



# FEAR OF A DEAD WHITE PLANET

**MORE WORLDS COLLECTIVE**

JOSEPH MASCO, TIM CHOY, JAKE KOSEK, & M. MURPHY

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# PART 0

# INVITATION

How do we study when the planet is on fire?

This question could go many ways. One could take it as a practical question. Which methods, tools, and concepts might help to solve the imminent problem of planetary emergency? One could hear it rhetorically: When so much is going wrong materially in the world, how could one possibly turn to studying as a course of action? Either of these could be followed in turn by interrogations of principles: What is *solving*? Who is the *we*? What is an *emergency* and for whom?

For our part, we assume that anything that big, that totalizing, that monumental a bummer—literally a planetary condition—implicates the organizations and practices of the university in a serious way. That a range of total Earth emergencies could develop so easily and garner such tepid responses in an age of abundant research and expert communication does not speak well for existing academic disciplines. They—their ways of slicing objects and methods, and their conventions for establish-

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ing authority and coherence—have been participants and executors in the current catastrophic state of things.

So, how to study when the planet is on fire? *Fear of a Dead White Planet* takes this question as a prompt for speculative thought and methods. We try to turn the question of *how* into an opening for stepping toward something different. This book is an experiment at building study in a joined-up way, the four of us, and maybe you too. It is an effort to lay some speculative groundwork for approaching the treatment of massive “environmental” problems differently. Our marking of “environmental” in quotes reflects one of our aims, which is to problematize the naturalized registration of drastically changed and changing lands, waters, and airs as “environmental” problems. We reject One Worldisms—that is, the assumption of a singular human species/planetary relation that can be characterized in universal terms—in favor of recognizing the world of many worlds: that is, the multitude of ways of living and being.<sup>1</sup> We become unfaithful to beloved concepts, like *planet*, *environment*, *land*, and *species*. We do so because, in the university, the fear of environmental chaos and efforts to stem it are often linked to insidious defense mechanisms protective of White Supremacy’s foundations. We diagnose efforts to save the planet that maintain structures and forms of Whiteness as a syndrome we call Fear of a Dead White Planet. The singular planet it posits and venerates, far from needing saving, is a formulation of colonial Whiteness to be rejected.

Our ways into this problem take several shapes. We challenge the epistemic commitments and material practices of contemporary environmental research entangled in this pernicious syndrome. We join up with existing communities that already think against, and not just with, the university. We seek methods to recognize other relations and activate collective efforts to make less violent conditions. As an effort to build study in a joined-up way against the logics of White Supremacy, this book embraces the joints, not the smooth resolutions. Instead, we come to see study in all its unruliness as a vital part of worlding, that is, creating conditions and relations for coming together in less violent ways, even as we are in the middle of it all.

1 We take seriously the invitation of the Zapatistas to think this way and follow colleagues like Marisol de la Cadena in this approach. See Subcomandante Marcos (2022); and de la Cadena and Blaser (2018). In addition, see Povinelli (2001); de la Cadena (2015); Escobar (2020); and Omura, Otsuki, Satsuka and Morita (2018).

The result is a punctuated, difficult, even dizzying read, a book that is strident yet also repeatedly resets its questions, terms, and tone. This is purposeful. We are for hesitations, for taking things apart, for uncomfortably knitting relations together, for breaking some things and letting others die, as we are also for noticing what gets generated or lost in the differences between attempts to do study differently. We are after a form of convivial ongoing study across difference to build less hostile worlds, in the plural, here and now, again and again. We cultivate a kind of study as a collective modest terraforming amid the many fires. To begin, let's revisit the concept of the planet. Why on Earth do we think we even know what a planet is?

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