Commonplace •

5 Things with Quincy Childs, climate justice researcher at the University of Oxford

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In planning these Five Things, I considered the ways in which my time with the Knowledge Futures Group pervades my current research around climate justice. The [themes central to the *Commonplace*](#) — communities, commons, and justice — are always circulating around my mind as they inform my drive for systemic change and climate repair. These five vignettes therefore touch upon various manifestations of the above.

1. The Man Who Sold the Moon

In a recent exchange with a notable futurist, I was reminded of a 1949 science fiction novel, [The Man Who Sold the Moon](#). This story is about Delos D. Harriman, a fictional “robber baron,” who was determined to colonize the Moon. The Moon has inspired the

intersection of literature and science since time immemorial. Take, for example, Johannes CH Kepler's *Somnium* (1608), a fictitious journey to the Moon that presents an imaginative description of how the Earth might look when viewed from its craters. Since then, lunar fascination has waxed and waned, slowly replaced by aspirations for further frontiers.

Simon Conway Morris (2003) spells out precisely how uniquely lucky we are to be inhabitants of this miraculous planet, that we so often take for granted, and how much we owe to the Moon.¹ He writes that our proximity to the lunar body is not only highly improbable but has made weather more benign and the evolution of higher lifeforms more likely. The evolution in our perspective to appreciate our place within this relationship, however, is not a virtue guaranteed to our species. This has been most recently demonstrated by the rocket launches that ascend in parallel with meteoric rises in global inequalities and planetary temperatures.

The claims by Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin, and Space X to make the cosmos more accessible are shockingly tone deaf when billions of people on this planet lack access to clean air and drinking water. What's more, this "rocketeering" has been paid for by public funds whilst loopholes allow billionaires to skirt taxes. There is an element of reckless irony to it all when, as this Sierra Club piece writes, our planet is already a spaceship, and an irreplaceable one at that.²

Our planet's temperatures are also soaring: the hottest temperature ever recorded was in synchrony with Branson's launch in New Mexico when, that same week, Death Valley reached 130 degrees Fahrenheit. This giant leap in temperature just days after Branson's launch seemed a timely nudge or portent in response to Virgin Galactic's tagline: *If we can do this, imagine what else we can do?* This slogan seems to make a sardonic quip at Neil Armstrong's "leap for mankind" when only 1 out of 10 people on this planet fly in a given year. As the dawn of commercial space travel for the world's elite is coeval with a dawning of our reckoning with the climate crisis, we must ask ourselves: who do these rocket launches speak for when they seek to make space accessible?

The window of opportunity to reverse climate change gets narrower with each launch. Spewing carbon for the sake of billionaire one-upmanship is not only asinine (saying nothing of Bezos's decision to dress as a space-cowboy), but is an act of malice towards the "Majority World," as if to trivialize the asymmetries of climate injustice at an astronomic scale. To take up Virgin Galactic's prompt, I will *imagine what else we*

can do in unassailably pragmatic terms: what about restoring our planet's capacity for equilibrium?

The Amazon rainforest, Bezo's namesake, recently crossed a dire threshold officially emitting more carbon than it sinks. Thanks to deregulations of the environmental protection sector in Brazil, the most biodiverse ecosystem formerly known as "the lungs of the earth" is now spiraling out of control like the smoke of its flames. As Einstein would say, stupidity is when one repeats experiments and expects different results; in this case, we continue to pollute and discount the future, hoping for the best.

In William Gass's novel *Middle C* the doomsday-inclined protagonist keeps rewriting a version of the same sentence over and over: "The fear that the human race might not survive has been replaced by the fear that it will endure."³ We are certainly at a crossroads for rewriting the future with a bifurcated task: to call out those who view themselves, quite literally, above the humble ground from where stand and yet to scrutinize our capacity to redress our wrongs.

2. Under a White Sky

In Elizabeth Kolbert's new book [*Under a White Sky*](#), she writes about several proposed interventions for climate mitigation that are grouped under the umbrella term *geoengineering*.⁴ The book's title is in reference to solar radiation management (SRM), where light-reflective particles are diffused to cool the atmosphere. The most visible risk is that our blue skies would turn white. Multiple questions arise, both technical and ethical, such as whether humans have the right to dramatically alter the planet. The stance of many scientists in this field is that the occasion to intervene underscores the fact that *we already have*. To them, tinkering-to-repair is more ethical than allowing nature, now so dramatically altered, to run its course into the ravages of time.

Kolbert writes that we are trapped by our hubris as a species to think we can decimate entire ecosystems without incurring any consequences. Equally, once we have acknowledged this fallacy, we cling to a belief in our capacity to find a silver bullet that reverses all damage. The hope that drives this searching is noble: if your ship is sinking, you either prepare a lifeboat to weather the storm or, less likely, fatefully dive into the churning, nacreous tides. Of course most people would choose the former. The problem at the scale of SRM, however, is that we cannot "engineer" things we do not completely understand. That is to say, we cannot determine with certainty what will happen to ourselves or even the proverbial waters once we hurl ourselves into that churning oblivion.

To be sure, neither scenario is without tragedies—the difference is a question of their magnitude. Foregoing a lifeboat is patently absurd to the human condition as it abandons any sense of hope. Any climate mitigation will require a portfolio of our greatest efforts, orchestrated by technical innovation, political might, and the support of entire publics. In the sinking ship scenario, this translates to everyone from the captains to the crew attempting different constructions in tandem, so to ensure that everyone has a chance to survive. What we need for climate mitigation is not a silver bullet, but more like a fleet of lifeboats, designed according to the biophysical limits of the crisis and tethered to an insurmountable hope in our shared future.

3. Scrolling as Infinite Regress

Under a White Sky reminded me of another abyss that has already gathered above our heads: the collective fog of digital screens. Neuroscientists have found that screentime can lead to “digital dementia” from accruing gray matter that atrophies in the right side of the brain. This can be experienced through potentially irreversible symptoms of chronic insomnia, short-term memory lapse, inattention, and vision strain. There is a kind of solipsism at work in the distancing effect that screentime imparts, not only between ourselves and the world that envelops us, but between the folds of our brain where such gray matter encroaches.

This can be an alienating process, as indeed the very etymology of solipsism comes from Latin *solus*, “alone,” and *ipse*, “self.” Returning to the theme of space travel, *solipsism syndrome* has been identified as a potential challenge for astronauts on long-term missions. The infinite scroll of the screen is a similarly isolating process. At the cost of our agency, scrolling through media mollifies our ‘cognitive security’ and, overtime, reveals intimate data about ourselves; in some sense, what is collected is the

algorithmic fingerprint of our intuition. In Foucauldian terms, this has often been cited as the digital panopticon where we, the observed *spectators*, are recorded surreptitiously.⁵ The process of endless scroll as infinite regress therefore enacts a sort of paradox, where we relay our innermost selves through a means unbeknownst to us.

Cameroonian philosopher [Achille Mbembe](#) critiques this “subjection to the digital” when he writes how *community*—as that which we have *in-common*—is based on “the possibility of sharing unconditionally, each time drawing from it something... uncountable, incalculable, priceless.”⁶ On the contrary, our data is analyzed, sold, and traded behind white screens, a process that undermines the very cohesion of our communities. As Mbembe implores: “to survive, we must return to all living things – including the biosphere.” He imagines a future “for all inhabitants of Earth, without distinction as to species, race... or other differentiating markers. In other words, a day after will come but only with a giant rupture, the result of radical imagination.”

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Achille Mbembe: Future Knowledges and the Dilemmas of Decolonization

If ruptures are openings, if they are *windows* to another means, then how can we make ruptures in the windows of our screens?

4. On Breathing

“[A]t the rate that life on Earth is going, and given what remains of the wealth of the planet, how far away are we really from the time when there will be more carbon dioxide than oxygen to breathe?” — Achille Mbembe

Source: Tomás Saraceno for Aerocene 21-28 January 2020, Salinas Grandes, Jujuy, Argentina Human Solar Free Flight as part of Connect, BTS, curated by DaeHyung Lee. Courtesy the artist and Aerocene Foundation. Photography by Studio Tomás Saraceno, 2020. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 by Aerocene Foundation.

Renaissance scholar Leon Battista Alberti saw the picture as a window frame that allows air to circulate through. As one might expect, metaphors of ventilation, respiration, and salubrious passage abound. In similar ways, the frames we interpolate digitally create spaces that increasingly feel like vertiginous echo chambers designed to fracture and silo dialogue within pixellated *mise-en-abymes*. French philosopher Michel Serres speaks to this when he writes:^{[7](#)}

Have we become monsters? Our last relation to the world, air, water, land and fire, goes through the imagination, dreams and speech. The universe is a dream, a discourse... Here we are, interiorized, inside *politope* cities and *gnoseotope* schools and in the intimacy of the private self that thinks and the small group that speaks.

What can we breathe into these 'spaces' of interiority? If a digital screen can be filled with windows, then what is its means of ventilation? How do we figure our breath upon, within, and perhaps most importantly, *in spite of* a digital screen?

To attempt these questions, consider what Timothy Morton calls “ambient poetics,” those dialects that dissolve the dualisms of Western metaphysics—e.g. human vs. nature—by revealing the stuff that drifts between them.⁸ The act of breathing is a paramount example of ambient poetics as it is contingent on oxygen, itself a life-supporting element, that traverses global and local scales. Inhaling and exhaling is a transcorporeal act of *exchange*, a sharing of space that is neither here nor there, a vital condition of *being embedded* in a world from which we cannot be extracted because the atmosphere is the “surrounding medium that sustains our being.”

In my research, I look for ways to make the transcorporeality of climate change tangible to others. In particular, I find fascinating the assumptions people have about scales between air pollution, atmospheric levels of greenhouse gas, and the looming hyper object of our climate . [This interactive map](#) is one way of tracing the boundary-defying vectors of wildfire smoke across the US; experimental art is another . The [Aeroscene Community](#) that Tomas Saracéno formed at MIT experiments with traveling in fuel-free hot air balloons to render ‘the elemental’ more communicable. Using only sun and air, the team has set six world records for the most sustainable human flights in the history of aviation.

Source: Global Systems Laboratory, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Other ways our atmospheric plight can be communicated is through the writings of Mbembe and Italian philosopher Franco "Bifo" Berardi who stage breath as an act of radical resistance.⁹ Mbembe observes how breath is a universal right denied to so many through different scales of injustice: the racial disparities of the pandemic, the omnipresent threat of police brutality, the 'slow violence' of atmospheric pollution unto frontline communities, and the overload of greenhouse gases that leaves "no doubt that the skies are closing in."

Composed in the wake of the pandemic last year, his essay "[The Universal Right to Breathe](#)" unravels the vectors of our shared lives. The lockdowns should be channeled as catabolic processes of societal breakdown, but in reality, they risk further ossification if we do not act upon the windows presented by their rupture. Likening confinement to another phase in the trend of isolating digitization, he identifies the corporeality of our existence as that which *fuses* the fabric of our collective strengths:

They say that through the digital... the physical and mortal body, will be freed of its weight and inertia. At the end of this transfiguration, it will eventually be able to move through the looking glass, cut away from biological corruption and restituted to a synthetic universe of flux. But this is an illusion, for just as there is no humanity without bodies, likewise, humanity will never know freedom alone, outside of society and community, and never can freedom come at the expense of the biosphere.

Bifo similarly identifies the fervor of our social struggles in the arrhythmia of our respiration. Chaos is the neocolonial order that "paralyzes the social body and stifles breathing into suffocation."¹⁰ He cites this within the overall chaos of financial capitalism that has so drastically damaged the planet and altogether contributes to a "contemporary condition of breathlessness." He foregrounds his text with Eric Garner's final words—I can't breathe—to capture the injustices of our time and argues that poetry's leaky excess that "goes beyond the limits of language" can contaminate, diffuse, and reorientate the field of neocolonial signification. In other words, poetry holds the means of extracting possible harmony from the present chaos through "chaosmosis," a breathing *with* the chaos so that a new harmony can emerge, "a new syntony."

Like Mbembé and Serres, Bifo cites "the acceleration of cyberspace" as that which creates a dissonance within the rhythm of mental time to the point where it's impossible to delineate what is most relevant to our surrounding environment. This

harkens back to the cognitive fog, the solipsistic scrolling, the threat of the sky bleaching. These are vignettes that Bifo would subsume under the word “chaos.” The philosophers frame antidotes in similar terms. For Bifo, the emancipatory tool is a poetic resistance that defies signification; for Membe, it is a rupture that defies distinctions and breeds interrelations; and for Serres, it is a return *to relate* to the world by eschewing the abstract signs and codes that fracture our shared selves. To relate to the world is “to cease our wandering outside all places.”¹¹

5. Death Spirals

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Source: Circular Mill by Youtube user Redbug

Ceasing our wandering outside all places is to return to the ground. For this vignette, we enact a lithic view from the critters of the earth. Consider this computer simulation of an ant mill and watch until you can spot the lead ant that, entirely randomly, seems to step into a gap and reverse course. So begins the “death spiral,” an evolutionary trap of army ants that would seem to evoke Stephen Hawking’s and Sir Roger Penrose’s finding of disasters that becomes inevitable. The scientists devised a simple formula according to the General Theory of Relativity that explains the entropy of a black hole, where an infinitely compressed energy arises in an infinitely curved spacetime. Similar to the trapped surface that induces a collapsed point of no return, these ants can be led astray into a mill measuring over a thousand feet in circumference, until they collapse into their own mass from exhaustion.

This example shows the flip-side to what researchers first called *swarm intelligence* in 1988.¹² Deborah M. Gordon, a biologist at Stanford University, maintains that while ants aren’t smart, ant colonies are.¹³ However, according to W.M. Wheeler, the ant mill seems to present an “astonishing exhibition of the limitations of instinct,” where evolution fails to select against maladaptive behavior.¹⁴ It is worth noting why death spirals only occur to army ants for a few isolated reasons: firstly, the species is a

textbook case of the blind leading the blind, as they depend on smells to navigate. Furthermore, they do not make permanent nests but are always on the move. They are ceaselessly wandering outside all places. The perils of the army ant underscore that swarm intelligence is achievable when the collective is not solipsistically self-organizing, but instead sees itself in relation to their surrounding environment, *in situ* of the surrounding world.

Serres employs the metaphor of internal parasites to illustrate the folding of dualisms that successfully stage the dangers of viewing oneself beyond one's environment:

"L'extérieur, pour lui, est l'intérieur d'un autre."¹⁵ With latent references to parasitic economies notwithstanding, the organizational directive within this metaphor is to situate beside, in relation to each other, *para sitos*. Feminist philosopher Donna Haraway similarly celebrates the ways in which critters interpenetrate one another, thereby establishing sympoietic arrangements otherwise known as "cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages."¹⁶ Sympoiesis means "making-with," it is an act of being *in-common*, for nothing makes itself; as the ant mill shows, autopoiesis is inevitably destined for disaster. Or as King Lear would say, nothing comes from nothing.

Sympoiesis, as a "word for worlding," describes systems that are "complex, dynamic, responsive, situated." Moreover, Haraway's concept alludes to the view of American biologist Lynn Margulis that evolution is the ongoing intimacy with strangers. Haraway and Margulis identify the limitations of sciences that are rooted in viewing life as a series of competitive units since they cannot account for key biological domains such as embryology, symbiosis, and the "vast worldings of microbes." Haraway uses the example of Latvian mathematician Daina Taimiņa to "tactilely explore the properties" of hyperbolic space through models in crochet. She writes how artists Christine and Margaret Wertheim were inspired by this medium to incite collective action to save the coral reefs. They brought together people, mostly women, in twenty-seven countries to crochet reefs in wool, cotton, plastic bags, and other detritus.

The reefs are an example of *sympoiesis*: a symbiotic relationship between the algae, the polyps, and other fish. As in any trophic system, their degradation is marked by a cascade of failures to the food-chain: as the oceans acidify from absorbing too much CO₂, the algae cannot tolerate the drop in pH and the polyps begin to fail. The panoply of colors fade to ghost white and bleaching ensues. With the loss of algae and polyps, the fish are unable to graze and are forced to migrate from their refugia at risk of predation, sending fish stocks further into collapse. In sum, as a result of our

emissions, the coral reefs can no longer flower to provide habitat for the quarter of ocean life that depends on them for nurseries and sustenance.

In contrast to the ant mill, what we see in this crochet collective is a kind of swarming *in-common* to respond to the world, a sympoiesis that makes kin with others for the salvation of another. The coral reefs are a cipher of what is to come should we not act now, a harbinger of a future that leaves others behind. This all-consuming bleaching of the sky, of the ocean, and of the screens beseech a pause in the rocket streams. When the world's richest few speak of achieving their childhood dreams, we ought to pause and recognize that pursuing such a star-crossed fantasy is itself a luxury for the reckless few.

Post Script: Eternal Flame

During the editing of these 5 Things, I came across another astounding story unfolding in what was ancient Olympia, Greece. This week, the site of the ancient Olympic Games in the western Peloponnese had to be evacuated on Wednesday as wildfires raged across the country. As such disasters become more ubiquitous across the globe, they stage a new notion of continuity that the Olympic flame was designed to personify. The idea for the flame stemmed from a tradition in ancient Greece, where a sacred fire burned within the altars of Hestia, goddess of the hearth.^{[17](#)} Hestia's official sanctuary was the *prytaneum*, or the seat of governance, for each municipality in ancient Greece.^{[18](#)} When a new colony was established, a flame from a public hearth would be transferred to the new settlement. Thus began the tradition of relaying the flame.

Putting out a sacred flame required rituals of completion, purification, and renewal. This underscored the divine connotations of the element as it was believed to have been stolen from Zeus by Prometheus.^{[19](#)} To honor his theft, sacred fires were lit ceremoniously in temples across Ancient Greece, most notably every four years during the Olympic Games at the temples of Zeus and Hera. The Olympic flame continues to be lit in Mt Olympus and travels in a relay to the opening ceremony of the Games where it burns until the closing ceremony. The irony of this tradition, as this week shows, there is no closing ceremony for the wildfires of Mt Olympus.

An aircraft drops water on a wildfire burning in Olympia, the site of the ancient Olympic Games held every four years from 776 B.C. for more than a millennium.

Source: Giannis Spyrounis / ilialive.gr

As changes in climate lead to drier conditions, longer droughts, and extended fire seasons, the global risk of wildfires steadily climbs. Departing from the ancient associations of flames as a sanctuary, the only “sanctuary” that arises in the public imaginary is a place far removed from the chance of flames. Should we not mitigate this infernal future, we could see a world that increasingly resembles *yanartaş*, a geographical phenomenon in Olympos Valley in Turkey. These *flaming stones* are caused by vents in the rocks and are patched along the hillside above the Temple of Hephaestus, known as blacksmith to the gods. These fires were first recorded as the fire-breathing Chimera in Homer’s *Illiad* and later elucidated by Pliny the Elder as an area of permanent fire that “...indeed burned with a flame that does not die by day or night.” ²⁰ The connotations of an inextinguishable fire extend beyond wildfires to the equally contemporary phenomenon of data centers. In his article, “The Sacred Fire of a Data Center,” Donal Lally compares these sites of computation to the Temple of Vesta, articulating their continual sources of exhausted heat as the fire of our modern times. ²¹ Whereas sacred flames once marked temples, the exhaustive hearths of our data centers no longer ignite our reverence but, more insidiously this time, our reliance.

Footnotes

1. [↵](#)
2. <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/billionaires-do-not-need-go-space> [↵](#)
3. Gass W (2013) *Middle C*. New York: Knopf. [↵](#)
4. Kolbert E (2021) *Under a White Sky*. New York: Penguin Random House. [↵](#)
5. Foucault M (1977 [1975]) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by A Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin. [↵](#)
6. Mbembe A (2021) “The Universal Right to Breathe,” *Critical Inquiry* 47(S2), Chicago: University of Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711437> [↵](#)
7. Serres M (1995) *The Natural Contract*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 145-146. [↵](#)
8. Morton T (2007) *Ecology Without Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [↵](#)
9. Berardi, F. 2019. *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. [↵](#)
10. Berardi F B (2019) *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e). [↵](#)
11. Serres M (1995) *The Natural Contract*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 17. [↵](#)
12. Beni G (2004) “From Swarm Intelligence to Swarm Robotics,” *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* (3342): 1-9. [↵](#)
13. To hear more about Deborah Gordon’s research about ant colonies, see her *Ted Talk*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL00a3sfnYM> [↵](#)
14. Wheeler W (1910) *Ants, their structure, development, and behavior*. New York: Columbia University Press. [↵](#)
15. Serres M (2013) *The Parasite*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[↵](#)

16. Haraway D (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. [↵](#)

17.

Wildfang, R. 2006. *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, London: Taylor & Francis.

Indeed, the etymology of Hestia's name meaning "hearth, fireplace, or altar" elevates the humble act of tending to a flame as the prototypical feature of a temple.

Perhaps the most famous of these hearths was the Temple of Vesta on the Roman Forum, where the Sacred Flame was extinguished in 394 BCE.

[↵](#)

18. This was where the flame was kept ablaze and where the chieftain (or *prytanis*) made his residence. [↵](#)

19. (Intriguingly, theft of fire for the benefit of humankind is a theme resonant with many world mythologies. Frazer, J. 2019. *Myths of the Origin of Fire*, London: Taylor & Francis. [↵](#)

20. Pliny the Elder. 1991. *Natural History*, London: Penguin Books. [↵](#)

21. Lally, D. 2019. "The Sacred Fire of a Data Center," *Strelka Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/the-sacred-fire-of-a-data-center>. Accessed: 7 December 2020. [↵](#)