

**Out of the Woods Collective**, *Hope Against Hope: Writings on Ecological Crisis*,  
New York: Common Notions, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-942173-20-5 (paper)

In a 1999 essay discussing the fierce struggles surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam project in India's Narmada Valley, Arundhati Roy (1999: 29) writes:

It's a sad thing to have to say, but as long as we have faith – we have no hope. To hope, we have to *break* the faith. We have to fight specific wars in specific ways and we have to fight to win.

Here, Roy seems to think in affinity with Ernst Bloch, who saw hope as an art to be learnt over time. "The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming", Bloch (1995: 3) wrote in his famous meditation on the matter. Hope, therefore, is generated by nothing other than people determined to make their own history. Faith, on the other hand, is a passive surrender to external forces, a desperate stab in the dark when the hard graft of history-making seems out of reach.

In the frightening times of ecological crisis in which we live, replete with resurgent nationalisms and intensifying racialised violence, the boundaries between faith and hope can be difficult to discern. More than this, as extinctions, degradation, immiseration and apocalyptic narratives of collapse abound, faith – let alone hope – can be hard to find. The "transnational political research and theory collective" Out of the Woods (OOTW), a "loose grouping" of radical scholars and organisers "working together to think through the problem of ecological crisis" (p.262) are determined to change this. In *Hope Against Hope*, an urgent collection of OOTW essays originally published in various outlets between 2014 and 2018, dominant ideas around what counts as faith and what counts as hope are turned on their heads.

While mainstream environmentalism optimistically positions overhyped techno-fixes and the extended violent commodification of the nonhuman world as “pragmatic” solutions to a world on fire, attempts to build futures beyond state and capital are inevitably sidelined as hopelessly utopian distractions. OOTW’s provocation, however, is that in stark contrast to the space-age technologies foregrounded by “sensible” ecological modernisation advocates, communism already exists. Specifically, OOTW argue that in the forms of mutual aid and solidarity fashioned between people in the midst of disaster, genuine hope for forms of collective life beyond capitalism can be found. They write:

Hope is our word for the grave but positive emotion which collectively emerges within the disastrous present, pushes against it, and expands beyond it. With Ernst Bloch, we insist that this hope is not expectation, nor even optimism. Rather, it is always against itself; warding off its tendency to become a fetish, sundered from solidarity and struggle. This is hope against hope. (p.12)

Drawing on Rebecca Solnit’s (2010) concept of “disaster communities”, OOTW point to the ways in which disasters such as the 1968 Mexico City earthquake and Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, often accentuate and pull together pre-existing relations of care and sociality to build new forms of communal self-organisation. Moving beyond Solnit, OOTW argue for something more than reinvigorated communities: disaster communism, “the ambition to ground nothing less than the whole world in the abundance found in the social reproduction of the disaster community” (p.240).

The concept of “disaster”, here, is expansive, transcending the one-off events we associate with the term by foregrounding the “ongoing disaster of capital, race,

gender, and colonialism” (p.4). This presents an extremely generative way to think through the complex temporalities of ecological crisis. OOTW write:

The concept of “disaster” is useful because it can collapse the distinction between event and effect – between ruination and the resulting ruins. Part of what makes the planetary ecological crisis so difficult to comprehend is its complex temporality; the disaster is simultaneously happening, has happened, and will happen. This is also part of what makes recognizing the scale of catastrophe so psychologically devastating. It is hard enough to accept some cataclysm that is yet to come. It is even harder to reflect on the rapid ruining of the past, present, and future all at once. Talking of ecological disaster offers a way to enfold these different times of ruination. (p.5-6)

This is a vital contribution. Whereas mainstream environmentalism often invokes depoliticised imaginaries of a distant future social breakdown threatening humanity as a whole, OOTW think across overlapping temporalities and, drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), understand ecological crisis as “group-differentiated”.

Equally as crucial, the political outlook that OOTW seek to foster, emerging out of the situated practices of those worst affected by disaster, makes for a refreshing break from dominant environmentalisms’ invocations of a romanticised pristine Nature separate from the dirt and detail of everyday life. Drawing on sources political ecologists will be very familiar with – Neil Smith, Donna Haraway, Jason Moore – alongside an array of other productive interlocutors less often found in geography’s narrow disciplinary debates such as Angela Mitropoulos and Lee Edelman, OOTW agitate for a “queer cyborg ecology”. In doing so, OOTW attend to the ways in which the myth of a feminised Nature aligned to the reproduction of the (white) Nation helps reproduce racist and heteronormative ideologies. They also craft themselves a sharply relational weapon well suited for dicing through defunct binaries that separate out the

natural and the social, the human and the technical, the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, local knowledge and expertise. This enables carefully nuanced political insights, particularly evident in their refusal to succumb to an increasingly prevalent dichotomy between an ecologically blind accelerationism or a “romantic anticapitalism” pining for a lost wilderness that never was. The essay on “cyborg agroecology” is instructive here:

Cyborg agroecology should not be understood as having an inherent preference for high-tech solutions. From a cyborgian perspective, the assemblage peasant-ox-plough is no more or less a technonatural mesh than the assemblage AI-drone-GMO ... It is capitalist social relations which pit agricultural technologies against agricultural workers as well as scientific knowledge against mētis. It is this system of relations that makes local commodity production appear as the only alternative to global commodity production. (p.117)

This cyborgian approach also helps OOTW craft a standpoint that pushes against the narrow constraints of “ecological” politics as traditionally conceived. Nowhere is this clearer than in the book’s rendering of a border-abolitionist lens as a vital starting point for ecological struggle. Inspired by Harsha Walia’s (2013) critique of border imperialism and Achille Mbembe’s (2003) work on death worlds, *Hope Against Hope* understands the border in a time of ecological crisis as a necropolitical relation for trapping people, particularly Black people, “within a situation where their life is defined by their proximity to death” (p.29). In turn, dominant notions of the subjects of a transformative ecological praxis are subverted: hospital workers refusing to withhold treatment for those without papers, for example, become central protagonists within endeavours towards climate justice.

Among the most generative points in the book are the short introductory passages that accompany each essay, in which OOTW contextualise and often rigorously critique their past writing in light of developments in the Collective's political and intellectual horizons. The authors' admirable honesty in these sections gives a sense of the pain endured in revisiting previous work and grasping its shortcomings, including the ways in which violence and exploitation have been perpetuated. Thus, OOTW acknowledge, in the first instance, an absence of questions of borders and migration in the Collective's early work. Meanwhile, some of their later thinking on borders is taken to task for under-theorising the role of race and anti-blackness and, moreover, for an un-reflexive deployment of quantified projections of climate migration – scaremongering statistics that present migration as a threat to be violently managed by the state. Here, we get the sense of a collective writing from within the climate movements of the global North – movements that are *moving* (albeit slowly and partially) thanks to the work of Black and Indigenous organisers to force greater attention and nuance to matters of race, borders and solidarity.

Indeed, *Hope Against Hope* is an unparalleled documentation of the debates and struggles currently live within ecological movements. Nowhere is this clearer than in the essays in which OOTW enter into direct dialogue with influential activists and thinkers. OOTW's critique of Paul Kingsnorth's dangerous ecological nationalism is a vital intervention that calls attention to the very real risk of an ecologically inflected far right. Here, the concept of Indigeneity emerges as a terrain of struggle: whereas Kingsnorth disingenuously cites the struggles of the Standing Rock Sioux to legitimise his attempt to reframe environmentalism around the desire to "protect and nurture your homeland" (Kingsnorth 2017), OOTW emphasise that "Indigenous concepts of place are dynamic and relational" (p.95). OOTW member Sophie Lewis' response to Donna Haraway's (2016) recent flirtations with population control furthers the critique of an environmentalism tainted by white supremacy, lamenting the tragic morphing of the relentlessly anticapitalist, anticolonial figure of

the cyborg within Haraway's contemporary work. Perhaps Haraway has lost the kind of hope-against-hope that OOTW seek to excavate? In Lewis' stinging words:

the chanting goddess who has displaced the earlier cyborg, at least in the pages of *Staying with the Trouble*, is too much of a clean-living misanthrope – and above all, too much of a pessimist – to be a comrade. (p.175)

If Haraway herself is no longer sufficiently cyborgian to be called a comrade of OOTW, what of the anticapitalist ecological movement's most recent high profile convert, Naomi Klein? OOTW's review of Klein's (2014) *This Changes Everything* distinguishes two diverging voices within the text: on the one hand, a dominant Keynesian Klein who seeks to use the tools of the state to challenge "corporate greed", stimulate small business and create "good jobs" in the service of the sustained reproduction of the heteronormative family; and, on the other hand, the seeds of a more radical Klein antagonistic to capitalism's endless drive for growth, advocating for universal basic income in the place of "shitty jobs", and invested in the power of autonomous social movements, grassroots democracy, and the remaking of the family to incorporate diverse forms of kinship across species. OOTW argue that Klein's "major" and "minor" personas are incommensurate, leaving us in no doubt as to which Klein they side with:

Are today's participants in climate movements willing to put their bodies and lives on the line, only to find that their dreams served to enlist them as foot soldiers for a modest Keynesian agenda? (p.204)

They conclude: "The distance between a major and a minor key is a single note, but everything depends on the difference" (p.205).

At this point, I couldn't help but feeling that OOTW's cyborgian distaste for dualisms may have fallen by the wayside. Might their assessment of Klein – or indeed OOTW's text more broadly – sometimes subtly invoke a reform versus revolution dichotomy that serves to delimit rather than expand the political imagination? The framing of moving “within, against and beyond” the ecological crisis outlined in the book's introduction is helpful. Are there then ways, in certain historical moments, to back demands for jobs that serve to move in-against-and-beyond waged labour? Can movements engage with the state in ways that work in-against-and-beyond its reified form? Might pre-existing concerns around “saving our children” be built upon to move in-against-and-beyond the heteronormative biological family? My intention is not to deny that the contradictions highlighted within Naomi Klein's text – and, indeed, within left-ecological milieus more broadly – are very real. Yet whereas OOTW insist that there is a choice to be made between two bifurcated trajectories, I wonder whether a fluid and flexible movement between diverging political registers can be possible.

It is a shame that the latest essay within *Hope Against Hope* was published in 2018, as 2019 was a year in which the kind of strategic questions set out above were posed particularly sharply. This was a year in which the idea of a Green New Deal – which OOTW explicitly oppose – received blossoming interest. I would be interested to hear in more depth what OOTW make of this revived interest in Green Keynesianism and attempts on the part of the anti-capitalist ecological movement (particularly in the US) to work in-against-and-beyond this. What's more, 2019 was a year that saw Extinction Rebellion explode like few other ecological movements before them. Extinction Rebellion is in many ways anathema to the vision of ecological politics developed in the book: intentionally “beyond politics”; apocalyptically inclined; often wedded to a romanticised pristine Nature; highly problematic in its relationship to the police and racialised state violence. What does the apparent success of this movement in capturing the popular imagination

(particularly in the UK) mean for those of us who find so much to object to here? How might antiracist and anticapitalist climate organisers relate to this movement? What can be learned? I'm aware that OOTW have written on Extinction Rebellion outside of *Hope Against Hope* – that the book passes by without so much of a passing reference feels like something of an omission.

If events of 2019 provide fertile ground for future thought on the part of OOTW, the Covid-19 pandemic that has dominated 2020 must surely change everything for how we conceive of ecological politics going forward. While narratives of scarcity, hoarding and fear have pervaded the pandemic, this has coexisted with the blossoming of kindness, care and mutuality between strangers described by OOTW in their reflections on disaster communism. In the UK, where I write from, a groundswell of localised “mutual aid” groups emerged very quickly, seeking to provide practical support through practices ranging from delivering groceries and medicines for those in quarantine through to supporting renters resisting illegal evictions. This, at face value, looks like the generosity and empathy in the face of disaster described by OOTW. Yet is this a world-changing solidarity that threatens to abolish the present state of things?

Many of those organising within the UK's Covid-19 mutual aid groups have fought hard against tendencies towards a paternalistic charitable outlook: a desire to “help the needy” rather than to work across difference, against domination, in pursuit of mutual liberation. Given that this organising is, encouragingly, absolutely not the exclusive terrain of those with pre-existing “activist” subjectivities, this should come as no surprise. All of us, including those on the radical left, are subject to capital's “philanthropic” logic, which keeps people divided between have and have not, giver and receiver, powerful and powerless. Experiences of organising around the pandemic, then, bring to light an important distinction between charity and solidarity, raising a series of thorny questions. How can charitable ideas and practices be challenged in ways that refuse an ultra-leftist political purism? How can disaster

communities foster a sense of reciprocity that does not collapse into a punitive Blairite ethics of “rights and responsibilities”? How might the group-differentiated impact of “disasters” be acknowledged in ways that simultaneously build hope for collective liberation? Perhaps these are some of the questions that could be taken forward in attempts to sharpen and develop the concept of disaster communism further.

In raising these questions, my intention is not simply to pass the buck back to the OOTW Collective’s existing membership. Part of the joy of *Hope Against Hope* is its open and creative approach to collective authorship. The text is written with the invitation to its readers to keep writing, struggling, hoping alongside its authors. In their words: “As disaster engulfs spaces and times around us, let us put to you a simple question: what will it take to get out of the woods, together?” (p.16).

The associations, provocations and conceptual toolbox to be found within the book offer fresh ideas at a time in which dominant articulations of environmentalism, including those coming from the left, often seem well and truly stuck. Against this stuck-ness, OOTW refuse to be seduced by the easy answers promised by environmentalism’s traditional articles of faith: Nature, technology, market, state, Nation. *Hope Against Hope* is, moreover, a book that has no time for faith in a future salvation or collapse, instead positioning the disastrous present as the site of struggle in which the futures and the histories we desire can be made. It is a book that “without ... disavowing despair” (p.3), can help us learn to hope.

## References

- Bloch E (1995) *The Principle of Hope, Volume 1* (trans N Plaice, S Plaice and P Knight). Cambridge: MIT Press
- Gilmore R W (2007) *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press

- Haraway D (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.  
Durham: Duke University Press
- Kingsnorth P (2017) The lie of the land: Does environmentalism have a future in the  
age of Trump? *The Guardian* 18 March  
[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/18/the-new-lie-of-the-land-  
what-future-for-environmentalism-in-the-age-of-trump](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/18/the-new-lie-of-the-land-what-future-for-environmentalism-in-the-age-of-trump) (last accessed 11  
September 2020)
- Klein N (2014) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York:  
Simon & Schuster
- Mbembe A (2003) Necropolitics (trans L Meintjes). *Public Culture* 15(1):11-40
- Roy A (1999) *The Cost of Living*. Toronto: Vintage
- Solnit R (2010) *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise  
in Disaster*. New York: Penguin
- Walia H (2013) *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Oakland: AK Press

*James Angel*  
*Department of Geography*  
*King's College London*  
*james.angel@kcl.ac.uk*

*September 2020*