

ily cere-
cahier

riding the blinds
maggie nelson

ily cere- cahier 42a
a part of:

On Freedom

FOUR SONGS OF CARE AND CONSTRAINT

Maggie Nelson

Graywolf Press

4. Riding the Blinds

TRAVEL TOWN — GAME OVER — THE MANSION OF MODERN
FREEDOMS — OUR CHILDREN AND THE CHILDREN OF OUR
CHILDREN — WHAT HAS THE FUTURE EVER DONE FOR ME? — UGLY
FEELINGS, REVISITED — POLITICS AND THERAPY — RIDING THE
BLINDS

TRAVEL TOWN

As he is my son, he may as well be the first boy ever to love a train. For the past two years, in addition to spending hours watching on YouTube what I can describe only as conceptual endurance videos of steam trains passing through towns in rural America in real time (first you see the smoke, then you wait and wait and wait for the train to hurtle past), he and I have spent a lot of time together at Travel Town, a cul-de-sac in Griffith Park where unthinkably large locomotives have gone to rest. First stop is always the biggest, blackest train, Engine 3025, the first parked in the yard. We ascend the steep stairs—the driving wheels among the largest ever built—so that he can sit in the cab and become Jim, the heroic engineer in Virginia Lee Burton's classic *Choo Choo*, one of innumerable children's books, mostly written by white women in the first half of the twentieth century, in which a runaway train who goes by a female name or pronoun must be caught, dragged back to the roundhouse by a heavy chain, and disabused of the notion that there is any better job for her on earth than to serve her Jim.

Once inside the cab, my son places his left hand on the throttle, his right hand out the window, and, save for the occasional pause to feed the tender with imaginary coal and water, he drives that train with an enthusiasm I've rarely beheld in close quarters. *WOO-HOO, WOO-HOO! DINGA DINGA DINGA!* he yells, imaginary countryside flying by, imaginary wind streaming through his hair. God help the toddler who wants a turn while he's driving. "The engineer needs his space," he says, showing them the palm of his hand, not yet three.

Nearly every time we go to Travel Town together, I think, *I've never been happier in all my life*. Sometimes I say this aloud, be it to him or myself or the uncaring air. This is one of the things I've learned about happiness: when you feel it, it's good to say so. That way, if and when you say later in depression or despair, "I've just never been happy," there will be a trail of audible testimony in your wake indicating otherwise.

"The end of the world has already occurred," writes Timothy Morton. Not only that, Morton says, but "we can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended. . . . It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth's crust—namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale." This era—our era—which is defined by human impact on the earth—is widely referred to as *the Anthropocene*.¹

It's not as if I didn't already have reservations about steam trains: in addition to the antifeminist narrative noted above (which contains within it a potent reminder of the female engine's desire to run free), nearly every train book in our house exalts the role of the railroad in what remains euphemistically called "the settling of the American West," cheerily omitting the carnage. It's not as if I don't, didn't, know the role played by slave and indentured labor in building the railroads, or the role that they have played in making possible the extraction, transport, consumption, and sale of fossil fuels over the past two centuries, all of which will surely be remembered—should there be anyone left to do so—as an object lesson of human shortsightedness, exploitation, and greed.

And yet, here I am, watching my son faux-conduct the quiescent train, admiring his beautiful face, his mouth agape at the machines he so adores, about which he knows nothing save what a human creature alive for barely three years can know: they're sensorially large and powerful; they make loud noises; they belch amazing clouds of black smoke; and when they get going, they impart a feeling of freedom—of speed, transformation, leave-taking, escape, anonymity, rush—whether you're riding or watching them speed by. (You can feel this weird reciprocity via the ministeamer ride that encircles the park, wherein waving to others is somehow irresistible, whether you're a passenger or pedestrian.) Here I am, still feeling the unprecedented (in my life, anyway) sensation of simple, total happiness in witnessing another's simple, total happiness, of beholding a new beginning in this world, while the words *The end of the world has already occurred* tick by under the scene.

Is what my son and I are doing part of that ending, even if it feels like a beginning to both of us? Is there any new beginning that doesn't already contain the seeds of its end? "When you give birth to a child, if you really want to cling to life, you should not cut the umbilical cord as he is born," writes Trungpa. "Either you are going to witness your child's death or the child is going to witness your death. Perhaps this is a very grim way of looking at life, but still it is true." Utterly unbearable, utterly ordinary.

One of the intellectual and emotional vexations of the climate crisis is that it strands us in a state of bewilderment as to whether our moment is mundane or exceptional. Sages throughout time have warned us against the delusion that our particular moment on Earth is extraordinary, reminding us that all forms of life, including the life of the planet itself, have always been accompanied by the specter (and reality) of impermanence and extinction. "Are we not especially significant because our century is?—our century and its unique Holocaust, its refugee populations, its serial totalitarian exterminations; our century and its antibiotics, silicon chips, men on the moon, and spliced genes?" writes Annie Dillard. "No, we are not and it is not. These times of ours are ordinary times, a slice of life like any other. Who can bear

to hear this, or who will consider it?" On the other hand, there's the truly startling news, delivered by climate scientists and environmentalists to anyone who will listen, that our actions over the past 250 years have brought about a sixth mass extinction, with one million species on track for extinction within the next few decades alone, our fate linked to theirs, whether or not we feel that link or believe in it.² Yes, there have been mass extinctions before, including a handful of occasions on which carbon dioxide has flooded the atmosphere. But in Earth's half-billion-year history of animal life, there have been only a few, and none was preventable in the way this one is (or was); none was caused by a single species (not to mention a species with the ability to address the threat to itself). The last sixty years have been particularly brutal: while the steam engine and founding of the modern petroleum industry may have marked the beginning of large-scale burning of fossil fuels, over half of all CO₂ emissions have been released since 1988, well after climate scientists—and oil executives—knew these emissions would end up trapped by the atmosphere ("the greenhouse effect"), causing irreversible warming.³

So, while no one wants to be one of Dillard's dupes, drunk on an ahistorical, spiritually unwise conviction of our era's special significance, it seems just as idiotic (not to mention genocidal, geocidal) to ignore the extraordinary facts of our moment, which, when allowed in, elicit awe (as well as fear, grief, anger, and other hard-to-bear feelings). Even if one took Dillard's sage counsel, it does not follow that everything is going to be all right. We can console ourselves that Earth or the greater universe will abide in some form without us—as theorist Andrew Culp has put it, "the combined detonation of all the world's nuclear weapons would be like a warm summer breeze to Gaia"—but such perspective doesn't necessarily help us to figure out how to contend with the "dismal picture of the future of life, including human life" the National Academy of Science confirms we face, or how to alter course. If the patenting of the steam engine marked the sealing of our fate, perhaps it's only fitting that one of the most common metaphors for our current predicament is that of being strapped to a runaway train.

Is it any wonder so many would prefer to ride the blinds? Avoid looking squarely at where we're headed, just to get through the day? Is it any wonder that the version of freedom so many seem enthralled by these days is nihilistic in nature, powered by impotence, denial, escapism, or indifference, rather than one that imagines—indeed, actually believes in—the possibility of ongoing coexistence, mutual aid, and survival? Take almost any other problem—the ravages of capitalism, racism, a more contained environmental disaster—and you might be able to argue that things getting worse is part of their getting better, in a “darkest just before the dawn” kind of way. I don't tend to buy such arguments, but even if I did, they don't apply to global warming. We might hope to burn down certain systems or ideologies and build up a better world from the ashes, but we can't burn down our atmosphere, then build it back. All the platitudes in the world about the patient labor that democracy or social justice requires crumble in the face of our current ecological dilemma, which is, as longtime climate activist Bill McKibben has it, “the first timed test that humans have ever had.” Even if we stopped emitting CO₂ today, we have already locked in a certain amount of warming, the effects of which will continue for decades, if not centuries.⁴ The task before us is therefore no longer to stop climate change from happening, but “mitigation and adaptation”: mitigation of the harm we've already set into motion, by means of averting, through rapid decarbonization, a further rise in temperature, and adaptation to the changes the warming we've already locked in will bring. If we don't undertake more serious mitigation soon—within a decade, most experts say—the task of adaptation becomes exponentially harder. Eventually, it may not be possible for us.

These are difficult facts. It's tempting, when confronted with them, to make recourse to apocalyptic fantasy, by which the whole human experiment (or planet) goes out in one painless flash and bang. Such fantasies relieve us from imagining, not to mention committing to, the hard work that mitigation and adaptation require. The fantasy of an equally distributed apocalypse also relieves us from grappling with the fact that the same people who always suffer worst and first will continue to do so, are already doing so, which makes any “might as well enjoy the

ride” nihilism one more choice instance of off-loading risk and suffering onto more vulnerable others.⁵ As Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers has put it, rather than bringing about “the mythical sudden end of the world,” global warming will more likely be “a long process” in which “our children and the children of our children will have to go along and live in the technologically sophisticated ruins of our dreams.” What else, one might ask, is Travel Town?

GAME OVER

I wrote the preceding paragraphs several years ago. We had five years on the clock to curb CO₂ emissions that we no longer have; five more years of emissions have been deposited into the atmosphere, with the rate ever climbing. I don’t know what’s going to be happening by the time these words move into print, but if I had to bet, it wouldn’t be on radical change. Never before has the time that writing takes, its *patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty*, felt so painful, so patently *not good enough*. My son doesn’t care about trains anymore—we gave away his meticulously collected heap of Thomas trains long ago; last week, when we took our bikes to the parking lot of the L.A. Zoo, which is right around the corner from Travel Town, he told me he didn’t even remember the place, which I had presumed would be indelible. (We had gone to the zoo parking lot because we had heard it was completely empty, due to the pandemic; there I watched him, now eight, do donuts in the gargantuan concrete expanse, practicing how to stand up on his pedals, to pump up his speed. As there was no one else around, I let him take off his mask, so he could really feel the breeze.)

Not a day goes by that I don’t wonder how I could have birthed a being so bright-spirited, so resilient, so sanguine. *Don’t worry so much, Mama, or else life isn’t any fun!* he tells me. Or, *Don’t worry, Mama, I got this!*, this last typically delivered with all the confidence and perspective of someone who has taken a turn (or several) here before. Even when pregnant, I had the distinct impression that his was something of a repeat appearance: he had a condition the doctors were worried about; after each ap-

pointment at which the outside people would worry, I would ask him, *Hey, you OK in there? BAM! BAM!* he would kick. He still kicks.

Once I asked a shrink if she thought these reassurances on his part indicated that I had passed too much of my anxiety onto him, forcing him to take care of me rather than the other way around (something I had long and probably unfairly accused my mother of doing, and sworn not to repeat if I ever became a parent). The shrink offered the totally surprising thought that he might be talking to himself, as a way of teaching himself courage, self-soothing, and survival. *Imagine that, Mom—he isn't always talking to you!* He has a relation to himself. *He has a self.* He talks to it. Your anxious care, however crushing or crucial you may feel it to be, is not and will not be his everything. *What a relief.*

It is not a relief to know that he will have to find a way to live in the “technologically sophisticated ruins of our dreams” (though that sounds better than fire, fire, and more fire, as is the style in California, from where I write). But there is some comfort in knowing that this predicament is not necessarily extraordinary, insofar as investing in dreams has always courted their ruin. *Cruel optimism*, theorist Lauren Berlant calls it. As my son grows up, his native capacity for courage, self-soothing, and survival will no doubt be tested: just the other night at bedtime, he asked me with uncharacteristic trepidation, *Mama, is it true that if we don't stop using gasoline, the earth will become as hot as Venus and kill me?* Although global warming was basically all I'd been thinking about for months, I had not yet mentioned it to him. As I struggled to come up with the right response, I flashed on the galley I'd recently received of Roy Scranton's latest, *We're Doomed. Now What?*, whose table of contents listed a final essay titled “Raising a Daughter in a Doomed World”—page 305. I had skipped right away to page 305, thinking there might be news there that I could use. But page 305 was blank, save the words: “Essay to come in final version of *We're Doomed. Now What?*” Just then my son interrupted my reverie to up the ante, asking: *Or will I just get shot?* Finally I rushed in to reassure him on both accounts without mobilizing cruel optimism, but he quickly tired of my middle way. He patted me on the arm and said, *It's OK, Mama. If that*

happens, we'll go together. We will have had a good life. This time, however, he had tears in his eyes.

For better or worse, the question of *what we tell each other*—and what we tell ourselves—has become a staple in the discourse on global warming. The field is teeming with narrative concerns, be they about genre (Are we living an apocalypse? a horror story? a tragedy? a fable? a farce? a typology?), origin stories (“It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine”), the problem of not knowing how the story ends or develops (climate scientists do not disagree on warming, but they do debate questions of “tempo and mode”), even the value of storytelling itself (Are stories still worth telling or recording if the likelihood of a future human audience for them is diminishing? What can the stories of much earlier humans tell us about our current crisis? What is the relationship between storytelling and adaptation, or storytelling and evolution?), and so on.

This makes sense, insofar as global warming, like narrative, is a temporal problem. It is the result of the accumulation, over time, of carbon dioxide in the earth’s atmosphere, put there by the actions of millions of human beings acting individually and collectively over hundreds of years, to burn material that itself took millions of years, millions of lives and deaths, to accrue. If one were in a compassionate mood, one might say that the tragedy of global warming is in part a tragedy of greed, and in part a tragedy of the human mind’s—or some human minds’—failure to apprehend or care about deep time.⁶ (The two are, of course, related: caring solely for one’s self-betterment does not typically correspond to caring for the future or honoring the past, though some peoples have had an easier time merging these goals than others.)

I haven’t read the final version of Scranton’s book, but I presume he is not likely to project, either to his readers or to his daughter, the “possibility of a new turn in the future,” but to encourage us to “come to terms nobly with the irreversibility of human extinction along with numerous other species with whom it is entangled.” These are not Scranton’s words, but those of political theorist William Connolly, describing the

“game over” attitude shared by some—perhaps an ever-increasing number of—climate scientists, such as Guy McPherson, who predicts that human extinction will arrive sooner—much sooner—than some expect; McPherson’s conservative estimate is 2030, the year my son turns eighteen, nine years after this book’s publication.

Connolly is critical of McPherson—not for the implausibility of McPherson’s claims, but rather for the fact that “McPherson has not yet told one old guy how to inform his children, partner, students, grandchildren, and Facebook friends about such an implacable future.” Theorist Donna Haraway echoes this critique when she says that the “game over” attitude “makes a great deal of sense in the midst of the world’s sixth great extinction event,” but she has concerns about its discouraging effects on others, including on young people, such as her students. “There is a fine line,” Haraway writes, “between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference.”

When I’m feeling fearful or suspicious, I read these writers and think, *A fine line, indeed*. Is all that’s left to us deliberating about the right or wrong way of delivering the news to ourselves and others, including those whose care or futurity we feel most responsible for? Are these thinkers practicing their own form of denial by worrying more about the “discouraging effects” of the bad news on our children, grandchildren, students, and others, than on the bad news itself? At which point I am forced to realize that my desire for the bad news—“give it to me straight, Doc”—reflects my own craving for an end to indeterminacy, an end to negotiating the interregnum between being born and dying—an end, that is to say, to the problem of living.

For however much we may want the straight news, no one necessarily has it to give. No one, not even McPherson, knows exactly what the future holds (which is decidedly *not* the same as saying we know nothing and should therefore do nothing; we act all the time based on best explanations, best options, best intentions). Part of the pain of our present moment, as Haraway has it, is that we “know both too much and too

little”—an epistemological quandary that can encourage us to “succumb to despair or to hope.” “Succumbing to hope” may sound odd to those conditioned to believe that hope is the sole pathway to right action. But increasingly it seems that relentless hope and despair may be but “2 sides of the same emotionally immature, over-privileged coin,” as climate justice writer Mary Annaïse Heglar has put it. Now that we are virtually certain to raise the earth’s temperature by at least two degrees Celsius, Heglar’s call for the climate movement to “occupy the space in the middle” makes a lot of sense. It pushes us away from the binary of “fucked” or “not fucked,” and toward thinking of global warming as “a problem that gets worse over time the longer we produce greenhouse gas, and can be made better if we choose to stop,” as David Wallace-Wells has put it. This means that, as Wallace-Wells says, “no matter how hot it gets, no matter how fully climate change transforms the planet and the way we live on it, it will always be the case that the next decade could contain more warming, and more suffering, or less warming and less suffering. Just how much is up to us, and always will be.” Again, these are difficult facts. But knowing that *something* is still “up to us, and always will be” can inject a measure of freedom into a situation that makes most of us feel throttled.

For what it’s worth—and believe me, I know gender essentialism isn’t always worth very much—it interests me that many women writing on climate, especially women of color, rarely engage in the “game over” style of thinking or feeling common to “doomer dudes” (Heglar calls them “de-nihilists”), even when their apprehension of the problem—and sometimes their experience of it—is equally grave or more so.⁷ This makes sense, insofar as fears of an apocalypse come to transform or destroy one’s secure, comfortable, hopefully inheritable lifestyle are nothing if not indicative of a certain class, racial, or national status, one for which civilizational collapse has been but a novel or notional threat rather than something that has already occurred. “If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and

capitalism,” writes Kathryn Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. “The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence.” After centuries of such exportation, it might seem grotesque to turn around and seek guidance on mourning and survival from those whose pasts and presents have been ravaged by imperialism, colonialism, environmental degradation, and slavery.⁸ All the more reason, then, not to seek guidance per se, but to let those with more wisdom as to how to live past “game over” lead the way.

THE MANSION OF MODERN FREEDOMS

One of the terrible ironies of our having refused to act on the warnings issued by climate scientists for so long is that, as McKibben tells it, there once was a time—and not all that long ago—when changing course would have been relatively painless, would have required far less sacrifice, disruption, and “unfreedom” than it will now. By wantonly whipping past that point, and by squeezing the amount of time we have left to deal with the problem into a matter of years, we have managed to ensure that the necessary interventions will both bring far more disruption *and* make less of a dent in the problem, thus failing to obviate suffering and loss that could have been avoided had we acted sooner. (Our national response to COVID-19, McKibben has pointed out, has followed a similar course.)⁹

As a problem gets harder to solve, ignoring it becomes all the more tempting. Ignore it long enough, and eventually it becomes unsolvable. Giving up can then seem to deliver a measure of relief, in that it appears, at least for a moment, to liberate us from the agonies of our failing efforts. But such relief cannot last, as the unsolved problem will continue to create problems and cause suffering. This suffering rarely feels like freedom.

In 2011, Naomi Klein attended the Heartland Institute’s Sixth International Conference on Climate Change, “the premier gathering for those dedicated

to denying the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is warming the planet,” and reported on the discourse of freedom she found there. As Klein tells it, the Heartlanders deeply believe—or at least purport to believe—that climate change is “a plot to steal American freedom.” As a senior fellow told the crowd, “You can believe this is about the climate, and many people do, but it’s not a reasonable belief. [The issue is that] no free society would do to itself what [the global warming] agenda requires.” According to this logic, even if global warming were not a nefarious “collectivist” or Chinese hoax (as many Heartlanders believe it to be), it would *still* have to go unaddressed, as a truly “free society” would opt for a suicidal course rather than acquiesce to the “freedom-killing” modifications in fossil fuel extraction or consumption that addressing the problem requires. (Unsurprisingly, Klein reports that *Give me liberty or give me death* rhetoric abounds at Heartland, often cast through the lens of attachment to household appliances. “You can pry my thermostat out of my dead cold hands,” one participant declaimed. COVID has brought out a similar sentiment, and not just from the fringes: as Representative Trey Hollingsworth (R-IN) told a radio reporter in April 2020, “It is always the American government’s position to say, in the choice between the loss of our way of life as Americans and the loss of life of American lives, we have to always choose the latter.” If only such loss—of lives, of species, of habitable regions—could be restricted to those who have agreed to it—but, alas, our interdependence stops nowhere.)

One could argue that the philosophical discourse about freedom at such gatherings—like that of the “Free Speech Week” planned and then abandoned by right-wing activists at UC Berkeley in 2017—is deliberately unserious, a means of giving intellectual and pseudoscientific cover to oil and gas executives while they pile fortune onto fortune (unsurprisingly, the petroleum industry finances the work of many of the “climate realists” featured at Heartland). One could even argue that Heartland acts as a troll within a troll, in that right-wing climate denialism is itself a sort of hoax: Exxon and other oil giants have known for decades about the science of global warming—and *have believed it*—with the difference being that they made the strategic decision to inculcate climate denialism in

others in order to buy more time to drill and sell—a decision McKibben calls “the most consequential deception in mankind’s history.”¹⁰

Klein, however, is willing to take seriously the debate about freedom on offer at Heartland, in part because she thinks that the Heartlanders apprehend the nature of the problem better than the “green capitalists” do. The Heartlanders are right, Klein says, when they say that climate change isn’t really an “issue.” Rather, she says, “climate change is a message, one that is telling us that many of our culture’s most cherished ideals are no longer viable.” These ideals—shared by people on both the right and left, Klein explains—involve a paradigm of a civilization based on progress and expansion rather than one based on an apprehension of and respect for natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence, and the material, planetary parameters that make human life possible. The hard lesson climate change has for freedom, Klein argues, is that the only way humans can stick around to practice it is by ceasing to conceptualize it as the defying of limits, and reimagining it as the practice of negotiating with the various material constraints that give our lives shape and possibility.

This seems right to me. The fact is that our bodies can survive only within a narrow range of conditions—as McKibben has it, “When temperatures [pass] thirty-five degrees Celsius (ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit) and the humidity [is] higher than ninety per cent, even in ‘well-ventilated shaded conditions,’ sweating slows down, and humans can survive only ‘for a few hours, the exact length of time being determined by individual physiology.’”¹¹ No matter our truly impressive reserves of ingenuity and resiliency, no matter the bubblesuits a costume designer imagines we might someday wear in that fabulous Mars terrarium, no matter the celebrities taking field trips to experience weightlessness at Zero G facilities, no matter the Google executives trying to upload their consciousnesses to the cloud, we cannot and will not escape the constraints that constitute the parameters of our mortal existence, such as our need for water, food, air, shelter, and love, nor do I see why we would want to. Accepting and working with such constraints, rather than hoping to be liberated from them by some unforeseeable technofix, divine intervention, or bloody boogaloo,

demands a more sensible, some might say a more grown-up, conception of freedom. (Massumi: “You can’t really escape the constraints. No body can escape gravity. Laws are part of what we are, they’re intrinsic to our identities. . . . Freedom always arises from constraint—it’s a creative conversion of it, not some utopian escape from it.”)

The divide between those who want to drill, baby, drill, and those who want urgent action on the climate, often gets posed as a struggle between those who value freedom (imagined as the freedom to excavate whatever one wants, make whatever profit one wants, consume whatever one wants, do whatever one feels like doing in the moment) and those who value obligation (imagined as the duty to be good stewards of the earth, cohabit it responsibly with the millions of life-forms whose fate is linked to ours, take into account the well-being of future generations). The problem with this binary is that it risks reducing “obligation” to moral hectoring, and “freedom” to a cheap, self-serving hedonism. Neither helps us seize the moment to shed some of freedom’s more exhausted—and toxic—tropes and myths, or to experiment with its next iterations. We could imagine, for example, *restraint* as a choice, as in the restraint needed *not* to extract the 80 percent of the fossil fuel that remains underground, in order to maintain the conditions of possibility for ongoing human life. (Obviously a veneration of restraint means and applies differently depending on the circumstances: for example, the poor cannot and should not be expected to “restrain” themselves from making a living in the sole ways available to them.) As the state of addiction makes clear, repetitive, compulsive sating of our immediate desires rarely leads to emancipation. And yet, before we mock those who find freedom in air-conditioning, solitary driving, disposable wrapping, plastic straws, hamburgers, or frequent airline travel, we might note that many of us have similar feelings and attachments: the goal is to invent new norms that feel palatable—desirable, even—to people, not to shame them for their cathexis to comforts and ways of living in which we share.

Rethinking freedom in the context of climate change also invites us to consider how the concept itself—like all concepts that have itinerantly preoccupied the human mind—has been shaped not just by human-made

phenomena (slavery, technology, distinct forms of government, and so on) but also by the nonhuman materials and forces with which we've been partnering, consciously or not. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" is instructive here, in that in it Chakrabarty asks us to see the entire modern history of freedom in its geological context:

In no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked to their acquisition of freedom. Philosophers of freedom were mainly, and understandably, concerned with how humans would escape the injustice, oppression, inequality, or even uniformity foisted on them by other humans or human-made systems. Geological time and the chronology of human histories remained unrelated. This distance between the two calendars, as we have seen, is what climate scientists now claim has collapsed. The period I have mentioned, from 1750 to now, is also the time when human beings switched from wood and other renewable fuels to large-scale use of fossil fuel—first coal and then oil and gas. The mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use.

Chakrabarty's thinking here is tantalizingly porous, insofar as he notes a temporal and structural relation between fossil fuel use and the "mansion of modern freedoms" without hammering out its exact nature. (His phrase "mansion of modern freedoms" may jar, as he's talking about the same 250 years that contained peak transatlantic slave trade, colonization, industrial pollution, and more. But Chakrabarty knows all this, so I'm guessing the mansion he has in mind is the sum total of discourse generated by human beings about freedom during this period, not the equitable distribution of it.)

Thankfully, other historians and scholars have filled in many of the gaps—Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*,

for example, offers a historical account of the linked development of modern democracy and oil to demonstrate how “fossil fuels helped create both the possibility of modern democracy and its limits.” “Rather than a study of democracy and oil,” Mitchell writes, “[this] became a book about democracy *as* oil.”¹² As Mitchell tells it, fossil fuels created the conditions of possibility for people to gather, organize, and mount challenges to oligarchical forms of rule, thus enabling modern democratic politics, including revolutionary politics. But insofar as these movements have tended to treat ecological limits as extrinsic to their cause, and imagined the future as a “limitless horizon of growth,” they, too, have not been able to keep us from the maddening situation we are now in, wherein democratic governments appear incapable of doing what it takes to ward off catastrophic warming.

The entanglement of modern democracy with fossil fuels does not necessarily mean we have to quit the former in order to wean ourselves off the latter (I remind myself of this whenever I find myself drifting toward ecofascist fantasy—like, *What if we just allowed an environmentalist dictator to take power for a teensy bit of time, just long enough to force us all to stop emitting CO₂, so that we have a chance of continuing any experiment in human governance*). As Mitchell makes clear, just because forms of energy *shape* our politics does not mean they *determine* our politics. The more alert we are to this dynamic, the more we can engage thoughtfully and inventively with it, and wrestle with the proposition that “the building of solutions to future energy needs is also the building of new forms of collective life.” (This is what Haraway is getting at when she says, “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots; what thoughts think thoughts. . . . Think we must, we must think.”)

To date, we have all thought modern freedom with oil, whether we aimed to or not. Carbon powers the very equipment by which our thoughts and voices and bodies reach one another; it powers our public conversations about the nature of freedom, autonomy, justice, and self-governance, from street protests to conference panels to Twitter wars. It even powers the ways in which we love our children: “Someday I must tell my son

what I have done,” NASA climate scientist Kate Marvel writes. “My comfortable, safe life is in large part a product of the internal combustion engine. Fossil fuels power the trains that take us to the beach, the factories that make his plastic bucket and spade, the lights I switch off when I kiss him good night. . . . In the end, I am responsible for the gases that are changing the climate and, in raising my son in comfort and convenience, am passing on that responsibility and guilt to him.” Even if our apprehension of deep time is minimal (as I believe mine to be), I believe that *something* inside us perceives the fundamental chasm between the millions of years it took for fossil fuels to accrue, and the mind-boggling speed at which we have extracted, consumed, and excreted them. The awe my son felt at Travel Town was justified: we *should* feel awe in the face of the energy we’ve generated by burning deep time in no time. Our own bodies have been shaped by this power, through the speed of planes, trains, automobiles, and cybercurrents, all of which have become integral to our conception of freedom. We often take freedom to mean freedom of movement—be it the freedom to leave behind a bad scene for a (hopefully) better one; the freedom to leave behind cramped origins and forge new kinships in a bigger, more anonymous, place; the freedom to choose the unknown over the known. Capitalist, abolitionist, queer, and revolutionary consciousnesses alike have depended on such dreams and desires, some of which are dear to my own heart.

I grew up, after all, in California, where my adolescent freedom was synonymous with driving my 1976 VW bug on the open road; after a long, carless sojourn in New York City, I have since returned to the gospel of solitary driving (or so I had before the pandemic—now my car collects dust in the driveway, which turns out to be its own form of freedom—the freedom of not having to go anywhere, which vibrates uncomfortably beside the feeling of there being nowhere to go). For the many years I lived in New York City—and even now, in my melancholic exile from it—poet Frank O’Hara’s words from “Meditations in an Emergency” always spoke my heart: “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life.” The paid labor

I perform in the world is exclusively cultural, and I like it that way; the only two jobs I've ever really had have been that of waitress/bartender and professor/writer. I cherish the anonymity and plethora of metropolises, have no special love of "the local," and harbor no anticiv fantasy of going "back to the land." I don't even garden. As British theorist Mark Fisher once wrote in a spasm of cosmopolitan honesty, "Hands up who wants to give up their anonymous suburbs and pubs and return to the organic mud of the peasantry. Hands up, that is to say, all those who really want to return to pre-capitalist territorialities, families and villages. Hands up, furthermore, those who really believe that these desires for a restored organic wholeness are *extrinsic* to late capitalist culture, rather than fully incorporated components of the capitalist libidinal infrastructure." It is intimidating, then, as well as rousing, to wonder what can and will happen to our conception of freedom when we begin thinking it, feeling it, living it, apart from so many of our current fetishes and habits. But this experiment is a necessary and worthwhile one, as only a fundamentally nostalgic, claustrophobic view of freedom would insist it stay allied to one technology of energy production, especially if and when continued reliance on that technology ensures painful new constrictions and claustrophobic new forms of suffering. (These are not abstract: I'm writing today with all the windows in my office taped shut and towels stuffed under the doors to block out the hazardous wildfire smoke seeping in from all sides. *Think we must, we must think.*)

The good news for those of us whose hands stayed down is that "post-civ" will not and need not resemble "pre-civ" or "anti-civ." As Bruno Latour has made clear, the opposition of the local and the global is pretty much spent: "The planet is *much too narrow and limited* for the globe of globalization; at the same time, it is *too big*, infinitely too large, too active, too complex, to remain within the narrow and limited borders of any locality." Climate change has revealed how local actions have global effects, and that those global effects are invariably experienced locally. Rather than continuing to think in terms of local/global—or right/left—Latour argues (persuasively, I think) that it would be more fruitful to think in terms of the Terrestrial/Out-of-This-World, with the Out-of-This-World signifying the abandonment of even the pretense of a

shared earth and common future and the subsequent mission of “*get[ing] rid of all the burdens of solidarity as fast as possible*,” and the Terrestrial signifying a willingness to “come down to Earth,” accept our entangled state, work with it and each other. Latour’s approach encourages us to move beyond increasingly antiquated debates about freedom as big vs. small government, totalitarianism vs. democracy, and start thinking about freedom ecologically, which involves reckoning with the limitations and possibilities of our shared environment, rather than hoping for walls, moats, ethnostates, apocalypse retreats, treasure troves, or spacecrafts to sever us from it.

None of this will sound novel to anyone who has but dabbled in feminist, environmentalist, postcolonial, or Indigenous thought, all of which has long pointed out, albeit from distinct angles, the various intellectual, ecological, and ethical errors—aka catastrophes—that have ensued from the presumption of a bounded individualism separate from and superior to a supposedly inert Nature.¹³ “Many humans, particularly those under the seductive spell of Western Enlightenment thought, had for centuries insisted that they existed on a plane far above the base material world around them because their ontology was one of creation and self-creation. Humans were subjects, never objects,” writes historian Timothy LeCain. “Yet what happens when humans’ thinking and creating results not in their transcendence of nature, but their abrupt descent back into it? This is precisely the phenomenon occurring with anthropogenic global warming.” Throughout these very same centuries, however, many humans *have* been treated as objects. What’s more, those objects did and do fight back (cf. the opening of Moten’s *In the Break*: “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist”). They resist not only their masters, but also notions of freedom or humanity that depend upon the domination or transcendence of a base material world with which they are repeatedly aligned. (Hence, Hartman’s argument in *Scenes of Subjection* that the abstract, universal subject of liberalism has always depended upon the “fleshy substance” of castigated subjects in order to achieve and maintain its “ethereal splendor,” a construction that ensures injustice even as it promises liberation.)

Acting upon entanglement—like acting on care—is more difficult than simply professing fidelity to the principle: the master-slave relation is a form of entanglement, too. Think, for example, of how feminist physicist Karen Barad’s notion of “living ethically,” defined as constantly “taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world’s vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us and it flourish,” mixes up with Morton’s observation that “because of interconnectedness, it always feels as if there is a piece missing. Something just doesn’t add up. We can’t get compassion exactly right. Being nice to bunny rabbits means not being nice to bunny rabbit parasites.” This not-getting-it-exactly-right means that there will always be occasions for disagreement, be it about the “we” who is to flourish (bunny rabbit or bunny rabbit parasite?), the meaning of “flourish,” and so on. Even if the type of freedom we value most is that of the “nobody’s free until everybody’s free” variety, such interdependence cannot spare us difficult trade-offs, ethical dilemmas with imperfect and sometimes even brutal outcomes. Our entanglement is above all complex, and complexity leads to difficulty. That difficulty is easier to bear once we recognize that our desire to solve it once and for all may also signify our desire to no longer be a part of it.

OUR CHILDREN AND THE CHILDREN OF OUR CHILDREN

Given the weird temporal situation we currently find ourselves in, wherein our past actions have locked in a certain amount of warming whose effects we have begun to experience, as we barrel toward significantly more intense effects in the not-so-distant future (with the terrifying possibility of runaway acceleration), it’s unsurprising that so many people writing and thinking on the climate have found themselves grappling with the dizzying notion of futurity itself. More often than not, this grappling relies upon the figure of the child. I myself performed such an invocation in the opening pages of this chapter, in part because it felt “natural,” and in part to set the stage for further questions.

Many movements aiming to “make the world a better place,” from Black Lives Matter to Fridays for Future to Standing Rock to Never Again to

Families Belong Together, frame their actions as service to children and the unborn. (“This moment requires *you* to ensure your own freedom,” said BLM activist Tamika Mallory in a 2020 speech in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. “And the freedom of your children—born and unborn.”) In other words, they make recourse to reproductive futurism, defined by queer theorist Lee Edelman in his polemic *No Future* as the twofold idea that there is a future we can and should make better, and that the Child is its emblem. *No Future* provocatively posits itself against this ideology, proposing that “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.” Many have taken Edelman up on this provocation—some, to disagree with it (see, for example, the late José Muñoz, who argued passionately that “queers have nothing but a future,” and called Edelman’s antifuture stance “the gay white man’s last stand”); others, to extend its lens to any number of novels, movies, environmental campaigns, political speeches, or personal decisions in which reproductive futurism can be sniffed out and rebuked.¹⁴

Given that queers have long been punished, often violently, for being perceived as threats or outsiders to reproductive futurism—and given how much kinship and culture they have been able to construct outside of it—it makes sense that a strand of queer theory would spend time uncovering and valorizing the “queer temporalities” repressed or occluded by straight norms. Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), for example, takes on something Halberstam calls “repo time,” in all its micro and macro manifestations: “Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children’s needs, and it relates to beliefs about children’s health and healthful environments for child rearing. The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next.” In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Sedgwick addresses the perils of “paranoid temporality”—the “dogged, defensive narrative stiffness . . . in which yesterday can’t be allowed to

have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so”—that Sedgwick sees as intrinsic to the “generational narrative that’s characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness: it happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son’s son.” In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway sets forth the anti-reproductive-futurism slogan “Make Kin Not Babies!,” by which she attempts to fuse the queer capacity for nonbiological kinship with ecological concerns about overpopulation and anthropocentrism.

Such theorizing has been crucial to recognizing, and sometimes enacting, forms of kinship and temporality not based in the heterosexual, privatized, white, nuclear, or even human family. Unfortunately, however, as often happens in academia, such critiques have at times slid into a knee-jerk dismissal of anything perceived to be contaminated with reproductive futurism, which includes, at this point, most major forces in the climate fight, which is partly being led by children themselves. (Think of teenage activist Greta Thunberg, who, along with fifteen other children, lodged an official complaint to the United Nations’ Committee on the Rights of the Child against nations failing to meet the emission reduction targets they agreed to in the Paris Agreement; the Sunrise Movement, “an army of . . . ordinary young people who are scared about what the climate crisis means for the people and places we love”; the twenty-one youth plaintiffs in *Juliana v. the United States*, a 2015 lawsuit alleging that the US government’s inaction on climate science “deliberately discriminat[es] against children and future generations in exerting their sovereign authority over our nation’s air space and federal fossil fuel resources for the economic benefit of present generations of adults”; the thousands of kids who have taken to the streets as part of the Youth Climate Strike; and more.) As so often happens when adults must listen to actual children rather than hide behind the pabulum of reproductive futurism (or the punk bravado of its no-future antithesis), the real difficulties of intergenerational conversation come to the fore.¹⁵

In such a context, Edelman’s refusal to “[abjure] fidelity to a future that’s always purchased at our expense,” or Lauren Berlant’s 1997 lament that

“a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children,” or Andrea Long Chu’s quip that “having a child, like heterosexuality, is a very stupid idea. . . . Children are a cancer,” begin to sound more passé than avant-garde, insofar as they reify the division between children and adults, with adults the privileged category. In other words, it’s hard to get excited about queerness as a force come to “ruptur[e] our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity” (Edelman) when climate change is accomplishing the same goal, to catastrophic effect. Ask the kids of *Juliana v. United States* what they think about the foreclosure of generational regularity and repetition; ask the child complainants to the UN whether the real problem is that we’ve imagined a world made solely for “fetuses and children”; ask anyone whose homeland or livelihood has been obliterated by climate change how they feel about the fact that their yesterday will not resemble their tomorrow.

The point isn’t that reproductive futurism was right all along, and now that queers have become more welcomed into its fold, we should all just pile in and swallow it whole. It’s more that all replication is not created equal: environmental activists making recourse to reproductive futurism do not want to reproduce the same world that brought us radical inequity and ecological devastation. They want a world that reproduces the same or similar conditions of habitability that other human animals have been able to enjoy for the past 11,500 years. Likewise, while it’s well and good to say (as does Rebekah Sheldon in *The Child to Come*) that we need to learn how to live “without the demand for safety and the pleading face of the child that is its warrant,” all safety is not created equal either. The climate fight—like the fight for racial justice, with which it is inextricably linked—absolutely has to do with a demand for increased safety, insofar as it is about reducing the threat of premature death or extinction for those disproportionately exposed to it, be it at the hands of police, the torching of the Amazon, or a rising tide. No wonder, then, that certain queer groups have begun to shift course: see, for example, the collective Parliament of Bodies, whose most recent summit in Bergen, Norway, named its goal as figuring out “how to redefine our alliances with those who are not presently living . . . [and take] responsibility for those who are no longer, or not yet, here,” or the Institute

of Queer Ecology (IQECO), “a collaborative organism” whose “mission is to make space for collectively imagining an equitable, multispecies future.”

By this point I’ve lost count of how many people have confided to me their feeling that, since having children is a “choice,” why should there be “special treatment” for those who opt to procreate (tax credits, special scheduling favors at work, universal daycare, and so on)? In response to such sentiments—which unintentionally echo the right-wing push to defund social services, including public education—opinion writers across the land churn out various entreaties as to why we should care about children, especially the children of others. These arguments vary by the writer’s commitments: sometimes children matter because they are a future national citizenry; sometimes they are the bearers of tradition for a disappearing or oppressed people; sometimes they are future taxpayers; sometimes they are future revolutionaries; sometimes they are our future nurses and home caregivers. If these arguments convince some people to care more about other people’s children or future lives more generally, great. But they strike me as a bit bizarre, in that it has always seemed to me that children matter simply because they matter—they are our fellow humans, albeit smaller ones with differing levels of need. They are not a separate species; they are already as well as forthcoming. In fact, they were us, they *are* us, even if we tend to forget it (and by forget, I really mean forget, in the Winnicottian sense that good-enough parenting allows the baby to forget the experience of being held, whereas the parent’s charge is to keep remembering the baby). Championing the unborn has become understandably dicey business. But there’s no reason that antiabortionists should get to rob us of recognizing and valuing the continuum between current and potential life (a continuum sometimes epitomized for me by the astonishing, if overtly biological, fact that a baby born with a uterus already has within it all the eggs it will ever have, which means that the egg cells that might one day become the grandchildren of a gestating mother have already lived inside her).

Caring for the unborn does not mean insisting that all unborn things be born. It means accepting that, by the time you have finished reading this

paragraph, about 250 more babies will have been born into a future that didn't exist when you began it. So before we bliss out on some sublime indifference to that which will postdate us, we might recognize that indifference to their fate is arguably no different from dumping a bunch of toxic waste guaranteed to poison whoever comes into contact with it, then contending that, because you won't know the sickened people personally or won't be alive when they get sick, or because you just aren't that into people anyway, especially small ones that cry on airplanes, you're off the hook. One does not need to be an advocate of fetal personhood, baby showers, the Disneyfication of Times Square, or treating present and future beings as ethically identical to recognize that this logic is morally preposterous.

The climate crisis cannot wait until we have purged people of their allegedly wrongheaded attachment to reproductive futurism. It cannot wait until everyone around the globe has embraced "Make Kin Not Babies." Doubling down on the conviction—so common in academic and leftist circles—that if we could just agree on the correct framing of the issue (or if we could at least all agree on what frame definitively to jettison), we would be closer to forging the kind of livable collaborations necessary for coexistence and survival, has become a waste of time we don't have. Rather than seek one singular frame to mobilize people on climate issues, we would likely benefit from getting more comfortable with diversity, enacting what Félix Guattari once imagined (in *The Three Ecologies*) as "a plurality of disparate groups [coming] together in a kind of unified disunity, a pragmatic solidarity without solidity."

About an ecological dispute in Manggur, Indonesia, that brought parties with vastly different priorities and outlooks together to oppose a logging company, Connolly writes, "The emergent assemblage did not become a unity, let alone a community; it became a moving complex of interests, concerns, and critical perspectives with a few shining points of affinity and commonality. All, for instance, opposed the logging company, but some pursued a wilderness ideal, while others sought to retain the forests as living sites of human-forest-animal-plant intersection. Even the victory did not look the same to all the parties involved."¹⁶ *Even the victory did not look the same to all the parties involved*: this kind of dissonance

does not mean anything went wrong. It means that people are different from each other. Given that close to half the people in the United States have developed an attachment to climate denialism (and/or its twin, a me-first survivalism) so intense that some are willing to take up arms against decarbonizing, we are going to need a lot of help and wisdom in navigating these differences. Many of these folks aren't on the cusp of discovering a queer, multispecies sense of ecojustice. But they may come to feel that the freedom not to lose your home, your health, your livelihood, your food supply, or future possibilities for your children and the children of your children is also worth fighting for. They may also have things to teach us about freedom, care, and constraint that we don't already know, even—or especially—when we already think we do.

WHAT HAS THE FUTURE EVER DONE FOR ME?

When economists contend with global warming, they engage in a process called “future discounting,” in which one “weighs future people’s benefits against costs borne by people in the present.” In contemplating the future, one can ascribe to it a high or low discount rate: as climate researcher David Hodgkinson explains, “If a cost benefit analysis uses a high discount rate, it discounts future benefits to a high degree, giving little weight to the interests of future people.” If one uses a low discount rate, then the present generation is called upon “to make urgent sacrifices for the sake of future people.” Economists and politicians have basically been future-discounting their asses off, ascribing “a lower weight to human interests the further they are in the future just because of the fact that they exist in the future.” As Hodgkinson explains, “The prevailing view at the international level about action on climate change seems to be, ‘Why should I care about future generations? What have they ever done for me?’” One scarcely needs to point out the conflict between this prevailing view and that which would insist, as does the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Constitution, that we must “look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation.”

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

the first copy of *ily cere- cahier 42* was printed in september 2026

1	the artist as producer in times of crisis	okwui enwezor
2	the carrier bag theory of fiction	ursula k. le guin
3	arts of noticing	anna lowenhaupt tsing
4	whatever & bartleby	giorgio agamben
5	notes toward a politics of location	adrienne rich
6	the intimacy of strangers	merlin sheldrake
7	the zero world	achille mbembe
8	why do we say that cows don't do anything?	vinciane despret
9	nautonomat operating manual	raqs media collective
10	on plants, or the origin of our world	emanuele cocchia
11	hydrofeminism: or, on becoming a body of water	astrida neimanis
12	the gift and the given	eduardo viveiros de castro
13	the three figures of geontology	elizabeth a. povinelli
14	what lies beneath	george monbiot
15	sculpture not to be seen	elena filipovic
16	the onion	kurt schwitters
17	tentacular thinking	donna j. haraway
18	toward a symbiotic way of thought	vincent zonca
19	living with birds	len howard
20	why look at animals?	john berger
21	quantum listening	pauline oliveros
22	politics of installation	boris groys
23	some notes on drawing	amy sillman
24	depiction, object, event	jeff wall
25	cyber-teratologies	rosi braidotti
26	love your monsters	bruno latour
27	arts of living on a damaged planet	multiple authors
28	what is it like to be a bat?	thomas nagel
29	dazzling diversity: the biology of chiroptera	tessa laird
30	what is an owl?	stephen moss
31	the gender of sound	anne carson
32	the euphio question	kurt vonnegut
33	listening to the tree of life	karen bakker
34	organic music societies	multiple authors
35	klittenbandjes	hay wijnhoven
36	rachel carson	a fable for tomorrow
37	listening music	john maus
38	wolf trilogy	angela carter
39	over leven	sander turnhout
40	hele dagen tussen levende wezens	estelle zhong mengual
41	the earthly community	achille mbembe
42	riding the blinds	maggie nelson
43	notes on gesture	giorgio agamben
44	the living mountain	nan shepherd
45	the ecological crisis as a crisis of sensibility	baptiste morizot

ilycere-cahiers.com
blyisnokino.com
itispartofanensemble.com
peelrealounoun.com
naipattaofficial.com
onarynornotice.com
theques-verlag.com

