

Thinking Like a Mountain

Supplement

Enemy of the Mountain

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On an August 2025 episode of the conservative podcast “Ruthless,” climate contrarian, Trump supporter, and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lee Zeldin¹ boasted of “driving a dagger into the heart of the climate change religion.”² He was talking about the EPA’s plans to repeal what is known as the Endangerment Finding, which lays out the danger posed by fossil fuels to human health and forms the basis for federal regulation of carbon emissions from power plants, cars and trucks, and the oil and gas industries.³ Though the proposed repeal of the Endangerment Finding isn’t backed up by climate research, defanging the EPA’s regulatory power⁴ will pave the way for an expansion of industries that contribute to carbon emissions and poise the United States to rely even more heavily on coal and fossil fuels, rather than renewable energy sources.

The facts haven’t changed. Yet, as was the case with the debunked Cass Report⁵—which was weaponized in the UK to deny medical care and push conversion therapy on trans youth—right-wing ideologues continue to brandish junk ‘science’ to shove what is inconvenient

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under the proverbial rug. As we speak, the United States is attempting to define trans people out of existence and eradicate us from public life. They must understand their rhetoric can't alter the fabric of reality, or there would be no need for them to make reality illegal. Those who have a stake in their fantasies bank on a public who believe collectivity to be a con, solidarity a public relations ploy, and respectability more valuable than human lives. Hideous, world-ending violence, shriveled to its driest and most grotesque form, is presented as grammatical inevitability. Politicians and journalists call Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people "tragedy" and the starvation of Gaza "famine." They use the passive voice to elide who murders, who starves. Palestinian children are killed, dismembered, shot 335 times, even.⁶ Black and Indigenous trans women are murdered, if they are even permitted the dignity of their names and genders in death. More often, these women are reduced to bodies, found. To point to the blood on the hands is to be accused of defamation and worse. As Sara Ahmed writes, "excessive force is only bad because it makes those who enact it look bad."⁷

What you disavow does not disappear. It grows, gets shunted elsewhere, or both.

The Padania plain⁸ bowls up particulate matter belched out by heavy industry. Prevented from dissipating, this pollution circulates and grows dense, driven by geographical features and weather patterns. The poorest municipalities are exposed to the most pollution.⁸

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Neglect marks the undesirable and the exploited. The economies of formerly colonized nations often remain dependent on their colonizers. A prison may be the majority employer of an entire town. Working class and immigrant neighborhoods may be dominated by factories, pushed close to sources of chemical, particulate, and even sonic pollution, such as loud highways and sports stadia. Roma and Traveller communities are often located near highways, dumps, quarries, and power lines.^{9,10} When the state of Michigan changed the water source of the low-income community of Flint to the Flint River in 2014 during a financial crisis¹¹, 100,000 residents were exposed to lead contamination associated with a drop in infant birth weight.¹² German-owned automotive and arms manufacturer Rheinmetall makes bombs not in its own backyard, but in Sardinia's impoverished Iglesiente, even attempting to transform the hydrological landscape of the region in order to expand.¹³

Sardinia has faced a critical water shortage in the last few years. In summer of 2025, the reservoirs in the Sulcis¹⁴ reached emergency levels. In some regions it hasn't rained regularly for a year.¹⁵ The mastic and strawberry trees wither. The drought slowly turns the Mediterranean to desert. Day after day, bombs are assembled. There's money for war, but not for water. It would appear that Israeli soldiers have been sent to Sardinia on vacation to "decompress" from committing genocide.¹⁶ On summer nights in Porto Pino, houses near the Capo Teulada base shake with the force of U.S. and NATO military exercises.¹⁷

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The sky flashes with light.

We're told enemies are everywhere. But who is the enemy of the mountain?

We may not imagine rhetoric to be the biggest threat to the wellbeing of the mountain. We may think instead of the slow erosion of time and weather. But a mountain is not threatened by a change in its shape. The mountain is utterly unperturbed by the cycles that smooth its edges.

Climate change, on the other hand, is a catastrophe, not a cycle. For the mountain, the problems of climate change are already here, proceeding more quickly at altitude than in the lowlands.¹⁸ The steady retreat of the snow line exposes the earth to solar radiation there is no longer any snow to absorb.¹⁹ Between 1980 and 1999, in Italy alone, glacial retreats rose from 12% to 89%.²⁰ More than one sixth of all human beings on the planet depend on glaciers and seasonal snowpack for water,²⁰ and every year their supply grows more scarce.

Forty years ago, on January 13, 1985, a thick snow fell on Bergamo. The newspapers called it 'the snow of the century'.²¹ The centimeters piled up: 50, 70, 90. Men bundled to the ears shoveled knee-high drifts. Cars and trains were stuck for hours. Two hundred additional civilians and a hundred soldiers from the Montelungo caserma were recruited to clear the snow. Burst pipes led

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to water and power shortages. Two hundred roofs gave way.

The last real snow on the plain, according to meteorologist Edoardo Ferrara,²² was on December 28, 2020. Temperatures have risen on the pianura Padana by one to two degrees. Snow has been rarer and rarer for the past ten years. As glaciers are lost to rising temperatures and snowfall declines, even winter is unrecognizable. *La gh'è piö la niv de öna ólta*, as they say in Bergamasco. It doesn't snow like it used to.

Water can tell you a lot about a mountain. The water in the area of Bergamo is calcium-rich because the pre-Alps are veined with soluble limestone. This causes karst formations in the rock,²³ creating underground springs, aquifers, pockets of oil. All the large Lombard lakes, the tributaries of the Po, and the rivers that descend from the Alps and pre-Alps—the Ticino, Adda, Oglio, Brembo, Serio, and others—are fed more or less directly by karst springs. Though Bergamo's Città Alta was once supplied by springs in its hills, these days Bergamo, Brescia, and other cities rely heavily on karst springs for their water supply.²⁴ As carbonic acid from rainwater eats away at fractures, it dissolves stone and absorbs minerals, pocking the earth like puff pastry. Calcium and magnesium are carried down to the city, exit my shower, and coat the shafts of my hair. My body bears the mountains in sickness and in health. What happens below, in the eighty kilometers of caves in the area of Bergamo,²⁵ is visible on my scalp.

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The roots of the mountains are invisible until they are not. The shell holds as long as it holds. Sometimes, the ground becomes a throat.

A mountain is a system whose goal is to sustain itself. *Sostenere*, from *tenere su*: literally, to hold up. If, like any system, the mountain proves unsustainable, it collapses. Sinkholes collapse. Banks collapse. Empires. It is the inevitable outcome of any system which must grow continually to avoid crashing out. Growth without limit is unsustainable.

Economist and activist Seymour Melman once argued²⁶ that continued investment in the military industrial complex (MIC), which contributes neither to production nor to taxpayer quality of life, would push the United States economy to a point of no return, a point at which the country would be so dependent on war that it would require a wholesale economic reorientation to change course. Nearly four million people²⁷ are directly or indirectly employed by the MIC, along with hundreds of paid lobbyists.²⁸ The MIC insists war is the only way for the system to avoid collapse. All that is required is a fresh supply of enemies.

Somewhere, on a government server, a registry names soldiers suffering from long-term health complications from breathing in toxic fumes from burn pits and other pollution during their overseas deployments. Some of these soldiers inhaled aerosolized

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shit from the Poo Pond on the U.S. Air Base in Kandahar and toxic fumes from Bagram's open burn pits,²⁹ which were used for years between the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of troops in 2021. Hot particulate matter and foul smoke rose into the air for miles. Eventually the soldiers went home and the reporters stopped talking about the War on Terror, but the wells of the people living near the base continue to yield sickly water, causing kidney problems; children who roamed the airfield collecting burnt scrap metal develop eye tumors as young as 6 or 7 years old.²⁹ The toxic smoke laced with mercury, lead, and dioxins³⁰ remains in the lungs³¹ of the people who live on the land as well as in the soldiers, now long gone.

Bagram Lung. Kabul cough.²⁹ The rape of the land remains chained to our bodies.

Floods and climate change-driven extreme weather events pose grave threats to sanitation and access to clean water.³² Some of those most impacted are queer and trans people, whose lives are already precarious. In Haiti, trans and intersex people were shut out of shelters following the devastating 2010 earthquake, and same-sex couples were denied aid because they were not counted as families.³³ In 2015 in Chennai,³⁴ when a trans woman's tea stall was washed away in floods worsened by climate change, she was denied access to shelters and forced into begging to survive. In Pakistan, when catastrophic floods hit Sindh in 2023, trans people were denied aid by relief organizations.³⁵

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Water, and thus also waste, is political. In Texas, even my urine will soon be illegal. Recently-passed Senate Bill ⁸, also known as the Texas Women's Privacy Act, restricts bathroom use in government-owned buildings, prisons, public schools and universities based on sex assigned at birth,³⁶ effectively making it illegal and potentially deadly for many trans people to use either bathroom.

If you hold your urine long and often enough, bacteria build up, irritating the urethra and bladder. If left unchecked, the bacteria begin to climb. They scale the ureters toward the kidneys like food coloring mounting the stem of a carnation. Over time, the bacteria gnaw at the kidneys, and the urine blushes with blood.

In her 1982 *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*,³⁷ Nawal El Sa'adawi describes writing on toilet paper at night and hiding the squares under the floor. When she was given permission to plant grapes and fruit trees in the prison yard, some of the other women discouraged her. They hoped not to be there by the time the plants bore fruit. El Sa'adawi replied that the fruit would be enjoyed by the prisoners who came after them. She was being held as a political prisoner, her cell guarded by a shawisha whose son suffered from kidney disease. In her memoir, El Sa'adawi recalls how, at a national conference in 1962, then-president Gamal Abdel Nasser had asked, Who is the peasant? When no one answered, El Sa'adawi replied, The peasant is the one whose urine is red.³⁷

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On 19 March 2025, 20-year-old college student Marcy Rheintgen was arrested³⁸ for using a public bathroom in an act of protest against a transphobic Florida bathroom law. She entered a women's bathroom in the state capitol building, washed her hands, and was handcuffed by police upon walking out. Rheintgen had exercised her right to protest an unjust law with a principled act of civil disobedience.

The law under which Rheintgen was arrested, like others of its kind, was authored by lawmakers who are lobbied by anti-trans initiatives such as the Alliance Defending Freedom. Incidentally, the ADF receives hundreds of thousands of dollars from fossil fuel companies³⁹ and the billionaires who own them. Fossil fuel companies bankroll all kinds of right-wing agenda items, from anti-abortion efforts to border policing.³⁹ In an independent analysis of 45 right-wing groups lobbying against trans rights, 80% of them received such donations.³⁹ They must continue to receive this money because their policies are wildly unpopular with voters. Despite The New York Times's recent coverage blaming "identity politics"^{40,41,42} for the Democratic Party's losses and California Governor Gavin Newsom's capitulation⁴³ to right-wing transphobia, 80% of voters polled said candidates should stop focusing on policies about trans people, including 64% of Republicans.⁴⁴ Transphobia and white supremacy are not sustainable or natural positions. They must be inculcated and maintained through constant streams of wasted coin and brute force.

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Transphobia is an effective tool of distraction, just as racism and xenophobia have historically been used to break up labor movements and divide working class people. Anything that brings people together can also push them to act against their own best interests. Billionaires - and the Lega - will have you believe you can't pay rent because of immigrants, Muslims, and trans people. But who is tearing down the old cascade to build bland gray apartments, filling them with cheap furniture and marking them up for short-term rental? To sell someone out, you've got to own them first.

Who belongs to a place? Comune: a place where your name is written down. A name written in the right ledger gives access to healthcare, identity documents, and other services through an approved relationship to the State. If your landlord won't let you use your rental contract to apply for residency, or you have no address to write on a form because you're houseless, or you can't get identification with the right name and gender on it, your ability to properly belong to the comune is compromised. Without access to the comune, you can live in a place and be forbidden to belong there. An us can be built around anything. You can build a system around a shared goal, but it's not always necessary. Having a them suffices.

There is a version of each city known only to its ghosts. My city's edges are pocked with joyful haunts. Some of the most beautiful people I've ever met were other trans people in hospital waiting rooms. We're always seated together in front of the same shut door. A list

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nestles our names against each other.

In their book *Écotransféminismes*,⁴⁵ scholars and artists Emma Bigé and Clovis Maillet discuss Léa Rivière’s term “deuiller” (from *deuil* and *lutter*, mourning and struggle), in Italian “luttare” (from *lutto* and *lottare*), “the art and practice that consists of trying to find the means to live with the dead.” They write, [L]uttare is part of the collective art of transitioning, that is, of the art of manufacturing ceremonies, occasions for being together, rather than remaining alone in our little corners, starting from that which changes, that which is lost, from the subsoils that feed us, from the compost (sometimes terrible) thanks to and in spite of which we persist. So, [these are] not only trans arts in virtue of the brutal necropolitics that kill trans people, but also, or above all, trans arts inasmuch as the act of transitioning means to learn to grieve the parts of oneself that one abandons. Every injection, every administrative act, every pronoun that we use in the correct way is an occasion to say goodbye to who we’ve been, to reckon with it, to transform it into soil (like the buried bodies we’ve loved), to make of it the ruin on which the fragments of other lives may germinate.

I don’t believe in an inexorable, so-called ‘natural’ march toward progress. Systems require pressure to change. Boycotts and sanctions played an important role in the end of South African apartheid.⁴⁶ Apartheid fell in South Africa partly because, with international boycotts as a supplement to Black South African resistance,

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apartheid became economically unsustainable. Boycotts work. They put pressure on unsustainable systems, using those systems' own precariousness against them. As acidic rainwater gnaws at the roof of an underground aquifer, so too may an organized movement apply steady pressure until what can no longer be sustained collapses.

What is considered 'natural' is violent, racist, misogynist, ableist, and transphobic so often as to render the concept worse than useless. I do not care if I am natural. I am no more or less natural than the mountain. Even the mountain cannot claim purity. High concentrations of microplastics have been found in snow samples from the Arctic, Swiss, Bavarian, and Western Italian Alps,⁴⁷ the latter of which was found to contain high levels of tire particles^{48,49} and polyethylene microplastics from the degradation of packaging and consumer goods.⁵⁰ Particles smaller than 5mm in length⁵¹ formed by the breakdown of plastics in car tires, synthetic clothing, and health and beauty products, microplastics are carried by wind and water into the high atmosphere. From there they are dispersed many miles. They reach the bottom of the Mariana Trench⁵² and the summit of Sagarmatha - Chomolangma.^{48,53,54} The microplastics in the mountains do not remain in the mountains. They reach us in soil and water and in the animals we eat. We consume microplastics in sea salt, beer, bottled water, even honey.⁵⁰ We breathe them into our lungs. They lodge themselves into the gastrointestinal tracts of brook trout⁵⁵ and disrupt the hormones of killifish.⁵⁶ In mice, orally-administrated microplastics accumulate in and inflame

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the lung, stomach, duodenum, and ileum.⁵⁰

I did my doctorate research on endocrine-disrupting environmental toxicants like bisphenol A (BPA), a xenoestrogen used in the EU in the manufacture of plastic water bottles, baby bottles, and other food contact materials as recently as 2024.⁵⁷ As of 2025 in the US, the use of BPA for food contact applications is restricted only for baby bottles, sippy cups, and infant formula packaging.⁵⁸ BPA, like microplastics, leaches easily into food and drink. By interfering with hormone receptors, BPA has been associated with altered age of menarche in multiple studies.⁵⁹ Microplastics, because of their small size, have been shown to transport bisphenols and other endocrine disruptors into many if not all organs, including the hypothalamus, thyroid, ovaries, testes, adrenal gland, and pituitary gland⁶⁰ in a series of processes known as “Trojan Horse Effects.”⁶¹ The smallest microplastics are able to cross even the placenta and the blood-brain barrier.⁶² They carry toxicants able to disrupt our hormones and our sex development. They are small enough, even, to penetrate our genders.

The contaminated mountain enters us by the mouth, the nose, the skin. Gone, but only in the sense of a thing that haunts. Varnish on the hulls of ships; the blades of wind turbines; abraded tires; roofing membranes; nitrile rubber⁶³ corroded from seals, hoses, cable jacketing, and offshore oil platform transmission belts;⁴⁷ Humvee parts, unexploded ordinance, aircraft deicing fluids, and human carcasses torched with JP-8 jet fuel in the open burn pits

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of U.S. bases in Iraq and Afghanistan^{29,30}—all these, borne on wind, water, and the flesh of animals, catch in our fat and the folds of our grey matter. There, as at the bottom of the sea or the top of a mountain, they can neither break down nor escape. They are trapped in us.

If a community can be defined as much by its ghosts as its goals, then a blacklist is as much a community as a solidarity encampment. We're all defined by something. History defines the human body by its presence in the deepest crevice of the lung. To quote Maillet and Bigé again, "In the milieu of toxic environments manufactured by integrated global capitalism, no one has the luxury of purity."⁴⁵

We must amend our hypotheses. The enemy of a mountain is not time. It isn't rhetoric or sinkholes or glacial retreat. The enemy of a mountain is the consequence of what is disappeared.

And what then? After Black revolutionary George Jackson was assassinated in 1971, among the 99 books found in his cell at California's San Quentin prison was a hand-written copy of a poem by Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim.^{64,65} You may burn my books, my poems / Or feed my flesh to the dogs. / You may spread a web of terror / On the roofs of my village, / O enemy of the sun, / But / I shall not compromise / And to the last pulse in my veins / I shall resist.

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Even ghosts get hungry. Down the street you can get halal chicken in cheap ten-kilo packs. I'll put my share in your freezer. You put yours in mine. We'll never have to eat alone.

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