



Hope

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

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Powerful forces have tried to steal the very idea of hope.¹ As an empty political slogan, “hope” has bulldozed over our dreams.² Yet, in the aftermath of disaster—in blasted landscapes that have been transformed by multiple catastrophes—it is still possible to find hope.

Looking to possible futures, rather than to absolute endings, Jacques Derrida draws a helpful distinction between *apocalyptic* and *messianic* thinking.³ Messianic hopes contain “the attraction, invincible élan or affirmation of an unpredictable future-to-come (or even of a past-to-come-again),” according to Derrida.⁴ “Not only must one not renounce the emancipatory desire, it is necessary to insist on it more than ever.”⁵ Yet, Derrida’s sense of expectation is not oriented towards a specific figure, event, political project, or Messiah.⁶ In contrast to Christian traditions, which pin hopes to a particular figure, Jesus Christ, Derrida’s notion of *messianicity* is “without content.” He instead celebrates a universal structure of feeling that works independently of any specific historical moment or cultural location: “the universal, quasi-transcendental structure that I call *messianicity without messianism* is not bound up with any particular moment of (political or general) history or culture.”⁷

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¹ Key ideas from this piece have been adapted from: Eben Kirksey, Nicholas Shapiro, and Maria Brodine, “Hope in Blasted Landscapes,” in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirksey (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 29-63.

² Bregje van Eekelen and colleagues have written a pamphlet full of other words that bulldoze over our dreams. Bregje van Eekelen, Jennifer Gonzalez, Bettina Stotzer, and Anna Tsing, *Shock and Awe: War on Words* (Santa Cruz: New Pacific Press, 2004), 1.

³ Frederic Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 63-64.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 253.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “For a Justice to Come.” accessed 3 November 2014, 24-25; <http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/brussels.html>; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 167.

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While Derrida's dreamscape is empty, I argue for the importance of grounding hopes in communities of actual living animals, plants, and microbes.⁸ Grounding hopes in living figures illuminates the possibilities that are emerging in an era of extinction and widespread ecological change. A figure might be regarded as "a fashioning, a resemblance, a shape; also a chimerical vision," following Nathan Bailey's 1730 *Dictionarium Britannicum*. "To figure" also means to have a role in a story.⁹ Tactfully guiding interspecies collaborations with living figures already in our midst, tinkers and thinkers are learning how to care for emergent ecological assemblages by seeding them, nurturing them, protecting them, and ultimately letting them go. Reaching into the future, visionaries are also grabbing onto hopeful figures and bringing them into contact with the field of historical possibility.¹⁰

Figures of hope can be found in the wreckage of catastrophic disasters, within landscapes that have been blasted by capitalism and militarism. Jacqueline Bishop, an artist who participated in discussions about "Hope in Blasted Landscapes" at The Multispecies Salon in New Orleans, showed me how shared hopes can be sustained by practical and imaginative labor.¹¹ Bishop's 2004 mixed-media installation, *Trespass*, an assemblage of flotsam and jetsam—baby shoes and birds' nests, toys and balls of twine—was first exhibited in the months before Hurricane Katrina. This piece contained aesthetic premonitions of the floating debris that were omnipresent after the storm. Coated in a black patina, a dark glossy finish like crude oil, this artwork also prefigured the oil flood that came with the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010.

⁷ Derrida, *Marx & Sons*, 253. Italic emphasis mine. See also: Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28; 74.

⁸ For more on how my position differs from Derrida, see: Eben Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Architecture of Global Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 25-28, 53.

⁹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁰ Kirksey, *et al.*, "Hope in Blasted Landscapes," 39; Anna Tsing, "Blasted Landscapes (and the Gentle Art of Mushroom Picking)," in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. S. Eben Kirksey (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 87-109; Vincent Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

¹¹ See: <http://www.multispecies-salon.org/bishop/>



Figures 1 and 2 *"Trespass"*, a mixed media piece, by Jacqueline Bishop made with artificial birds, baby shoes, bird nests, and toys (2003-2004, 59.5 x 97.5 inches). Photographs by the author, courtesy of the artist and Arthur Roger Gallery.

If, at a distance, *Trespass* seems to be a uniform black morass—a dreadful rendering of disaster—closer inspection reveals lively figures hiding in the shadows. Mushrooms, seed pods, and bird eggs anchor hopes in living forms. Like a bird nest, built from scavenged detritus, *Trespass* nurtures hopeful dreams. In other words, it illustrates that hope can move like oil in water. This point emerges when the artwork is viewed with shifts of scale—a sea slick with oil and wreckage, an unfathomable disaster when viewed from afar, contains anchoring points for hopeful desires that can only be grasped on a molecular level. Zooming in reveals that when droplets merge together, when they grab hold of almost imperceptible figures, they generate dynamic coalescences.¹² Panning back out reveals the dance of oil in water.¹³

Thousands of people flocked to the Gulf Coast in 2010, seeking to help care for creatures covered in oil following the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion. Official rules blocked people from trying to help charismatic animals, like birds. Volunteers instead began caring for smaller animals, like hermit crabs, that fell through the regulatory cracks. Jacqueline Bishop, the artist who created *Trespass*, found hope in initiatives to care for these small critters. Against the nightmarish landscape of the oil slick, Bishop grounded her desire for a livable future in the figure of the hermit crab. “We had this makeshift lab and we would collect about a thousand crabs a day.” Caring for the hermit crabs involved edging Q-tips into their shells without injuring their delicate bodies. “I felt so comfortable cleaning the hermit crabs,” Jacqueline reminisced. “Swabbing with the Q-tip was the same gesture as painting, except I was taking oil off instead of applying it.” As Bishop’s seasoned hand traced the intricate recesses of hermit crab shells, legs, and claws, she found modest hopes for specific animals stirring with each of her concrete, repetitive and meditative, actions.

¹² “A coalescence is a historical force that derives from an unexpected connection,” write Anna Tsing and Elizabeth Pollman. “The connection transforms the parties involved.” Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and Elizabeth Pollman, “Global Futures: The Game,” in *Histories of the Future*, ed. Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Friend Harding (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 109.

¹³ Elsewhere I describe messianic dreams that move like liquid mercury—dancing about, moving in different directions, coalescing around multiple figures of hope. Operating in the imagination of a single person, such messianic imaginings are often cautious, flitting around from object to object, probing the field of historical possibility. When these dreams catch hold of a crowd, a multitude of creative agents, the impossible comes within reach. Anything can happen at any time when this sort of collective imagination meets up with collaborative action. Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 32.



Figure Three An image of the Oilflood protest. Photograph by Maria Brodine.

Optimism attached to other living beings, according to Lauren Berlant, can be the cruelest of all. When contingencies beyond one's control result in the death of a loved one, this produces a cruel jarring slap.¹⁴ Hope involves vulnerability when you "care for that which is beyond or outside your control," in the words of Sara Ahmed.¹⁵ While Jacqueline Bishop saved the lives of hundreds of hermit crabs, she exposed herself to these vulnerabilities, as well as to the toxic properties of oil itself, as she watched entire ecological communities die. Bishop began working with the uneasy alchemy of the *pharmakon*, thinking about how to transform poisonous oil into a cure. Classically, the *pharmakon* is a poisonous substance that can have a therapeutic effect depending on the dose, the circumstances, or the context. Converting despair to hope, a swarming multitude joined Bishop in turning this oil flood into an opportunity.¹⁶

Gathering together collective hopes or feelings of outrage, figures can ground collaborative action. Figures can also produce hopeful events and concrete victories. As the collective will of millions became focused on the figure of BP, as artists imaginatively playing with the rebranding possibilities contained in their logo, this multitude reconfigured the field of political possibility. BP executives emerged from a meeting with President Obama on 16 June 2010, and told reporters assembled on the White House lawn that they had reached a deal: the

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 48.

¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 31, 186.

¹⁶ Kirksey, et al., "Hope in Blasted Landscapes," 39.

company would pay a \$20 billion fine. “For the president and the Gulf,” in the words of marine biologist Carl Safina, this deal was “a stunning coup.”

At an earlier moment in history, during the 2008 Presidential campaign, Barack Obama had worked to embody the messianic spirit—quoting Martin Luther King’s famous plea about “the fierce urgency of now,” trying to claim “hope” as a political slogan.¹⁷ Shortly after Obama was elected, the toxic properties of hope became apparent to many people who had once been caught up in the collective enthusiasm behind “Yes We Can!” The very idea of hope became a cruel and cynical slap to those who audaciously dared to participate in collective dreams.¹⁸ Perhaps hope itself has the properties of the pharmakon.¹⁹ Optimism can be cruel, according to Lauren Berlant, when you discover that the dreams you are attached to are either “impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic.”²⁰

The Deepwater Horizon disaster illustrates how a toxic nightmare can become an opportunity for hopeful dreaming. Figural oil bubbles can coalesce. Bumping into one another these bubbles of oil in water can become more perceptible, a glimmering sheen spreading through the sea of collective imagination.

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¹⁷ Kirksey, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, 207.

¹⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 48.

¹⁹ Kirksey, *et al.*, “Hope in Blasted Landscapes,” 39.

²⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.