



Independent  
Social Research  
Foundation

# Prehistories and Afterlives

Bulletin 30  
Edited by Dr Lars Cornelissen



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**ISRF BULLETIN**

Issue 30

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# **Prehistories and Afterlives**

First published October 2024  
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62 Bayswater Road  
W2 3PS, London

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# Editorial

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Lars Cornelissen

ISRF Academic Editor

**T**his Bulletin comes out of a Congress we organised with a small group of our Fellows in January 2024. Though technically intended for Fellows to report on their findings, ISRF Congresses tend to be more like convivial research conversations. Most of the time, what begins as a series of presentations quickly morphs into an exploration of shared themes, interests, and horizons.

The fourth ISRF Congress, held in London, was no different. As the hours passed and the conversation matured, it became clear that many Fellows were thinking through similar problems, themes, and questions. Though each approached these in their own way, of course, the common ground was undeniable. One of the most pronounced common themes was the conceptual pair to which this Bulletin owes its title: prehistories and afterlives.

Here these concepts are used not in a naïve but in a critical sense, of course, to indicate that social facts never just consist

of a set of givens in a one-dimensional present but carry with them the traces of their history. The structures, processes, and subjectivities we inhabit today are inescapably conditioned (though not determined) by the events of the past. And if, from a present perspective, those events are experienced as prehistory, from the perspective of the past we live amidst their afterlives.

To be sure, what constitutes a prehistory or an afterlife is never just given. What appears to us today as relevant prehistory depends on our priorities in the present and, by extension, on the power relations, class formations, and discourses that direct them. We may even say that to establish a given cluster of past facts and events as constituting our prehistory is akin to a performative speech act. It is the practice of delineating pertinent from mute histories. This is not to suggest that we are ever fully in control of this process, as if we get to pick and choose how we live our history. It is, rather, to emphasise that prehistories and afterlives are always given shape in and by the present. Prehistories and afterlives are always lived in the present tense.

The contributions to this Bulletin think through these dynamics in very generative ways. The first contribution, by co-authored by Levi Gahman, Shelda-Jane Smith, Filiberto Penados, Kadia Andrewin, Zoye Herrera, and the Youth for Justice Collective, reflects on a participatory action project done with youth in Belize. The article situates contemporary Belize both in relation to present-day and future issues, most notably climate change, and to histories of colonialism, enslavement, and dispossession. These histories have fundamentally shaped the present and are expressed not just in economic and climate inequalities but also in a deep mental health crisis amongst young people. Rather than despair in the face of these problems, however, the article calls for deep and serious engagement with young people themselves, for efforts to foreground the hopes, dreams, and narratives of the generation not just in research but in politics too.



The second contribution is a reflective piece by Eva van Roekel that explores the role of temporality in ethnographic research. Recounting her own encounters with themes of time, temporality, and chronicity in diverse research settings she holds out that different cultures tend to experience the flow of time differently, meaning that no ethnographer can afford to ignore its importance. Applying these insights to the specific question of climate change, she asks what temporalities are mobilised in anxieties over impending ecological catastrophe.

The third piece in this Bulletin is a transcription of an interview with Greg Constantine, a two-time ISRF Fellow whose current work focuses on the history of the Rohingya. His worry is that the world's (understandable and legitimate) focus on the slow genocide experienced by Rohingya communities risks eclipsing their rich cultural and personal histories. Constantine's current work focusses on the collection and curation of artifacts, paperwork, photographs, memories, and stories that are able to show that underneath (or perhaps alongside) the history of genocide sit alternative histories, ones that push back against the historical erasure that often accompanies genocide and is frequently its aim.

The final contribution to this Bulletin comes from Sarath Jakka and also takes its cue from the social, political, and epistemic challenges posed by climate change. Asking what lies behind elite failure to act on the threat of climate change, the piece delves into the prehistory of organised forms of not-seeing and not-knowing by tracing the history of early modern Utopian fiction. Like today's climate change deniers and technocrats, early Utopian writers like Thomas More and Francis Bacon were practiced in the art of dissimulation. And while in their case the focus of their dishonesty was less the problem of ecology than the question of colonial expansion and dispossession, the parallels with climate change inaction today are striking.



# **“There Will Be a Time...”**

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***Confronting the Colonial-  
Health-Climate Crisis  
through Participatory Action  
Research by and for Youth***

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The Youth for Justice Collective

*The authors of this article are Levi Gahman, Shelda-Jane Smith, Filiberto Penados, Kadia Andrewin, Zoye Herrera, and the Youth for Justice Collective.*

## Contextualising the Colonial–Health–Climate Crisis in the Caribbean



*A beach in the Creole Maroon community of Gales Point Manatee, a coastal village where youth conducted research.*

*Credit: Youth for Justice*

Amidst the myriad crises related to climate, health, and inequality that continue to debilitate the world, it is patently obvious that: 1) something’s gotta give, and 2) something urgent must be done.<sup>1</sup> Persistent global poverty, escalating environmental ruin, intensifying “not-so-natural” disasters, recurring food shortages, and deadly epidemics are being exacerbated by climate change, which is threatening both humanity and the life-sustaining capacity of the planet. Given the dire circumstances at hand, there is a pressing need—and golden opportunity—to imagine and

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<sup>1</sup> F. Yamin, “Why I broke the law for climate change”, *Nature* 573, no. 7774 (2019): 337-339.

craft more sustainable and socially just futures. Regarding what it will take to radically transform the status quo and “build better worlds”<sup>2</sup> in the face of global catastrophe, it is undeniable that youth can and will play a crucial role, specifically when it comes to climate action. Notably, an unfortunate point that must be reiterated until resolved, is that the enduring aftermaths of empire, enslavement, and dispossession continue to resonate and give rise to injustices and injurious impacts materially, environmentally, and psychologically.<sup>3</sup> This is unambiguously evident in the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, youth throughout the Caribbean face a wide range of complex challenges and disparities that are deeply rooted in the lasting legacies of colonialism and being exacerbated by the current climate crisis. The challenges are multifaceted, interconnected, and systemic, encompassing economic, educational, health, ecological, and political dimensions. Different forms of persistent inequality, structural oppression, and “organized abandonment”<sup>5</sup> continue to stifle the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of young people across the region. The richly biodiverse and multi-ethnic nation of Belize is a case in point given its high poverty rate of roughly 50% and the fact that it is one of the most at-risk nations regarding climate disaster. The World Bank Natural Disaster Hotspot, for example, ranks Belize as the 8th

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2 L. Gahman, S.J. Smith, F. Penados, N. Mohamed, J.R. Reyes, and A. Mohamed, *A beginner's guide to building better worlds: Ideas and inspiration from the Zapatistas* (Bristol 2022: Bristol University Press).

3 L. Sealey-Huggins, “‘1.5° C to stay alive’: Climate change, imperialism and justice for the Caribbean”, *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 11 (2017): 2444–2463.

4 L. Gahman and G. Thongs, “Development justice, a proposal: Reckoning with disaster, catastrophe, and climate change in the Caribbean”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45, no. 4 (2020): 763–778.

5 R.W. Gilmore, “Forgotten places and the seeds of grassroots planning”, in: C.R. Hale (ed.), *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship* (Berkeley 2008: University of California Press): 31–61.

most vulnerable nation to climate change out of 167 countries.<sup>6</sup> With under-30s making up over half the populace,<sup>7</sup> Belize also has a substantial population of young people who are negatively affected by and highly susceptible to social inequality and climate catastrophe.



*Members of the Youth for Justice core collective participate in a lecture on global inequality and the climate crisis. Credit: Sayan Penados*

Economically, the ongoing repercussions of imperialism and the plantation system have left numerous peripheral Caribbean nations like Belize, a former British colony whose head of state and monarch incidentally remains King Charles III, with an over-reliance on sectors related to tourism, industrial agriculture, large-scale

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6 *World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal*, retrieved from: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/belize/vulnerability> (accessed June 2024).

7 *Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100 (2024)*, retrieved from: <https://www.populationpyramid.net/belize/2024/> (accessed June 2024).

ranching, and natural resource extraction—industries predisposed not only to the shocks of global capitalist markets but also the devastating effects of extreme weather events and major seasonal shifts. This economic vulnerability, which is also magnified by massive debt burdens owed to international financial institutions like the IMF,<sup>8</sup> manifests in elevated rates of youth under- and unemployment, leaving many with bleak prospects of a decent wage, fulfilling career, and dignified life.

From our grassroots work with youth across the Caribbean, it is clear that the erratic fluctuations of major industries are resulting in financial precarity and psychological distress, which disproportionately affect young people. In turn, cycles of poverty, crushing feelings of despair, chronic states of anxiety, and lingering hopelessness about the future are spiralling out of control. Moreover, extractivist practices—where lands, beaches, forests, sacred sites, and local resources are privatised, commodified, and depleted primarily for foreign profits and upper-middle class consumption—continue to adversely impact and profoundly harm the region, especially Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Caribbean, inclusive of Belize, these groups are bearing the brunt of the durable forms of exploitation, extraction, and racial animus that defined the colonial encounter.

## **The Enduring Aftermaths and “Underdevelopment” owed to Empire**

Historically, pre-contact economies, cultures, governance institutions, and social relations across the Caribbean were

- 8 S. Desai, *Drowning in debt: understanding debt-for-climate swaps through a case study of the Belize blue bond*. (unpublished honors thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2023), retrieved from: <https://repository.upenn.edu/handle/20.500.14332/43502>.
- 9 L. Gahman, A. Greenidge, and A. Mohamed, “Plunder via violation of FPIC: Land grabbing, state negligence, and pathways to peace in Central America and the Caribbean”, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 15, no. 3 (2020): 372–376.

condemned, usurped, and (dis)ordered to serve the colonial enterprise and capitalist world system, rather than existing communities and region at large. This resulted in long-term “underdevelopment”, a term we use critically a la Walter Rodney,<sup>10</sup> and underinvestment in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and local non-capitalist economies. Fast-forward to the present moment, and you will see that youth from marginalised communities in the Caribbean, particularly those from Afrodescendant and Indigenous backgrounds in biodiverse and resource-rich rural areas, continue to acutely experience the deleterious consequences of economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and forced displacement. In short, their communities and cultures have been targeted for neoliberal



*Youth from the Maya villages of Laguna and Big Falls discuss the strengths, challenges, threats, and assets of their communities.*  
Credit: Sayan Penados

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10 W. Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (London 2018 [1972]: Verso Books).



“development” as a result of having ancestral roots and residing in extractivism’s “sacrifice zones”.<sup>11</sup>

What precisely is at stake in the region, then, are homes, heritage, collective health, and entire ecosystems, not to mention intergenerational memories, histories, and futures.<sup>12</sup> The challenges and threats faced by marginalised communities are further exacerbated by state-sponsored austerity, where governments systematically withdraw services from peripheral areas, typically remote cash-poor communities that have been negatively racialised.<sup>13</sup> This institutionalised neglect leads to declines in living standards and foreclosures of life chances, with young people from forsaken communities offered few educational opportunities, limited access to healthcare, racially prejudiced stereotypes, and little to no possibility of a decent wage. State withdrawal not only deepens existing material inequalities but also places additional emotional strife and stress on youth.

With respect to physical-mental health, Caribbean youth are presently navigating widespread austerity, climate chaos, systemic marginalisation, corrupt governance, inadequate healthcare, insufficient investment, and a lack of access to meaningful work and even land, a direct consequence of colonial dispossession, industrial extraction, and the imposition of Westminster-modelled governance.<sup>14</sup> Currently, public institutions across the region are being further strained by harmful economic and health impacts

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11 E.C. Miller, “Expandability and expendability: Reading the sacrifice zone”, *Textual Practice* 37, no. 10 (2023): 1624-1630.

12 S.J. Smith, F. Penados, L. Gahman, “Desire over damage: Epistemological shifts and anticolonial praxis from an indigenous-led community health project”, *Sociology of Health & Illness* 44 (2022): 124-141.

13 F. Penados, L. Gahman, and S.J. Smith, “Land, race, and (slow) violence: Indigenous resistance to racial capitalism and the coloniality of development in the Caribbean”, *Geoforum* 145 (2023): 103602.

14 N. Girvan, “Assessing Westminster in the Caribbean: Then and now”, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 53, no. 1 (2015): 95-107.

related to climate change, crop failures, dependency on corporate food imports, unsustainable debt, and the upshots of the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

In speaking with youth across the region, environmental ruin is one of their most immediate and alarming concerns. Escalating hurricanes, intensifying floods and droughts, rising sea levels, and the destruction of coral reefs, tropical forests, and coastal mangroves, to name only a few, directly threaten flora and fauna, as well as countless families and cultures.<sup>16</sup> Such pressures are endangering local economies, reducing biodiversity, and eroding the country’s pluralist multi-ethnic heritage, in addition to jeopardising liveable and dignified futures for young people. Challenges of this magnitude not only affect the physical wellbeing of youth, but also their mental health and ability to co-create and contribute to the sustainable and socially just societies they would otherwise like to be experiencing and enjoying.

Despite these challenges, Caribbean youth are demonstrating an impressive amount of resilience and agency, engaging in social activism and community organising. Young people across the region are raising their voices to advocate for bottom-up sustainable development, environmental protection, and economic justice. However, their efforts are regularly hampered by parochial authority figures and hierarchical governance systems that remain beholden to colonial-era edifices and respectability politics,<sup>17</sup> which frequently are undemocratic, disciplinary, and signal to

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15 J. Byron, J.L. Martinez, A. Montoute, and K. Niles, “Impacts of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth Caribbean: Key lessons”, *The Round Table* 110, no. 1 (2021): 99–119, doi: 10.1080/00358533.2021.1875694.

16 K. Rhiney and A. K. Baptiste, “Adapting to climate change in the Caribbean: Existential threat or development crossroads?”, *Caribbean Studies* 47, no. 2 (2019): 59–80, doi: 10.1353/crb.2019.0014.

17 S.J. Smith, A. Greenidge, and L. Gahman, “Unsettling orthodoxy via epistemological jailbreak: Rethinking childhood, psychology, and wellbeing from the Caribbean”, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 7, no. 1-3 (2022), 17–36.



*Members of the Youth for Justice core collective engage in dialogue and reflection about colonial legacies and the climate crisis in the Caribbean. Credit: Sayan Penados*

youth they must only “be seen, not heard.” In Belize, youth-led collective action has consequently been limited, not due to a lack of either desire or motivation on the part of young people but because formal institutions and credentialed adult leaders in the country tend to be locked into top-down, path dependent solutions and are dismissive of the radical imaginations and direct action of young people. The participatory research featured here, which was co-designed and guided by youth in Belize, sought to address these challenges.

### **Participatory Action Research, Political Education, and Pluriversal Praxis**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) that is co-produced and led by the creative vision of youth represents a transformative

shift in how research involving young people is conceptualised and conducted.<sup>18</sup> As researchers who are motivated by pluriversal politics,<sup>19</sup> the practice of accompaniment,<sup>20</sup> caring and transgressive pedagogies,<sup>21</sup> and Freirean notions of praxis<sup>22</sup>—as well as who pay heed to the political agency and place-making capacities of youth—we believe that research carried out on crises and challenges faced by marginalised communities must at once be *guided by* and *relevant to* those involved. Hence, our ambition is to move beyond mere listening<sup>23</sup> as a means to write *about* others, as well as break away from collecting, harvesting, and handling (if not pirating) participant stories and insights as atomised, proprietary “data”—as has been the expropriative Western research orthodoxy for decades.<sup>24</sup>

Contrariwise, our goal is to see PAR include young people as research co-producers who are telling their own stories and collectively crafting and carrying out their own activities, analyses, outputs, and forms of resistance.<sup>25</sup> In this same vein, another aim of

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18 D.E. Wright, “Imagining a more just world: Critical arts pedagogy and youth participatory action research”, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 33, no. 1 (2020): 32–49.

19 F. Demaria and A. Kothari, “The Post-development dictionary agenda: Paths to the pluriverse”, *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 12 (2017): 2588–2599.

20 M. Watkins, *Mutual accompaniment and the creation of the commons* (New Haven 2019: Yale University Press).

21 b. hooks, *Teaching to transgress* (Abingdon 1994: Routledge).

22 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York 2017 [1970]: Penguin Classics).

23 We agree and are fully aware of the fact that careful, considerate, and attentive listening is indeed the obligatory, essential, and ethical thing to do apropos responsible and respectful research practice/engagement.

24 A. Simpson, “Ethnographic refusal: Indigeneity, ‘voice’ and colonial citizenship”, *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9, no. 11 (2007): 67–80.

25 A.D. Domínguez and J. Cammarota, “The arc of transformation in youth participatory action research: Creative expression to creative resistance”, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 35, no. 8



*Members of Youth for Justice discuss plans related to participatory research they will conduct in their respective communities. Credit: Sayan Penados*

our work is to avoid designing one-off, short-term projects (i.e., the trap of NGO'ised "*projectitis*"<sup>26</sup>) in which researchers parachute in, mine participants for information, depart after a brief stint, and write *about* participants after the fact. In short, it is high time for research to be designed and conducted *by and for* youth—as well as for researchers to commit for the long haul. Such an approach to PAR mitigates the degree to which research participants are exploited by academics because it places young people in the driver's seat, where they take on roles as project leads, decision-makers, and co-authors. This shift is pivotal because it acknowledges and leverages the unique insights, experiences, and imaginations of youth, which are often paternalistically dismissed

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(2022), 805-823.

26 O.F. Giraldo and P.M. Rosset, "Emancipatory agroecologies: Social and political principles", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50, no. 3 (2023): 820-850.

or undervalued in conventional research.<sup>27</sup> It similarly ensures that self-efficacy, confidence-building, and self-actualisation are fundamental aspects, impacts, and outcomes of youth-centred research.

Another one of our primary objectives is to ensure that critical consciousness (i.e. political education) and collective action are cornerstones of research. Promoting political education in PAR can serve as a catalyst for youth empowerment and transformative praxis, particularly when critical history (e.g., discussing empire’s afterlives in the Caribbean) and pluriversal politics (e.g., envisioning diverse utopian futures) are principal elements. By integrating youth into PAR as co-producers, interrogating how colonial history affects the present, and encouraging young people’s political imaginations, youth are not only questioning the status quo and scrutinising social structures, but better positioned to actively respond to and overcome the oppressive institutions they are up against. Likewise, studying the historical-colonial roots and structural forces that are adversely impacting young people’s communities, environments, and *futures* can foster critical thought, creative expression, and collective action, in addition to a sense of responsibility to advance social and environmental justice.

With the aforementioned in mind, our pilot project took inspiration from the Zapatista’s pluriversal call to build “a world where many worlds fit”<sup>28</sup> and explicitly centred a convivial and cyclical process of:

1) Building Community and Solidarity

2) “Reading” the World Critically

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27 T.T. Flores, “Breaking silence and amplifying voices: Youths writing and performing their worlds”, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 61, no. 6 (2018): 653–661.

28 EZLN, “Fourth declaration of the Lacandon Jungle” (1996), retrieved from: <https://radiozapatista.org/?p=20287&lang=en> (accessed June 2024).

### 3) Dreaming Alternative Worlds

### 4) Enacting New Worlds Collectively

In further reflecting upon the geopolitical context and revolutionary thought that has emerged from both the Caribbean and Central America, where the country of Belize is uniquely situated and exists as a dynamic liminal geography, we drew specific inspiration from Frantz Fanon's assertion that "the *political education* of the masses is now recognized as an historical necessity",<sup>29</sup> as well as the additional prefigurative politics of the Zapatistas, who poetically state: "In contrast to those traditional stories that begin with 'Once upon a time...,' Zapatista stories begin with '*There will be a time...*'"<sup>30</sup> Collectively, these quotes prompted our research to feature political education, pluriversal politics, prefigurative praxis, and collective action as a means of breathing life into the historically-informed yet desired alternative futures of youth.

## **The Origin Story and Ongoing Work of the "Youth for Justice" Collective**

The recently formed Youth for Justice Collective emerged from a collaborative PAR project that took place over the span of three months in Belize. With the support of researchers from the University of Liverpool (United Kingdom) and Galen University (Belize), 10 ethnically diverse young people representing Creole, Maroon, Maya, Garifuna, Mestizo, and mixed heritage backgrounds from the communities of Gales Point Manatee, Hopkins, Laguna, Big Falls, San Jose Succotz, Pomona, Caye Caulker, and Calla Creek were convened. This core collective participated in a three-day "Training of Trainers" session at an ecological learning centre in the

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29 F. Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (New York 1968 [1961]: Grove Press).

30 EZLN, *Critical thought in the face of the capitalist hydra: Contributions by the sixth commission of the EZLN* (Durham 2016: PaperBoat Press).

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*Members of the Youth for Justice core collective engage in ludic pedagogy and outdoor educational games during a “Training the Trainers” session. Credit: Sayan Penados*

rainforest where they received technical expertise in participatory research methods and critical education related to colonialism, capital accumulation, collective memory, social movements, and climate change.

The pilot was explicitly guided by the following questions:

- What are the unique histories, heritages, and assets of the communities youth are from?
- How do youth perceive themselves and the challenges they and their communities face?
- What kind of sustainable and just futures do youth desire and are they dreaming of?



- How might adult advocates create spaces, support, and accompany youth who would like to engage in transformative action to address social inequalities and the climate crisis?

To address these questions, we made use of artistic methods, place-based education, ludic pedagogy, arts-based envisioning, and photovoice activities to create spaces and facilitate dialogues where youth could share their concerns and explore issues that are affecting their lives and communities. In short, our goal was to build solidarity and further develop the young peoples' capacities to "read" the world critically, imagine alternatives, and collectively envision and enact better "worlds."



*Youth from the village of Gales Point identify key themes and begin illustrating the sustainable and just futures they desire.*

*Credit: Sayan Penados*

More specifically, the programme began with a “Building Community and Solidarity” phase, where youth engaged in initial gatherings to create camaraderie through ludic/play-based activities, educational games, experiential learning, and group discussions. In the “Reading the World Critically” phase, participants were trained in PAR methods and photovoice to explore and critically assess their local communities. This step also included instructive presentations and conversations related to the Caribbean’s colonial legacies, realities of climate change, and the role of young people in political movements. After the technical training, the attendees conducted a trial photovoice project, shared their photos and narratives, engaged in collective reflection, and identified common themes and challenges across their respective communities. The subsequent “Dreaming Alternative Worlds” phase prompted youth to imagine and illustrate the types of sustainable and just futures they desired. Finally, in the “Enacting New Worlds Collectively” phase, participants took action by planning individual community-based projects they would lead and carry out in following weeks.

Members of the core collective who completed the “Training of Trainers” session then dispersed and recruited 10 young people from four respective communities to participate in village-based PAR and arts-based envisioning projects. Outreach sessions, photovoice instruction, and dreaming activities were subsequently completed in four communities, which culminated in exhibitions that were open to the public. During the weeks in which village projects were being executed, select members of the core collective promoted the initiative across various media platforms, including a live appearance on a national news programme. Following completion of the respective village projects, the core collective was reconvened to reflect upon the entire process. During the session, they discussed and developed future action plans, formally named their group “Youth for Justice”, and selected the Zapatista expression noted earlier: *“There will be a time...”* as their official motto. In total, the core collective includes 10



*Youth conduct a trial photovoice project after PAR training to prepare for the community-based initiatives they would lead.*

*Credit: Sayan Penados*

members while the broader “Youth for Justice” network is roughly 50 youth and growing. In addition, for the first activity after formalising “Youth for Justice”, the core collective planned and organised a national gathering and public photovoice exhibition in Belmopan, Belize’s capital city, which featured the village-based projects and community photos from youth in the broader network, who were also invited and supported to attend.

### **Just the Beginning: Youth Reflections on PAR and the Path Ahead**

Overall, our PAR project was oriented at maximising the degree to which research can be guided by and relevant to youth, whilst also providing them the platform to amplify their voices, dreams,

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and demands for a better world—on their terms. More broadly, the pilot and ongoing work of the Youth for Justice collective and network is meant to be an intervention into the colonial-health-climate crisis mentioned at the outset. We collectively happen to feel that creating spaces for youth to freely engage in group dialogue, creative expression, community engagement, and direct action is one of the best ways of tackling said crisis. Notably, our research and activities were and remain driven by a dedicated focus on justice—environmental, social, economic, and climate. By concentrating on various dimensions of justice and centring it in our efforts and even name, we are seeking to combat challenges related to inequality, discrimination, poverty, and environmental degradation, which are affecting all of the communities we are from and continue to work in. And while the work is rewarding and meaningful, it is also admittedly taxing and tiring at times.

When conducting research across the communities, we identified a range of challenges and problems that need to be addressed. Division caused by political interference, unequal access to resources and opportunities, land disputes, transportation



*The newly designed and official logo for the recently formed Youth for Justice collective and network. Credit: Gliss Penados*

limitations, job scarcity, ecosystem damage, and threats posed by foreign investors were and remain some of the major issues we encountered. These dilemmas not only erode the wellbeing of community members but also exacerbate existing inequalities and tensions. However, amidst the adversity, we recognised and celebrated the major strengths and assets of the communities. Our diverse cultural heritage, village traditions, the resilience of our people, and the beauty of the natural environment in each village surfaced as indispensable strengths for all the communities. These assets, which we are averse to putting a dollar sign on, serve as sources of pride and inspiration for our communities and provide a foundation for co-creating brighter futures.

For us, while conducting PAR offers a fruitful avenue for community engagement and transformative change, it is also important to remain aware of its complexities and challenges. Across any diverse group, conflicts, clashes, and frustrations can arise as a result of contrasting core values, diverging personal opinions, and even different personality types. Such instances need to be addressed in thoughtful, empathetic, and constructive ways. Moreover, young people are often juggling numerous responsibilities related to family obligations, schoolwork, social lives, peer networks, and even job duties, which can place a strain on their time, energy, and motivation.

It would be dishonest to say that there were moments of fatigue and discouragement, particularly when confronted with the magnitude of the challenges we are addressing and the time and energy it takes to organise activities and events. In Belize, confronting the historical legacies and contemporary institutions that are perpetuating injustice can be met with disapproval, criticism, and opposition from certain authority figures and adults involved in politics as well as the public in general. Breaching decorum is also not always welcome and pushing the envelope comes with risk and sometimes discipline, especially if it is youth who are rocking the boat. All these factors highlight the

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complexities of PAR in our context and remind us that our work is both a rewarding and demanding endeavour.

Amidst it all, however, we feel the good far outweighs the bad. Experiencing and working through the complexities and challenges is helping everyone get united, grow as individuals, and become principled leaders. It is strengthening our resolve to persist and change things, as well as having prompted us to cherish our community histories and cultures more than we did before. Participating in the training and PAR projects not only broadened our understanding of social justice issues and the climate crisis, but also deepened our sense of obligation to address them. More practically, our active participation in the projects and now Youth for Justice group is significantly enhancing our abilities in a variety of ways. These include leadership, communication, interpersonal,



*Youth participants from the communities of San Jose Succotz and Calla Creek present findings related to their photovoice projects. Credit: Sayan Penados*

teamwork, active listening, problem-solving, and project planning skills.

Being key contributors and driving forces of change is increasing our motivation to tackle complex challenges and problems that are affecting our and other villages. When we overcome obstacles and achieve milestones it feels good and boosts our confidence. The work we are doing in our communities makes us feel proud, brave, fierce, and meaningful. Our next idea is to create murals, collect oral histories, and make ethnographic maps in each of the communities, as well as get more youth and villages involved. Overall, engaging in these participatory activities has shifted our perceptions about ourselves and our capabilities, showing us that we have the power to make a difference in our community, country, and the world. We have accomplished a great deal in only a few



*Members of the Youth for Justice core collective lead a walking tour of Gales Point Manatee for their adult collaborators and guests. Credit: Sayan Penados*

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months and are excited to see what comes next. Even though we have already done so much, this is just the beginning.

## **Biography**

Youth for Justice is a grassroots collective and network in Belize committed to the co-creation of sustainable and just futures. It is composed of diverse young people who conduct participatory action research with communities via convivial democratic process. The team has an explicit focus on resolving colonial legacies, social inequalities, and the climate crisis through collective action and the creative arts. The initiative was co-convened by Dr. Filiberto Penados (Research Director, Galen University) and Levi Gahman (Professor of Emancipatory Politics, University of Liverpool).



# After Time

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Eva van Roekel

Political Economy Fellow 2021-22

**A**re we in the end of times?<sup>1</sup> We appear to be in a moment in which we are constantly overwhelmed with images and words of drought, floods, blizzards, starvation, extinction, scorching woods, and war and conflict, all due to climate change and environmental upheaval. For some people we are living in a world where we are approaching some kind of finale from there is no escape. With this in mind, stating that the current state of the world is worrisome sounds shallow. The scale and depth of what is coming appears beyond any words or concepts. Yet, I cannot stop wondering if we can think of 'ending' in non-specific ways? As an anthropologist, I tend to think we cannot.

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1 Parts of this text have previously appeared in Jesse Jonkman and Eva van Roekel, 'Muddled Times: Temporality and Gold Mining in Colombia and Venezuela', *International Development Policy* 15, no. 1 (2023): 1-19 and in Eva van Roekel, 'Ecocidio and Genocidas: Anthropological Reflections on Existence and Extermination in Latin America', in: J.S. Bachman (ed.), *Genocide Studies: Pathways Ahead* (Rutgers University Press, forthcoming).

It can be dangerous to claim relativism when we are increasingly subjected to deliberate disinformation and fake news. I do not in any way wish to contest the meaning nor likely outcomes of a breach of the 1.5 Celsius climate threshold. Let that be clear from the start. I believe that is not my task as an anthropologist. However, I do think that a critical attitude towards far-reaching claims about the end of times and approaching apocalypses has value in and for the world we inhabit; if only because it helps us to understand how life under threat is experienced and understood in different ways. I believe that there lie important ethnographic tasks at hand to figure out how people across the world think and feel about human-made disaster, extinction, and ruin. The following is no more than a concise reflection on temporalities and crises that situates this enormous ethnographic task.

I think a vital and recurrent theme in these ethnographic queries relates to the experience of past, present, and future. In what way, for instance, do time and temporality—or the way we dwell in time—shape the way we envision the workings of nature and the way we live *in* climate? Current experiences of ‘ending’ and ‘post-apocalyptic’ worlds belong to specific temporal notions concerning how life (of any kind) comes to exist in the world. This way of understanding the workings of time often tends to be conceived in linear fashion, in which case a definitive end to time is indeed possible or even about to happen. Yet, to claim that this temporal linearity applies to the experience of time for everyone and everywhere in the world is, in my view, a leap too far. The experience of time can turn in multiple directions, as will hopefully become clear in the way I have (often accidentally) stumbled upon time and temporality in different fields of research as an anthropologist over the years. A plea for a culture-sensitive approach to time is not, of course, to bring thoughts on time and temporality to a close. I see it rather as a continuation of vibrant debates in the anthropology of time.

As an ethnographer I first became interested, somewhat unwillingly, in the workings of time when I did ethnographic research on post-conflict and transitional justice. In the context of pursuing a doctoral degree on retribution for and commemoration of crimes against humanity in Argentina, I engaged with both victims and perpetrators of violence, making it almost impossible to write one coherent history of the violence. I became aware of the unbreakable link between history and what it meant to be a person, as Clifford Geertz rightly suggested.<sup>2</sup> Particularly experiences of violence tend to be fields of contradicting stories and truths. Conflict about how one remembers the past and what one expects of the future express the specific ways in which we engage with and in the world. Historical facts, present events, and their lived experiences and attached meanings and scenarios do not exist separately. Meaning, fact, and conflict all converge to constitute pasts, presents, and futures within people's lifeworlds. I therefore opted for a temporal approach to avoid threading coherence into a history of violence and impunity that was inherently fraught with contradicting interpretations and multiple temporalities that favoured past, present, and future in highly different ways.<sup>3</sup> This turn to time became pivotal to my anthropological 'becoming', so to speak.

Time has been a perennial object of anthropological inquiry and runs through almost all social analysis. Ernest Gellner, for instance, asserted that 'the way in which time and its horizons are conceived is generally connected with the way the society understands and justifies itself.'<sup>4</sup> Decades later, Richard Irvine similarly observed that 'conceptualizations of time emerge from

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2 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 389–404.

3 Eva van Roekel, *Phenomenal justice: Violence and Morality in Argentina* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).

4 Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 1.

social interests, activities, and relations.<sup>5</sup> The way we understand time thus largely depends on to whom and for what we think ourselves responsible, as well as with whom and what we interact daily. People's experiences of time are often related to a jumble of biological rhythms, daily routines, seasonal practices, and social calendars. The impact of time on people's everyday lives depends on these competing or coexisting relations between natural and social tempos, cyclical and linear times, and repetitions and irreversibilities.<sup>6</sup> Time is multiple for this reason.

In recent years, the anthropology of time has moved from juxtaposing temporalities in specific cultures to interweaving multiple experiences of time into one. The recent 'temporal turn' in anthropology has emphasized the profound heterogeneity of temporal experiences other than a linear one.<sup>7</sup> Circular or spiraling temporalities may very well run in parallel with a linear progression of past, present, and future, for instance. The struggle, therefore, should not be to determine which temporality has it right, but to do justice to a much more indeterminate relationship of multiple social representations of temporality and the many varieties of experience of being-in-time.<sup>8</sup> What is of importance here is that temporal experience can be upended in times of crisis and disaster. Time, then, stops being something we take for granted. I think this is where anthropology has the potential for a critical inquiry into the way people across the world experience and make sense of such phenomena as flooding, drought, extinction, and

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5 Richard Irvine, 'Deep Time: An Anthropological Problem', *Social Anthropology*, 22, no. 2 (2014): 157–172, 158.

6 Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images* (Berg, 1992).

7 Laura Bear, 'Time as Technique', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 45 (2016): 487–502; Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

8 Michael D. Jackson, *The Varieties of Temporal Experience: Travels in Philosophical, Historical, and Ethnographic Time* (Columbia University Press, 2018), xv.

famine. This can allow the foregrounding of additional temporal dimensions and ways to dwell in time, such as the temporal concept of deep time that refers to geological periods of time.

In my current ethnographic research on the complex humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, which has displaced more than 7 million Venezuelans from their country, the workings of time again inform my thinking on what it is to be human. Over the last ten years, Venezuela lost almost 80% of its Gross Domestic Product due to political conflict, state negligence, and economic sanctions implemented by the United States and several European countries. For those that did not flee from crisis and conflict, small-scale gold mining has become a way to overcome the crisis. There are no exact numbers of the amount of new gold miners, but satellite imaging shows an increase of almost 300% in excavated lands—and the global pandemic most likely played a significant role in this growth.<sup>9</sup> In current social theorizing on human ecologies and the exploitation of land and people, there is a burgeoning interest in the ‘afterlife of destruction’.<sup>10</sup> These debates often refer to demarcated temporalities, such as “before,” “during” and “after” periods of destruction to address how landscapes and communities develop in the wake of capitalist ruination (like mining). Such change is not a passive undertaking, though. Chloe Ahmann argues, for instance, that we must look first and foremost at ‘how affected groups *work time* to emphasize their vulnerability.’<sup>11</sup>

The way that, in recent years, the extraction of gold in the Venezuelan Amazon has become a solution for famine caused

9 See for instance, Luis Salas Rodríguez & Wataniba, ‘Illegal mining in Venezuela: a map of the issue’, accessible at <https://www.iwgia.org/en/venezuela/5242-illegal-mining-in-venezuela-a-map-of-the-issue.html> (accessed April 28, 2024).

10 Gastón R. Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Duke University Press, 2014).

11 Chloe Ahmann, “‘It’s Exhausting to Create an Event out of Nothing’: Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 33, no. 1 (2018): 142–171, 144.

by barren lands allows us to think about time and temporality in intersecting ways. The workings of time amid catastrophic destruction and survival consist of coexisting temporalities of people, lands, policies, and things. Time is heading towards some apocalyptic finale while at the same time there is deep acknowledgement of the circular aspect of extraction and the degenerative and regenerative character of the Amazonian land and its people. Just as the afterlife of one gold mine gives birth to future mining desires and activities, so is the present-day extraction sometimes experienced as an aftermath of earlier boom years of the same or another resource. In gold country, the past, present, and future are often all over the place.<sup>12</sup>

More often than not, the experience of time is messy and multiple. How people reckon the beginning and ending of a certain time in their life may vary significantly. I therefore think, following Geertz, that there exists an unbreakable link between the way existence comes into being and how people experience the impending extermination thereof. Questions I find particularly valuable to carve new pathways for thinking about disaster, ruin and extinction are: how does social existence manifest in the world? How do people rationalize its violent loss and grieve it (or not) on their own terms? Elsewhere I have argued, following Judith Butler,<sup>13</sup> that not every death nor every aspect of loss is lamented the same way. Some lives are deemed more worthy of mourning than others.<sup>14</sup> 'Such differential allocation of grievability [a priori] defines what is normatively human and what counts as a livable life and a grievable death.'<sup>15</sup>

While being with my Venezuelan friends and family, the everyday presence of dearth, flooding and famine never feels the same as

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12 Jonkman and van Roekel, 'Muddled Times'.

13 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009).

14 Van Roekel, 'Eccidid and Genocidas'.

15 Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2003), xiv-xv.

when I am in the Netherlands. There seems less anxiety around the impending finale of humankind. There appears to be a form of acknowledgment that human beings are just one thing that constitutes the immensity of what life entails. While being in the field, fraught with crisis and little to no prospect for improvement, I must admit that this acknowledgment of human humbleness can be strangely comforting at points. Life will move on, yet perhaps (or perhaps even better) not with human beings at the centre. I do not wish to bring these nascent thoughts to any close as I think anxiety of endings and human humbleness are not opposites. Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian rightly warns that we should not deny the coevalness of time of the ethnographer and their so-called Other.<sup>16</sup> Alternative experiences of time should never become a device that unfairly exoticizes people or land. There is simply not *one* way of being in time and neither is there one way of experiencing the end of times.

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16 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 1983).





# A Different Portrait of the Rohingya

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*An Interview with Greg  
Constantine*

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Lars Cornelissen and  
Greg Constantine

**Lars Cornelissen**

Can we start with you explaining your current research and your current fellowship and how it relates to your previous work?

**Greg Constantine**

My trajectory with the ISRF has been interesting. I've been a photographer for 20 years and I dedicate my work to long-term

projects. And one has been documenting the persecution of the Rohingya community in Burma. There are many other projects – immigration detention, statelessness – but the Rohingya community has remained a constant through 17 years.

The Rohingya community has been subjected to different waves of violence and a genocide that has been ongoing for a long time – although the world only recognised this genocide as such in 2017. Prior to 2017, I'd spent most of my time, around 20 trips, trying to dissect and document the persecution this community had faced.

When 2017 happened and it was recognised by people all over the world as a genocide, it wasn't breaking news for me – it was the culmination of years of documenting systematic, structural, strategic persecution by the Burmese authorities.

Where the Rohingya live in Burma has been a black hole that very few people have been permitted to get to. So most of my work over the years has focused on people that have left that area. But the violence of 2017 pushed over 600,000 Rohingya out all of Burma and into a space where you could actually access them and hear from them.

For me, the big question in 2017 was: "What were they bringing with them?"

That's where my relationship with ISRF and these fellowships started. There is all this evidence related to the structural violence, but none of us had been able to see it. So, in 2017, I identified this opportunity to document the process of what had happened to them over the past 20 or 30 years, through what people had brought with them out of Burma, into Bangladesh.

And in 2018, that led to my Independent Scholar Fellowship with the ISRF. With that fellowship, I was thinking about how I could capture the stories and the things that they had brought with them

– but also how the genocidal process is happening to them as refugees in another country. Because the death, the persecution, the isolation, the segregation continue.

During 2017, there were several well-documented mass killings by the Burmese authorities: Chut Pyin, Maung Nu, Tula Toli. With the fellowship, I documented the aftermath of almost all of them. I recorded the stories of people who had survived all of them; a collective voice of those that had different experiences but shared an experience of trauma and violence.

As a photographer, the visual is my medium. But my photographer peers and I never had access to where all that death happened. We couldn't get there. So how do you visually translate that loss, that trauma and its scale?

My answer was to tell the stories of those who had lost someone in that violence. So there were all these different techniques I used that pushed me as a visual storyteller into a space I'd not been in before.

The work from the Independent Scholar Fellowship and my work from previous 14 years became a major exhibition in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, which continues until the end of 2025.

Putting together the exhibition, I realised that it's about the survival and life of this community. But it's also about its destruction. I believe genocide is a process. It's not something that just happens spontaneously. It's something that is planned and takes time. For the Rohingya, it was decades in the making.

I wanted to explore the backstory – the things that set the stage for that destruction. The denial of rights, the segregation, the arbitrary denial of citizenship, the economic desperation, the denial of education and birth certificates.

**LC**

And you've tried to understand this through the concept of slow genocide, visually documenting the decades of changing citizenship documents and passports and other official state documents?

**GC**

Yes. And to do that, you need access to those hard materials. So in 2017, the Burmese authorities essentially pushed people out with that hard evidence. And if you looked hard enough, you could piece together a process going back decades. That's what I tried to do.

**LC**

Is that why these communities held on to documents from 40–50 years ago, and why they had these objects with them? Was it as a means of documenting it and reconciling themselves with what had happened?

**GC**

Absolutely. I think it's amazing that people would hold on to things like that. But when you talk with Rohingya, you realise they are aware of how invaluable those things are. They realise that the minute their grandparents' original ID card from the 1950s is gone they have no hard proof to show their connection.

That's the answer I got from almost all the Rohingya who shared with me some of these family things they had carried with them in 2017 and previous displacements.

It's been an incredible process to be able to see how, in some ways, it's taken a genocide to push this community into a place where people can finally see for themselves the process of exclusion and erasure.

## **LC**

Could you describe your new project and how it builds on previous work in Bangladesh?

## **GC**

After the Independent Scholar Fellowship, and putting together the exhibition, there was one particular element of that exhibition that I thought was absolutely crucial. And that was a historical section, a visualization of what this community was like before everything started to go bad.

The Burmese government has always claimed this community was never indigenous to Burma. That they're interlopers from India and later, Bangladesh. That they've never contributed anything. And this has been used to support the strategic, structural violence against them. It's also how other people in Burma have come to understand and accept this violence.

So I thought: "Okay, well, what would happen if I tried to work with people in the community to see what actually still exists? What part of their history is still there? And what would happen if I tried to work with the community to almost act as a magnet to bring it all together?"

## LC

So you've started to draw on the networks that you've got all over the world to try and trace these different fragmented groups of people and the materials they still have?

## GC

I feel, and what people I know in the community also feel, is that they cannot be defined by this violence that has been perpetrated against them, because there's an entire history that precedes that.

So what would happen if I started working with people in the Rohingya community to find five pieces of this visual history in Pakistan, and 20 pieces of this jigsaw puzzle in Bangladesh, and 40 pieces inside of Burma, and in the US and the UK, Europe, Malaysia?

And what would happen if I then tried to put them together to create a whole different portrait of this community that's based on history and challenges the portrait that people today have of this community? That was basically the starting point for my ISRF Early Career Fellowship.

Burma is now in the aftermath of the 2021 coup. All communities across Burma are now experiencing a level of violence that the Rohingya have been experiencing for decades. Everyone now has one common enemy: the military. There's this moment of shared solidarity – and the Rohingya community fits, I think, within that shared solidarity.

So why not use this project to make people rethink what they've been told by the government, and see the contributions and the sense of belonging and the placement of the Rohingya community in Burma?

**LC**

That's great, Greg. You've just said that a lot of the impetus comes from the community, so how does that play out?

**GC**

I wouldn't be able to do this work myself. It needs collaboration with the community. They're the gatekeepers to this work. I can initiate the contact and describe what I envision and the motivation, but they're the caretakers of this visual representation that I believe is out there.

I've done this by utilizing different connections I have with Rohingya around the world. I've told them about the project and said: "This is what I want to do, can you help me?" In some places, it's going great; in other places, I've kind of hit walls.

But the closer I stay to Burma, the better. So I've been working with four young Rohingya in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. And several still living inside Burma who have worked secretly approaching families. I've given them guidance and set up a system that's secure, and I've let them do their thing, and monitored how things are going.

And over the last 2 years, slowly, Rohingya in these places have been contributing visual materials to the project.

I'm amazed by these pieces of visual evidence, these pieces that make up this jigsaw puzzle. And these materials have also amazed the Rohingya who I've worked with, because they're younger, in their 20s or early 30s, and – I hate to say this – are of a generation of genocide. They've never seen an alternative visual history that challenges that.

It's incredible to see all these materials start to coalesce into a portrait that is very different than what most people – them included – think of this community. These jigsaw pieces might be old black and white family photographs, old documents, anything you can imagine. And they show the contributions this community has made – and their sense of belonging.

One photograph might tell a story, but when you place it with one hundred other photographs, it creates a portrait of a community that was once very much part of Burmese society; not only economically, but politically and professionally.

All these things embed a community into being a part of a greater society.

## **LC**

Are you collecting mostly visuals, photographs in particular? Or are you also interested in diaries, oral histories, narratives and textual materials?

## **GC**

All those. The curation of those materials has been an huge task. This is something that has never been done with this community before, and something the community has never done by itself before.

One of the many exciting parts of this project is that this visual representation of who they are as a community; who they were at a particular point in time, is not being driven by and created from the outsider's point of view. It's not my camera taking pictures of them; it's them actively participating in creating a greater portrait that shows who this community was. That is unique.



Anytime you read something related to the Rohingya, news reports or whatever, the first paragraph usually contains a sentence that says, "One of the most persecuted communities in the world". And yes, that's true. But it doesn't define who this community is.

I've been fortunate that people trust me enough, because of the work that I've done over the years. Being in London for so much time, I've also had access to archives – materials that I'd never otherwise have access to, and a lot of Rohingya wouldn't have access to either.

In the archives, I try to find things that represent the active voice of the Rohingya community. So much comes from the colonialist perspective, but it's exciting to uncover things that aren't so much the colonialist voice, but the Rohingya voice that is being reported by the colonial authorities.

To find old telegrams and old cables of Rohingya talking, reporting what Rohingya are saying, in the 1940s, right around independence, is super exciting. It tells a lot about who this community believe they were and where they passionately felt their position in Burmese society was at that crucial time in their history.

For me, it's also, "How can you take something that is from the past and activate it in the present?" It's like all these materials have been sleeping for decades. Let's use this project as an opportunity to take that family photograph, and let it awaken and speak in a way that it hasn't been able to in a long time – if at all.

## LC

You've previously told me about finding this incredible archival source in somebody's attic in England. Can you say more about that?

## GC

There's two great anecdotes to talk about in terms of fieldwork: one from within the Rohingya community; and one external, the one you just mentioned.

Over the past year, all these materials have been trickling in: photographs, documents. And I've been seeing all these things in isolation: one picture, isolated by itself; another picture, isolated by itself. And each one tells an important story.

But when I went to Bangladesh and met with the different people who have contributed these things, they began to show me portfolios of materials. Not one photograph, but four, and three ID documents and four pieces of paper. So that one photograph told a story. But this portfolio of things held a conversation that talked all about Rohingya history, generational things.

That was significant for me, not just creatively, but also archivally. I could say, "Okay, well, what if I put all these disjointed, isolated documents together and start creating collages of materials that then tell a deeper story and include that with the audio – the oral testimony – of the people who have contributed it? What do they think is important about these documents and these photographs of two generations of their family? Why is it significant to the Rohingya community? Why is it significant to them?".

That propelled this project into a whole different space.

I think a lot of communities are suspicious of people within their own communities for any number of different reasons. What worked to the benefit of this project is that being a trusted outsider opened up a space where people started sharing more documents with me than they would with some of the Rohingya themselves.

They'd show me the pictures they'd already submitted. But then they'd pull out a bag of extra materials to share. And then, a skeptical, older Rohingya man might fully understand the power of the project and get on his phone, calling old men all around the camps to come over, because there was somebody here, who was really interested, genuinely, in seeing and learning about these historic materials they'd miraculously preserved and carried with them during the genocide, from Burma into Bangladesh, and had kept secretly.

That was invaluable.

When I started the project, my ambition was to get pictures from anybody related to the Rohingya and Arakan – the area where the Rohingya are from and live.

I was going to be in the UK, so because the British were actively involved during World War Two in this area of Burma, fighting the Japanese, I thought it would be miraculous if I found a family in the UK who had an ancestor who fought for the British in Arakan during the war. Especially if they had a photograph from that time.

So last year, one of the Rohingya I had been working with, who was working inside Burma, submitted a portfolio of documents of one particular man from the 1940s. This man's name was Abdul Salam.

The portfolio included an original Burmese passport, issued in 1949, and a couple other things. One was a copy of a war service certificate issued to him, on June 14, 1945, by the British government, acknowledging his contribution to the British war effort against the Japanese.

I'd never seen a document like this before.

It's known that the Rohingya community helped the British during World War Two, but very little was documented. But here, all of a

sudden, was this war service certificate.

Then, at the British Library, I found some books about 'V force'. 'V force' was set up by the British military to fight along the India-Burma border against the Japanese in World War Two and used locals across enemy lines to help filter intelligence back to the British. And in part of Arakan, these locals were Rohingya.

One book was called "Burmese Outpost" by Anthony Irwin. And there was a chapter about the Muslim community of North Arakan, which would be the Rohingya community.

The book specifically mentions two Rohingya men: one named Waji Ullah, and the other Abdul Salam. Could this be the same Abdul Salam we had the war certificate of? Yes, it could.

This took me down a rabbit hole as I tried to find the relatives of the author, Anthony Irwin, who fought for the British in 'V force'. And that led to online records that took me to the last town he possibly lived in, where I knocked on doors, asking anybody if they knew of Anthony Irwin. Which led to nothing.

So I returned to my online research and was able to connect with Anthony Irwin's grandson. I told him about this project and he said, "Oh, well, you have to talk with my dad", who would be Anthony Irwin's son, "and my auntie", who would be Anthony Irwin's daughter from another marriage. And that led to conversations with both, one of whom invited me to their house.

In the dining room of this home were two suitcases filled with old letters, papers and photo albums of two generations of people from that family who had served in the British military, including Anthony Irwin. Most remarkable, however, was a thin photo album – with 'Arakan, 1943' written on its spine.

Inside was a black and white print of her father, standing



Figure 1: Anthony Irwin's suitcases, containing old documents, photographs, and notebooks. Image by Greg Constantine.

underneath the Union Jack, with a group of young Rohingya men all serving with 'V force'. And on the back of that photograph was handwritten something like, 'Author with Muslims from Arakan, partisans at guerilla HQ'.

This, I believe, is the first picture that visually places men from the Rohingya community in service of the British during their fight against the Japanese in World War Two.

This is one of the reasons why you do this work – you never know where these discoveries are going to come from. But there's an instinct, a kind of intuition, to not give up. Sometimes, it leads to a dead end. Sometimes, it leads you to a very historically significant part of this community and its history.

This time, it also led to even more rabbit holes. I also found in the family archive a series of communications Anthony Irwin had with the BBC about a radio programme he did in 1945 about the 'V force' and these indigenous communities, including the Rohingya community.

The BBC no longer had the recording, but I found a transcript of it in a copy of The Listener magazine from April 5, 1945. And that was significant. But what was even more significant was that there were three pictures.

One was a photograph of several Rohingya with rifles being trained by the British behind enemy lines. Unfortunately, Abdul Salam was not mentioned in the radio broadcast. But, I did find another mention of him in the June 14th 1945 issue of 'The Burma Gazette', the official correspondence of the British military.

In this copy, were two pieces of paper. On one of those pieces of paper, on the same exact day as the one on the war service certificate of Abdul Salam, is a section that says, "War Service Certificates", and there's about nine people mentioned, including Abdul Salam from Buthidaung.

Which triangulated all these things. It also made me realize that, on that day, Abdul Salam was one of several Rohingya from that area of North Arakan who received war service certificates.

**LC**

This is an incredible anecdote, Greg.

How would you then feed these sorts of findings back to the community? Do you go back to the family members of Abdul Salam and say, "That picture you sent me, alongside the war certificate, have led me on this incredible path. Here's what I found.

What do you make of it?”.

**GC**

I'll end up doing that with many people who have contributed materials to this project. I'll show them how they fit within the larger picture of things and explain to them the contribution that one thing makes to the greater representation of the community. It might even fill a gap in the community's historical timeline.

It's really important to do that. I'll do the same with the UK family; to show them what that contribution has made to the greater picture.

**LC**

Can you tell me a little bit more about the website, Ek Khaale, that has come out of this project? How did you arrive at the idea to curate a website? And what are your hopes and ambitions for it?

**GC**

In September of 2023, I found myself in a very interesting space with this project and with this work because there's a creative component, and an intellectual component.

Regarding the creative component: when do you stop creating? Three years into this project, I felt like I could just keep going and learning and discovering and finding and having people share more and more materials with me. It could go on for another two years. So I was confronted with this important question, when does that part of this process have to be paused?

Over the past three years, this amazing team of young Rohingya and others who have contributed to this project and I have amassed together a significant block of raw materials that didn't exist before. Last September, it was clear to me that it was time to start chiseling away at that block of raw materials, critically look through and analyse these materials, deconstruct all of the materials and start to create a narrative that's accessible for people, that tells a story.

This brings up questions about the power and the role of an archive. One of many gifts an archive provides is that it awakens the past and places it in the present. And in so many ways, what people see in an archive has the ability to re-establish a history that has been forgotten or correct and re-align a history that has been falsified and accepted by the majority as being true.

What Rohingya did in the 1950s, 60s, 70s or 80s might have been decades ago, but these visual moments have a place in a trajectory of a historical timeline that are linked together, build upon each other and when sewn together, they bring us to now. For people in Myanmar, a significant part of the Rohingya community's historical timeline has been, for the most part, questioned, denied or just erased.

All of the materials in the project *Ek Khaale* synthesize together, collectively in a process that is a restoration, is a rewinding of the visual representation of the Rohingya most people have of this community, including those who live in Myanmar, people who live around the world and also people within the Rohingya community itself.

So, I spent months testing out various design strategies that could allow these materials to have a voice in the present, allow them to speak. A story began to develop where the materials we found and the voices of Rohingya within them could be curated in a way that presented the 'active' voice and role of the Rohingya at key



moments in Burma's history. Yet, in doing this, it also permits these materials to have an active voice in the present at this important moment in Burma's history right now.

How can you take old journals, books, diaries, bureaucratic communications and newspapers and make them come alive and have a voice? It took months to figure this out.

The website [www.ekkhaale.org](http://www.ekkhaale.org) is really a digital book. That is how I designed it. Nine chapters, each chapter focusing on a specific part of the Rohingya story and each sharing and showing micro-histories composed of different themes. In many ways, I let the materials drive the story and the decisions for how the final chapters were edited and curated. Some of the chapters are quite dense with archival materials because the materials demanded it, which also meant these chapters needed more text to provide context. While for other chapters the visual materials are so strong, they speak for themselves.

On a number of chapters, I consulted with several Rohingya and others who know this story and who I trust, almost as editorial advisors.

To maximize on engagement and sustain and build interest in the project, I decided to serialize the release of the project website. The first chapter was released in the middle of June and every week or so, I would release a new chapter, publicizing it to mailing lists and so Rohingya groups around the world could share it within their networks as well. It was definitely the right decision.

Now the project is in an exciting phase: public and strategic engagement. Presentations of the project have already been held in Bangkok and at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Burma/ Myanmar Studies in Chiang Mai. Several more presentations and exhibitions are being organized for the end of the year and early 2025. Use of the materials from Ek Khaale are being used

by groups within the Rohingya community too, which for me is incredibly exciting.

I've been documenting the Rohingya for 18 years now. While I believe my older working documenting the persecution of the Rohingya is crucial in bearing witness, holding Burmese regimes to account for the atrocities they have committed and leaving behind sometime that contributes to a historical record, I feel the project Ek Khaale is the kind of work that can contribute something of infinite value. I want to explore as many creative and intellectual pathways and collaborations to see this happens.

# The (Ab)uses of Utopia

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## *Notes on a Colonial and Speculative History of Climate Change*

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Sarath Jakka

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**A**nother summer goes down as the hottest ever on record. Just like the previous year, and quite likely the following year as well. As these indices of ongoing and future catastrophes stack against each other, another ritual plays out—the clamour over numbers. Do the prevailing scientific projections—and the models that underlie them—accurately reflect the temperature shifts currently being experienced or are global heating trends beyond the predictive capacity of these models? Is the planet heating at a faster

rate than anticipated?<sup>1</sup> The frustration and helplessness that accompanies this clamour is all the more volatile due to powerful well-funded disinformation campaigns that deny not just the scope but also the reasons behind global warming. Ineffectively designed and implemented international treaties and regional environmental policies are yet to provide reasons to hope. Apart from these obstacles, could this sense of frustration and insurmountability also betray something even more fundamental—a blind spot inherent to the technocratic conception of an environmental crisis that has been centuries in the making? Are the knowledge paradigms, attitudes and institutions that have actively pushed planetary processes to a breaking point now stepping in as crisis managers? Can this frustration and urgency then be seen as a ritual for a problem that cannot be addressed meaningfully through the scientific, administrative, economic and political institutions and actors that have come to dominate the global scene?

This is not to suggest that frustration at climate inaction is feigned or half-hearted, or that climate science is unnecessary. Rather, it is to say that this crisis is so vast and all-encompassing that any meaningful response would involve a total and radical overhaul of the global economic and political order as it stands. To reduce it to the monitoring and modulation of what is primarily one line of measurement—carbon accumulation in the atmosphere—would inevitably provide a woefully incomplete description of the crisis, culminating in rituals of frustration. This will be followed by only the appearance or staging of a response. Responses based on a narrow engagement with global environmental crises are likely to yield policy instruments that don't really address the historical, political, and economic roots of these catastrophes. This technocratic frustration and clamour over measures becomes a ritual in the sense of a well-known parable by Kafka, "Leopards break into the temple and drink up the offering in the chalices; this happens

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1 See, for example, G.A. Schmidt, 'Climate models can't explain 2023's huge heat anomaly—We could be in uncharted territory', *Nature*, 627 (2024): 467.

again and again; finally, one can predict their action in advance and it becomes part of the ceremony".<sup>2</sup> Despite its exotic setting, the parable points to something simultaneously profound and ordinary: that the rituals we live by have consequences beyond their initial designs and that rituals expand in scope absorbing the other realms of activity that have become a part of their gravitational field. Simply put, this can be seen as a parable about knock-on effects. If it was believed and made imperative that every phenomenon, creature and society could be endlessly known, modified, homogenised, controlled and profited from, surely the knock-on effects of that scrutiny and exploitation would lead to consequences that can longer be contained by those very modes of control.

In the discourse on climate action, there has been a pronounced focus on the urgent need to move away from fossil fuels and adapt other renewable sources of energy like wind and solar energy. This push has inaugurated an era of green capitalism with increased investments in newer technologies like electric cars and fiscal outlays which seek to fulfil policies that accelerate this shift away from non-renewable sources of energy. As this push for a greener, cleaner capitalism evolves, it could be argued that different consequences, rather than the ones being claimed by those invested in such a push, are taking shape. Rather than a course correction and a cleaner planet, this push seems to have opened up an entirely new frontier of financial speculation for corporations. A salient example of this is the case of carbon offsets which amount to little more than a secular form of purchasing indulgences. Through this financial instrument, corporations are allowed to offset their carbon footprint by purchasing credits which are transferred to industries and enterprises that might enable reduced emissions and foster initiatives such as the protection of rainforest ecosystems. In this way, corporations do not have to

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2 As quoted in Ron Slate, 'on Kafka's Leopards, a novella by Moacyr Scliar', available at <https://www.ronslate.com/on-kafkas-leopards-a-novella-by-moacyr-scliar-texas-tech-university-press/> (accessed September 29, 2024).

worry about their impact on the environment as they can literally purchase and declare their carbon neutrality. Unsurprisingly, studies are now concluding that this sort of exchange does not reduce emissions or nurture vulnerable ecosystems and often have detrimental effects on the habitats they are supposed to protect.<sup>3</sup>

What the example of carbon credits demonstrates is that corporations and financial institutions are not interested in pursuing actions that will reduce their disastrous impact on the environment. Rather, corporations, financial institutions and the governments that abet them are primarily invested in claiming a 'carbon neutral' status that will legitimise their unfettered pursuit of profit. Such disjunctions lurk at the heart of the speculative frontiers of green capitalism. Our collective environmental predicament can be seen as a history of looking away; of claiming to seek solutions and enacting remedies while actively pursuing the contrary. This vacillation between the sober auditing and designing of outcomes and the surprise and frustration of not being able to achieve them is akin to deeming something inert and being shocked by its movement. In his extended essay on climate change *The Great Derangement*, the writer Amitav Ghosh poses the encounter with climate catastrophe in images of the uncanny.

Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive? As, for example, when an arabesque in the pattern of a carpet is revealed to be a dog's tail, which, if stepped upon, could lead to a nipped ankle? Or when we reach for an innocent-looking vine and find it to be a worm or a snake? When a harmlessly drifting log turns out to be a crocodile.<sup>4</sup>

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3 See, for example, A. Guizar-Coutiño, J.P.G. Jones, A. Balmford, R. Carmenta & D.A. Coomes, 'A global evaluation of the effectiveness of voluntary REDD+ projects at reducing deforestation and degradation in the moist tropics', *Conservation Biology*, 36, (2022): e13970.

4 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2017: University of Chicago Press), 3.

The technocratic clamour over climate change is characterised by urgency and does not have time for the uncanny. But what looks like urgency for action on one level could be recognised as a convoluted form of inertia on another level. The large leeway and exits permitted by the world of climate measures and policies allows for flagrant contradictions. The UAE might have a strategy to reduce net emissions to zero by 2050 but the Emirati minister who presided over the COP28 summit (and is the chief executive of the state oil company) can also simultaneously claim there is “no science” behind the assumption that a phase-out of fossil fuels is required in order to limit global heating to not more than 1.5C.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Elon Musk can claim green points for making electric cars with Tesla while simultaneously raising billions of dollars from banks and venture capitalists to fund the SpaceX program that includes an apocalyptically envisioned Mars Colonization program—two ventures with diametrically opposed horizons.

In this fairground of futurity, the commodification of hope—of a climate-friendly capitalism—can quite easily be sensed as a vast tapestry of dissociation from the various crises that occupy the present. Here, the rapid churn of speculative capital disguises a more fundamental paralysis. It is only fitting then that the other image Ghosh summons to encapsulate the climate crisis is one where urgency is conjoined with immobility. Referencing the unique topography of the Sunderbans, Ghosh notes that “concealment is so easy for an animal that it could be just a few feet away. If it charged, you would not see it till the last minute, and even if you did, you would not be able to get away; the mud would immobilize you”. Given the frequency of such ambushes, the local folklore of the region contains many stories where “a great deal hinges on the eyes; seeing is one of their central themes; not

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5 Damian Carrington & Ben Stockton, ‘Cop28 president says there is “no science” behind demands for phase-out of fossil fuels’, *The Guardian*, 3 December 2023, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/03/back-into-caves-cop28-president-dismisses-phase-out-of-fossil-fuels> (accessed September 30, 2024).

seeing is another. The tiger is watching you; you are aware of its gaze, as you always are, but you do not see it; you do not lock eyes with it until it launches its charge, and at that moment a shock courses through you and you are immobilized, frozen".<sup>6</sup> Panoramas are antithetical to the mangroves where seeing happens at the very end, when the threat has already made escape impossible. In Ghosh's allegorical framing, climate catastrophe is only accorded significance after an extremely delayed cognisance, this endgame preceded by a lengthy and complex not-seeing.

Ghosh traces the planetary catastrophes arising from this 'deranged' relation with the environment to "the era of Western military conquests" that "predates the emergence of capitalism by centuries. Indeed, it was these conquests, and the imperial systems that arose in their wake, that fostered and made possible the rise to dominance of what we now call capitalism".<sup>7</sup> If one aspect of the history of our current environmental predicaments is a history of looking away, of not-seeing, what would such a history look like? The commodification of hope, the harnessing of its dissociative powers, is not unique to our present moment and can be distinctly traced back to the history of colonial speculation that took root across Europe in the fifteenth century. As reports of voyages to the 'New World' and its riches began to circulate, aided by the explosion of print culture, it engendered a frenzy of speculation regarding the natural world, the diversity of social formations, avenues of investment, the justification of violence and conquest, and civilizational and racial hierarchies. One of the locales in which these concerns coalesced was the hybrid genre of utopian writing, of which Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) are prototypical examples. More and Bacon's fictional depictions of ideal societies and 'New World' geographies are useful examples through which the imperial and

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6 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 28-29.

7 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021: John Murray Press), 116.



colonial intent undergirding the emerging discourses of scientific, technological and social improvement can be evinced.

Unlike More's England replete with corruption, poverty, unemployment and reeling under the devastating social and economic effects of enclosure, More's Utopians are prosperous, dutybound, learned, industrious and peaceful. So pacifist are the Utopians that even amidst war, their physicians administer treatment to their wounded opponents while their priests administer prayers. The Utopians only participate in war as a measure of last resort. There is one interesting exception, however, where the Utopians engage in pre-emptive warfare. If their neighbours refuse to use the service of the Utopians in improving the former's wastelands (for mutual benefit), they colonise the neighbouring land by justifying it in the following manner:

But if a city has too many people, the extra persons serve to make up the shortage of population in other cities. And if the population throughout the entire island exceeds the quota, they enrol citizens out of every city and plant a colony under their own laws on the mainland near them, wherever the natives have plenty of unoccupied and uncultivated land. Those natives who want to live with the Utopians are adopted by them. When such a merger occurs, the two peoples gradually and easily blend together, sharing the same way of life and customs, much to the advantage of both. For by their policies the Utopians make the land yield an abundance for all, though previously it had seemed too poor and barren even to support the natives. But those who refuse to live under their laws they drive out of the land they claim for themselves; and against those who resist them, they wage war. They think it is perfectly justifiable to make war on people who leave their land idle and waste yet forbid

the use and possession of it to others who, by the law of nature, ought to be supported from it.<sup>8</sup>

This passage is eerily reminiscent of a contemporary trope of Israeli settler-colonial discourse where it's claimed that Palestinian land was a bleak desert that is now made fertile by the agricultural ingenuity and technical prowess of Israel. If colonial promoters had to convince potential investors and patrons of the profitability of their ventures, they also had to simultaneously construct a rhetoric of why their conquest was necessary for the people whose lands they would dispossess.

Bacon's *New Atlantis* is centred on a scientific institution, 'Salomon's House'—"the very eye of this kingdom"—where all manner of inventions are brought forth. The dungeons of Salomon's House consist of laboratories where experiments over every variety of phenomenon is carried out, including the prolonging of life, the "divinations of diseases, plagues, swarms-of hurtful creatures, scarcity, tempests, earthquakes, great inundations, comets, temperature of the year, and divers other things".<sup>9</sup> The aim of Salomon's House is to acquire "the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible".<sup>10</sup> In Bacon's empire of knowledge, 'Merchants of Light' are dispatched as spies to collect information in secret from various corners of the planet. Here, knowledge and secrecy, seeing and not-seeing, epistemic dominion and the inscrutable motivations that drive such a dominion are conjoined. These texts are rudimentary, distilled exemplars of the repertoire of dissimulation that sustained the self-image and grandiose visions of these global maritime colonial

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8 Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. and ed. George M. Logan (2011: Norton), 49.

9 Francis Bacon, *Sylva sylvarum (century IX-X) Physiological remains. Medical remains. Medical receipts. Works moral: Colours of good and evil. Essays of counsels civil and moral. Theological works* (1819: C. and J. Rivington), 122.

10 *Ibid.*, 118.

empires. They are ideological models through which it is possible to see how a history of not-seeing was arranged.

The elsewheres conjured by More and Bacon, though explicitly fictional, were directly inspired by accounts of colonial voyages. This does not necessarily imply that they are divorced from the imaginaries encountered in the travel accounts that were actually employed to promote and gather funds for a potential colony. In one such colonial promotional text, Walter Hamond's *A paradox Prooving that the inhabitants of the isle called Madagascar, or St.Laurence, (in temporall things) are the happiest people in the world* (1640), the virtues of Madagascar's inhabitants are emphasised by contrasting their fulfilment with English avariciousness for whom "the whole world being scarce sufficient [...] whilst we impoverish the land, air and water, to in rich a privat Table".<sup>11</sup> And yet, the opening plea, within the same text, to plant a settlement in the island where the English "may enjoy the first fruits of a most plentiful Harvest, which is better than the gleanings of America"—typifies the very acquisitiveness that Hamond rails against in the concluding section of his pamphlet. Hamond used the rhetoric and arguments of Montaigne's essay *Of Cannibals* to construct his paradoxical colonial pitch. Hamond's trope of colonial greed is reminiscent of Girolamo Benzoni, the Italian-born conquistador's description of Indigenous perspectives on Europeans. Benzoni's *History of the New World* (1565) features the following passage:

They say that we have come to this earth to destroy the world. They say that we devour everything, we consume the earth, we redirect the rivers, we are never quiet, never at rest, but always run here and there, seeking gold and silver, never satisfied, and then

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Hamond, *A paradox Prooving that the inhabitants of the isle called Madagascar, or St. Laurence, (in temporall things) are the happiest people in the world* (1640: Nathaniell Butter), available at: <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/> (September 30, 2024).

we gamble with it, make war, kill each other, rob, swear, never say the truth, and have deprived them of their means of livelihood.<sup>12</sup>

Hamond employs the trope of colonial greed to contrast it with the innocence of the natives who it is later implied can be easily disarmed and dispossessed. What Hamond's text demonstrates is the severity of dissociation and the extent of the not-seeing. Amid the churn of financial speculation that fuelled colonial enterprise, even a critique of colonial greed is purposed as a rhetorical tool for attracting colonial investments.

In the measurement-oriented world of climate solutions, there is a tacit assumption that once the evidence is irrefutable, once the crisis is rendered transparent, a system of global coordination can be put in place to take remedial action. The problem with such an assumption is that the systems of coordination that constitute global capitalism are largely geared towards the expansion of profit and the extraction of resources and labour. Even the critique of such a system can be manoeuvred to open up new frontiers of financial speculation. Common to the futurity of contemporary projects—whether the occupation of distant planets, a new era of green capitalism, or the promise of miracle technologies such as fusion reactors—is a vision of future progress built on utopian ruins. Utopian ruins refers to the historical sleight of hand by which the ideal futures that dominate an earlier age, having failed to materialise and having accelerated a new set of crises, are then repurposed and redeployed as novel solutions for the problems of the current moment. Utopian ruins are characterised by hubris, blind spots, paradoxes, schisms, contradictions, dissimulation and forgetting. What does not alter in these transitions are the uninterrupted programs of plunder, extraction, exploitation and profit that are needed to sustain these visions.

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12 Quoted in Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, 2nd ed. (2014: Automeia), 219. Benzoni's description also features in Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*.







**This Bulletin comes out of a Congress the ISRF organised with a small group of its Fellows in January 2024. It critically explores the conceptual pair of prehistories and afterlives, used here to speak to the ways past, present, and future blend into each other.**



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