

More Worlds Collective, *Fear of a Dead White Planet*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-4780-3210-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2884-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-6105-2 (ebook)¹

How does one study when the planet is on fire? This is the foundational question that animates the More Worlds Collective (MWC), a coalition of geographers, STS scholars, and anthropologists, Joseph Masco, Tim Choy, Jake Kosek, and M. Murphy. Their inquiry is not a polite rhetorical exercise. It is a stubborn and material call to action. Over the course of a sharp and succinct book, small enough to fit in a coat pocket, MWC presents their case. If academics wish to undertake meaningful research on a “planet on fire”, they must cut ties to the old research methods. But they urge us not to act in haste—the researcher must first do the harder work. They must critically reflect on their own patterns of collaboration, question the “objects” at the heart of their inquiries, and—most unsettlingly—sit with the possibility that the very academic institution housing their work may be foreclosing a better future. Or, worse still, that the university is holding the very same match as those who set the planet alight.

MWC situates their claim at the intersection of two dominant ideological formations: the “planetary technofix” imaginary for environmental emergency (i.e. geoengineering, carbon capture, climate technologies) and the university’s domestication of charismatic “sustainability” discourse into politically inert branding. Rather than celebrating these planetary imaginaries, MWC shines light on their epistemic power, excavates their concealed violences, and traces their entanglements with green capitalism and solutionist logic.² MWC encourages researchers to resist trusting the “objects” of research (i.e. the planet, the environment). The academic must focus more squarely on the conditions that built these (not so) “innocent” conceptual objects from the ground up. In this four-part book (plus an “Invitation” and “Conclusion and Future

¹ Open access version available at <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478061052>

² Solutionism refers to the belief that complex social, political, or ecological problems can be resolved primarily through technical or managerial interventions, often without addressing the deeper structural, historical, or relational causes of those problems (see e.g. Morozov 2013). It critiques the tendency to frame systemic issues as fixable through innovation or optimization rather than transformation.

Assessment”), the authors assert their case for situated, relational, and reflexive research methods that maneuver around the allure of contemporary environmental discourse. They admit this is not an easy task. MWC does not impose some laundry-list of qualitative or quantitative steps to follow, scale, and repeat. Instead, the authors invite academic readers to be with their discomfort, challenging their embedded positions and assumptions that undergird their knowledge production. Not only is this a fresh kind of analysis. It is timelier than ever. Seven in ten Americans believe that higher education is “heading in the wrong direction”. Societal trust in university affiliated knowledge is at an all-time low (Hashemzadeh 2025). We must chart a corrective course before the ship is burned to the ground.

In Part 1, *Fear of a Dead White Planet* begins with a truth that contaminates the integrity of today’s academic landscape. Contemporary universities rely on the same “mega-concepts” to map-out and “solve” environmental problems that the largest “green” oligarchs (coincidentally also the world’s richest men, i.e. Musk, Bezos, Gates) mobilize to carry forth their grand visions to consolidate resources and authority on their own terms (what MWC calls governance at “the ultimate scale” [p.8]). But *Fear of a Dead White Planet* is not another critique of green capitalism or the perverse incentives of climate finance. That work has been exhausted in literatures of climate geoengineering and techno-utopia (e.g. Hamilton 2013; Mann and Wainwright 2020), as well as rebukes of climate universalism that flatten differences between geographically unique political economies (e.g. Castree 2014; Liverman 2009). Rather, MWC’s distinctive contribution lies in not only locating these epistemic dangers within the university itself, but also by demonstrating *why* methodological correction is needed to avoid falling into its alluring traps.

Fear of a Dead White Planet illustrates the impressive scale that universities mobilize essentialist and charismatic notions of land and space (what they call the “environment”). These are the identical charismatic concepts (or Charismatic Mega Concepts, CMC) that oligarchs, fossil-fuel producers, and elites rely on to advance their own (often profitable) solutionist aims to the climate crisis they created. “Cambridge’s degree in Anthropocene studies ... Princeton’s new neighborhood that conjoins environment and engineering, Columbia’s new Climate School, or Chicago’s climate system engineering initiative” (p.74-75) mobilize similar grandiose terms that

treat the environment as a system of problematized parts that can be separated and solved with technocratic logics. Yale Planetary Solutions, too,³ is energized by accelerating carbon credits, green capital investing, and “innovative solutions” to scale across the world.^{4,5} In this shadow, the authors invite readers to confront how the most “knowledgeable” institutions are complicit in the same problems that their own solutionist logics seek to “solve”.

Indeed, “if the problem is the size of the planet, who has the capacity to manage it?” (p.26). MWC shows how this kind “planetary consciousness” commonplace in today’s university system—the assumption that we all share an identical ontological experience of the world—is not neutral but saturated by centuries of “resource extraction, nuclear nationalism, racial capitalism, and the ambitions of entities ... that seek to work on [the] ultimate scale” (p.8). By mobilizing this charismatic framing, scholars produce research in an unchallenged power matrix, which inevitably repeats the same imbalances that researchers seek to “solve”. MWC makes this point early, helping readers arrive at the foundational question the book begins with—again, not rhetorical, but methodological in nature—*how does one study when the planet is on fire?*

In the book’s centerfold (Part 2, “Who’s Afraid of a Dead White Planet?”, and Part 3, “Middles”), MWC lays the groundwork for their answer. As Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (2000: 88) argued, “people, by naming the world, transform it”. Indeed, the old names made land legible for commodification and the environment ripe for technocratic management (Scott 1998); as we’ve shown, ambiguous research objects like “environment” or “planetary” concepts mislead

³ Yale Planetary Solutions is a group within the Yale School of the Environment, funded by Southwest Airlines, Fedex, and anonymous donors (see Yale News 2021; Yale University 2021; Ye and Maney 2022).

⁴ “We are launching [the Planetary Solutions Impact Accelerator] to transform Yale’s world-class research into applied innovations with measurable planetary benefit ... By supporting bold ideas, we aim to scale solutions from campus to New Haven and out into the world”—Julie Zimmerman, Vice Provost for Planetary Solutions (quoted in Yale University 2025).

⁵ On the other side of the US in Silicon Valley, California, is Stanford University. In 2022, it was estimated that about 84 billionaires lived in Silicon Valley, or 10% of the US total (Segal 2025), while containing <1% of the US population. In the same year, Stanford University opened the doors of its new Doerr School of Sustainability. This is no coincidence. The program was brought alive by tech venture capital (Rogers 2022) and has promised similar solutions-thinking without any “faculty from the humanities or social sciences”.

us. The authors trace how these “objects”—the environment, the planet, M. Murphy’s (2017) chemicals, Jake Kosek’s (2010) honeybees—are constantly unmade and remade through societal conditions. They are never neutral, even when researchers are blind to this fact. The authors demonstrate how this sense of false neutrality is a careful construct of whiteness, fear of the unknown “other”, racial capitalism and colonization, resource extraction, commodification, and technocratic authority—all so pervasive that they are nearly invisible. The “objects” of research can no longer be trusted.

As such, MWC makes the case that the academic has an obligation to contest and renegotiate an “object’s” conditionality. But what does this look like, in practice? One must start from the ground up—at the root of the concept. The authors bring us face-to-face with the building blocks of human life normally rendered indivisible by social conditioning—the land we inhabit, the air we breathe, the bodies that animate us, the thoughts we produce—through MWC’s own distinctive line of questioning: *What is a Middle? What is Land? What is a Lung? What is a Virus? What is Thinking?* This is not a philosophical exercise. It is an introspective prerequisite that must be worked through before turning to methodological design. Throughout these means of questioning, the authors strike a profoundly impactful line between surrealism, subjectivism, and historical material analysis to produce a powerful line of intellectual inquiry that justifies why new methods are needed.

This style of inquiry can sometimes make *Fear of a Dead White Planet* a meandering read. It does not follow the linear flow of empirical hypothesis-driven inquiry. It is abstract. But that is what makes it so transformative. The concepts introduced here demand time and care. They breathe. They demand the reader to reflect on their role, position, and relationship with knowledge produced in the academy. We see this most acutely in Part 4 (“Terraformatics”), where the authors chart a path for a new kind of methodological “collective action” by weaving together sharp humor with material grief. It all comes together in Section 4.2 (“Impossible Methods for Terraformatics Research Studies”), where 100+ pages of rich critique are followed by practical steps for shifting methodological practice. The book’s final section is a welcome shift in tempo, when MWC proposes their situated research methods that center “conditions” and relationships:

What have you been doing? With whom, with what? You can build on the work you, and your communities, have done and the lives you have lived for practices, models, and support. What things and words have mattered to you in that life you have been living? Are you already a community organizer? A Land defender? Part of a mutual aid collective? In what ways have you already been engaging with questions about conditions for living, conditions for change, and changing conditions? Shield yourself from the colonial fantasies of the university, prioritize recovery strategies when exposed to toxicities, and seek friends, allies, and accomplices as a way of surviving and working to shift the conditions. (p.133)

To break free from the bondage of the modern university system, the researcher must inspect not just the foundational questions of one's research, but how such research is undertaken, with whom, and in what ways. Thinking is a deeply social matter. It is not an individualist or monastic project. Research must be rooted in cultivating long-term relationships with other scholars both within and outside the constraints that the university imposes with its violent epistemic assumptions about the environment, the planet, and beyond. Researchers must "welcome the contradictions" that arise in collaborative research (p.128) instead of feigning certainty about objective knowledge. As academics, we must self-reflect on the "desires" that animate our research (inspired by the works Audre Lorde and Eve Tuck, among others), and pay close attention to the underlying "desire machines" (p.134) that propel us to write the next paper, fundraise for the lab, or turn towards (or away) from collaborating with others.

Fear of a Dead White Planet is a necessary moment of introspection for academics and researchers critical of green capitalism and its impossible promises. It is not just a foundational critique for those in the academy preoccupied with "fixing" climate change, "protecting" the environment, or creating "solutions" for environmental problems. It is a manual about how researchers can navigate through, and beyond, the pessimism/optimism binary of research, transforming the human aspects of desire, fear, and collectivity behind the researcher. *Fear of a Dead White Planet* is not feel-good literature. It is not the next quick fix for the climate crisis or

a breathtaking policy recommendation. Rather, it makes a strong case for crafting a new research paradigm, one that can withstand a turbulent future of techno-optimism. In doing so, it transforms research into a resilient and collective project that can nourish the humanity of the researcher while addressing the slow and steady transformation of the living world into the fold of technocratic rule yet again.

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