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# Introduction

CHAR MILLER AND JEFF CRANE

Hope. For poet Emily Dickinson, it is the “thing with feathers,” a fearless little bird that “sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all.” The fact that its voice can be heard even above gale-force winds is only part of its embodied power, metaphorical and galvanic. Another strength is reflected in its plumage. Individually, feathers are lightweight, immaterial. Yet when hooked together—hollow shafts inserted in skin—they provide insulation and uplift, warmth and flight.<sup>1</sup>

Hope. For novelist Barbara Kingsolver, it comes in the fragile form of the endangered and voiceless monarch butterfly, a central figure in her novel *Flight Behavior* (2012). A fictional homage to Dickinson’s poetic insights, *Flight Behavior* also carries a political charge. In it, hope becomes a potent force for social change. Not to be confused with its smiley-faced analog, optimism, that oft-uncritical expectation that things will get better because they always get better, hope is made of sterner stuff. Securing its potential—fictively and factually—requires agency, intention, and action: lift. Hope is, Kingsolver observes tellingly in an interview about her novel, a “mode of survival” and

a form of resistance. It is “how a cancer patient endures painful treatments. Hope is how people on a picket line keep showing up. If you look at hope that way, it’s not a state of mind but something we actually do with our hearts and our hands, to navigate ourselves through the difficult passages.”<sup>2</sup>

Navigators need charts to see and prepare for the shoals that lie ahead. *The Nature of Hope* offers one such mapping of the past as a guide, however complicated and fraught, to those who would act in and on the present and who seek a way forward to a more sustainable, just, and humane future. This book focuses on the dynamics of environmental activism and does so through an examination of the environmental and political cultures that have emerged in response to such contentious issues as mining in national parks, mitigation and adaptation to the challenges climate change poses, and the dilemmas some South Texas communities have faced as their wealth and woes spiked with the advent of the hydraulic-fracturing boom. It probes as well the significance of urban farmers pursuing food justice, those confronted with toxic chemicals in the air and water, and others rallying to defeat a proposed expansion of a US air base in Japan. It also taps into the energy animating housing and worker-rights activists and those challenging the militarization of the US-Mexico border. Collectively, these chapters are also reflective of the drive for greater democracy, a politics of hope on the most fundamental of levels—human and ecological health—within communities large and small.

The stories these chapters interrogate demonstrate equally that local activism is as important and meaningful to the preservation of democracy as the protection of the environment, broadly defined. National environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and the Wilderness Society have grown into the hegemon of American environmentalism, exerting considerable influence in defining environmental issues at the national level and thus on the flow of money and political support to them and the issues they define as important. These organizations’ dominance, for all their legislative success, has overshadowed the many community-based environmental battles that have profoundly shaped US environmental culture. These latter movements and moments are the focus of *The Nature of Hope*. In chapters framed around the fights over the wilderness areas in the Northern Cascades and the Stringfellow Acid Pits in Riverside County, California; brawls over flood control in San Antonio, Texas; battles

to shutter coal-fired energy plants in North Carolina, and a host of other underreported struggles, this anthology illuminates the unsung and unstinting efforts of those fighting to protect the environments they inhabit. These activists—women and men, the poor and dispossessed, the young and old, those more vulnerable, others not—have pursued this work in the face of the failure of state and federal governments to adequately deal with the resulting degradation of air, water, and soil, food, infrastructure, and community life. In an age of environmental crisis, apathy, and deep-seated cynicism—to say nothing of a distressingly polarized political landscape—these engagements suggest how a politics of hope can offer an intersectional and compelling model of resistance, resilience, and regeneration.

Another objective of this book is to complicate assumptions about the paradigms that define the environmental movement in the United States—whether that involves certain celebrated, male leaders (think naturalist John Muir, the presidents Roosevelt, or activist David Brower); particular organizations such as Greenpeace; thematic orientations (such as conservationism, utilitarianism, and preservationism); or the human construction of nature and Nature viewed through an anthropocentric, romantic, or biocentric lens. There is nothing wrong with these varied classifications, but if we strictly or solely adhere to them, we will continue to overlook the powerful role of intersectionality in shaping the on-the-ground dynamics of popular protest and social change.

As the essays in *The Nature of Hope* make clear, new styles of leadership have emerged, which Bill McKibben likens to distributive energy production. The new structures of organizing are thus more horizontal and local than hierarchical and central. This shift is one reason why academics and activists need to pay closer attention to some of the critical implications that emerge from these stories about ecological activism so we can better understand why protecting the environment has been and remains so critical to sustaining the health of civil society (and vice versa). Consider, for example, the role the nation's wealth of nature has played in its development. Yet that development has always come at a cost, contested by those who disproportionately bear its burdens. Across time, Americans have organized in opposition to forms of ecological change and environmental degradation that have undercut their social status, community strength, and economic opportunities. Many of these principled efforts to protect or improve the environment

have resulted in democratization at all levels of government: every campaign to preserve green space, limit pesticide poisoning, obtain environmental justice, or slow climate change has resulted in corresponding alterations—some limited, some not—in the political process. These include greater access to government documents and information, expanded participation by traditionally marginalized constituencies, and the creation of broad-based, intersecting political coalitions. The ongoing efforts of Americans—wherever they were born—to confront and resolve environmental issues has regenerated our politics while managing the core problems that affect everyone: clean air and water, disrupted climates, species protection, and the production of and access to healthy food.

To help identify some of these changes and their manifold ramifications, we have structured this anthology around a set of themes. The first, “Building Agency,” lays out the theoretical terrain and ideological insights that set the stage for subsequent chapters. The title of Bill McKibben’s essay—*Movements without Leaders*—speaks volumes (and directly to one of this volume’s organizing motifs): that new models of leadership must guide the global effort to respond to climate change and its imperiling of all species. Indeed, he advocates what he calls a new “planetary architecture” of leadership that builds off the diligent work of innumerable local organizations and interest groups and charts an intersectional relationship between them. The result is a new kind of movement: “We may not need capital-L Leaders, but we certainly need small-l leaders by the tens of thousands. You could say that instead of a leaderless movement, we need a leader-full one.”

Brinda Sarathy underscores and expands this compelling claim in her close analysis of the academic literature on environmental justice, as concept and praxis. At the heart of her project is how the theoretical and the applied intersect: “The concept of environmental justice is not only composed of discrete types (such as environmental racism, sexism, and classism),” she observes, but “these varying dimensions often interact together in important ways.” The nature of these interactions matters “not just for the manifestation of environmental harm within a community but also for the shape of social movement activity in response to those harms.” Sarathy’s insight is then tested and revealed in Cody Ferguson and Paul Hirt’s analysis of the degree to which environmental issues are debated, negotiated, and adjudicated on local, state, and federal levels. One of their focuses is on Save Our

Cumberland Mountains (SOCM), a grassroots organization in rural eastern and central Tennessee that in the 1970s emerged in opposition to landfills and strip mining. But these site-specific issues were also global in their reach: SOCM's members "were concerned about water and air pollution and the health of their families and communities; their understanding of environmental issues was tightly woven into ideals of good government and the notion that citizens ought to have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives." These local activists discovered, as Bill McKibben would forty years later, that creating a more accountable, participatory, and transparent nation requires a long view, an enduring vigilance, and a deep commitment to the power of individual and collective agency—and a multitude of leaders. Such "can only happen with a spread-out and yet thoroughly interconnected movement, a new kind of engaged citizenry," McKibben writes. "Rooftop by rooftop, we're aiming for a different world, one that runs on the renewable power that people produce themselves in their communities in small but significant batches. The movement that will get us to such a new world must run on that kind of power too."

Identifying the physical environment in which such change has occurred and can occur is the subject of the second section, "Spatial Dynamics." Each of its chapters explores particular locations—Portland, San Antonio, Tachikawa, and the US-Mexico borderlands—and sets their specific environmental-justice challenges in their unique historical contexts. For African Americans whose neighborhoods abutted the Columbia Slough in Portland, World War II brought new work and housing; but as Ellen Stroud explores these glimmering opportunities, she also uncovers the racial segregation and social injustice embedded in a low-lying landscape wracked by floods, disease, and death. These social forces and health stressors circumscribed residents' life chances: "Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the land near the Columbia Slough appeared on the cognitive map of many Portlanders as a throwaway place, an area best suited to industry and waste. That perception, which has a multiplicity of origins, was as much a cause as an effect of the environmental disaster at the slough."

Many of these same pressures confronted those living in San Antonio's flood-prone and dense west-side barrios. Char Miller probes how Communities Organized for Public Services, a Hispanic organization that emerged in the early 1970s to combat flooding in these impoverished neighborhoods, achieved

its goals only after it undercut Anglo domination of that city's government and thereby gained access to local, state, and federal financial resources to develop flood-control projects that protected these oft-inundated communities. Political change was also the result of intense protests in the mid-1950s over the expansion of the US air base in Tachikawa, Japan. Its markers are embodied, Adam Tompkins and Charles Laurier argue, as much in the composition of the cross-sector, mass movement of farmers and urban residents taking on the US Air Force as in the final, striking result of their actions: the military base became a park, concrete turned into grass.

Those activists protesting the construction of the infamous border wall separating the United States and Mexico, just south of San Diego, have also pushed for a more sustainable, life-affirming solution. Under directives from the George W. Bush administration, in 2007 contractors began to erect a triple-layer structure that bisected Friendship Park and cut off access to that once open space, part of a 700-mile-long project designed to halt the undocumented from crossing into a post-9/11 America. Over the next three years, activists held weekly prayer vigils just off-site as well as routine meetings with US Border Patrol officials. Their engagement bore fruit in two directions—a binational grassroots movement emerged, stronger than either segment alone could have been; and for a time the Border Patrol conceded some ground such that families trapped on either side of the wall would be able to see one another. Still, as Jill M. Holslin points out, not all victories endure. Indeed, in 2018, the Trump administration, after further militarizing the border and criminalizing those seeking asylum in the United States, then tore immigrant children from their parents. The right to a salubrious environment proves to be an equally contested and polarizing issue in American society. This concept constitutes the heart of this volume's third section, "Healthy Politics." The right to a healthy environment emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, families—especially mothers—found that they needed to question the impact of global military conflict on their children's bodies. Jeffrey C. Sanders analyzes a series of women-led peace groups and their activist rhetoric that fused protection of their progeny's health in the Atomic Age with a call to break the silence Cold War anti-communism inflicted on Americans because of the damage it was inflicting on American bodies. The "bones, blood, and thyroids of children living in the United States moved to the center of the political debate over nuclear testing," Sanders

indicates, “and inspired a movement.” Part of what made it so inspiring—and catalyzing—was how the activists developed and disseminated new knowledge about the life-threatening effects of radioactivity in defiance of corporate, state, and federal scientists. The pressing need to develop citizen science emerged anew in the 1980s. In response to the Reagan administration’s concerted effort to block citizens’ access to scientific expertise, argues Michael Egan, a pair of grassroots organizations galvanized “policy for their protection by doing the work they felt government agencies were not.” Their struggles to examine the carcinogenic impact of industrial pollution in Woburn, Massachusetts, and the consequences of spraying daminozide on apple orchards ran up against stonewalling corporations and agencies. As a result, these groups were compelled to produce their own “reliable environmental information as a means of evaluating social risks,” a popular epidemiology that became an “important strategy in confronting toxic fear”; this strategy remains a vital part of an American environmentalism worried about toxins in the air, soil, and water.

A related anxiety that has also generated new forms of local knowledge and an uptick in political engagement revolves around food production itself. In response to scientific evidence detailing the residual impact of spraying pesticides on crops, spikes in obesity and related health problems linked to ubiquitous fast-food restaurants, and the existence of food deserts in many poor neighborhoods, an urban agricultural movement sprang up in the last decades of the twentieth century. In tracking its historical development and policy implications, Jeff Crane asserts that community farming is an identifiable form of environmental protest that, among other things, can reclaim lost knowledge, restore human health, regenerate brown fields, and rebuild communal solidarity. Yet who is involved in these community deliberations and progressive outcomes and whose needs they are projected to meet are integral to these projects’ success. Anna J. Kim and Sophia Cheng confirm that expanding the range of people directly engaged on such issues is necessary to create sustainable communities. Doing so requires that we recognize “the interconnectedness of the urban and rural, the human and environmental, the social and the natural.” It is just as essential to “identify the links between paradigms” and to recognize the inequalities embedded “within them as symptoms of problems of the ecosystem.” In a case study of this intertwining, Kim and Cheng assess the labor conditions of contemporary

workers in Los Angeles and the layered injustices they endure. In this manner, exposure to toxins in the workplace, like wage theft, food insecurity, and environmental inequality, are parts of a larger whole, militating against human sustainability.

The effort to sustain communities became a good deal more complicated with the advent of the Trump presidency. In a spate of late January 2017 Executive Orders, the new president undercut the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) and froze the US Environmental Protection Agency's budget and hiring (while his political appointees to that agency wiped clean its hitherto robust data on climate change). He asserted that the border wall separating the United States and Mexico would be completed and he approved construction of the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline and the Keystone XL Pipeline. The latter is a signal of his administration's commitment to ramping up oil, gas, and mineral extraction while further delaying climate-change action—a point it hammered home when it pulled out of the Paris Climate Accord and radically undermined domestic environmental protections. These and other declarations, along with like-minded policies, immediately generated an array of grassroots protests and legal challenges, an oppositional strategy that has a lengthy history dating back to the early twentieth century. Those earlier confrontations did not always succeed, and the same mixed outcome surely awaits those who have resisted the latest efforts to put profits before people, to elevate the privileged few even farther above those who struggle to get by, to degrade America the Beautiful because they can. Yet however partial previous campaigns to build a more resilient society and healthier environments may have been, they are a vivid reminder of the need for and capacity of local activism to assert its claims in the public arena, to fuse its calls for enhanced environmental protections and social justice with demands for a more open, accessible, and activist democracy.

Tracking these related concerns are the chapters included in the fourth section of *The Nature of Hope*—"Challenging Resources." In his essay on the lengthy fight to stop Kennecott Cooper Corporation from extracting ore from within the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area in the Northern Cascades of Washington State, Adam Sowards sifts through public documents and private correspondence to recreate the tools activists employed to derail the project. However beautiful the landscape, however hopeful opponents were that its aesthetic qualities would change the corporation's mind, their real

success—and hope—lay in the political arena: in “the constitutional system and citizen action—as well as a moral sense of right.” This potent combination, Sowards writes, was “cause for resounding optimism.” There were other factors: “Maybe the combination of copper prices, changing costs, and differing priorities tipped the balance.” Yet as the historical record also makes clear, “grassroots action made a difference to that place and that place made a difference to the grassroots,” a reciprocal process that is evident as well in Hugh Fitzsimmons’s analysis of the politics of fracking in South Texas in the first decades of the twenty-first century. A rancher who reintroduced bison to its original range, Fitzsimmons has a personal stake in the damage to local water quantity and quality that hydraulic fracking in the Eagle Ford play has brought to his county, and this stake propelled him into the political arena: “It was time for me to stop complaining and start campaigning.” He won a seat on the local groundwater conservation district and was immediately drawn into a series of fights over serious aquifer draw-downs, contamination of once potable-water wells, and resulting threats to public health. His learning curve was steep, as was that of the larger community, and for all their shared activism and negotiations with industry to slow its vast uptake of local water supplies, the ultimate collapse of this energy boom may have been the real savior.

Salvation was harder to find in North Carolina, a state Duke Energy dominates—a dominance that a broad-based, multiply led, anti-coal movement has fought to check. Monica Mariko Embrey contributed to the development of this statewide coalition opposing the Charlotte-based utility’s dependence on fossil fuel, and her chapter therefore brings an insider’s perspective to community organizing. It also contains an academic understanding of how this environmental-justice group’s principles shaped its diverse, cross-generational, and deeply intersectional mission and objectives. This coalition’s political potency is a direct result of its ideological commitments: “Building alignment between historically diverging environmental and environmental-justice movements,” she notes, has enabled energy-justice activists to tackle “the most formidable fossil-fuel industry and utility adversaries,” which in turn made it possible to address “the growing climate crisis.”

Keeping fossil fuels in the ground and expanding a network of like-minded and intersecting alliances to disrupt the development and use of the nation’s energy infrastructure have similarly informed protests surrounding the

Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines. Bill McKibben's opening essay in this volume addresses Keystone; bookending it is the final contribution, Kyle Powys Whyte's analysis of how the Standing Rock Sioux, other Native peoples of the northern Plains, and non-tribal allies, beginning in 2012, battled the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Arguing that the project was one more expression of a settler colonialism that had long determined US and tribal relations and that its completion would degrade local water quality and inflict considerable harm on the cultural heritage of the Dakota and Lakota people (and had already destroyed ancestral burial sites), the tribes put their bodies in front of bulldozers. Knowing that direct action and personal sacrifice would raise national consciousness but would also need legal backing, their attorneys went to court. A mass movement around the call for sacred justice sprang up over the summer and fall of 2016. So forceful was the collective pushback that President Barack Obama, in the waning days of his administration, called for a delay in the pipeline's construction until completion of a full environmental impact statement. The fact that his successor, through a January 2017 Executive Resolution, green-lit the project only underscores the thrust of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard's argument about this struggle's enduring significance: "We must remember we are part of a larger story. We are still here. We are still fighting for our lives on our own land."

Sill here, still fighting. Unbending and unrepentant. Persistent and vigilant: hope.

## Notes

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1. Emily Dickinson, "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers," in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 182.

2. Interview with Barbara Kingsolver appended in "p.s.," *Flight Behavior* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 7.