

Naomi Klein: Let Them Drown

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EDWARD SAID was no tree-hugger. Descended from traders, artisans and professionals, he once described himself as 'an extreme case of an urban Palestinian whose relationship to the land is basically metaphorical'.* In *After the Last Sky*, his meditation on the photographs of Jean Mohr, he explored the most intimate aspects of Palestinian lives, from hospitality to sports to home décor. The tiniest detail – the placing of a picture frame, the defiant posture of a child – provoked a torrent of insight from Said. Yet when confronted with images of Palestinian farmers – tending their flocks, working the fields – the specificity suddenly evaporated. Which crops were being cultivated? What was the state of the soil? The availability of water? Nothing was forthcoming. 'I continue to perceive a population of poor, suffering, occasionally colourful peasants, unchanging and collective,' Said confessed. This perception was 'mythic', he acknowledged – yet it remained.

If farming was another world for Said, those who devoted their lives to matters like air and water pollution appear to have inhabited another planet. Speaking to his colleague Rob Nixon, he once described environmentalism as 'the indulgence of spoiled tree-huggers who lack a proper cause'. But the environmental challenges of the Middle East are impossible to ignore for anyone immersed, as Said was, in its geopolitics. This is a region intensely vulnerable to heat and water stress, to sea-level rise and to desertification. A recent paper in *Nature Climate Change* predicts that, unless we radically lower emissions and lower them fast, large parts of the Middle East will likely 'experience temperature levels that are intolerable to humans' by the end of this century. And that's about as blunt as climate scientists get. Yet environmental issues in the region still tend to be treated as afterthoughts, or luxury causes. The reason is not ignorance, or indifference. It's just bandwidth. Climate change is a grave threat but the most frightening impacts are in the medium term. And in the short term, there are always far more pressing threats to contend with: military occupation, air assault, systemic discrimination, embargo. Nothing can compete with that – nor should it attempt to try.

There are other reasons why environmentalism might have looked like a bourgeois playground to Said. The Israeli state has long coated its nation-building project in a green veneer – it was a key part of the Zionist 'back to the land' pioneer ethos. And in this context trees, specifically, have been among the most potent weapons of land grabbing and occupation. It's not only the countless olive and pistachio trees that have been uprooted to make way for settlements and Israeli-only roads. It's also the sprawling pine and eucalyptus forests that have been planted over those orchards, as well as over Palestinian villages, most notoriously by the Jewish National Fund, which, under its slogan 'Turning the Desert Green', boasts of having planted 250 million trees in Israel since 1901, many of them non-native to the region. In publicity

* Naomi Klein delivered this year's Edward Said lecture in London on 5 May.

Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World

Naomi Klein

materials, the JNF bills itself as just another green NGO, concerned with forest and water management, parks and recreation. It also happens to be the largest private landowner in the state of Israel, and despite a number of complicated legal challenges, it still refuses to lease or sell land to non-Jews.

I grew up in a Jewish community where every occasion – births and deaths, Mother's Day, bar mitzvahs – was marked with the proud purchase of a JNF tree in the person's honour. It wasn't until adulthood that I began to understand that those feel-good faraway conifers, certificates for which papered the walls of my Montreal elementary school, were not benign – not just something to plant and later hug. In fact these trees are among the most glaring symbols of Israel's system of official discrimination – the one that must be dismantled if peaceful co-existence is to become possible.

The JNF is an extreme and recent example of what some call 'green colonialism'. But the phenomenon is hardly new, nor is it unique to Israel. There is a long and painful history in the Americas of beautiful pieces of wilderness being turned into conservation parks – and then that designation being used to prevent Indigenous people from accessing their ancestral territories to hunt and fish, or simply to live. It has happened again and again. A contemporary version of this phenomenon is the carbon offset. Indigenous people from Brazil to Uganda are finding that some of the most aggressive land grabbing is being done by conservation organisations. A forest is suddenly rebranded a carbon offset and is put off-limits to its traditional inhabitants. As a result, the carbon offset market has created a whole new class of 'green' human rights abuses, with farmers and Indigenous people being physically attacked by park rangers or private security when they try to access these lands. Said's comment about tree-huggers should be seen in this context.

And there is more. In the last year of Said's life, Israel's so-called 'separation barrier' was going up, seizing huge swathes of the West Bank, cutting Palestinian workers off from their jobs, farmers from their fields, patients from hospitals – and brutally dividing families. There was no shortage of reasons to oppose the wall on human rights grounds. Yet at the time, some of the loudest dissenting voices among Israeli Jews were not focused on any of that. Yehudit Naot, Israel's then environment minister, was more worried about a report informing her that 'The separation fence . . . is harmful to the landscape, the flora and fauna, the ecological corridors and the drainage of the creeks.' 'I certainly don't want to stop or delay the building of the fence,' she said, but 'I am disturbed by the

without that knowledge, there is no way to understand how we ended up in this dangerous place, or to grasp the transformations required to get us out. So what follows are some thoughts – by no means complete – about what we can learn from reading Said in a warming world.

HE WAS AND REMAINS among our most achingly eloquent theorists of exile and homesickness – but Said's homesickness, he always made clear, was for a home that had been so radically altered that it no longer really existed. His position was complex: he fiercely defended the right to return, but never claimed that home was fixed. What mattered was the principle of respect for all human rights equally and the need for restorative justice to inform our actions and policies. This perspective is deeply relevant in our time of eroding coastlines, of nations disappearing beneath rising seas, of the coral reefs that sustain entire cultures being bleached white, of a balmy Arctic. This is because the state of longing for a radically altered homeland – a home that may not even exist any longer – is something that is being rapidly, and tragically, globalised. In March, two major peer-reviewed studies warned that sea-level rise could happen significantly faster than previously believed. One of the authors of the first study was James Hansen – perhaps the most respected climate scientist in the world. He warned that, on our current emissions trajectory, we face the 'loss of all coastal cities, most of the world's large cities and all their history' – and not in thousands of years from now

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but as soon as this century. If we don't demand radical change we are headed for a whole world of people searching for a home that no longer exists.

Said helps us imagine what that might look like as well. He helped to popularise the Arabic word *sumud* ('to stay put, to hold on'): that steadfast refusal to leave one's land despite the most desperate eviction attempts and even when surrounded by continuous danger. It's a word most associated with places like Hebron and Gaza, but it could be applied equally today to residents of coastal Louisiana who have raised their homes up on stilts so that they don't have to evacuate, or to Pacific Islanders whose slogan is 'We are not drowning. We are fighting.' In countries like the Marshall Islands and Fiji and Tuvalu, they know that so much sea-level rise is inevitable that their countries likely have no future. But they refuse just to concern themselves with the logistics of relocation, and wouldn't even if there were safer countries willing to open their borders – a very big if, since climate refugees aren't currently recognised under international law. Instead they are actively resisting: blockading Australian coal ships with traditional outrigger canoes, disrupting international climate negotiations with their inconvenient presence, demanding far more aggressive climate action. If there is anything worth celebrating in the Paris Agreement signed in April – and sadly, there isn't enough – it has come about because of this kind of principled action: climate *sumud*.

But this only scratches of the surface of what we can learn from reading Said in a warming world. He was, of course, a giant in the study of 'othering' – what is described in *Orientalism* as 'disregarding, essentialising, denuding the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region'. And once the other has been firmly established, the ground is softened for any transgression: violent expulsion, land theft, occupation, invasion. Because the whole point of othering is that the other doesn't have the same rights, the same humanity, as those making the distinction. What does this have to do with climate change? Perhaps everything.

We have dangerously warmed our world already, and our governments still refuse to take the actions necessary to halt the trend. There was a time when many had the right to claim ignorance. But for the past three decades, since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was created and climate negotiations began, this refusal to lower emissions has been accompanied with full awareness of the dangers. And this kind of recklessness would have been functionally impossible without institutional racism, even if only latent. It would have been impossible without *Orientalism*, without all the potent tools on offer that allow the powerful to discount the lives of the less powerful. These tools – of ranking the relative value of humans – are what allow the writing off of entire nations and ancient cultures. And they are what allowed for the digging up of all that carbon to begin with.

Fossil fuels aren't the sole driver of climate change – there is industrial agriculture, and deforestation – but they are the biggest. And the thing about fossil fuels is that they are so inherently dirty and toxic that they require sacrificial people and places: people whose lungs and bodies can be sacrificed to work in the coal mines, people whose lands and water can be sacrificed to open-pit mining and oil spills. As recently as the 1970s, scientists advising the US government openly referred to certain parts of the country being designated 'national sacrifice areas'. Think of the mountains of Appalachia, blasted off for coal mining – because so-called 'mountain top removal' coal mining is cheaper than digging holes underground. There must be theories of othering to justify sacrificing an entire geography – theories about the people who lived there being so poor and backward that their lives and culture don't deserve protection. After all, if you are a 'hillbilly', who cares about your hills? Turning all that coal into electricity required another layer of othering too: this time for the urban neighbourhoods next door to the power plants and refineries. In North America, these are overwhelmingly communities of colour, black and Latino, forced to carry the toxic burden of our collective addiction to fossil fuels, with markedly higher rates of respiratory illnesses and cancers. It was in fights against this kind of 'environmental racism' that the climate justice movement was born.

Fossil fuel sacrifice zones dot the globe. Take the Niger Delta, poisoned with an Exxon Valdez-worth of spilled oil every year, a process Ken Saro-Wiwa, before he was murdered by his government, called 'ecological genocide'. The executions of community leaders, he said, were 'all for Shell'. In my country, Canada, the decision to dig up the Alberta tar sands – a particularly heavy form of oil – has required the shredding of treaties with First Nations, treaties signed with the British Crown that guaranteed Indigenous peoples the right to continue to hunt, fish and live traditionally on their ancestral lands. It required it because these rights are meaningless when the land is desecrated, when the rivers are polluted and the moose and fish are riddled with tumours. And it gets worse: Fort McMurray – the town at the centre of the tar sands boom, where many of the workers live and where much of the money is spent – is currently in an infernal blaze. It's that hot and that dry. And this has something to do with what is being mined there.

Even without such dramatic events, this kind of resource extraction is a form of violence, because it does so much damage to the land and water that it brings about the end of a way of life, a death of cultures that are inseparable from the land. Severing Indigenous people's connection to their culture used to be state policy in Canada – imposed through the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families to boarding schools where their language and cultural practices were banned, and where physical and sexual abuse were rampant. A recent truth and reconciliation report called it 'cultural genocide'. The trauma associated with these layers of forced separation – from land, from culture, from family – is directly linked to the epidemic of despair ravaging so many First Nations communities today. On a single Saturday night in April, in the community of Attawapiskat – population 2000 – 11 people tried to take their own lives. Meanwhile, DeBeers runs a diamond mine on the community's traditional territory; like all extractive projects, it had promised hope and opportunity. 'Why don't the people just leave?', the politicians and pundits ask. But many do. And that departure is linked, in part, to the thousands of Indigenous women in Canada who have been murdered or gone missing, often in big cities. Press reports rarely make the connection between violence against women and violence against the land – often to extract fossil fuels – but it exists. Every new government comes to power promising a new era of respect for Indigenous rights. They don't deliver, because Indigenous rights, as defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, include the right to refuse extractive projects – even when those projects fuel national economic growth. And that's a problem because growth is our religion, our way of life. So even Canada's hunky and charming new prime minister is bound and determined to build new tar sands pipelines, against the express wishes of Indigenous communities who don't want to risk their water, or participate in the further destabilising of the climate.

Fossil fuels require sacrifice zones: they always have. And you can't have a system built on sacrificial places and sacrificial people unless intellectual theories that justify their sacrifice exist and persist: from Manifest Destiny to Terra Nullius to *Orientalism*, from backward hillbillies to backward Indians. We often hear climate change blamed on 'human nature', on the inherent greed and short-sightedness of our species. Or we are told we have altered the earth so much and on such a planetary scale that we are now living in the Anthropocene – the age of humans. These ways of explaining our current circumstances have a very specific, if unspoken meaning: that humans are a single type, that human nature can be essentialised to the traits that created this crisis. In this way, the systems that certain humans created, and other humans powerfully resisted, are completely left off the hook. Capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy – those sorts of system. Diagnoses like this erase the very existence of human systems that organised life differently: systems that insist that humans must think seven generations in the future; must be not only good citizens but also good ancestors; must take no more than they need and give back to the land in order to protect and augment the cycles of regeneration. These systems existed and still exist, but they are erased every time we say that the climate crisis is a crisis of 'human nature' and that we are living in the 'age of man'. And they come under very real attack when megaprojects are built, like the Gualcarque hydroelectric dams in Honduras, a project which, among other things, took the life of the land defender Berta Cáceres, who was assassinated in March.

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during Hurricane Katrina or whether they are among the 36 million who according to the UN are facing hunger due to drought in Southern and East Africa.

THIS is an emergency, a present emergency, not a future one, but we aren't acting like it. The Paris Agreement commits to keeping warming below 2°C. It's a target that is beyond reckless. When it was unveiled in Copenhagen in 2009, the African delegates called it 'a death sentence'. The slogan of several low-lying island nations is '1.5 to stay alive'. At the last minute, a clause was added to the Paris Agreement that says countries will pursue 'efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C'. Not only is this non-binding but it is a lie: we are making no such efforts. The governments that made this promise are now pushing for more fracking and more tar sands development – which are utterly incompatible with 2°C, let alone 1.5°C. This is happening because the wealthiest people in the wealthiest countries in the world think they are going to be OK, that someone else is going to eat the biggest risks, that even when climate change turns up on their doorstep, they will be taken care of.

When they're wrong things get even uglier. We had a vivid glimpse into that future when the floodwaters rose in England last December and January, inundating 16,000 homes. These communities weren't only dealing with the wettest December on record. They were also coping with the fact that the government has waged a relentless attack on the public agencies, and the local councils, that are on the front lines of flood defence. So understandably, there were many who wanted to change the subject away from that failure. Why, they asked, is Britain spending so much money on refugees and foreign aid when it should be taking care of its own? 'Never mind foreign aid,' we read in the Daily Mail. 'What about national aid?' 'Why,' a Telegraph editorial demanded, 'should British taxpayers continue to pay for flood defences abroad when the money is needed here?' I don't know – maybe because Britain invented the coal-burning steam engine and has been burning fossil fuels on an industrial scale longer than any nation on Earth? But I digress. The point is that this could have been a moment to understand that we are all affected by climate change, and must take action together and in solidarity with one another. It wasn't, because climate change isn't just about things getting hotter and wetter: under our current economic and political model, it's about things getting meaner and uglier.

The most important lesson to take from all this is that there is no way to confront the climate crisis as a technocratic problem, in isolation. It must be seen in the context of austerity and privatisation, of colonialism and militarism, and of the various systems of othering needed to sustain them all. The connections and intersections between them are glaring, and yet so often resistance to them is highly compartmentalised. The anti-austerity people rarely talk about climate change, the climate change people rarely talk about war or occupation. We rarely make the connection between

30 Rue Duluth August Kleinzahler

– Elvis is dead, the radio said,
where it sat behind a fresh baked loaf of bread
and broken link of kobasc
fetched only lately from Boucherie Hongroise:
Still Life without Blue Pitcher.
I read that piece of meat as if I were Chaim Soutine,
with its capillaries and tiny kernels of fat,
bound up in its burnt sienna casing.
There and then the motif came to me
that would anchor my early masterwork, Opus 113.
No? I'll hum the first few bars.

The window was small,
and set low on the wall. Little out there to see,
only the legs of pedestrians below the knee.
Captive, a prisoner nearly, inside the ochre room,
as the radio poured forth this terrible news:
– KING ELVIS IS DEAD
his flesh empurpled, the giant gold medallion,
his lolling tongue bitten nearly in two.

I took note, the time was propitious for soup
even amidst the bulletins and updates, and then made ready
with the preliminary slow-mo casting about that attends
the act of creation,
a length of sausage readily at hand.
Soup-making always seemed to settle me back then.

Those with whom I lived considered me vain,
excepting the Lady M,
with whom I tirelessly played,
Parcheesi, Scrabble, less circumscribed games.
She would have bought for me a giant gold medallion
could she have managed the expense,
if only I would let her.

Presently the soup was the colour of the room;
everything around me, the walls, the air,
varying shades of ochre,
but pebbled with paprika-coloured nuggets.

They say he existed on tuinol and cheddar,
his blood turned to sludge,
odds&ends from this snack or that buried deep inside him,
dating all the way back to Blue Hawaii,
the fat around his neck like a collar of boudin blanc.

Every so often he'd soil his white cape,
and only, it turns out, in Vegas and while on stage.
Now, that's what I call a showman.

Both afternoon and summer were drawing to a close
while the soup thickened on the stove,
the unlit room darkening by degree.
The radio resumed its regular programming,
and, as always seemed the case that hour of the day,
the *Gymnopédies* by Satie.

the guns that take black lives on the streets of US cities and in police custody and the much larger forces that annihilate so many black lives on arid land and in precarious boats around the world.

Overcoming these disconnections – strengthening the threads tying together our various issues and movements – is, I would argue, the most pressing task of anyone concerned with social and economic justice. It is the only way to build a counterpower sufficiently robust to win against the forces protecting the highly profitable but increasingly untenable status quo. Climate change acts as an accelerator to many of our social ills – inequality, wars, racism – but it can also be an accelerator for the opposite, for the forces working for economic and social justice and against militarism. Indeed the climate crisis – by presenting our species with an existential threat and putting us on a firm and unyielding science-based deadline – might just be the catalyst we need to knit together a great many powerful movements, bound together by a belief in the inherent worth and value of all people and united by a rejection of the sacrifice zone mentality, whether it applies to peoples or places. We face so many overlapping and intersecting crises that we can't afford to fix them one at a time. We need integrated solutions, solutions that radically bring down emissions, while creating huge numbers of good, unionised jobs and delivering meaningful justice to those who have been most abused and excluded under the current extractive economy.

Sadie died the year Iraq was invaded, living to see its libraries and museums looted, its oil ministry faithfully guarded. Amid these outrages, he found hope in the global anti-war movement, as well as in new forms of grassroots communication opened up by technology; he noted 'the existence of alternative communities across the globe, informed by alternative news sources, and keenly aware of the environmental, human rights and libertarian impulses that bind us together in this tiny planet.' His vision even had a place for tree-huggers. I was reminded of those words recently while I was reading up on England's floods. Amid all the scapegoating and finger-pointing, I came across a post by a man called Liam Cox. He was upset by the way some in the media were using the disaster to rev up anti-foreigner sentiment, and he said so:

I live in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, one of the worst affected areas hit by the floods. It's shit, everything has gotten really wet. However... I'm alive. I'm safe. My family are safe. We don't live in fear. I'm free. There aren't bullets flying about. There aren't bombs going off. I'm not being forced to flee my home and I'm not being shunned by the richest country in the world or criticised by its residents.

All you morons vomiting your xenophobia... about how money should only be spent 'on our own' need to look at yourselves closely in the mirror. I request you ask yourselves a very important question... Am I a decent and honourable human being? Because home isn't just the UK, home is everywhere on this planet.

I think that makes for a very fine last word. □