

Written, offered and read by Harry Josephine Giles at the Rehearsals for Living event at Arika's Episode 11: To End the World As We Know It on Saturday 16 November 2024 at Tramway, Glasgow. One letter in response to the book Rehearsals for Living by Robyn Maynard & Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

A chàirdean còire, Robyn agus Leanne,

I'm beginning this letter to you in the foothills of Beinn Os, deer mountain, sitting among the granny pines. Above me, their red-brown trunks rise to a wisdom of crooked branches casting both light and shade; below me, their ropy roots reach out towards each other, making a guddle of any attempt at a smooth trail. A heady stream hurls through its gorge, sides thick with fern and rowan. The deep funk of old growth forest rises from the springy ground. This is a southernmost scrap of Caledonian Pine Forest, which once covered the Highlands in its merry patchwork, and now hangs on in three dozen remnants of square mile or two. Each has an ecological history stretching back ten millennia to the last glaciation, and a social history for as long as there have been people in the valleys. This forest, Coille Coire Chuilc, the forest of the cirque of reeds, is a place I've come to to seek understanding and restoration, to experience again what matters to me and what I'm struggling with.

I'm beginning here because it's a place I love in an ecology I love, and I want to share that with you both, share with you somewhere I care about, as your letters have shared so much of your own love. Love of particular places, particular communities, particular stories: networks of commitment and responsibility in which you write and for which you struggle. You write to each other of what matters to you – a moment with your daughter, a rebellion against police, a passage from a book, a history that forms the present – and in that offering, that exchange, grow solidarity.

This forest, a shock of green in a yellowing late autumn landscape, is not the way Scotland is most often imagined and sold. It is not a vista of grassy hills, craggy mountaintops, purple heather. The forest is close, thick, intimate. But it is pressed on all sides by that postcard vision: a sheep pasture, a deer park, a grouse moor, a farm of tight-ranked sitka spruce, a gold mine. (The gold mine is not a metaphor.) When the forest reaches out a hand, a sapling, it's bitten off by unchecked grazing, cut down for a road, burned for easier shooting parties, overshadowed by the sun-swallowing tree farm. The forest was cleared and cannot grow because other landscapes are more profitable: land banks for investors, playparks for the wealthy, extractive monocultures. The word used in Gaelic song for this resource-extraction landscape, a landscape deliberately created over a couple of centuries, is fàsach: emptiness, desolation. A landscape cleared not only of its people but of the web of relationships and stories which could animate it. A landscape cleared of its language.

This is the other place I'm beginning, following your lead: an open-eyed view of a history of dispossession. Your book is a history of genocides and resistances, of the entangled catastrophes of transatlantic slavery and settler-colonisation, of how those catastrophes shape the contemporary genocidal order of racial capitalism, and of the forms of Black and Indigenous struggle which, against that order, grow life. Your book enlivened me with this clarity and determination, brought me back to what is essential and true in this historical moment, in the same way the forest does, with the same deep roots and reaching branches.

So here is one part of that history to which and for which I am responsible. In the 18th and 19th centuries the communities who belonged to this forest, this valley, this mountain – and to valleys across the Gàidhealtachd – were cleared from their livelihoods, separated from their dùthchas, by forceful eviction, managed famine, industrial labour, and, sometimes, when landowners considered it necessary in order to more efficiently replace the people with sheep, fire. They were offered instead the white supremacist promise of settler-colonisation, encouraged or paid or coerced to cross the ocean and steal land, to take a more powerful place in the emerging global order. Others came to the city where we'll meet, you and me, Glaschu, the grey-green hollow, Baile Mòr nan Gàidheal, a city being built on the proceeds of slavery, to labour in the shipyards and factories of empire. Some two hundred thousand people, near half the population of the Highlands, were emptied out over the course of a century, and those who remained faced a state policy of language and cultural suppression. Fuadach, clearance, the process of emptying a landscape, of producing fàsach. A process enabled by and enabling of the settler-colonial project. A process which made this nation-state what it is.

I need to be careful in telling this story, because of how it has often been deployed – through transparently false equivalence with settler-colonial violence, or as a means of arguing Scottish victimhood in the service of a contemporary state-building project. Such stories have a lie to them. My reason for this too-brief sketch of what happened in one part of this country is, rather, to better understand how empire emerged in this place in order to better resist empire here and now

Your book understands the nation-state as a project of domination which emerged from genocides and which continues to perpetuate genocidal necropolitics. The racial capitalist nation-state manages who deserves life and who is marked for death through stratified pandemic response, through policing and prisons, through continuing theft of land and life, through the destructive profit-seeking consumption of all the gifts of earth and air. Against that, you describe and enact a methodology for making life: reciprocal sharing in resistance, practices of community-strengthening mutual aid both everyday and extraordinary, a continual learning from, for and with each other.

I'm moved by your book, then, to try to see the place I sit with such eyes. A country whose economy is powered by fossil fuel extraction, arms manufacture, and the financing of both by international banking. A country built on its share of the genocidal legacies of empire. A country where nation-state ambitions are fully integrated with international military and financial orders. A country formed through the logic of clearance, where the clearance of communities and their

languages continues, now driven by holiday lets and second homes, landlords selling the emptied landscape their predecessors made.

And another place where life can be, must be and is rehearsed. I think of the moments when I could reach out to touch life and feel it growing: when the arms factory manufacturing for the genocide in Palestine was shut down for one more day, when the mutual aid network distributed masks at rallies against police violence, when the crowds in the street forced the immigration removal van to leave empty. These moments of refusal, these offers of life.

One last moment which I hold close. In 1852, Andrew Scott, estate manager of the Marchioness of Stafford, landed in a' Chòigeach, the five townships, with the intention of serving eviction papers on the Gaelic community there. He was met by a line of local women – among them the young leaders Anna Bhàn, Màiri NicLeòid, and Cèitidh Chaimbeul – with all the people of the community behind them. They burned his papers, written in a language they did not use, and sent him back. This burning of the law, often by the women of the community, was a method of resistance seen across the Gàidhealtachd, the strategy of rebellion recorded and spread in song. Scott returned a week later accompanied by sherrif officers, and the women met him with a larger crowd, burned his papers again, and bore his boat off the shore and up the hill. He came a third time with a stronger state force, but the women, backed by more people yet, once more burned the eviction notices, and this time the stripped him naked and sent him back across the water. The law was never served: the idea of the law was burned. The people remained, on this occasion not removed and recruited into the service of an expanding genocidal global order. Some of the women's descendants still live where the law was burned, and remember.

I'm sitting with these pines, four days' walk north of Glasgow, twelve days' walk south of a' Chòigeach, via drovers' trails, military roads and sheep tracks, thinking about the offer you've made with this book and what offer to make in return. Thinking about how to tend to this forest, about how to grow life where emptiness has been made. Thank you for your words and your work.

Le spèis mhòr is gach beannachd,

Josie