

ANIMATE PLANET



Making Visceral Sense of Living
in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World

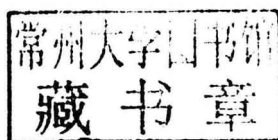
KATH WESTON

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Making Visceral Sense of Living in a
High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World

KATH WESTON

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ANIMA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Generosity and Nothing But

Appreciation and debt: these are the topics of many an acknowledgment. Appreciation, to be sure. Without it, misrecognition ensues, things break apart, and what then is the point? But rather than speak of debts incurred in the making of a book that works hard to avoid reducing a world of cottonwood saplings, RFID tags, bedtime stories, computer modeling, pilgrimages, moose hunts, nuclear ruins, and ever-shifting entanglements to the terms of finance, I dedicate a few pages here to interdependencies. Interdependencies rely on give-and-take, on call-and-respond-and-call-again. Listen carefully, and even if you never consult a footnote, you can hear legacies of conversations past and bids for reciprocity whistle through the passages. Interdependencies thrive on generosity. Without them, nothing happens. Certainly not the writing of a book.

Above all, I am grateful to Geeta Patel, my once and future inspiration, for the many delectable debates, references, meals, and critiques that have underwritten and overwritten this text. With experience I have come to wonder why spouses, especially when they serve as indispensable interlocutors, conventionally come last in acknowledgments, when it seems clearer and clearer that they should come first.

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The concept for the book derived from the invitation to deliver a public lecture series called “The Intimacy of Resources” at the University of Cambridge in 2011–12, while serving as a Wyse Visiting Professor in the Division of Social Anthropology. My thanks to Henrietta Moore, Pervez Mody, and others who were instrumental in bringing me to Cambridge for a year of animated intellectual exchanges through a grant from the Leverhulme Trust. Linda Layne and Cindi Katz showed up with visiting appointments and provided just the sort of inquisitive companionship that spurs a project on.

During my time in the UK, Vick Ryder, Stacy Makishi, Max Carocci, Simona Piantieri, and Yael Navaro provided life support in every sense of the word. Salem Mekuria stopped by en route to Addis to remind me, as she always does, that it’s all well and good to reason, but sometimes you just have to laugh. *Ad astra per aspera*, dear friends, no matter what beckons. I was also hosted in fine style by Janet Carsten and Jonathan Spencer in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, where they graciously engaged with a frightfully preliminary version of chapter 2; by Jeanette Edwards and Penny Harvey on several inspiring occasions at the University of Manchester; and by James Leach and Marysia Zalewski at the University of Aberdeen, who were game enough to stray from the topic of my designated talk to puzzle through some of the topics explored in these pages. I can’t say enough about how this book has benefited from the intellectual curiosity that illuminated a series of conversations that same year with Barbara Bodenhorn, Janet Carsten, Sophie Day, Jeanette Edwards, Robert Foster, Sarah Franklin, Kriti Kapila, Cindi Katz, Nayanika Mathur, Henrietta Moore, David Sneath, and the inimitable Marilyn Strathern.

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tion provided the very definition of serendipitous support by granting me a Guggenheim Fellowship for an unrelated project, which in turn led me to the research in the history of science on embodied empiricism that became integral to chapter 4. Administrative staff at the Bhasin Group in New Delhi with no previous experience with a wandering anthropologist kindly provided admission passes to gain entry to the soft launch of the Grand Venice mall described in chapter 3. An invitation from Andrea Muehlebach and Nitzan Shoshan to contribute to the special issue on “Post-Fordist Affect” they were editing for *Anthropological Quarterly* galvanized the writing of “Political Ecologies of the Precarious,” which reappears here in a substantively modified incarnation as chapter 5. Yasuhito Abe helped me track down the *いってきます* image in chapter 2, while Allison Alexy suggested a way to draw on the literature in medical anthropology for the same chapter. An International Studies Research Grant from the Center for International Studies at my home institution funded my way to an Asian studies conference in Tokyo that never happened, but it also located me in Tokyo during the earthquake/tsunami/nuclear meltdown at the heart of that same chapter. Satsuki Takahashi, my partner Geeta Patel, friends too many to name, and participants in the Reuters live blog set up to cover the disaster offered a lifeline of counsel and support while the earth continued to shudder through the nights, the wind threatened to shift, and it wasn’t at all clear what would happen next. I’ll never forget.

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Yet these named interdependencies are only the most obvious and gratefully received, a paltry gesture toward acknowledgment. Without Raoul Peck and his prose-poem of a documentary, *Profit and Nothing But!*, this section of the book would have a different title. Without a childhood enlivened by a great-aunt like Elsie, the third chapter would have to open with a different vignette. Without the daily companionship of a “reading cat” like Paco, my restless attention might have been diverted elsewhere. Without what passes in the United States for health care and an income sufficient to support a varied diet, I might not have managed to think clearly enough to make certain connections. Without the Charlottesville T’ai Chi Center run by Hiromi Johnson—a teacher’s teacher and maker of worlds—I might not have slowed down enough to make *any* connections. And while we’re at it, here’s to Henry Bessemer, Sir Alistair Pilkington, and their colleagues, who engineered across two centuries a succession of techniques to form molten glass into cylinders, floating ribbons, and large sheets that could be cut to order. By turning windows into an affordable mass-produced accessory, they gifted a view—with its promise of a beyond—to every room in which I’ve ever sat down to write. Without their clever interventions, I might be writing still.

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INTRODUCTION

Animating Intimacies, Reanimating a World

The bedtime story that sings a fitful world to sleep while it hurtles toward ecological destruction goes something like this:

Long ago but not so far away, perhaps in the very place where you lay your head tonight, the creatures of the earth depended on one another, and they knew it. It was the Age of Intimacy, the Era of Connection, an Anthropocene in which Relation had not yet birthed Alienation, its shadowy twin. Even on the hunt—especially on the hunt—the people waited to see which animals might offer themselves, and made sure to handle those gifted bodies properly, with respect. Then came a mighty gale, scouring every field and glade and village in its path, until the winds of Capital had laid the old ways bare.

Some creatures took flight before the relentless advance of the market, finding solace on islands, seeking shelter in hollows, until eventually there was nowhere left to go. Their cousins, too weak to travel or fixed in place by the siren song of More, stayed behind and became something different from what they once were. Many looked down after the gale swept past to find themselves shackled—ankles, wrists, and minds—to desks, furrows, machines. Huddled in shiny new towers, they raised their hands to the sky waiting for the plans or the planes that would seed the clouds with jobs and water the earth with wondrous playthings to light up the nights.

Chained or unchained, chained and unchained, the lords and lieges of Capital had something in common. What the lieges shared with the lords was this: They had come to live a life once, twice, thrice removed from all that sustains it. They piled their glass castles high with plunder or whatever ambitions they could afford, until the castles became so heavy that the turtles upon turtles upon whom the land rested could no longer come up for air.

Everyone knew better than to inquire too deeply into the matter of where the jobs and packages came from, or why during the lean years known as Re-

cession the deliveries stopped. Oh, they asked why, all right, but they stopped expecting answers that would make a difference. When occasionally they visited their plant relatives in the forests that had not yet been turned into charcoal, or their animal relatives near rivers whose sand had not yet fed the cement mixers, they forgot how to signal their approach. They forgot to bring gifts. Eventually they forgot they had forgotten.

Then one day something stirred on the mesas and whispered through the gullies laid bare by Capital. "Do you think there's something missing?" one brave (or was it foolhardy?) soul asked. She gathered comrades to venture out into what was left of the deserts and the tundra and the forests to ask the animals the same questions but found that her human companions could no longer understand the replies of the lizard or the bear. Where water trickled in streambeds below the dams, they thought they heard a lazy gurgling sound but couldn't decide if it was a message. In the sharp crack of ice cliffs tumbling to the sea they thought they heard something ominous, but the ice was on its way before their jerry-rigged prayers could reach it.

So they set about reconstructing, as best they could, what they suspected might once have been. They built temples of commerce to new gods called Sustainability and Resilience (whom they imagined to be old), tried catching rainwater in barrels, rediscovered how their grandmothers had brightened winter days by turning jars crimson with tomatoes. They dusted off ancient technologies to see what they could learn about living "in harmony with Nature." They tasked their scholars with revealing the paths traveled by things, so that every link in that most binding of bonds, the commodity chain, could be laid out for inspection. When the faces of the farmers who had raised their coffee beans appeared on the packages dropped from planes, they felt a bit better, if not quite cured of their malaise. They had a vague sense that something more was required, which they called "Community," although the ways to build it seemed as mystifying as they were varied.

They knew something had to change, so they changed, constantly, too quickly and never enough. They thought they heard something coming, so they looked around and they waited. They prepared for the day when the waiting would end, but they never really prepared for the waiting. Eventually they grew tired, too tired to read a book, much less write one, about things they thought their ancestors had already mastered.

Then suddenly, a sign appeared. It was small at first, a tingling sensation that started in . . . what was that? A foot? One person started to roll over, then another, like sea otters diving back into the dream, but now someone was shouting, shouting, and that tingling sensation was getting harder to ignore . . .

This is modernity's story, not necessarily or always our own, dropped onto pillows in candy-colored foil-wrapped installments, two sustainable steps forward and three steps back, night after night another character lost. Passenger pigeons yesterday, the Kalimantan mango today, pandas tomorrow. Like any dreamwork, this one is a farrago, a mélange of reminders about the proper way to hunt recounted by elders in the pages of *Indian Country Today*, descriptions of New Guinea cargo cults from introductory anthropology textbooks, the uses of a fairy tale in the hands of a theorist like Michel Foucault, *Hindustan Times* exposés of riverbed dredging by the construction industry's "sand mafia," the shifting registers of billboards across three decades and four continents, Christian echoes of exile from any garden worthy of the name, the things my grandfather might have told me if silence had not already claimed him.¹ It is the sort of narrative that can only be pieced together at a time when the travelers who long to range across borders are forced to settle, while people who have just invested two month's wages in their first set of chrome and veneer furniture are chucked out onto the road. As such, and even so, it is a story to take with two lumps of salt.

If Apocalypse had a fifth rider, it would be Foreshadowing. Although the final chapter in modernity's tale has yet to be told, Foreshadowing (as a lead category in an updated morality play) has long insisted that the story's end must coincide with the End of the Planet, or with some respite that only an Age of Miracles can provide. Even though the dreamers think they know what is coming, the pathos these endings evoke keeps them coming back for more, lured not so much by the denouement as by the intermediary spectacle of What Comes Next. When last we tuned in, the new god Resilience had demanded that animacy and intimacy no longer be sacrificed to the old god Development, that humans reimmerge themselves in a world of connections they have yet to recover. Most excellent: a quest! While the earth continues along its trajectory of ecological destruction, this, at least, gives them something to do.

Like the best bedtime stories, modernity's tale directs the sleepy listener's attention to an elsewhere. If worldly intimacies with anyone and anything other than the human belong to some far-ago place before capitalism, before roads, before the advent of an "environment" in need of rescue, why would anyone look for them here? Likewise, if such worldly intimacies become possible only by overcoming a modernity whose distinctive demand is a perpetual progressive overcoming, surely the seekers will only find themselves transported, night after night, to endless vistas of deferral?²

Yet there are other stories that could be told—aren't there always?—about a world in which each ravaged ecosystem, each technological triumph, each bold new synthesis of Nature pulls creatures into new forms of connection, as compelling as any that shadowed futures past.³ New animisms and new intimacies thread their way through these alternate stories, as humans come to terms with both the injury they daily inflict in the name of “advance” and the transformation of their very bodies through biotechnology, industrialized food production, and synthetic chemistry.

Older animisms, in the limited way that European anthropologists such as Edward Tylor (1871) understood them, prompted nineteenth-century debates about the status of cultural beliefs in trees with “souls” and twentieth-century controversies about studies that claimed flowers cry out when plucked on a decorative whim. The new animisms of the twenty-first century (dubbed “animacies” to mark the distinction) are less concerned with whether trees and rocks and cows are sentient or “like us” or even in need of our salvific ministrations (although they occasionally discuss all that as well). Instead they remake the world with the conviction that animacy renders trees and humans and rocks and cows inseparable, not only in the sense that each acts upon the others in ways that may or may not be deliberate but also in the sense that each takes up something lively from the others that contributes to its very form.

Synthetic hormones flow into cows into milk and back into humans, accomplishing life-altering work along the way. Plants need not be genetically modified to ingest more than water from polluted streams and pass it on when creatures turn them into food. Uranium extracted from rocks to power turbines yields hot radioactive particles that lung tissue can incorporate in the event of a nuclear meltdown. In this sense new animisms literally reconceive humans as the products of an “environment” that has itself taken shape through embodied human action, often in pursuit of profit.

These visions of an animated world are as remarkable for the conditions that have produced them as for their distinctive take on how bodies move through industrial and postindustrial landscapes. My purpose here is not to extend the arguments on one side or the other of recent debates on post-humanism, new materialities, or what anthropologists have dubbed “the ontological turn.” As any beaver caught up in the more animated versions of these debates can tell you, the discussions have already grown somewhat long in the tooth. My interest, rather, lies in taking the twenty-first-century fascination with ecologically infused animacies and intimacies as a symptom—perhaps a sign—worthy of investigation in its own right.

New animisms may differ in their details, in their materialist versus epistemological emphases and so on, but collectively they represent an intimate, emergent, mutually constitutive vision of a world infused with life, down to the pavement caressed by our feet as we walk down the road and the exiled wildflowers finding a way back to the sun through crevices in the asphalt. What “life” in this extended sense means has, not surprisingly, become the subject of yet more debate.

Many recent accounts of animacy have focused on decentering the human, while others come closer to the approach I favor here, which studies animating and reanimating as an efflorescent, historically located process. But which parts of this process are conceptual, perceptual, or made in practice? What part, if any, is given or, for that matter, *a given*? Marilyn Strathern (2012) has suggested that we set aside the morally laden assumption that proper knowledge-making occurs prior to doing, to events, to action, long enough to reconsider what *actualization* might entail, particularly when it comes to emplacement of a world as we (or you, or they) know it. Even the conundrum of actualizing the virtual appears different then: “For isn’t the body—or the part we call mind—always on the edge of description?” (Strathern 2012:404). This is not the world fully formed, springing from the hands or head of a god (not even the secular pantheon of science, society, and modernity). This is not the kind of lifeworld that dutifully offers up a holistic cosmology to the anthropologist. Instead, the pressing matter of what evokes embodied worlds on the edge of description, and how, becomes the very thing.

Animate Planet presents five case studies of the animacies and intimacies involved in particular reworlding projects that have emerged as people in rather different places have begun to wake up from the dream of modernity that opens these pages. Of course, they do not always manage it. Sometimes they stir, then drift off again. Occasionally they marshal enough clarity for lucid dreaming, knowing they are sleeping as they sleep, understanding themselves to be guests or prisoners or authors of the dreamwork, depending. What happens along the way, as they try to make sense of incongruities between modernity’s vaunted technological prowess, its ecological harms, its claims on life, and its still glistening yet wavering promises? What sorts of visceral sensory engagements are embedded in these bids to *make sense*?

In the pages that follow I draw on ethnography, STS (science and technology studies), social critique, and political theory to flesh out the cases I take up. There is even a bit of memoir. Instead of quest narratives in which the hero sets out to regain a lost paradise of ecological balance and inter-

species connection, readers will find themselves dropped into scenarios in which the characters have already arrived, living however they are living, in ways that matter for understanding their simultaneous attraction to and disillusionment with technology's siren song. And wherever the characters are living, Chicago or New Delhi or Tokyo, "the environment" is already there, not off in some faraway place that requires saving.

Although cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2012) might not have been thinking about relentlessly rising greenhouse gas emissions when she described how the dissociative life can be lived in intimate relation to (and through) a world, her observation that this can be so is right on the mark for understanding the things that ecologically ail us. People do not leave their bodies behind when they feel detached, or even when mysterious manufacturing processes stand between them and the food in a box. For every moment in which urban dwellers confess to having no idea where their water comes from, there is another moment when they use their bodies to connect viscerally with whatever materials capitalism sells back to them in a bottle. And for every coal seam, aquifer, energy drink, and chicken nugget that late industrialism produces as alienated "resources" destined for consumption, there are people who have to engage—intimately, creatively, sometimes eagerly, sometimes reluctantly—with the land dispossession that new factories entail, the arsenic poisoning as borewells sink ever deeper, the sweet scent of the latest chemical concoctions, the unreliability of electrons dispatched on overstretched grids, the taste of hydroponically grown vegetables, the fish ladders that salmon disdain, the monsoons that fail to come, the monsoons that fall in a day, the advertisements for "green solutions," the too-familiar warnings about where such a world is headed. Technology mediates it all, in ways that the literature on intimacy and animacy has scarcely begun to explore.

"To call something a resource is to make certain claims about it," Elizabeth Emma Ferry and Mandana Limbert (2006:4) remind us: claims that are "imbued with affects of time, such as nostalgia, hope, dread, and spontaneity." The chapters in this book take up classic environmental resource categories—food, energy, climate, water—to search for intimacies embedded in them. There is the techno-intimacy threaded through North American surveillance regimes that tag and track animals destined for stir fries or sandwiches. There is the bio-intimacy spawned by the 2011 nuclear meltdowns in Japan, which ensured that radioactive isotopes would become part of the walking, crawling, and swimming creatures they encountered, as well as the trees and mountains culturally charged with protection.

There are corporeal intimacies that suffuse the highly politicized North American debate over climate change, in which some climate skeptics argue they should be able to sense these changes with their bodies if they are really happening. There are playful intimacies that water spectacles stage in the north Indian desert, where players may not know how the water gets there but capitalism throws up new possibilities for becoming viscerally acquainted with water nonetheless. There are the affective intimacies fostered by synthetic chemistry, whose sensuous qualities tempt even people who want to “heal the planet” to act in ways that seem at odds with their politics.

Why introduce a term like *intimacy*, already applied rather loosely by scholars, into a discussion of animation and political ecology? Why not simply use *closeness*, *proximity*, *entanglement*, *incorporation*, or *suffusion* instead?⁴ For several reasons: First, because although any one of these terms might substitute for *intimacy* in any given instance, *intimacy* is capacious enough to carry all these meanings and more. It is this conjuncture of meanings and the way they play off one another, the slip-and-slide between the spatial contiguity of *proximity* and the permeability of *suffusion* that accounts for some of the appeal of a term like *intimacy* for our times. The particular range of meanings that the concept carries also serves as a reminder that situated modes of intimacy do not automatically lead to empathy or identification. As Veena Das (1995:3) has pointed out with regard to knowledge production in anthropology, the “intimacy and experience” of immersive fieldwork can equally well produce the kind of alterity that transforms acquaintances into exotic Others. Last but not least, the generative imprecision of a term like *intimacy* allows interesting and fruitful things to happen when analysts extend that concept into arenas that have no well-worn historical associations with it.

When most people think about intimacy, ecology is not the first thing that comes to mind. Intimacy dwells in the realms of family, friendship, sexuality, and romance—or so the latest scholarship and the latest cinema releases, from Hollywood to Bollywood, tell us.⁵ Those established kingdoms for intimacy, staked out through world-traveling calls for modernization, constitute, by and large, a human preserve, with occasional exceptions made for pets or other creatures granted companion status by those self-same humans.

In this book I use the cultural category *intimacy* not as some universal free-floating descriptor, not as an ontological claim, but as a heuristic that can be helpful for getting at some of the ways in which people try to make creative sense of tensions between all that technology promises and the