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On Freedom

FOUR SONGS OF CARE AND CONSTRAINT

Maggie Nelson

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Navigating between the extremes of obligation-to-none/obligation-to-all is no easy matter. Even if and when we lean toward the latter, our ambitions are seriously challenged by questions of scale and capacity, not to mention the fact that, when it comes to care, there is no such thing as getting it exactly right. “Being nice to bunny rabbits means not being nice to bunny rabbit parasites.” What’s more, the attempt to urge “species thinking” upon people without taking into account the difficulties they might face in meeting the needs of their most immediate kin has its own ethical problems (which is why organizations like the Just Transition Fund, a group devoted to communities most directly destabilized by the transition away from coal, emphasize that the “most sustainable solutions are community-driven, developed by those most affected, and built from the ground up”).¹⁷

In the realm of climate negotiation, the problem of variegated obligation actually has an acronym: CBDR-RC, UN lingo for “common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities.” CBDR-RC negotiations, which aim to address the fact that nations have distinct histories and present challenges when it comes to reducing carbon emissions, justly play a role at any international summit about climate change. Such negotiations are notoriously thorny, and contribute to rendering climate change not just a “wicked problem,” defined in 1973 by professors Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber as one that “has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn’t have a right answer,” but a “super wicked problem,” defined in 2012 by professors Kelly Levin, Benjamin Cashore, Steven Bernstein, and Graeme Auld, as a wicked problem with four added features: “time is running out; those who cause the problem also seek to provide a solution; the central authority needed to address it is weak or non-existent; and, partly as a result, policy responses discount the future irrationally.” These four additional features, the researchers say, “combine to create a policy-making ‘tragedy.’”

In the face of this difficulty—or, for those already there, this tragedy—some thinkers and writers have started to take a different tack altogether, asking us to question the knee-jerk belief that “survival is always better than non-survival,” as Morton has put it. Morton sees this preference for survival at all costs at the core of something he calls “agrilogistics”—a

modality he says developed in Mesopotamia at the end of the Pleistocene/start of the Holocene, when humans shifted from nomadic hunting-gathering to settled-down agriculture. Over time, agrilogistics scaled up, “eventually requiring steam engines and industry to feed its proliferation.” In this version of the story, the steam engine marks not the beginning of a new way of thinking or being, but the moment at which a much older habit or logic found expression in an energy source capable of making a geologically transformative mark.

Because agrilogistics predates industrial capitalism by thousands and thousands of years, Morton—along with some other political and earth scientists—considers industrial capitalism more a symptom than a cause of our predicament. Certainly there is no shortage of villains responsible for our current situation (a definitive cast of characters takes shape after 1965, when the American Association for the Advancement of Science delivered the news to President Lyndon Johnson about the causes and effects of accumulating CO₂ in the atmosphere). But the wider lens used by Morton, Chakrabarty, and others—along with Chakrabarty’s provocatively compassionate contention that we “stumbled into” our current predicament—also seems worth bearing in mind, even if it chafes against the habit of blaming capitalism for everything.

If agrilogistics developed as a means for humans to better assure their security and survival *and* has led to the current crisis, then, as Morton argues, “a survival paradox emerges: the attempt to survive at any cost . . . is precisely the dynamic of murder-suicide.” In the face of such a paradox, Morton thinks we would do well to shed our attachment to the axiom that “existing is better than any quality of existing” (or, more particularly, that “human existing is always better than any quality of existing”). He wants us to unsettle our unquestioned dedication to the idea that “no matter whether I am hungrier or sicker or more oppressed, underlying these phenomena my brethren and I constantly regenerate, which is to say we refuse to allow for death.”

I’m up for thought experiments that allow for the reality of death, and destabilize our knee-jerk conviction that the survival of *Homo sapiens* is that

which matters most. But I scarcely think anyone should get too comfortable with white, first-world intellectuals—me included—musing about what conditions for life merit its continuation, and which forms of suffering (be it hunger, sickness, oppression, or the various deprivations certain peoples have imposed upon others) disqualify a life from perpetuation. At times people choose death rather than continue in gravely oppressive circumstances, or to avoid the near surety of a horrifying fate, or to save the life of another. But if and when someone else makes such a judgment call on behalf of another, or upon a demographic, it's justly called murder, or genocide.

Many branches of radical ecological thinking edge into this territory, insofar as grappling with systemic threats to the biosphere as we know it often demands a kind of zoomed-out perspective on humanity and planet that can prompt deeply unnerving paradigm shifts and proposals. Survival (and, some would say, reproduction) are (arguably) core instincts; philosophers excel at asking us to rethink and recalibrate rote behaviors, helping us to imagine—to feel, to know—that things could be otherwise. We could be otherwise. Our method of inhabiting the planet could be otherwise. Our attitude toward death, including our own individual deaths or that of our species, could be otherwise. Our attitude toward reproductive futurism could be otherwise. Our attitude toward nonhuman forms of life could be otherwise. Our negotiation, distribution, and conceptualization of freedom and obligation could be otherwise. Despite our instinct to preserve “civilization” (cf. Elon Musk’s ethos, which he says he derived from Isaac Asimov: “You should try to take the set of actions that are likely to prolong civilization, minimize the probability of a dark age and reduce the length of a dark age if there is one”), it’s absolutely worth questioning whether its preservation should be our aim *no matter what*. I agree that the problems before us are not thinkable unless we are willing to experiment with the type of perspective that environmental scholar Laura Watt models when she says: “As climate change shifts things in new and unpredictable ways, I have no doubt that planet Earth will survive, and that various aspects of the biological world will adapt and evolve accordingly. Change will happen, as it always does, and those changes are not necessarily ‘good’ or ‘bad’

in a nonhuman sense; is it better or worse to have a predominance of mammals versus dinosaurs? Neither—these are just different outcomes. What gives climate change its most terrifying charge is the very real possibility that we will not survive it—although again, better or worse to have people around? From our perspective, better, but otherwise it's just another possible outcome on an ever-shifting planet."

The trick is learning how to move between the kind of open-ended thought experiments undertaken by Morton, the big-picture equanimity here evidenced by Watt, and the impassioned, fighting spirit of an activist like Heglar, as when Heglar declares: "Even if I can only save a sliver of what is precious to me, that will be my sliver and I will cherish it. If I can salvage just one blade of grass, I will do it. I will make a world out of it. And I will live in it and for it." Moving between these modes is not just an intellectual exercise. It involves letting ourselves be flooded by ferocious love, and experimenting with how that same love feels with a lessened grip.

UGLY FEELINGS, REVISITED

Talk to anyone about global warming for just a couple of minutes and you're likely to get some variation on "I just can't deal." It's too depressing, too overwhelming, too paralyzing, too sad, too frightening, too unimaginable. I get it. I don't actually think we can or should be able to contemplate in any casual way living through—not to mention causing—a sixth mass extinction that may eventually wipe out life on earth as we know it, including "our children and the children of our children." Given all the intense, daily demands on people's time and hearts, it seems fair enough to ask: When *is* the right time to grapple with climate-related feelings of anxiety, fear, rage, grief, and impotence—feelings that, when experienced in their entirety, threaten to feel bottomless or incapacitating? Especially since, as any student of anxiety knows, catastrophizing about the unknowable future is not a very productive or happy-making activity, and does surprisingly little to strengthen our capacity to cope. And who really cares how we *feel*, anyway, when the real business in front of us should

undoubtedly be action? Why on earth would I continue, at this moment in time, to persevere on feelings, rather than lobby for the Green New Deal, advocate for reduced consumption of plastic and meat, be of service to those more vulnerable than myself, or just protest madly?

The inverse relationship between the scale of the climate problem and our difficulty in engaging with it emotionally isn't just a cruel irony, or another opportunity to squabble over the proper traffic between the personal and the political. It is one of the structural features of the crisis. So I'm focusing here on feelings, especially ugly ones, not only because I think they're standing in the way of something we like to call "action," but also because, whether we "act" in time to stave off a truly catastrophic rise in temperature or not—and we may very well not—they still matter, insofar as they shape our experience of our lives, determine how we treat others, and decide the ways we are able to "stay with the trouble," sometimes even determining whether we are able to do so at all.

We all struggle with what it means to "know" about global warming, even as we are living it. As Edward Morris and Susannah Sayler of the Canary Project point out, "knowing" is distinct from "believing" as, by their account, true belief would spur action, yet we do not act. (It would help, of course, if we felt surer about what actions to take, or if we had a stronger sense of the collective into which our individual actions poured.) As Morris puts it, "Belief is a function of feeling. We can only believe in climate change—by which I mean *not* the statistically created research object, and not even the hyperobject, but rather the cost in terms of pain that climate change will cause—when we are opened emotionally to it. Pierced." He and Sayler have described this awakening as a type of rupture or trauma. Those who have borne the brunt of climate-related trauma have already been delivered unto this awakening; those who have not face something of a paradox, wherein the continued refusal to be pierced on behalf of others may be precisely what ensures that climate-related trauma will come to them as well.

And yet, once pierced, then what? Who or what is supposed to aid us in navigating this rupture? How can we learn to move in and out of these

bursts of feeling, such that we feel neither subsumed by their intensity nor driven to repression?

Asserting the legitimacy of one's feelings—including one's ugly feelings—can be important, especially when one's being gaslit. And in a real, even literal, sense, we are all being gaslit, insofar as our so-called leaders are definitively *not* leveling with us about the facts of our ecological present or future. As the manifesto of the Dark Mountain Collective—a UK-based group of artists and writers dedicated to “uncivilization”—states: “We hear daily about the impacts of our activities on ‘the environment’ (like ‘nature’, this is an expression which distances us from the reality of our situation). Daily we hear, too, of the many ‘solutions’ to these problems: solutions which usually involve the necessity of urgent political agreement and a judicious application of human technological genius. Things may be changing, runs the narrative, but there is nothing we cannot deal with here, folks. We perhaps need to move faster, more urgently. Certainly we need to accelerate the pace of research and development. We accept that we must become more ‘sustainable’. But everything will be fine. There will still be growth, there will still be progress: these things will continue, because they have to continue, so they cannot do anything but continue. There is nothing to see here. Everything will be fine.” To which the Collective replies: “We do not believe that everything will be fine.”

I don't believe that everything will be fine either. I don't actually know anyone who thinks everything will be fine, or anyone who could say, with a straight face and clear heart, that we are on track to leave behind a healthy, habitable planet that will sustain the miracle of biodiversity along with our children and the children of our children. But despair and depression are not the only possible responses to this fact, however sensical they may be. Despair tends to make a disproportionate claim on our thinking and feeling, as it is “the only thing which can be understood, explained and amply justified” (Stengers). It has, or it appears to have, a truth-value that joy, optimism, and happiness do not.¹⁸ When we are in its grip, optimism and happiness appear foolish: when the true horrors of the past, present, or future are revealed to us—the bitter, cruel, inevitable

realities of life and death—we will rue any childish, illusory feelings of freedom, peace, or goodness we were once naive enough to entertain.

For some time now scholars and activists have tried to mine ugly feelings such as depression, fear, panic, paranoia, rage, jealousy, and shame for their political value.¹⁹ Culp, for instance, laments that “most sober-minded critics find the uglier of our shared feelings unfit for something as noble as liberation,” and argues that using negative affects as the basis of shared liberation is a possibility “only visible to those who have given up on the illusion that positive affects draw out the best in people.” I agree that one must move through negative affects and not around them. But it seems to me there is a crucial difference between accepting their existence—being curious about them, giving them space, depathologizing them, understanding their cause and potential energy, not treating them as enemies to be purged from our psychic or collective lives—and believing that they signify the ultimate in radicalism or utility, or imbuing them with a kind of truth or use value that exaggerates both their significance and solidity. Habits of mind tend to produce more of the same habits of mind; negative affect is no different. And while positive affects may not always draw out the best in people (whatever that means), the idea that negative affects therefore do belies all of my experience of them (not to mention of those folks who merrily feed their fire).

Scholars Ann Cvetkovich, Moten, and others have noted that a lot of depression and negativity seems to coagulate in places where people are ostensibly “doing what they love,” including the art world, activist circles, or the university. As Culp puts it, “Positive affects swirl through both the vortex of Zuccotti Park and the high rises of Goldman Sachs. Negative affects are caught at work at temp jobs but also at feminist conference panels. Like the ambivalence of any other form of power, affect is not a virtue but a diagnostic.” Just so, people at Trump rallies seem to feel pretty good, maybe even *really* good, though it’s worth considering whether pleasure and disinhibition shot through with scapegoating, nihilism, and odium qualifies, or in what ways it qualifies, as good feeling. Rather than trying to identify particularly miserable realms, it seems to me more fruitful simply to note that there’s a lot of misery everywhere, along with an

underdeveloped ability to ask why, when things don't feel good, how we might make them feel better.²⁰ In which case, it makes sense to ask structural questions about which conditions need to be altered so that a bad thing can feel better, while examining the bad feelings themselves, to see if they are really as immovable or inevitable as we presume them to be. The former is hard because changing conditions and structures is hard; the latter is hard because it involves recognizing that there may be things about our bad feelings we have become habituated to and are loathe to give up, even when we insist that's precisely what we're going for.

This isn't simple perversity. It is hard to defy the strong forces of anxiety and paranoia because they are, as Freud had it, fundamentally forms of defense. ("People become paranoid over things they cannot put up with," Freud wrote, indicating why we can't ever purge paranoia and anxiety from our psychology entirely.) We worry that, if we loosen our grip, it will mean we are not apprehending our situation correctly, that we are denying real threats. We worry that, without sustaining our anxiety, a threat will take us by surprise, and that surprise will be unbearable (hello, near extinction 2030!). We worry that, if we practice a radical acceptance of "things as they are," we will slip into repression, self-indulgence, or inaction (the standard leftist critique of Buddhism and other forms of mindfulness). But paranoia, despair, and anxiety are not known for helping us to "stay with the trouble," or to deepen our fellowship with one another. In fact, they tend to reify an already painful sense of individuation, and to constrict our imagination toward the very worst it can conjure, as if rehearsing our worst fears will lessen our future suffering. Extensive personal experience with this approach has taught me that it does not. Instead, I've come to know it as a completely understandable, extremely effective means of attenuating whatever liberation, expansiveness, or pleasure might be available in the present moment, and depriving oneself of it.

POLITICS AND THERAPY

In 2014, Guy McPherson became a certified grief-recovery specialist, and has since made a career of helping people accept their imminent ex-

inction. McPherson frames this acceptance as a form of freedom—the only freedom left to us. In a 2019 talk, he quotes concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” McPherson argues that our last act of freedom should be choosing an attitude that enables us to live “fully [and] urgently, with death in mind” as our species exits the stage.

McPherson’s trajectory from climate scientist to certified grief-recovery specialist may be more explicit than that of others, but many intellectuals, especially those whose work focuses on climate change, have begun to lean into—if not fully embrace—the role of therapeutic guide. Morton’s *Dark Ecology*, for example, leads the reader on a Tibetan-Book-of-the-Dead type of journey through the many layers of difficult feelings that “dark ecology” can bring about: “We usually don’t get past the first darkness, and that’s if we even care. In this book we are going to try to get to the third darkness, the sweet one, through the second darkness, the uncanny one. Do not be afraid.” Berardi has also been quite explicit about this turn, arguing that “politics and therapy will be the same activity in the coming time. People will feel hopeless and depressed and panicking because they are unable to deal with the post-growth economy, and because they will miss the dissolving modern identity. Our cultural task will be attending those people and taking care of their insanity, and showing them the way of an adaptation, of a happy adaptation at hand. Our task will be the creation of social zones of human resistance, intended as zones of therapeutic contagion.”

As I made clear earlier, I’m skeptical about turning more and more arenas of life (teaching, activism, art) into caretaking and therapy; as always, I suspect there’s more élan to men taking up the cause, insofar as their doing so doesn’t reinscribe any expectation of caretaking or healing that still manages to trail women in every sphere. Many men seem quite comfortable in the role of guru, perhaps because it places them in the position of purporting to know: presenting oneself as an authoritative source for diagnosis + treatment can be a performance of mastery as well as,

or in place of, care provision. At the same time, I think it's absolutely right that, when it comes to global warming—in addition to other acute crises that we face, many of which have begun to stack on top of each other—no one can bear the burden alone; the resulting dislocations will undoubtedly scramble our roles and relations (the experience of teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has made this abundantly clear).

Getting past the first darkness of ecological awareness is easier said than done. I'm ashamed to admit it, perhaps because I still don't fully understand it, but the months I spent researching and writing this chapter were accompanied by somatic freak-outs repeatedly diagnosed—to my ferocious irritation—as “anxiety related.” It was as if, after reading about mass extinction, environmental racism, and dying oceans all day, my attention and anxiety would unconsciously flip onto a more local object—my body—and fixate on eye twitches, chest pain, itchy skin, overactive bladder, jaw pain, GI distress, dizziness, and more. When I wasn't fixated on my own body, I worried over the health and safety of my son. I had unexplained weeping spells. I felt, like so many feel after deep exposure to the facts, like a wild-eyed Cassandra, unable to believe that anyone—including my own family, or me—could spend any part of any day reheating coffee, watching the US Open on TV, or bitching about email backlogs or annoying coworkers. Watching our so-called leaders not just deny and delay, but spitefully conspire to make things worse, felt like being trapped in a cocoon of ruinous madness, a true upside down, wherein everything from hundreds of thousands of COVID deaths to police violence to mass unemployment to poisoned air and water gets reflected back to us as “terrific” and “beautiful.”

If this was staying with the trouble, it sure didn't feel good. In fact, it felt quite lonely. For while many of us think and feel about the climate all the time, no one really wants to talk about it, including, quite often, me. Howling at others to partake in the conversation can end up reinforcing one's alienation (“The Arctic Circle Hit 101°F Saturday, Its Hottest Temperature Ever. The average high temp for June is 68 degrees F. So, the Arctic is running +33 degrees right now. Is anybody listening?” a journalist tweeted today, clearly feeling the desperation).

In retrospect, my fixation on my body was not just pathological displacement. Contending with our collective predicament as a species amplifies the predicament in which we each find ourselves as mortal beings, which can feel overwhelming even on a good day. What we fear is coming for our planet or species is what we already know is coming for us and everyone we love. That's hard.

None of these feelings has gone away, exactly, but I see them now a hair more clearly for what they were, or are: flailing attempts to get through the first darkness unaided by the skills or solidarity that can keep one from collapsing into the whirlpool of individuated suffering. The good news is that those skills, that solidarity, is out there. Sometimes you just have to suffer long enough or hard enough to be compelled to seek it out, or recognize its existence.

RIDING THE BLINDS

Many writers on the climate have argued that artists have a critical role to play in imagining possible futures, be they dystopian or utopian. We can't construct a world unstructured by carbon energy or endless growth, they argue, unless we have imagined it first—or, conversely, we need images of the futures we most want to avoid in order to scare ourselves off course. Novelist Amitav Ghosh makes such an argument in *The Great Derangement*, in which he calls for “a transformed and renewed art and literature” that engages more directly with climate change—a call echoed by everyone from Stengers (“We need to learn telling other tales, neither apocalyptic nor messianic ones . . . Tales that, together with Haraway, I would call SF tales”) to the Dark Mountain Collective, which includes British novelist and “recovering environmentalist” Paul Kingsnorth (“We believe that art must look over the edge, face the world that is coming with a steady eye, and rise to the challenge of ecocide with a challenge of its own: an artistic response to the crumbling of the empires of the mind”) to Scranton (“We must build . . . cultural arks, to carry forward endangered wisdom. . . . The fate of the humanities, as we confront the end of modern civilization, is the fate of humanity itself”).

As much as I understand these calls for us to invent or safeguard stories that might help us reflect and comprehend our circumstances with compassion, imagination, humor, solidarity, and dignity, I also think it valuable to “drop the storyline,” as Chödrön has counseled: *all* story lines, including “progressive” ones, which pin their hopes on the arc of history moving toward justice. For at some point in our lives, if we live long enough, we begin to feel in a visceral fashion what we’ve always known intellectually to be true: our life spans will not allow us to take in the whole story. Indeed, there may be no whole story. Maybe there’s no story at all. Our brains may be hardwired to produce story as a means of organizing space and time, but that doesn’t mean that story is the only mode available to us in experiencing our lives.

It’s hard to drop the story line—not to mention our steadfast conviction of linear time—when you’re staring each day at your whitening hair and bearing witness to the stunning dissolve of the polar ice caps. It’s hard when your kid is asking you point-blank how we got into this mess, and how—or whether—we’re going to get out. “Tell me how it ends,” writer Valeria Luiselli’s daughter asks her repeatedly throughout Luiselli’s book about children seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border. “Sometimes I make up an ending, a happy one,” Luiselli writes. “But most of the time I just say: I don’t know how it ends yet.”

Rather than make recourse to story, often I find myself returning to a certain tableau, one conjured in the opening pages of Harney and Moten’s *The Undercommons*. (Tableaux have to do with story, but insofar as they are perched in time, they offer a kind of pause or suspension from it.) The authors explain their book’s title by summoning a classic Hollywood scene of the American West, in which—as political scientist Michael Parenti has noted—the colonial settlement is invariably depicted as surrounded by hostile, aggressive forces (“the natives”). This inversion is key to the settler’s recasting of his own invasive, murderous colonialism as an act of self-defense. But Moten and Harney are not interested in simply repairing inversions. “The fort really was surrounded,” they write, “is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath—before and before—enclosure.” Their task—and ours, if their “we” is in

fact “us” (and I think it can be, if not without some trouble; that is the profound generosity, and, for some, the controversy, of their work)—is “the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted disposessions through the settler’s armed incursion.” In an interview at the end of *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harney describe this notion of the undercommons, aka *the surround*, as “the first freight that we hopped.” After that, Moten says, “we started riding the blinds.”

“Riding the blinds”: the hobo practice of riding between cars on a moving freight train, so as to evade capture by the train crew or police. The phrase appears often in the blues, that foundational laboratory for allowing any affect to attach to any object, alchemizing pain into sustenance, and creating zones of social resistance and therapeutic contagion. See, for example, Robert Johnson: “Leaving this morn’, I have to ride a blind / Babe, I been mistreated, baby, and I don’t mind dying.”

Riding the blinds means you’re out of the authorities’ sight. It also means you can’t see where you’re headed. Maybe you’re on a runaway train heading for a concrete wall. Maybe you’re heading for a future that is simply impossible to imagine from the present. Maybe life will be better at the next stop; maybe it won’t be. “Seen from the future, might the human prove nothing but a pollinator of a machine civilization to come?” ask Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian in their introduction to *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*. What a thought! I won’t live long enough to find out, and neither will you.

One benefit of riding the blinds, or dropping the story line, is that other senses of time can become more palpable, including the feeling of *folded* or *intergenerational* time—what feminist scholars Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker have called “thick time”: “a transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past.” “Thick time” is neither repo time nor queer time per se, though I admit to feeling it most often when I look at my son, and behold all the selves and ages he has passed through folded atop one another. (My mother once told me that, when she would go to pick me up from our town’s square, she would sometimes get momentarily confused about what kind of body she was looking

for—a toddler body? A teenager body? A preteen body? At the time I thought she was a little nuts, but now I realize she was just touching the kind of thick time I experience all the time these days, when my son is explaining why a hot dog can't freeze in the freezer or how a realm differs from a world in Minecraft, and I'm distracted by noticing that his eyes look exactly as they did when he was an infant, nursing, in all that disordered time spent in the glider. My guess—my hope—is that, as I age, time will thicken further.)

All care—perhaps save hospice, though even that, in its way—has a tacit, if open-ended, relationship to futurity: you feed someone so that she will not grow malnourished; you treat a wound so that it will not become infected; you water seeds in hopes they will grow. It's not that there is no present in care, or that caring in the present is invalidated if and when the desired outcome fails to fruit. It's more that, in caring, time is folded: one is attending to the effects of past actions, attempting to mitigate present suffering, and doing what one can to reduce or obviate future suffering, all at once. Rather than tying ourselves in knots over how much value to assign to the future, or opposing an in-the-moment freedom to a future-concerned obligation, or consigning ourselves to the work of planetary hospice, we might instead recognize that "living fully in the present" always entails making choices about lessening or increasing future suffering. It always entails *temporal abundance*, a phrase lifted from poet-philosopher Denise Riley's beautiful, painful book-length essay *Time Lived, without Its Flow*, in which Riley reckons with the surprise death of her adult son. At her book's end, Riley describes this maternal temporal abundance as an "elaborate, dynamic, silent temporal abundance, even as this is also an abundance in loss." *An abundance, even in loss*: this sounds right to me, even if it pierces.

In an attempt to screw around with our sense of time, perhaps in the hopes of awakening us to the feeling of folded, or thick, or intergenerational, time, Morton often addresses his reader as a time traveler: "There you were, shoveling coal into your steam engine, that great invention patented in 1784 that Marx hails as the driver of industrial capitalism. The very same machine that Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer hail as

the instigator of the *Anthropocene*,” he writes. “There you are, turning the ignition of your car. And it creeps up on you. You are a member of a massively distributed thing. This thing is called *species*. . . . My key turning is statistically meaningless. . . . But go up a level and something very strange happens. When I scale up these actions to include billions of key turnings and billions of coal shovelings, harm to Earth is precisely what is happening. I am responsible as a member of this species for the *Anthropocene*.”

So, here we are again, shoveling coal into the tender, or, in my son’s case, pantomiming the motion in the ruins. He loves trains and doesn’t care about trains anymore, ersatz wind in his toddler hair, real wind on his big-kid face as he flies through the pandemic-emptied lot. Here I am beside him, discovering, for the millionth time, the verity of joy, and how it throbs with impermanence, responsibility, and sorrow. The cord has been cut, most surely. But if I can imagine raising him, and continuing to raise myself, as those who might work on behalf of the surround—the common beneath and beyond—the *already and forthcoming*—if we can love all the misery and freedom of living and, as best we can, not mind dying—then my heart feels less broken, more emboldened. It feels shaped right. Morton says he wants “to awaken us from the dream that the world is about to end, because action on Earth (the real Earth) depends on it.” For so long, I didn’t know what he meant. I do now.

4. RIDING THE BLINDS

1. The term *Anthropocene* was coined in the 1980s by ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer and popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen. It is now widely used to designate the period after the Holocene, the epoch that began about twelve thousand years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. Though most scientists agree that we have entered the Anthropocene, they are still debating exactly how and where to mark its inception (they call the geological mark they are looking for the “golden spike”—a railroad term, even if the eventual decision ends up pre- or postdating the railroads). Some argue that the spike goes back as far as eight thousand years, with the first farming; some argue for 1610, with the European conquest of the Americas and subsequent deforestation and global spread of disease; some for the Industrial Revolution (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change uses 1750 as a baseline for charting greenhouse gas emissions, which roughly corresponds to Morton’s comments about the steam engine); some for the mid-twentieth century, with the first deployment of the atomic bomb and the depositing of nuclear isotopes into the earth’s strata. For a critique of “golden spike” logic and theory, see “Golden Spikes and Dubious Origins” in Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

2. See the 2014 and 2016 “Living Planet” reports by scientists at the World Wildlife Foundation and the Zoological Society of London.

3. See Union of Concerned Scientists: <https://blog.ucsusa.org/peter-frumhoff/global-warming-fact-co2-emissions-since-1988-764>.

4. See NASA’s Global Climate Change page: <https://climate.nasa.gov/faq/16/is-it-too-late-to-prevent-climate-change/>.

5. See the National Climate Association, <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>: “Future climate change is expected to further disrupt many areas of life, exacerbating existing challenges to prosperity posed by aging and deteriorating infrastructure, stressed ecosystems, and economic inequality. Impacts within and across regions will not be distributed equally. People who are already vulnerable, including lower-income and other marginalized communities, have lower capacity to prepare for and cope with extreme weather and climate-related

events and are expected to experience greater impacts.” Each day brings more granular analyses underscoring the same fact, such as Christopher Flavelle’s June 18, 2020, *New York Times* article “Climate Change Tied to Pregnancy Risks, Affecting Black Mothers Most.”

6. See Amy Westervelt’s 2019 article “The Case for Climate Rage” (*Popula*, August 19, 2019), in which Westervelt forcefully rejects the (often white, male) habit of using the first-person plural or generalizing about “humanity” when laying the blame for the climate crisis: “People in power have never willingly dismantled the systems that benefit them. Thus David Wallace-Wells earned an eye-popping advance for *The Uninhabitable Earth*, a book in which he makes some solid and necessary points, and then concludes, in the absence of credible evidence, that ‘we,’ who are responsible for climate change, will solve it with geoengineering; Nathaniel Rich was given a whole issue of the *New York Times Magazine* in which to wax poetic about ‘our’ failure to stop climate change, a story optioned almost instantly for a book and a film; Jonathan Safran Foer will soon join them with his own version of the ‘we are all to blame’ narrative, *We Are the Weather* [since published in 2019], in which he argues first, incorrectly, that human diets are the primary cause of climate change, and then that ‘we’ need to tackle it by making the necessary lifestyle changes. . . . But when women like my colleagues point the finger, it is not at one company or even one industry. The oil, coal, and automotive industries all play a role, the utilities, too, the PR flacks and lobbyists who carry out their vision, the politicians who cave. It’s a lot of people, but it’s not *all* people, it’s not ‘humanity.’”

Multiple data points—such as a 2017 Carbon Majors report that details how more than 70 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions released since 1988 have been produced by only one hundred companies—underscore Westervelt’s conviction that it’s not “humanity.” Stepping back further still, certainly not all humans have lived as recklessly and destructively as have white Europeans and Americans for the past six hundred years or so; noting the difference matters, not just for assigning accountability but also for figuring out how to move forward. At the same time, given the depth of our own entanglement with fossil fuels and daily participation in their consumption, I don’t think a strict “us/them” mindset is the most fruitful approach; Kate Marvel’s acknowledgment of complicity and responsibility, as when she writes, “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,” also seems important to bear in mind. See also Amitav Ghosh’s case for Asia’s centrality in the climate crisis in *The Great Derangement*.

7. In “The Case for Climate Rage,” Westervelt offers the following list, which I see no reason to try to best:

- Psychologist Renée Lertzman first wrote about climate grief, and how to process it into action, more than a decade ago
- Mary Annaïse Heglar writes beautifully about the intersection between racism and climate change
- Katharine Wilkinson is a vocal advocate for amplifying the voices of women of color on climate
- Marine biologist Ayana E. Johnson writes on ocean conservation, a critical and weirdly overlooked component of tackling climate change
- Bina Venkataraman's forthcoming book *The Optimist's Telescope: Thinking Ahead in a Reckless Age* focuses on long-range thinking for a better future
- NASA scientist Kate Marvel writes regularly about the interface between science and human values
- Tamara Toles O'Laughlin is transforming the climate activist group 350.org into a diverse and equitable force for justice
- Rhiana Gunn-Wright is writing the real policy that will help create a Green New Deal
- Oceanographer Sarah Myhre fought for, and won, the freedom to bring feeling and conviction into communicating the science of climate change.

See also Somini Sengupta's June 5, 2020, resource list in the *New York Times* about overlaps between racism and the climate crisis.

8. See, for example, Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, in which Lear meditates on the story of the Crow Nation to explore how other cultures might courageously face the possibility of their collapse. Lear focuses on the philosophical implications of a statement made by Plenty Coups, the last traditional Crow chief, shortly before his death: "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." Of particular interest to Lear are these last four words, as they indicate the difficulty the Crow had in attributing meaning—or even temporality—to events that transpired after the destruction of the matrix that gave Crow life significance. See also David Treuer's *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, which recasts the story of Native America from 1890 to the present as "one of unprecedented resourcefulness and reinvention" rather than one of disappearance and decimation.

9. See McKibben, *The Quarantine Tapes* podcast, <https://quarantine-tapes.simplecast.com/episodes/the-quarantine-tapes-036-bill-mckibben-cmRf5Wlk>.

10. See McKibben's 2018 *New Yorker* piece, "How Extreme Weather Is Shrinking the Planet."

11. McKibben, "Extreme Weather."

12. See also Matthew T. Huber's *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*.

13. See Métis scholar Zoe Todd's account of going to a talk by Bruno Latour, and feeling disheartened by people's "celebrating and worshipping a european thinker for 'discovering' what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia" ("An Indigenous Feminist's Take on Ontology").

14. See, for example, Rebekah Sheldon's *The Child to Come*; Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*, in which Puar describes queer engagement with the "capitalist reproductive economy" as "simulations" of heteronormativity; or Heidi Nast's writing about the faulty "queer alibi" white queers with kids allegedly use to protect themselves from charges of participating in "queer patriarchies, queer racisms."

15. See the remarks made by Emma González, one of the most outspoken of the Parkland, Florida, #NeverAgain survivor/activists, in the face of ugly attacks on her and her peers by right-wing media and the NRA: "When did *children* become such a dirty word? . . . We have always been told that if we see something wrong, we need to speak up; but now that we are, all we're getting is disrespect from the people who made the rules in the first place. Adults like us when we have strong test scores, but they hate us when we have strong opinions."

16. Connolly is here summarizing a story Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing tells in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, a dense, compassionate examination of the matsutake, a valuable mushroom that thrives in human-disturbed forests, which Tsing considers an example of the kind of resurgent, contaminated forms of life from which we might learn how to live in the ruins of our dreams (or someone else's).

17. These are the words of Heidi Binko of the Just Transition Fund, as quoted in Eliza Griswold, "People in Coal Country Worry about the Climate, Too."

18. Paranoia and despair are not identical, but Sedgwick's discussion of paranoia in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" bears relevance here, as when she discusses the axiom "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're *not* out to get you": "The truth-value of the original axiom, assuming it to *be* true, doesn't actually make a paranoid imperative self-evident. Learning that 'just because you're paranoid doesn't mean you don't have enemies,' somebody might deduce that being paranoid is not an effective way to get rid of enemies. Rather than concluding 'so you can never be paranoid enough,' this person might instead be moved to reflect, 'but then, just because you have enemies doesn't mean you have to be paranoid.'" See also Michael Snediker's *Queer Optimism*, in which Snediker writes (in discussing a Sedgwick passage about joy in Proust), "I'm riveted by the idea that

joy could be a guarantor of truth—differently put, that joy could be persuasive.”
I am, too.

19. To take just a few examples: see Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger,” Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression*, and Rebecca Traister’s *Good and Mad*. Also, in *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai differentiates “relatively unambiguous emotions” (such as anger and fear) from “unprestigious” negative feelings (such as envy, irritation, and paranoia), and terms only the latter “ugly feelings.” For my purposes here, I’m ignoring this distinction and treating all negative feelings under the rubric of “ugly.”

20. See Moten, *The Undercommons* (117): “How come we can’t be together and think together in a way that feels good, the way it should feel good? For most of our colleagues and students, however much you want to blur that distinction, that question is the hardest question to get people to consider. Everybody is pissed off all the time and feels bad, but very seldom do you enter into a conversation where people are going, ‘why is it that this doesn’t feel good to us?’ There are lots of people who are angry and who don’t feel good, but it seems hard for people to ask, collectively, ‘why doesn’t this feel good?’ I love poetry, but why doesn’t reading, thinking, and writing about poetry in this context feel good? To my mind, that’s the question that we started trying to ask.”

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notes:

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.

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