope that you have a more delightful and lively city in the future, my intelligent fellows.

Fei Sheng

Across Generations



These self-portraits are part of *I Am Nature*, an ongoing participatory exhibit that invites children and adults from all over the world to express their identities using natural materials found near their homes. The exhibit was inspired by the picture book *You Are Stardust* by Elin Kelsey (Photos courtesy of Elin Kelsey).

swaying and twirling in the wind
blow blow. My body grows like soft flowers
up and up. My body grows like soft flowers



Cameron Muir

Dear optimistic future self,

You probably don't even exist... but I owe it to Elin K to give you a chance. I am so down I failed at writing a letter about hope. Every time I started, my attempts at the positive soon appeared trite and were overwhelmed by the immense shadow of doom and gloom.

What year is it for you? I reckon something like 2024. Ten years might be enough. Maybe by then you've overcome my preoccupation with the broken and ugly, with the ironies of environmental history, with trying to understand the worst in humanity.

I may be, in fact, anti-hope. A few months ago I gave a talk and an audience member said, "After hearing you speak I want to slit my wrists." Do you remember that? Proof, Elin K would say, of everything she had warned us about! Perhaps.

When I work, I'm followed by this big black cloud like Eeyore the donkey, and lately it's been darker than ever. I think part of the reason my letter attempts failed was because of this video I saw six months ago. I was doing some research on World War II and Youtube suggested I watch a video urging me to see what's happening in Syria. I guess I should, I thought. The first scene is of nine young men blindfolded with rags, their hands bound, kneeling, and lined up shoulder to shoulder. More men kneel with them beyond the field of view. The men are facing the camera. Standing behind them is a hooded man pacing up and down the line and waving a pistol about in his left hand. The kneeling men have drawn their shoulders inwards like they're trying to shrink, to make themselves small. Bang. Back of the head. The blindfolded all flinch as one and a man towards the middle of the line topples forward. It's started. The men on either side instinctively lean away, bracing, and willing the universe to somehow get them out of this. One man leans so far his head rests on the chest of the man kneeling next to him like he wants comfort. The gunman struts behind the line at an even pace. A single shot for each head at the speed a clock ticks. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

You know I've argued that the state of the environment is a reflection of how we treat each other. But that's not why I'm bringing it up now. That video has haunted me. Is

it still with you now, ten years later? I've been sitting in conferences recently, in comfortable well-lit, climate-controlled solar-powered buildings and listening to us argue over two feet of intellectual ground on the secondary interpretation of some zeitgeisty theorist, while this is going on right now somewhere else in the world. So this video isn't causing me to think hope is hard because horror lurks in the heart of humanity, but because in my clouded view over here we've gone way off track: we've drifted far from the reality of what it will take to move us towards us a socially and ecologically fairer world. At times I think academia is not about helping the world, but instead it is a sophisticated way of withdrawing from the world. It's hard to think about hope because of the disconnection and abstraction. It's hard to think about hope because I feel I'm taking the safe and sheltered way.

When I consider hope right now, I can't help thinking about the advice that the British government published in the wake of Field Marshall Douglas Haig's 60,000 casualties in one day on the Somme: "How the civilian may help in this crisis: Be cheerful. Write encouragingly to friends at the front. Don't think you know better than Haig." There's a fine line between the optimism that wills people on in times of adversity and one that eschews reality, one that becomes self-censorship, one that serves the status quo. Hope starts to seem like an emotion designed to comfort the helpless, the passive.

There is power in shedding light on the shadow places and dramatizing the slow violence of grinding ecological damage. If there wasn't, there wouldn't be "ag-gag" laws—the Big Food lobby in Australia wouldn't be pushing to make it illegal to film slaughterhouses and other livestock operations. When we smooth out the wrinkles, when we leave people feeling comfortable, when we strive for the transcendental, we lose something. Do you remember that essay on narrative by Maria Tumarkin? I reckon you would. It's central to our art. She said we risk losing the "friction-and-silence-laden spaces" created by telling and listening. "Narrative," she said, "when fetishized, can become an evolved and brilliantly disguised way of shutting our ears to what hurts and scares us the most." How can we get a grasp on what it will really take if we prefer to turn away from the dark?

There are people who are wrong and our stories expose their flaws. There are people who are unjust and our stories bring them to account. The doom is always there, and we have a collective responsibility to confront it. We are obliged to cooperate in its defeat.

And so this is my state of mind for the last six months, or for as long as I can remember, really, until a couple of weeks ago when we're all at the dinner table, and Hamish our five-year-old son says he needs to go to his room. No way, we say, wait until we're finished dinner. He insists he really needs to go to his room, and the more we say you can't the more upset and insistent he gets and all of a sudden he's distraught and bursts into tears and screams at us. He runs to his room, switches off his light, and comes back. Eventually we discover he'd just learned about electricity generation and pollution at school. He didn't want us to get sick.

Okay, so Elin K's onto something. Doom and gloom narratives spur some people into action, but I concede it is overwhelming for some. We have to be careful when dealing with emotions because not everyone responds in the same way. But should I tell Hamish that if we just install solar panels we'll be right? Or if we price nature, the free market will take care of everything? There must be types of hope beyond techno-optimism. Narratives shouldn't have to end optimistically in the way that the person who made the wrist-slitting comment wanted. What did you tell Hamish? I think I should tell him yes, over a hundred thousand people die each year because of burning coal, and that most of these people are poorer people living near the power plants. I should tell him that climate change will hit the poor the hardest. I would tell him it's up to all of us to fight injustice, and that it's not easy, but we must persist. There is a long history of doing just that, and this is inspiring. This is the most positive view I can offer. A way to keep going. It's part of the plurality of hope.

Cameron

Chioma Daisy Onyige

A Letter to My Father

Dear Peter,

“Are not you moved, when all the sway of earth
shakes like a thing unfirm? O Cicero,
I have seen tempests, when the scolding winds
Have rived the knotty oaks, and I have seen
The ambitious ocean swell and rage and foam,
To be exalted with the threatening clouds:
But never till to-night, never till now,
Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.
Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,
Incenses them to send destruction”

- The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 3

It has taken me over 20 years to pick up the courage to write to you. I do not have to ask how you are because I know you are fine and in a safe place. Do I miss you? I miss you a lot. What I miss the most is your presence and your knowledge. You were able to offer insight into almost every environmental topic that I have ever questioned. I start my letter with one of my favorite quotes from the works of Shakespeare because his descriptions of weather-related events can be seen as a manifestation of abnormal human activities. Yes Peter, we are facing perilous times. The whole world is experiencing climate change at a very rapid pace. How is the world coping with all these natural disasters in their environment? Don't ask me.

But I can tell you how we are coping in our region, at least.

As a geographer, I know you would have been highly interested to know about the latest developments in the so-called Global South.

Since you've been gone, the region has witnessed plenty of destruction of the environment in the name of modernization and development. This is surely a familiar topic to you because you wrote about it in 1979 in your PhD thesis, where you talked about the impact of mineral oil exploitation in rural communities in Nigeria. I particularly enjoyed reading the part about the attitudes of the villagers in the community to the destruction of their environment by the oil companies operating in their community. You tried to show that despite the destruction of their farmlands and rivers as a result of oil pollution, the people of the communities still found ways to cope and survive.

Years later I would witness this resilience when our village Omoku was flooded for several months in 2012. The flooding was so severe that it affected more than half of the entire country. People were left homeless, people drowned; there was no way to send relief materials to those who desperately needed it. Businesses were destroyed and goods worth millions of naira were washed away. The government was helpless in the face of the natural disaster. You would think that they would have borrowed knowledge about disaster preparedness methods from other countries in the Global North, but alas, there was nothing like disaster preparedness in our case. Old and decayed bones and dead bodies were naturally exhumed from their graves because the waters pushed them up to the surface. I had never seen people so dejected, miserable, and helpless as they were in the face of the great flood. Of course by now, we were not talking about the lands that have been destroyed by oil pollution. We are talking about land that was soaked, drenched, submerged, and cleansed by the great waters.

But do you know what? The floods receded after about four months of destroying everything in its path. I know you would be wondering how the people survived after the flooding, if they survived? My dearest Peter, they did survive. There is no doubt that the people really suffered, but somehow they adapted to the problem. I came back to the village when I was told that the water had dried up in some places, and found that all the places that had been flooded were almost dry. All the food crops were destroyed by the waters, so people had to harvest crops that were not fully matured so they might have something to eat, and so that the crops wouldn't be wasted by the flood.

During the floods, old canoes that had been left in people's backyard dumps for years were cleaned and brought out to use as water transportation. The village looked like the city of Venice in Italy, with gondolas and water buses—or vaporetto, as they are

popularly called in Venice—moving from one end of the village to the other. The local and poor people in the villages used their knowledge of the environment passed down from generation to generation to deal with the problems that they were experiencing.

Despite the gloomy situation that these poor people were in, they just seemed to move on with their lives. It was like business as usual. They were not expecting any help from the government, because they knew it might never come. They were not expecting any help from NGOs and other organizations. They just put their hopes on their faith, and believed that as long as they were alive, there was still hope. I was amazed and still am amazed at the resilience of these people in the face of doom and gloom. They are able to look within themselves to find ways of coping in their environment.

People in the Global North might find the thought of resilience as a weak response to nature, but I believe that we have gone too far to stop climate change from happening to us. We should look for ways of adapting to the ever-changing weather conditions. We shouldn't keep waiting for the country or the Government or the Scientists to find solutions for us. When we learn to rely on our own ingenuity and resources, we will be able to withstand any challenges that come our way. I know you will agree with me on this one . . .

I hope I am not boring you, dear Peter, but I must end by saying that in the face of environmental pessimism and despondency, it is my hope that the people will realize that they need to retrace their steps and build on knowledge from the olden days. We cannot fight nature. Nature must take its course. We should accept our situation and reality and move on. We should be resilient in the face of natural disasters, and adapt and survive in the face of adversity. Life is too short to waste on worrying about tomorrow. That is the only way we can move beyond doom and gloom. Hopefully, climate change will not wipe away the world the way it did the earlier civilization. As for me, I'm going to enjoy each day that passes by.

Take good care, beloved Peter, until we meet to part no more.

Your first baby girl,
Chioma

Jenny Price

Green Me Up, JJ

Advice for Greenies in a Complicated World

Dear JJ:

Why should I care? I'm 23, an Ivy League college graduate, and my Aunt Jenny and all my friends from Brown keep telling me that I have to save the planet NOW—but I've just never been political. And seriously, the whole planet? I care A LOT about my girlfriend, my new start-up, my family, my friends...and my ultimate frisbee team. Definitely frisbee. Life is frisbee is life. So am I a bad person if I don't care about environment too?

Jake

Providence, RI

Dear Jake:

Great question—and no, you should only care if you're not the least bit concerned that the earth you and your friends and your beloved Aunt Jenny (and Grandma!) live on is...MELTING. As we speak. *You don't care? Really?*

You don't *care* that we're hurtling headlong into a toxic, dark, burning future for you and your children and you should probably just forget about their children? About Man's wanton destruction of all that's real and natural on our fragile planet? Jake, I'm sure you're *not* a bad person, but how can you be as good or as wonderfully virtuous as your friends who very *much* care that we're condemning I-can't-even-think-about-how-many billions of humans in the future to battle like rabid mutants for potable water on the shrinking land mass of a searing, miasmic, no-fish-left, Florida-free, what's-a-polar-bear Earth that's afflicted daily by fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis in biblical proportions?

Just kidding.

Honestly, though, Jake, here's why you should care about environment: ultimate frisbee.

What, to begin with, do you need to play it? You need parks—the green spaces that we as a community decide to set aside, and then to plant and maintain, since we know that healthy and happy people and communities require fresh air and clean stormwater and recreation sites and gathering places that parks can provide, and we also know that public parks ensure that everyone will have access to these good things.

Now take the frisbee itself: you need oil and water to create the plastic, and also a lot of fuel and some metal instruments, and you want the industrial processes involved in making a frisbee to be as clean as possible, so that manufacturing a frisbee doesn't pollute the air so badly that you wouldn't really ever want to play frisbee in it. And shouldn't everyone who wants to play frisbee be able to—so we need clean factories to ensure that the air is just as frisbee-friendly for the people who make the frisbee as it is for the people who live near the frisbee factory. And the people who make the frisbees need to earn enough income to eat well and pay for medical care and generally enjoy the health required to toss a frisbee whenever they feel like it.

I could go on— How does a frisbee get from the factory to you? How do you get to the parks to play? What do you eat to stay in optimal shape to play ultimate frisbee? — but the point basically is that environment is the resources we use and the lands we live on and change to create our everyday lives. And how ecologically, sensibly, and fairly we do that has everything to do with how fair and healthy pretty much everything is. Environment is you. It's all the resources and people that contribute to all that you love when you play ultimate frisbee—all the joy and flying and exertion and fortitude and after-parties and camaraderie. Life is environment is frisbee is life.

So why should you care? I think the best answer is that you already do. You just have to make this network of connections visible.

Of course, environment (and then ultimate frisbee, too, of course) is also politics and international relations and war and especially economics—and it's polar bears and climate change and the problem with Florida. OK, also Chernobyl and fracking, and the KFC Double Down with fried chicken, bacon, two melted cheeses, and "secret sauce" that's likely less of a secret than what's actually in those two melted cheeses, and it's also huge open piles of Americans' electronic waste in villages in China.

But the good news is that we don't have to fix all these troubles, at once, for good. Environment isn't ONE THING, the whole planet (seriously, right?)—so your friends can relax, at least a little, as it's not as if there's one, single big balloon that we're filling up with environmental problems and then...BOOM. And the entire planet won't explode or melt if your friend doesn't put the empty Dasani bottle in the appropriate color bin.

You and your friends don't have to save the planet. The entire planet. All at once. By yourselves.

So what can you do? Well, my advice is to vote. Pay taxes, and don't fudge on them—as the government (that's us) has the resources and power to address all these problems that we individually, by ourselves, do not. Also, pay attention in your new start-up to all the ways it makes money go 'round, and aim to make it all go 'round in ways that use resources and alter places as fairly and as ecologically sensibly as possible. Oh, and how you make money will have a much, much bigger impact than how you give it away.

Most of all, play frisbee, Jake. With all your heart and head and soul. Play frisbee honestly. Play frisbee with your eyes wide open. Play frisbee as if your friends and family and your new start-up—and all the environmental networks that whirl constantly to keep them going—really, truly, and powerfully matter.

Love,
JJ

Elin Kelsey

Dear Alyssum,

I am sitting on a hillside gazing out at ochre colored villas clustered among the silver glinting sprays of olive trees. The air is thick with the scent of wisteria and my legs twitch each time an ant stretches out from the stubble of meadow and hurries across my skin. When I lean back, I feel the soft puff of a fresh yellow dandelion and the satisfying crunch of last year's grass. The mountains tucked behind Lake Como are as flat and opaque as a natural history museum diorama. It is only the ferry, with its frothy wake, that dares to toss water droplets into the shiny hands of the sun.

I have been carrying you around in my mind these past few years, trying to find an answer to the question you tucked in my heart. You told me you were struggling with whether or not to try to become a mother. You told me a version of a yearning I have heard expressed through so many other lips: that your love for your future daughter or son was so great, you could not imagine bringing him or her into a world marked by environmental catastrophe.

Of course we both know that what you are grappling with is not only whether to have a child. What you are asking, I think, is whether things are hopeless: if the state of the planet is as wretched as all the gloom and doom you're bombarded with.

I had never met a contortionist before I met you. Imagine what I would have missed when you casually offered up your TED talk to share during the workshop. What if I'd stuck to our existing agenda and said there wasn't time or offered some other polite version of "no"?

We sat transfixed as you folded and unfolded your body into your story of loss. How a fire destroyed your home, killed your cats, and badly injured your lover. How the flames ignited a debt that engulfed your options for continuing your veterinary degree. How you tried to fit your whole self into the tiny scorched spaces that remained; each of which proved too brittle to build your old familiar life upon.

It has taken me all this time to echo back to you the wisdom that you grew through that experience. The knowledge that we can not nurture the kinds of worlds or lives we

want to inhabit by twisting and forcing ourselves into broken stories. There is ample evidence to support environmental despair but it rings so loudly we grow deaf to other more inspiring possibilities. When we accept doom and gloom as a truth, as real, as fixed, we extinguish not only our own agency, but the agency of more than five million other species that live on the planet.

What I have come to know is that things are far more resilient than I ever imagined. Me, my daughter, coral reefs blown to bits by atomic bombs. In a twist of fate that even surprised scientists, Bikini Atoll, home to the world's biggest nuclear explosion is now a scuba divers' paradise. The Chernobyl Power Plant disaster site turns out to be the best place in Europe for wolf conservation. Forests march up hillsides in defiance of climate change. Gorillas teach themselves to disable poachers' snares.

We have been taught to see the environment as if it is on a one-way journey from utopia to ruin. I think it's a mistake to focus only upon the fragility. Things get horribly broken. That is true. But the remarkable capacity for renewal is true too. The crooked spider web glistening in a Chernobyl forest or the bald head of my dear friend Katie is imbued with the capacity to be broken, beautiful, or both.

I left your letter on my bedside table yesterday evening. Now, outside my open window, the sky is inky black. Still night by my standards, but not for the single bird whose trill tiptoes across the breeze gently fluffing the curtains. Who decides who goes first? In the pre-dawn stillness, how do the birds choose? I try to identify new voices as they join in. I hold my breath to hear more clearly, but already, there are too many to count. My quest is as deliciously futile as trying to track individual notes in a symphony.

Half a decade ago, when Rachel Caron wrote *Silent Spring*, she did not know that I would awake to the glory of this dawn chorus. As she wrote in a letter to Dorothy, her dear friend:

"The beauty of the world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind—that and anger at the senseless brutish things that were being done. I have felt bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could—if I didn't at least try I could never again be happy in nature."

Such agency exists in each of us, and far more in the grand collective of animals and plants that thrive on earth.

The spring is anything but silent.

Do not grant the story of doom and gloom the status of truth.

Warmest thoughts,

Elin

About the Authors

Elin Kelsey is an educator, consultant, researcher, author, and spokesperson for hope, resilience, and the environment. She received her PhD in science communication and international environmental policy from Kings College London, and conducts research into the emotional responses of children, environmental educators and conservation biologists to the culture of “hopelessness” that permeates environmental issues. She writes popular books for kids and adults, and collaborates on academic, public engagement, and writing projects with a wide variety of environmental and sustainability initiatives. See more at www.elinkelseyandcompany.com.

Sherilyn MacGregor received her PhD in environmental studies from York University in Toronto. Since 2006 she has been a full-time faculty member in the School of Politics, International Relations, and Philosophy at Keele University where she is currently a senior lecturer in environmental politics and director of the Environmental Studies program. Her research expertise lies in the fields of feminist politics and environmental politics, with a special focus on the connections between citizenship, social reproduction, and sustainability.

Anna Mazanik graduated from Moscow State University and received an MA degree in history from Central European University in Budapest, where she is currently a PhD candidate in the Comparative History of Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe program. She is writing a PhD dissertation on public health and urban environment in late-imperial Moscow.

Cameron Muir is a writer, historian, and Australian Research Council postdoctoral fellow at the Australian National University and the National Museum of Australia. His research interests include food ecologies, transboundary environmental and social justice, emotional relationships to landscapes, and ways in which narrative writing can contribute to public debate.

Daniel Münster is a social anthropologist working on South Asia with interests in agrarian environments, political economy, global food regimes, science and technology, and social theory. He holds a doctorate (Dr.phil.) in anthropology from LMU Munich and is currently the leader of the Junior Research Group “Agrarian Alternatives.” at Heidelberg

University's Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Perspective." His current research focuses on the South Indian district of Wayanad, Kerala, where he has been conducting fieldwork since 2008.

Chioma Daisy Onyige is a sociologist by training and a multidisciplinary researcher by choice. She is currently a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, where she earned a PhD in sociology with a specialization in criminology, police science, and social work. Her research interests include crime and gender issues, environmental issues such as oil spillage and environmental degradation, conflict and conflict resolution, and climate change and health issues.

Seth Peabody is a PhD candidate in Germanic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, where he received his MA degree in 2011. His current research explores environmental aspects of Weimar film, focusing on the intersections between imagined wild spaces, urban landscapes, and notions of community.

Jenny Price is a public writer, artist, and historian focusing on US environmental topics. She has written about urban nature, environmentalism, and Los Angeles, and about urban river revitalization and public beach access. She has a PhD in history from Yale University and is currently the Barron Visiting Professor in the Environment and the Humanities at Princeton University.

Thomas Princen explores ecological and economic sustainability at the University of Michigan focusing on social organizing principles (e.g., sufficiency), overconsumption, norms of resource use, and transition. He is the author of *The Logic of Sufficiency and Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order* and lead editor of the forthcoming *Ending the Fossil Fuel Era*, all published by MIT Press.

Katie Ritson is the managing editor of publications at the Rachel Carson Center. She has a degree in German from the University of Cambridge and an MA in Comparative Literature and Nordic Studies from LMU Munich, and is currently working on a doctoral project.

Nicole Seymour is a contemporary American literature and film scholar with a special interest in environmental cultural studies. She received her PhD in English from Vanderbilt University and is currently an assistant professor in the area of literature and the environment in the English department of California State University, Fullerton. Her first book is *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (University of Illinois Press, 2013).

Fei Sheng is an environmental historian and an assistant professor at the School of Asian-Pacific Studies, Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, China. He received his PhD in world history from Peking University (Bei Da). He is especially interested in the evolution of environmental ideology and movement in China and other developing economies.

RCC Perspectives

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perspectives@carsoncenter.lmu.de

Series editors:

Christof Mauch

Katie Ritson

Helmuth Trischler

Editors:

Brenda Black

Marielle Dado

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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
LMU Munich
Leopoldstrasse 11a
80802 Munich
GERMANY

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ClimatePartner[°]
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Our worries about the environment are not only academic—they affect us personally. Yet there is a strange silence about the emotional impact of the ways in which we talk about the environment, which is so enmeshed with hopelessness: horrifying statistics and gut-wrenching images that threaten to seal the planet’s fate. How can we best influence and enact a shift beyond “doom and gloom”? The letters in this *Perspectives* volume are responses to this dilemma. Through an exploration of new environmental narratives, this volume aims to stimulate readers to emotionally reflect on how we can embrace hope and resilience in our stories about the environment.



Deutsches Museum



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