ARTICLES > INTERVIEW

A Caribbean Lens to the Climate Crisis: A Conversation with Tao Leigh Goffe

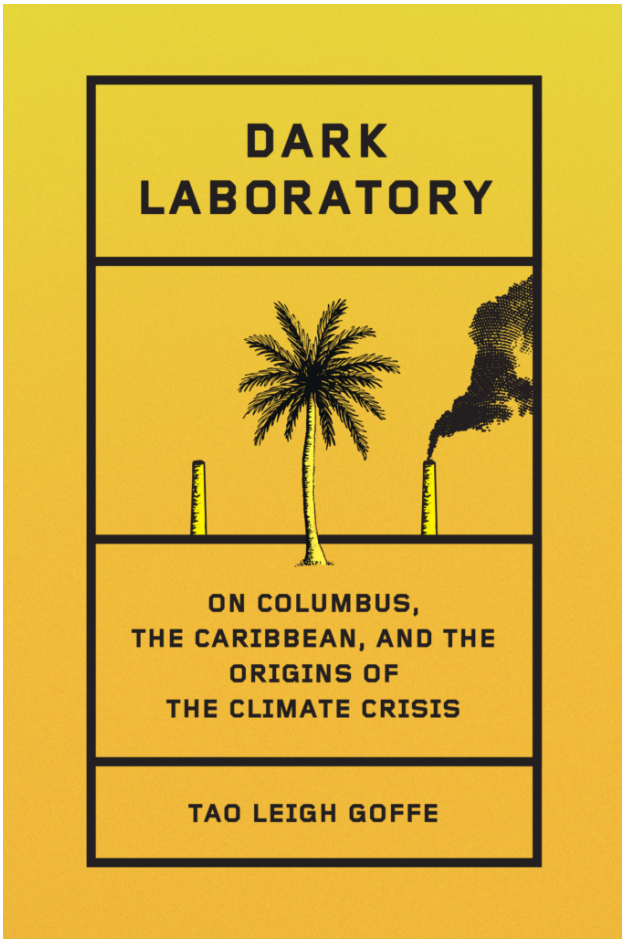
By: Tao Leigh Goffe and Dannah Dennis

CRISES & RESILIENCE

Dennis, Dannah, and Tao Leigh Goffe. "A Caribbean Lens to the Climate Crisis: A Conversation with Tao Leigh Goffe." Just Tech. Social Science Research Council. December 4, 2024. DOI: doi.org/10.35650/JT.3077.d.2024.

Ahead of the publication of her book Dark Laboratory: On Columbus, the Caribbean, and the Origins of the Climate Crisis *(to be released by Doubleday in January 2025), scholar Tao Leigh Goffe discussed with Dannah Dennis, former program officer and postdoctoral fellow of the Data Fluencies Project, the interconnected histories of technology, race, and climate, focusing on how these manifest in the Caribbean. And, looking beyond the doom of the ongoing climate crisis, Goffe reflects on the potential futures the cultural exchanges that happened in the Caribbean can offer us when facing climate change.*

Dannah Dennis (DD): We'd love to know a little bit more about you and your work. Where are you coming from? What was your journey to where you are now as a scholar and an artist?



Tao Leigh Goffe (TLG): Now that I've finished writing my first book, I realized it does chart my artistic journey. It's a climate history, but also an island story that, for me, begins with being born in London, and then migrating as a child to New York City. It's the story of archipelagos and a time travel narrative, across space and time. I joke that it begins in 1492 with Columbus' mistake and goes into the far future where Black and Native peoples achieve sovereignty and Land Back. I see it as Black feminist storytelling and a journey about my ancestry, the people who came before me. I extend this genealogy to a broader ecological question that brings together not only the island of Great Britain and the 40 plus islands of New York, but also Jamaica, where my mother is from.

I look to the islands of the Caribbean Sea, but go back in my ancestry to the Gold Coast of West Africa, and grapple with the relationship between the ocean and the land, especially coastlands. It's also a story about Hong Kong as a British colonial territory, because my grandfather grew up there. A lot of my work has been motivated by silence—the silence that we receive from our grandparents or parents through mysteries about family history. I often think about a silence that is so loud that it keeps secrets from the future. What do we with this silence in between the generations?

It's been a journey of learning how to grapple with what you're not told, but also with what people can't tell you because of past colonial traumas. This book has been a climate journey by reckoning with what climate crisis is. I want to encourage everyone to think about their ancestral background and the environments and ecologies that surrounded their forebearers. What can the soil tell them? I see the soil as a storyteller that narrates a deep sense of ancestry.

DD: Can you tell us a little bit more about how you work with this question of silence, or how you write about these things that are often missing from our historical records or from our visions of the future? What are the texts, objects, archives, or people that you're working with?



Fieldwork on Tetiaroa (Tahiti) July 2023. Photo courtesy of author.

TLG: *Dark Laboratory* is a deeply archival book that draws on the environmentalist histories of the great transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson and his understanding of natural science, spirituality, and cosmology, but also offers climate critiques by people like George Jackson, and the poetics of his reckoning with the Black experience and the carceral landscape in which he found himself as a political prisoner. My book began with a preoccupation with guano—bat and seabird droppings used as fertilizer—which f
ormed a billion-dollar industry in the nineteenth-century, and its hidden history of mining and labor rebellion. People of color were revolting across the world because they were forced to be guano diggers. I'm inspired by C. L. R. James's statement that it's only in the pages of capitalist historians that Black people did not revolt.[1]

In the chapter on guano, I look at the islands contested between the United States and Haiti, which are disputed territory to this day. I look at the African American workers who were conscripted from Baltimore to go to the Haitian island of Navassa, which was known as Devil's Island because the conditions were so horrible. There was a labor uprising in 1889, and several of the white overseers were

killed. There were also Native American laborers who were conscripted to mine guano on this island. It's been great to use the Library of Congress and various other resources to see the print culture that African Americans were producing to raise money for this court case, because it became a Supreme Court case. This is just one of the many ecological case studies or stories from which we can learn about climate crisis as a racial crisis over deep time.

I also heard similar echoes of dissent in Hawai'i where there are guano islands too. And though the story is not told this way, there are examples of rebellion caused by the noxious conditions that guano produces because of the phosphorus and the ammonia in the air. These people were starved and forced to do back-breaking work, and they rebelled against, again, white American overseers. I have also found similar stories in Peru about Indigenous laborers, and also Chinese laborers who were brought there in the nineteenth century. For me, this chapter of racial capitalism has not been read through a climate lens. And yet, Frederick Douglass was writing about it at the time, writing about the trade of debt laborers from China to Peru on the ship the *Dolores Ugarte* in 1871 to power the guano economy.[2]

It says a lot about soil exhaustion in nineteenth-century Europe and the eastern seaboard of the United States, that guano was needed to replenish the soil. But, if we go back even further to understand what guano is, we begin to understand regenerative technologies of the soil developed by the Inca and civilizations centuries ago, using it for terrace agriculture in the Andes. This is to say there are many labor histories that are climate histories, and I want to encourage others to go into the archives, go to the Library of Congress and get to know archivists. Where do you fit within the story of the climate crisis? In order to shape the future, we must reckon with Black and Indigenous knowledge. There are so many futurist technologies that have yet to be invented. The blueprint for these technologies could be based on knowledge from scientific traditions that have been discredited by the West.



Guano miners at the Great Heap, Chincha, Peru. Photo by Henry Moulton (1895). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

DD: You've talked about this a little bit, but I would love to hear more about what you think people don't understand or don't know about the intertwined histories of technology, race, and climate?

TLG: As a professor, I start with simple questions. My education—I have a PhD in American studies—has been led by defining keywords as a method. We can look to Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, written in 1976. We ought to start by defining what technology is, what race is, and what climate is, and we shouldn't just assume these definitions as being universal. A lot of *Dark Laboratory* is about grappling with those terms. I participated in a panel for Black women in tech in DC recently, and we discussed technological process, or progress and process. How do we interrogate the matter of mechanization? I suggested that Black women were forced to be the technology of the plantation, their wombs were imagined as factories of what was called "future issue." I spoke about how enslavers saw each plantation as a laboratory where they sadistically played God. Though people tend to think about the Industrial Revolution as the beginning of the climate crisis, we also need to put it in the context of the crisis of the soil—the plantation. We picture these billowing clouds of smoke as the origin of the climate crisis, but there is actually a deeper timeline.

Guano is the missing link between the agricultural age and the Industrial Revolution. When the Haber-Bosch process of producing fertilizer chemically was developed in 1909, the guano trade abruptly

stopped. I want people to grapple with the consequences of taking guano and all of its potential pathogens, even though it's this incredible substance, to other parts of the world, from the Andes to Ireland.

Thinking about the causes of the Irish Potato Famine, what were the pathogens circulated? Scientists have speculated that it's quite possible that these pathogens, the blight that affected those potatoes and led to the death of more than a million Irish people, originated in the Andes.[3] To me, this is our climate history, this is what leads to many Irish people migrating to the United States, and to Emerson saying, "[T]he German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, and carted over America, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie."[4] It's profound, and we need to understand the climate crisis from a microbial level about the consequences of so-called technological fixes, which is how guano would've been seen in the nineteenth century, as a technology. Emerson did not know it at a microbial level, but guano had impacted the Irish on a deep level, perhaps causing blight.



Coastal Ecologies research, Sag Harbor, August 2024. Photo courtesy of author.

There's a cascade of ramifications when you uproot and transport ecologies across the globe. There are philosophical questions, and also ethical ones, regarding the loss of human life and deforestation. These decisions to export guano were probably made by individuals who may have called themselves scientists,

and here we are with these problems in the twenty-first century caused by a person in the nineteenth century who decided this was “science.”

DD: Man, I could ask so many follow-up questions. I’m so excited to read the book. Over the past few years, I’ve been really getting into plants, gardening, native gardening, and thinking about the consequences of invasive species on local environments.

Can you tell us a little bit more about why you decided to write this book? Because you have so many really rich strands of thinking and interests in your work: sonic technologies, family histories and genealogies, photography and visual art. What was it about this project that made you want to take the time to focus on it?

TLG: It’s a great question, I’ve been writing some form of this book since 2017. My former job at Cornell, where I spent four years, was a position in which the job posting called for someone specializing in Black and queer feminist ecologies. So, I’ve been talking about this idea of the laboratory, Afro-Asian bioengineering, and the island as a laboratory for a long time, and all of what you just mentioned is in the book. I begin with mountain ballads. The sonic technologies of how messages were sent across mountains is important to how I think about sound as a method for deep listening in wildlife, and grapple with the sounds that we’re losing, that we’ll never hear again due to species extinction. There are so many extinction events that we don’t even know are taking place. What is genocide but an extinction event?

My research on guano started in 2013. While I was pursuing my PhD, I was more of a literary scholar and was reading into the world of James Bond. Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, has a novel that’s all about a fantastical guano island named Crab Key. (By the way, he named James Bond after a Pennsylvania ornithologist.) Fleming was a lover of nature; he also included very racist stereotypes in the book. His service during World War II as a British naval officer makes sense of these stereotypes when you consider the British Empire and how the militaristic imagination is also the naturalist’s imagination.

In October of 2023, I visited the archives of Kew Gardens in the United Kingdom, and there you begin to see the militaristic logic of royal botany as well. I was reading a little bit about your research and saw that we both have an interest in Nepal. I’ve learned from Nepalese friends of mine that rhododendrons (*lali gurans*) are their national flower, which I included in *Dark Laboratory*. One of my chapters is on botanical gardens, examining how from the eighteenth century through the twentieth century Scottish plant hunters would go to places like Nepal, across South Asia to China. I come to terms with the myth of the English country garden. As a child, I was taught to sing the song “English Country Garden” about how many kinds of sweet flowers grow in an English country garden. I never realized how imperial it is. Therefore, my book answers questions through travel and fieldwork, making sense globally of the doom of the climate crisis. It also charts how I am finding a lot of hope in how we can connect globally beyond these borders of the nation state in order to support climate technologies and strategies that could come from the Global Majority.

It’s exciting to think about technologies originating in Asia, Africa, and South America, and to go beyond the West—even though that’s where I am from—to decenter England and the United States in order to

center collective ways of grappling with the next stage of this environmental and racial crisis.

DD: I'd love to hear more about those hopeful imaginings of what might come next or what could come next, because it's easy to get caught up in these feelings of doom when thinking about climate. Like, we've screwed up everything, now what? But your book is also promising that there are lessons to be learned about repair and regeneration.

TLG: I have a deep sense of climate optimism. Even though everything has been ruined, I do think that if we can sit with the origins of the crisis, then maybe there is hope for another future. Grace Dillon, whose book *Walking the Clouds* is about Indigenous futurism and science fiction, poses an Anishinaabe cosmological question as one asked by peoples who have survived multiple timelines of apocalypse. Being a Black woman, I also contend with deep time, and the various layers of colonialism and colonial time. When you look not only at British colonialism, but also French, Spanish, Dutch, Danish colonialisms, and the worlds that they foreclosed, the battleplan of conquest was always the same. They built directly on top of the infrastructure of the lands that they colonized, because they recognized the scientific value and knowledge of Natives. If we go back to the nineteenth-century guano trade, the Europeans and Americans actually understood and learned from Andean science.



Using a hydrophone in Mo'orea (Tahiti) to record coral reef sounds, July 2023. Photo courtesy of author.

We must interrogate the scientific method, by questioning that process of discrediting non-Western

science. The world's knowledge is much more vast than just Western science. The science that got us into the climate crisis, which has chiefly been extractive, won't be the science to get us out of it. I've done research over the years at the Geological Society in England and at The Royal Academy, and it's just stunning that they continue to push geoengineering, carbon capture, deep-sea mining as solutions. Can we not see that mining has been the entire problem? What we're extracting from the earth, the people that are required to be disposable to do that labor, but also just why would that be the solution?

There are just so many other worlds. The original title of the book was *After Eden*. For me, "after" carries the optimism of hope in what comes next. I don't think it has to be doom and despair, I don't think the racial crisis was inevitable. I don't think the climate crisis was inevitable. Yes, we are in it, but capitalism was not inevitable either. There are many other systems and markets of value and exchange, and we ought to be looking at other traditions of natural science, other parts of the world and their technologies. For me, the Garden of Eden was an evocative way to think about this story that we have been told, at least in the West, about what it means to be punished for seeking knowledge, and the gendered ways in which Eve is blamed for eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

Thinking about the Caribbean Archipelago as island laboratories, I began to think about the many other religions that continue to live in the Caribbean beyond Christianity. I thought about Jewish refuge from the Spanish Inquisition, Muslim communities, Chinese cosmologies, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, all of the gods that live in the Caribbean garden. For me, within each of those different cosmological traditions, we could find a pathway to the science of that part of the world. There's a way of living and being a part of nature instead of having to be afraid or to extract resources from nature.

There are so many possible worlds. That's where the optimism lies for me, in connecting these various and disparate parts of the globe, because if we do not have what I call "affective plate tectonics" where we can't feel for other people's natural disasters, then we really are doomed. The final chapter of the book is called "Affective Plate Tectonics." It's about not being numb to what is happening on the other side of the globe, connecting Haiti and Nepal, and thinking about the fault lines and the kinds of friction that divide us when our fate is shared, come what may, in the climate crisis.

DD: You mentioned that the title has changed now, what title have you settled on?

TLG: The book began as *After Eden*, it is now *Dark Laboratory*: *On Columbus, the Caribbean, and the Origins of the Climate Crisis*.

DD: Okay, I love this. Let's talk a little bit more about that term, Dark Laboratory, because it has come up in our conversation, but I want to take a minute to really focus on that.

TLG: Everything in the past four years has been about climate research organization I founded: the Dark Laboratory. It became clear to me, my agent, and my editorial team at Doubleday that this should be the title, because the book is about my research practice, my art practice, and the fact that I actually founded a lab with this name. So, summer 2020 is when Dark Laboratory began, it was me wanting to examine the nexus of stolen land and stolen life, which overlaps in upstate New York, where I was working in Ithaca,

with African American and Native histories, but also futures.

It's not to say that stolen land is only Native dispossession and stolen life is only about the transatlantic slave trade. It's actually reckoning with the dark blueprints of the Americas, which, for example, manifests as Native American people enslaved in New York City. My lifelong research question is that of the Dark Laboratory as a practice that is deeply collaborative and based in technology, putting tools into the hands of collaborators. So, I teach the Lab as a course at Hunter College, and I'm planning to build a sound system with students, a deeply interdisciplinary practice, wherein we can converse with scientists so that we don't have this segregated or extractive relationship of knowledge production. We collaborate and publish, producing theory and research under this umbrella of the Dark Laboratory.

It comes from my own training, having been part of working groups in graduate school, and that being inspired by Stuart Hall, his intellectual tradition, and his influence on my professors at Yale. But also, as a Black British person, I center this collaborative labor question. Some of what we've done at Dark Laboratory, and I write a bit about it in the book, is publishing articles together. One of our recent peer-reviewed publications has 32 coauthors. It is called "The World We Became: Map Quest 2350, A Speculative Atlas beyond Climate Crisis."[5] It is a speculative deep dive into the far future, and it asks a lot of the questions that we just discussed about how we imagine the world in terms of climate crisis. Will we all be underwater?



Fieldwork on Tetiaroa (Tahiti) July 2023. Photo courtesy of author.

In that project, people were able to think about different cosmologies, trickster gods, different mythologies, and ways of time travel, imagining how we need to have a radical sense of imagination to survive this ecological crisis. Dark Lab is a space for experimentation. I'm glad that it's come full circle and that the book is titled *Dark Laboratory*; it allows me to explain my process, and how it's influenced by Toni Morrison and her 1992 book of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark*, as well as her atelier model of teaching. I was a student of hers in 2008, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about America as a haunted house, but I see great power in playing in the dark.

Even though the laboratory is a violent idea in terms of the colonial experimentation done on people, people who are my ancestors, we can still take that question of the laboratory as a space for regenerative potential technologies that have yet to be invented. It's really about these kinds of undared forms of collaboration.

DD: You've already given us some great insights into the sources that shape your work, from Toni Morrison, to Frederick Douglass, to many others. But I'm curious, what are you doing now? What are you listening to? What are you reading and watching? Are you doing any gardening? What's informing your work and your practice right now? And what might you recommend others to check out?

TLG: With my new job as associate professor at Hunter College, CUNY, I've been thinking about New York City and deep time, focusing on my art practice and wanting to do more site-specific and site responsive work. My first solo art installation took place earlier this year at Wave Hill, which is a garden in the Bronx, titled *Plot and Provision: Crate-Digging*. I've been really reflecting on 50 years of hip hop, and what that means, sitting with the vibrations and the soundtracks of Black life in New York City. I've been doing a lot of primary source reading, so not fiction, but lately I've been excited by primary source documents from Dutch New York. Dark Lab is partnered with the New York Society Library, which was founded in 1754, and it's been great to work with their librarians and staff as I begin new research on enslaved African people and enslaved Native people, who lived here in the seventeenth century in the Bronx.

The archive is taking me on a very interesting journey. It's been great to be able to work with the curators in the Bronx at Wave Hill, and to be able to think about the fact that in the space where my installation was, the plants from outdoors have been brought indoors.

I'm taking a break from words now that I've wrapped up the book before I jump back into the next one, and am very open to visual art as opposed to new stacks of books. I am cocurating an art exhibition with artist Cecile Chong in Brooklyn, featuring the artists Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Sim Chi Yin, Jeremy Dennis, and Johann Diedrick. I mentioned earlier in our conversation a fascination with how loud silence can be, and this is the theme of the show which will take place at Tiger Strikes Asteroid gallery. Later, I do want to carve out some time to read novels for pleasure. I am slowly finding my way back to fiction.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Footnotes

1 C. L. R. James (J. R. Johnson, pseud.), "The Revolution and the Negro," *New International* V, December 1939, 339–343, https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1939/12/negro-revolution.htm.

2 Frederick Douglass, "Cheap Labor," *The New National Era*, August 17, 1871.

3 Nicholas Wade, "Testing Links Potato Famine to an Origin in the Andes," *New York Times*, June 7, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/07/world/testing-links-potato-famine-to-an-origin-in-the-andes.html.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/fate.html.

5 Tao Leigh Goffe et al., "The World We Became: Map Quest 2350, A Speculative Atlas beyond Climate Crisis," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 7, no. 1–2 (2022): 5–49, https://doi.org/10.1163/23523085-07010002.