

Enchanted Cutaway: Nurturing Imaginations Through Regrowth and Remembrance in the Altered Landscape of the Weald (UK)

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Abstract This study traces the impacts of an iron industry upon a woodland in the Weald (UK), called Cutaway Wood. It emphasises that the sixteenth century, which spanned the boom of the industry in the UK, also saw the greatest impacts of enclosure upon the landscape, the scientific revolution strip life down to its basic elements, and religious theory manifest notions of superstition. All of which created space for a burgeoning industrial capitalism to exploit nature's resources. These capitalist abstractions haunt the present, forming a psychological hurdle as we try to visualise a new world. In this article I argue that rekindling a connection to land through visitation may help to reorient our diminished capacities for envisioning solutions to the climate crisis.

Keywords Woodland. Extraction. Imagining otherwise. Coppice. Visitation.

Summary 1 The Weald. – 2 Cutaway and the Long Sixteenth Century. – 3 A Haunting. – 4 A call to Visitation. – 5 Regrowth in Ruin. – Conclusion.

1 The Weald

It is hard to picture the scale of the iron industry in the Weald today as a large amount of the violence inflicted upon the landscape has healed, only expressing its scars when you know what to look for. However, due to the actions of an industry that was in full force by the sixteenth century, and which continued until the last furnace burnt out in 1813, vast quantities of iron were extracted from the area, shaping the landscape, the human history and the non-human ecosystem to this day. The Weald describes an area

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of land which flows up from the coast at the South-eastern tip of England into Kent, West and East Sussex, Hampshire and Surrey. It was after nearly a year of monthly visits, from my home in south London to a woodland in Haywards Heath, situated within the Weald, that I began to notice the traces of industry that remain.

Centuries of capitalist abstraction has left many of us living without a psychic connection to land, which has in turn diminished our imaginative skill-set with which to envision solutions to the climate crisis. I began a practice of monthly visits to the woods in an attempt at rekindling my own connection, and to focus on the woodland as a subject for my film practice. I chose to spend a year watching the seasons change, with the intention of slowing down and listening attentively, in an effort to form a relationship with an environment that was unfamiliar to me. I went in search of ‘enchantment’. Peter Linebaugh wrote in his introduction to Silvia Federici’s text *Re-Enchanting the World*, that for Federici enchantment refers, “not to the past but the future. It is part, perhaps the leading part, of the revolutionary project and inseparable from the Commons” (Federici 2019, XVII).

Noticing the ghosts of industry present in the woods, was one of the first signs that I was beginning to attune to the environment. Once I had identified the fingerprint of extraction amongst the irregular growth formations of the trees, the controlled trajectory of the rivers and the ferric oxide bubbling to the surface of the cratered woodland floor, I began to see it everywhere. Some of these traces would have informed early industrialists that the area would be profitable to mine, and others exist now as relics to what took place as a result.

2 Cutaway and the Long Sixteenth Century

My lived experience of place is London, the city where I spent my childhood and still reside today. In cities, our imaginative worlds are prescribed to us, whereas to step over the threshold and into the woods feels like stepping out of time. This is not to say that one location is *Nature* and the other not. To recognise the city as a place of human economic labour, is to understand that such labour cannot exist without the countryside. Cheap labour within the city has always been sustained by cheap food being produced in the countryside, and this relationship has its roots in enclosure.

The enclosure system in England removed access of the peasant population to the commons. Common lands consisted of both agricultural flat lands used for farming, and wooded areas that provided building material and fuel. Tending to common land was a community-based labour where the results were seen and enjoyed directly. Enclosure began in 1604, but it was not until 1750 that the Enclosure by Parliament Act became the norm. Concurrently the iron industry of the Weald boomed in the sixteenth century and thrived until production began to decline in 1770 when the promise of coal lured it elsewhere.

Although the whole of the woodland in Haywards Heath is ancient,¹ there is a discernible difference between plant life found in the higher drier

¹ The term ‘ancient’ defines a woodland that has been consistently wooded since at least 1600 AD.



Figure 1 Cutaway wood (2021). The alder tree in the centre of the image has been coppiced. © Sam Risley

section, when compared to the lower swampier area. The lower section is called Cutaway Wood. Simon, one of the two brothers who own the woodland, showed me how alder trees had been coppiced within Cutaway. The reason for this was twofold; firstly, due to alder's ability to grow in moist swampy soil, but secondly because it burns at a high temperature once charcoaled; hot enough to smelt iron from iron ore.² The alder trees at Cutaway often grow with multiple fingers all reaching up from one root source due to coppicing. Coppicing is a practice of cutting a tree at a low point of the trunk to create a 'stool', from which a new tree, often with numerous stems grows. Now that these trees are no longer coppiced, their growth pattern has been rendered abnormal; but there is knowledge held within this irregularity. The trees are witnesses to a time before the excesses of capitalist extraction and they hold that account to this day [fig. 1].

The coppiced alder trees grow alongside the river that runs through Cutaway. The river's current was once harnessed to turn water wheels that in turn pumped bellows that stoked charcoal fires and drove hammers that beat the iron. A symbiotic relation was established, however, humanity's place within that symbiosis became distorted as the developing capitalist regime created a new relation to nature. Before enclosure, those tending to the commons knew that if they took too much timber this winter, then next winter would be cold. When the peasant population was removed from common lands, they were forced into working for a wage. This gave landlords, who were physically and psychologically removed from any lived relation to land, the power and circumstance to extract beyond what the land could provide.

² Today the responsibilities we impose on trees have shifted from source of fuel to carbon sink. 10 to 15 percent of annual carbon emissions are absorbed by forests, therefore deforestation accounts for 11 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. See <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/climate-change/global-warming/global-co2-emissions>.

Occasionally, as a result of the heating and hammering of the smelting process, the iron ore was magnetised. At the time magnetism was commonly thought to be a supernatural occurrence. An inexplicable alchemical attraction, caused by something divine or cosmic. During the sixteenth century and the boom of the Wealden iron industry, Europe saw the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, following a long period of Catholic rule. Religion played a violent role in the everyday life of a large section of society. In his text *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram (2017, 8) claims that “it is likely that the ‘inner world’ of our Western psychological experience, like the supernatural heaven of Christian belief, originates in the loss of our ancestral reciprocity with the animate Earth”. Abram suggests that notions such as a ‘supernatural heaven’ filled a void left by a loss of connection to our ‘ancestral’ position within a global ecology. He uses the word ‘supernatural’ to highlight a separation from the natural, that he claims is linked to,

the modern, civilised assumption that the natural world is largely determinate and mechanical, and that that which is regarded as mysterious, powerful, and beyond human ken must therefore be of some other, non-physical realm *above* nature, ‘supernatural’. (8)

Today we trust that magnetic forces pervade everything from plants and animals to the tides and their moon. Far from being a ‘supernatural’ occurrence, the magnetised ore was instead simply illuminating the complexities and peculiarities of the natural.

Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore claim in *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, that twentieth century environmentalists ‘have ascribed supernatural powers to nature – above all, the supernatural power to make or break civilisation’ (Patel, Moore 2018, 102). This conception of nature is easy to comprehend with the capitalist tools of understanding at our disposal. But it puts us in opposition to nature and forgets that we are inseparable from it. The separation between nature and society was a capitalist invention, generated to act as an organising principle. Patel and Moore go on to claim that

before society could be defended, it had to be invented. And it was invented through the policing of a strict boundary with nature. (46)

This nature/society divide formed a psychological distinction between us as society and nature as oppositional, and thus open to exploitation by society. This abstraction still haunts us today and forms a lasting linguistic, and thus psychological hurdle, as we try to visualise our way into a new world. The scientific revolution was gathering momentum as the Wealden iron industry was expanding, and the success and power of language to form division was not going unnoticed.

Scientific rhetoric enforced divisions not just between elements and species, but also between man and woman, and Europeans and everyone else; colonisers were even cataloguing certain groups of people as plant life, sanctioning further conquest and subjugation. Carolyn Merchant (2019, 2) writes in *The Death of Nature* that science, technology and the economy reconceptualised reality as a machine rather than a living organism. We once recognised nature as a caring and nurturing guardian, a view which kept extractive practices in check. For example, many traditional cultures saw mining

and metal extraction as a process of birthing metals from the uterus of mother earth. To satiate the extraction of earth's creations,

miners offered propitiation to the deities of the soil and subterranean, performed ceremonial sacrifices and observed strict cleanliness, sexual abstinence and fasting before violating the sacredness of the living earth by sinking a mine. (4)

Metal smiths were given almost shamanic importance and saw metal extraction as a great responsibility. Although swathed in anthropocentric logic, these early mines were dug with the recognition that something finite was being extracted. Future capitalist, colonial and scientific expansion in the sixteenth century, sanctioned a newfound lack of restraint. The land at Cutaway is pockmarked with, now shallow, craters due to digging by the iron industry. Even location names in the area are haunted by the mining process. Cutaway Wood backs onto *Hammer* Wood and if you walk up *Slugwash* Lane you will soon find *Furnace* Pond.

Francis Bacon is often heralded as the architect of modern science. He wrote that humanity, directed by the cause of scientific discovery, should "penetrate into the inner and further recesses of nature" (Bacon 2011, 50). This interrogation was sanctioned as a way of ridding society of the perceived dangers of unscrupulous nature. The scientific revolution intended to find answers devoid of alternatives and produce classifications. It removed the space for symbiosis between beings or substances by imposing monocultural thought and stripping life down to its basic elements.

Storm Eunice blew through Cutaway in February 2022. Some trees were felled by the force of the wind. Where they fell an incredibly complex structure of root and mycorrhizal intermingling was uncovered, exposing structures mocking any attempt at individualisation. There was a time not so long ago when people spoke of plant communication as a far-fetched notion. However, through the recognition of mycorrhizal networks created by the hyphae of mycorrhizal fungi joining with plant roots, we now speak of trees, communicating, learning and behaving in recognisably sentient ways, without invoking supernatural forces. The more our knowledge of trees expands the harder it is to tell where one tree ends, and another begins. It seems conceivable that changes like this in ecological rhetoric uncover a finer attunement to nature's peculiarities and could lead to a perception of the life of other living organisms, as being as significant as our own.

While the divisive classifications of science need to be contested, it is also true that today the sciences are finding antidotes to some of their own failings. Isabelle Stengers calls for "an adventure of sciences", as opposed to science "as a general conquest bent on translating everything that exists into objective, rational knowledge" (Stengers 2012, 2). In his text *Entangled Life*, Merlin Sheldrake claims there are words like 'symbiosis', 'holobiont', and 'ecology', that do "useful work" (Sheldrake 2020, 103) as they are not terms of division, but instead open our minds to further possibility. They magnify what they describe, allowing space for imaginative expansion. They are words that help us manifest a different future, "because if we only have words that describe neatly bounded autonomous individuals, it is easy to think that they actually exist" (103).

A greater vocabulary for difference and specificity opens space for greater care and relation-building. But society removed from nature and defined by

capitalist language and logic finds it easy to forget. It is going to take a revival of imagination to envision our way out of climate change, but it is also going to take a practice of remembrance. Perhaps the trees have something to say.

3 A Haunting

One way of knowing that iron ore exists at Cutaway, is a thick orange sludge of ferric oxide that bubbles upward out of the soil. The earth is covered by patches of this rust-coloured primordial ooze. However, it is not only the earth that bleeds, but also the trees. The living wood of alder is a pale colour that turns a deep orange when cut. The illusion of bleeding led to many superstitions concerning alder trees, linking them to mystery and secrecy within myth and folklore. It is also believed that the flowers that grow on alder trees in spring were used to dye the clothes of outlaws such as Robin Hood. Evidently, it is not inconsequential that the tales of Robin Hood, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, took place in the woods. There were, however, other tales of the woods being told [fig. 2].

Erlkönig is a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Well known for his plays and poetry, Goethe also wrote scientific treatises on botany. *Erlkönig* translates as either Elf King or Alder King; a forest creature of Danish origin who lives in alder trees. Goethe's poem narrates the story of a father carrying his son on horseback through an alder wood. When the boy hears the Alder King call for him to dismount and walk through the woods, his father tells him he is just hearing the wind through the leaves, but when the pair reach the other side of the wood, the boy is dead. The poem is one of many of Goethe's works that express his understanding that nature contains elemental powers capable of harm.

Erlkönig was written in Germany in 1782. Enclosure took place in Germany during the sixteenth century; however, it was not put into law until the middle of the eighteenth, reflecting the progression of enclosure in England. *Erlkönig* is just one of many texts published at the time that expresses a distrust or fear of nature. Through capitalist and scientific endeavour nature had been physically, and in the collective consciousness, psychologically changed. A depiction of horror found in nature was being established, one that still haunts culture to this day.

Although climate change due to human action has been discussed since ancient Greece, it was not considered to be of concern until the 1950s. It was not until the 1970s that we saw the first UN environment conference and the term 'global warming' introduced into the public domain. Concurrently, the horrors of possessed nature had a boom of interest in Hollywood cinema in the 1970s and 1980s with films such as *Day of the Animals* (1977), *Long Weekend* (1978), *Kingdom of Spiders* (1977), *Frogs* (1972), *Pumpkinhead* (1988), and *The Toxic Avenger* (1984). *The Evil Dead* (1981) depicts a group of friends visiting a cabin in the woods only to be attacked by vines, roots and the trees themselves. The film contains lines such as 'it was the woods [...] they're alive Ashley!', and 'I have seen the dark shadows moving in the woods [...] whatever I have resurrected [...] is sure to come calling for me' (*The Evil Dead*, 1981). Today we are more likely to see the horrors of nature in the form of disease or pandemic (*Carriers*, 2009; *Contagion*, 2011; *The Bay*, 2012; *The Flu*, 2013; *Virus*, 2019), trees taking revenge upon humanity (*The Happening*, 2008), apocalyptic weather (*The Day After Tomorrow*,

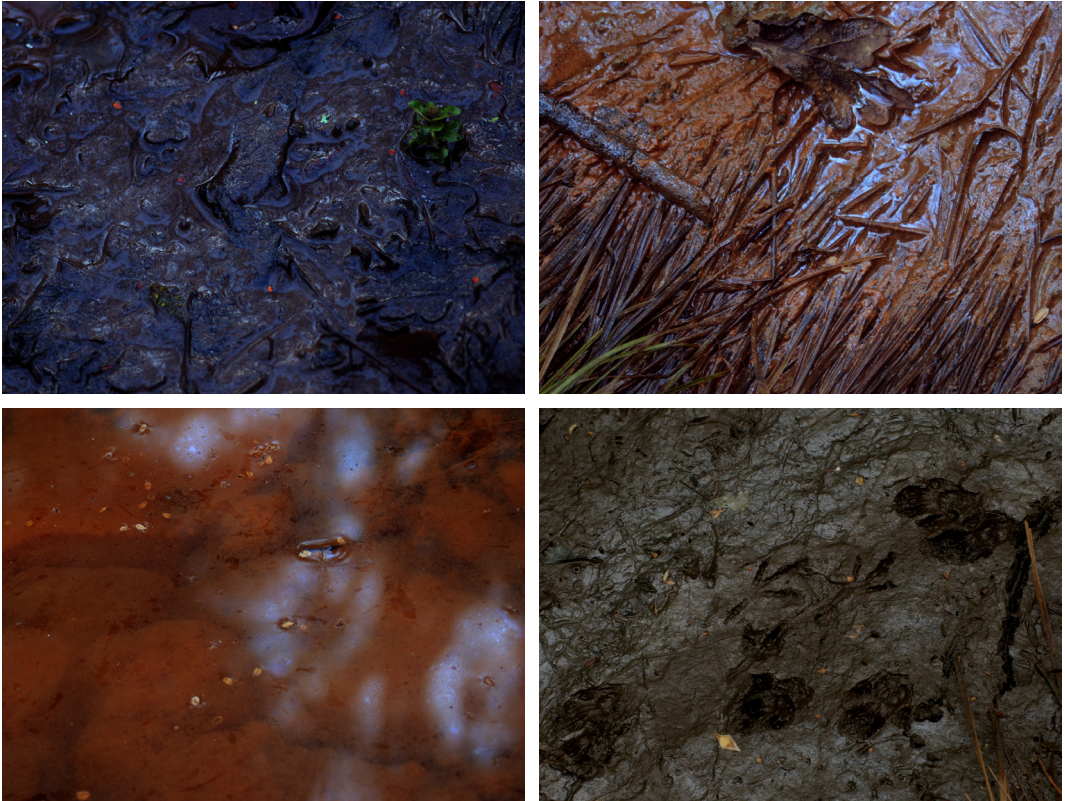


Figure 2 Ferric oxide at Cutaway wood (2021). © Sam Risley

2004; 2012, 2009; *Geostorm*, 2017; *Greenland*, 2020), or nature so abundant the boundaries between ‘man and beast’ become indistinguishable (*Annihilation*, 2018). Many of these examples present nature fighting back, reproducing the idea that we exist in opposition.

Within both folkloric and more contemporary tales of hauntings, nature is often expressed as dead matter, ripe for occupation by the ghosts of deceased humanity. Sladja Blazan (2021, 161) describes a traditional haunting as “the projection of *human* will and ‘energy’ or spirit onto objects or beings which would otherwise remain inanimate”.

With a contemporary recognition of plant life as sentient and containing agency, the horrors of nature are now expressed through conscious hostility. The supernatural power to make or break civilisation becomes fearful because we impose human notions such as revenge onto vegetal life. If the young boy from Goethe’s poem had dismounted from his horse and walked, he may have realised there was little to fear in the woods.

4 A Call to Visitation

When I return to Cutaway, built-up feelings of anxiety or disquiet are often alleviated by the aroma of growth and decay suspended in the damp woodland air. Cutaway was with me now, whether I was thinking about it or not. I had begun to understand the demands of the woods because I was present. But my presence was changing with each visit; this time I was here *again*. The repetition of my stays was a choice, and what started as a practise grew to be a pleasure.

In her essay *It's Not Rocket Science - It's Just Community: Radical Ffestiniog*, Grace Blakeley (2022) refers to *Restanza*. 'Restanza' is a term coined by Vito Teti, an Italian anthropologist who spent much of his life studying the town where he was born. Restanza describes

choosing to stay in a place in a conscious active and proactive way by actively guarding it, being aware of the past while enhancing what remains with an impulse towards the future. (Blakeley 2022, 90)

There is no fix-all for the problems of climate change, and each habitat involves its own set of concerns. Although theoretically understood, without lived experience our psychological separation from land abstracts the notion that we are damaging an environment that nurtures us from afar. This separation needs to be adjusted.

We need more space where people can connect with other forms of life, as access to spaces like Cutaway may help to shift the violence of capitalist abstraction. If we do not remember often, we may forget. As Robin Wall Kimmerer so astutely declares in her text *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 'breathe in its scent and you start to remember things you did not know you'd forgotten' (Kimmerer 2013, 65).

Therefore, as Teti writes of the benefits of staying, I would make the argument for visiting. Visiting in a way that is conscious, curious and nurturing, or as Teti would say in a 'proactive way by actively guarding'. These visits should be as much about listening to the needs of the trees as one's own. Simon and Konrad, the brothers who own the woodland at Haywards Heath, are conscious of its ability to foster productive relationships and keen to encourage that kind of activity. There are no fences around the woodland, and I have met numerous passing travellers during my visits. The brothers invite people that they trust will be cautious, and whilst there are rules, it is the woodland that defines and expresses the rules beyond Simon and Konrad's guidance.

Our visits should not be about simply soothing our anxieties wrought by the stresses of the urban world, for this just supports the inherent problems of the economic market. Nor should it be about escaping the broken city to visit archaic wild nature. For one, there are very few primordial woods left, but beyond that to 'escape' the city is to prop up the insidious notion of a society/nature split. Disregarding one's impact is another concern of visitation. However, through fostering relationships, I believe disregard can develop into guardianship. Establishing this relationship relies on access, and consequently less of the wild spaces in England being fenced off. 92% of England is off limits to the public. The majority of this 92% is not protected woodland but rather golf clubs and the gardens of stately homes. Rebecca Tamás describes in her collection of essays titled *Strangers*, how painfully ironic it is that St Georges Hill in Surrey, where in 1649 Winstanley and the Diggers

established a new commons in protest of enclosure, is now ‘a gated community with huge private tennis courts and golf courses’ (Tamás 2020, 24).

There is also much debate about the efficacy of removing human access entirely and enclosing parts of virgin forests. Although this seems an effective fix to a problem that feels out of control, there must be a way that we can relearn or reimagine a beneficial relation for all. We should not see humanity as the scourge, instead it is our political and social structures that need contesting.

5 Regrowth in Ruin

The woodland at Haywards Heath is laced with a loose spider’s web of paths trodden by travellers over many years. Something tells us to stick to a path, so most of us do, slowly deepening the route rather than creating a new one. Some paths are deep and wide enough for a vehicle, but some are freshly made, so lightly trodden they will not be present tomorrow. None are straight lines; thus, none describe haste. All meander in contact with the woodland, moving between rather than through. But Cutaway is where the paths stop. The density of the plant life constricts human movement and forces one to slow down and “notice their tempo” (Tsing et al. 2017, 10). All signs of passage are swallowed back up, as if one’s presence was an apparition. Each step generates a new organisation of trees in relation to others, and a newly complicated horizon. This is not a horizon of range, but of animated arrangement and rearrangement. The woodland began to feel less like a place, than a happening. It is constant *becoming* pulled into focus my own self as persistently materialising, making me feel as though if I were to lie down and sink into the soil that would be fine, and appropriate, not a nihilistic urge but a proactive one. The sights, smells and sounds alerted me to the fact that the biodiversity at Cutaway was different, denser and more plentiful. Yet this was once a site of industry. The extraction processes and alder coppicing had helped to create and maintain a thick swampy environment. Therefore, the farming practices that took place after the iron industry moved on, were unable to farm birch, oak or cedar, as they had done all around this sanctuary. It was in fact the violent history of industry that had created the conditions for the ecosystem that now protected it.

This recognition seemed at first a sorrowful illumination of a violent history, recognisable as an iteration of the capitalist regime that continues to damage our planet. However, ending the narrative with destruction, we also end with apathy. As Anna Tsing writes in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*,

industrial transformation turned out to be a bubble of promise followed by lost livelihoods and damaged landscapes. And yet: such documents are not enough. If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope. (Tsing 2017, 18)

The acknowledgement of what has occurred at Cutaway since the iron industry moved on, presents the power of nature to return, and beyond that, even thrive. The desire for an archaic untouched nature is only found through conquest and extermination, instead we need to learn to work with our haunted landscapes. Not to fully exhume the horror but instead “negotiate it with flair” (18).

Looking to the future of Cutaway, it is worth stating how effective alder trees are at renourishing the soil in which they grow. The nitrogen-fixing nodules on the alder's roots greatly improve soil fertility, making this tree ideal for reclaiming degraded soils. The soil at Cutaway today is coal black, thick and heavy, and is often marbled by a bright orange vein of ferrous oxide. It supports a thriving ecosystem that is an undulating mass of luminous green in the summer, dappled with bluebells and snowdrops in the spring, and where the ground water pools, tall Irises flourish. Ferns and tangled blackberry bushes stop you trespassing but just beyond, it is possible to catch glimpses of white anemones blooming near the river [fig. 3].

Anna Tsing argues that what we acknowledge by identifying growth in capitalist ruin is that

thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible. (18)

Some stories of regrowth cannot be foreseen, but the unforeseen and precarious relationships formed by indeterminacy are also the cause for many of the relations that create life. In his essay *Getting Along with Nature*, Wendell Berry writes,

what we call nature is, in a sense, the sum of the changes made by all the various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places. (Berry 2017, 160)

We cannot exist apart from nature, yet we cannot exist at all without having some bearing and impression. Humanity needs to learn to know the world again, in all its indeterminacy, recognise that what is good for it is what is good for us, and then bend to its limitations. Just as importantly, we need to do away with capitalist abstractions that separate us from nature and make us fearful of the mysterious and intangible.

Climate change begins as a crisis of inequality, expressed through enclosure, human and non-human subjugation, colonial oppression, the Atlantic slave trade, global patriarchy, consumer culture, and industrial and post-industrial exploitation of natural resources. Climate crisis then compounds and magnifies these inequalities. In 2016 Black Lives Matter tweeted, "the UK is the biggest per-capita contributor to temperature change and among the least vulnerable to its affects".³ I am writing this in the summer of 2022 while the Weald is luminous green with healthy abundance and its inhabitants reside in their dry and temperate homes. At the same time a third of Pakistan is under water. The greatest damages of climate change are going to affect those who have done the least to cause it.

³ <https://twitter.com/ukblm/status/773053025720078336>.



Figure 3 Bloomings at Cutaway wood (2021). © Sam Risley

6 Conclusion

We disregard climate catastrophe due to its intangibility or ‘slowness’.⁴ In the global north at least, we have yet to truly behold its effects, thus it does not compute with our empathy-illiterate capitalist culture. However, following a summer that recorded the hottest day in the UK on record, a fuel crisis sending thousands into poverty, and stories of ‘exceptionally rare’ weather events appearing in the news on a near daily basis, we are beginning to recognise our precarity. We forgot an understanding of the natural world as a place of mysterious intelligence. Its complex ‘strangeness’, which had never previously been perceived as a hostile unknown, was instead the reason a reciprocal relationship was significant. Renewing this relationship has the potential to shape politics, society, culture, education, the economy and manifest a better way of life beyond an averted crisis. A way of life that instils joy through gratifying relations, community, freedom and self-worth. We must remove the human ego that supports inquisition, learn to be receptive rather than expectant and sometimes just be in admiration. Only through a practice at once productive but patient, can we change our liveability. It is important that we slow down and listen, because it is our turn (again) to be re-made by our environment.

The troubled history of Cutaway Wood communicated a great depth of knowledge. To recall it felt significant, as its specificities were helping to unveil the complexities of the whole. My ritual of visitation felt like a first meeting, an introduction to a practice that in its very nature can never be fulfilled but must commit to being consistently revisited. I found no concrete answers, only fragmentary insights revealed through an experience involving smells, temperatures, tastes, textures, comfort, discomfort, joy, unity, solitude and communion. However, to return to a reference from the beginning of this essay, one encounter rings distinctly true; “the only thing sacred about the earth is that we can help make and care for it... well, we with worms withal” (Federici 2019, XVII). Remember, it is fragile, but go visit the woods.

⁴ For further reading on slow violence see Nixon 2011.

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