

Crist, "Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization"

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Book Review

Crist, Eileen. *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Eileen Crist's *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* comes into print as a prescient text, strong medicine for these days in which we find ourselves. She has gathered bitter berries and fertile fruit from her life as a scholar and as an articulate voice for wild nature, offering this text as an antidote to these times of rapidly changing environmental circumstances marked by climate disruption, expanding human numbers, and a disquieting loss of species. Normally staid scientists and journals are speaking of "ecocide," "biological annihilation," and "ecological Armageddon" as plant and animal numbers are extirpated beyond our ability to comprehend the full scope of the losses (Ceballos et al. 2017; Hallmann et al. 2017).

More recently, in the report "A Global Deal for Nature (GDN)," a team of conservation biologists mapped out "a science-driven plan to save the diversity and abundance of life on Earth ... [to] avoid catastrophic climate change, conserve species, and secure essential ecosystem services" (Dinerstein et al. 2019, 1). This arrived in tandem with a United Nation's assessment of dangerous declines in nature's resiliency, and the unprecedented acceleration of species extinction rates (IPBES 2019). Both documents call unequivocally for securing half the planet as biodiversity preserves if the specter of a sixth extinction and climate chaos is to be averted. Audacious as proposals to set aside half the planet for wild nature may once have sounded, the best conservation science now tells us this is imperative for the sake of a habitable Earth.

It is into this milieu that *Abundant Earth* arrives with its fearless call for nothing less than a total reformation of human civilization on the planet. Cataloging human impacts over the most recent 10,000 years of the Holocene, sometimes dispassionately, sometimes with a smoldering rage, our author concedes that while each story calls out for its own attention, it is "only by congregating them in our mind's eye that we can grasp the systemic scope of the crisis under way" (Crist 2019, 11).

But if this was all Crist did in her work it would be unbearably forlorn. Again and again, *Abundant Earth* returns us to the miracles of wild nature with its variety of life, abundance of wild species, complexity of ecological relations, and diversity of nonhuman forms of awareness. Within this "flame of life" is a "richness that is self-perpetuating and builds more of itself over time" (12). Here, in the cauldron of earth's beauty and creativity lies a wild freedom from which humans and the more-than-human-world have arisen. In the end, *Abundant Earth* is a text rooted in freedom.

Fundamental to this work is the idea of “human supremacy,” the “collective, lived belief system that humans are superior to all other life forms and entitled to use them and their places of livelihood” (3). It is a belief system inculcated into us from birth, so much a part of our development it becomes an unconscious lens, literally determining the way we perceive the world. Through this perception the Earth and all its wonders become a cache of “resources,” that most baneful of appellations serving to strip the living, breathing planet of its enchantment and beauty (see below).

This anthropocentric worldview has been part of the human experience for a relatively short time, a scant two percent of our species’ tenure here on Earth. The advent of civilization arose about 6,000 BCE with the domestication of livestock and crops, sedentary settlements, and accelerated population growth. Luminaries of Deep Ecology such as Paul Shepard and Gary Snyder have decried this change of humanity’s place in the biosphere:

In the old ways, the flora and fauna and landforms are *part of the culture*. The world of culture and nature, which is actual, is almost a shadow world now, and the insubstantial world of political jurisdictions and rarefied economies is what passes for reality. We live in a backward time. (Snyder 1990, 37)

The idea that wild nature had been created for human beings became increasingly systemized through the time of classical antiquity and the emergence of Judeo-Christian theology. The Middle Ages were marked by rigid anthropocentrism, giving rise to hierarchical ideas such as the Great Chain of Being, with humans at the top. It might be assumed modernity supplanted such narratives to suit a more secular world, but in practice it took the Chain of Being and “gave it a new twist” (Crist 2019, 67).

Crist, with the eye of a critical theorist, states that the “most overarching of modern-age anthropocentric concepts is that of *natural resources*, which linguistically crystallized the post-Cartesian secular view of nature as purely material, mechanical, and lacking inherent purpose” (67). Continuing, Crist says “the idea of resources sets up the nonhuman world as an instrumental field stripped of its interiority, sentience, luminosity, and self-being” (72). She concludes: “Because nature’s domination is the sine qua non of civilization, we must remake civilization in its totality” (73).

I have gone on at some length explicating the import of human supremacy to *Abundant Earth*, and have only touched the margins. But, it is from the foundation of this sociohistorical construct that Crist begins assembling the stories of human impact during the past 10,000 years in a way that allows us to “grasp the systemic scope of the crisis under way” (11).

While anthropogenic climate disorder exacerbates virtually all ecological impacts of our species, even in the absence of climate disruption we would be in a world of hurt. Human expansionism

has brought us the juggernaut of expanding world economies; exponential population growth; the sprawl of industrial infrastructure, both urban and rural; and industrial agriculture with its impacts on fresh water, topsoil, native species, and wild nature. All too often the refrain of human ingenuity and innovation is invoked as justification for these instances of environmental fallout. *Abundant Earth* refers to these refrains as “piecemeal and techno-managerial” and as “[i]mplicitly confirming ... the human supremacist worldview” (74).

Crist’s work is a systematic disquisition on a range of topics we find ourselves confronting in the early decades of the twenty-first century. These are informed by her studies in natural history, sociology, and critical theory, as well as Deep Ecology, bioregionalism, and a life lived contemplating the fate of the Earth. While Part 1 of *Abundant Earth* focuses on “The Destruction of Life and the Human Supremacy Complex,” Part 2 serves as a critique of environmental thought and why it has “largely desisted from opposing anthropocentrism” (3).

Pulled together under the rubric of “Discursive Knots” – a metaphor from Buckminster Fuller and parsed as “rehearsed patterns of reasoning ... that interfere with the flow of imagination and action in an alternative direction” (4) – the chapters in Part 2 ask why a movement arguably birthed in North America as a counterpoise to the acquisitiveness and rapaciousness of the United States, lost its way toward illuminating the reciprocity of the human and nonhuman worlds. A movement nurtured by Thoreau’s wish “to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness” (Thoreau 1988, 93) and Leopold’s love for “wild things and sunsets” (Leopold 1949, vii); a movement some of us discovered 50 years ago on the first Earth Day, in a time when it seemed the world might be heading in a new direction.

The first chapter in this section looks at the question “Is the Human Impact Natural?,” initially taking on the advent of agriculture and its diffusion across the globe. Critical to this discussion is the insight that the first agriculturalists were real human beings, acting “within specific contexts of social structure and organization” (Crist 2019, 89), not people qua natural entity. Agriculture developed in fits and starts over some millennia, coming and going with changing climate and other factors – historical, cultural, and linguistic (Scott 2017).

I am reminded of the Canadian anthropologist Hugh Brody and his *The Other Side of Eden*, where he makes the counterintuitive point that over time it is agricultural societies that are on the move, with hunter-gatherer cultures being the more settled:

The model of a growing population with a recurrent demand for new farmland and pasture may reveal the process by which hunter-gatherers, despite the strengths and achievements of their forms of economy and social life [high-protein diets, strong bodies, long lives, egalitarian systems], disappeared. The

implication is that they did not adopt agriculture so much as lose to it. (Brody 2000, 147)

Certainly, the genocidal assault upon indigenous peoples of the so-called 'New World' by invading cultures steeped in delusions of human supremacy bears witness to these incursions. These dynamics are still in play today, from the tropical rainforests of the Amazon with their agro-industrial cattle ranches and soybean operations, to the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge, known to the Gwich'in people as the "Sacred Place Where Life Begins," an abiding place sustaining the millennial old culture of these indigenous Alaskans.

Moving on from agriculture's origins and subsequent fallout, *Abundant Earth* turns to the current fascination with "Anthropocene-think" as another strategy casting human impacts as natural. The idea of the Anthropocene has been co-opted by those who think of themselves as ecomodernists, a new version of environmentalism valuing wild nature for the ecosystem services it provides humans at the expense of biodiversity, and for whom the idea of wilderness is an obsolete anachronism.

One of the most galling marks of this stream of environmental thinking is the veil of neutrality embedded in their language, with catchwords like "natural capital," "novel ecosystems," and "sustainability." In the vernacular of Anthropocene-think, humans are not responsible for the depredation, extirpation, or destruction of the natural world, but are rather shaping, transforming, or simply changing the biosphere; the former so emotional and biased, the latter so much more dispassionate and civilized.

Advocates of the "new environmentalism" are unapologetic for their anthropocentric focus naturalizing human domination, and, in their most hubristic guise, refer to *Homo sapiens* as "the god species." What they fail to recognize is not only that their science and ethics are suspect, but more importantly, that the loss of wild nature is a profound and disheartening disaster to the spirit of good-hearted people everywhere.

After a nuanced treatment of how the Pleistocene overkill has been represented, Crist proffers a cogent summation of why the view that human nature is to blame for the ecological crisis is so persuasive:

To subvert the compelling illusion of human specialness and the foundationalist fiction of Earth as humanity's property calls for arduous efforts in deprogramming at personal and communal levels, cultivating new ways of seeing, questioning normalcy, ... engaging in ecological restoration projects, and generally venturing in practice and imagination into new possibilities of being human in the world. ... Discovering life after human supremacy will involve protracted work carried forward by future people. (Crist 2019, 110)

Echoing Crist's conclusion to this section, "We can call that revolution coming home, or we can call it becoming intimate" (112).

Abundant Earth proceeds from a critical view of human nature to a spirited defense of Nature's nature qua wilderness. What began as an academic debate in the 1990s has metastasized into the broader culture, becoming a red herring for every interest keen on exploiting the more-than-human-world, from corporations to policy makers to weak-kneed environmentalists. Talking points debunking wilderness can include: wilderness no longer exists due to the absence of pristine nature; untrammelled wilderness has not existed for millennia as a result of the impacts of indigenous people; the argument that people are part of nature (a curious rebuttal coming from those most invested in separating themselves from wild nature); and finally, the idea that wilderness is a cultural construct centered in America. Crist carefully dissects the fallacy in each of these attempts to discredit the idea and *reality* of wilderness.

As a denizen of western North America, I have been blessed with the endowment of public lands, wild landscapes serving as a geography of hope for our democracy. Thus, I was charmed by Crist's handling of the charge that wilderness is a cultural construct. After reviewing the impacts of Euro-American settlement on North America's biosphere and its indigenous populations – "it was a massacre" – she moves on to the "conceptual transformation" effected by a cadre the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Muir, and Dickinson, who "broke rank from their society and blazed a different path" (133). It was a path leading away from the "hideous and desolate world" of the colonists and early settlers, to a vision of "a beautiful and fecund one," an "*actual* deconstruction and reconstruction of a nature concept from a purely negative referent to one redolent with abundance and stature" (135).

Let us not delude ourselves. We are living in a time when wilderness lands are under intense assaults from people who are beyond criminal. But the call to elaborate upon the idea of wilderness, birthed from the American experience, may serve as a gift to the "universal heritage of humanity" (135). Wilderness philosopher and mountain guide Jack Turner has encouraged this elaboration, comparing it to what the Japanese did with their tea ceremony (Turner 2013, 30). Perhaps this very voicing may help to revivify the passion we will need to set aside half the Earth for wild nature, ushering in a new vision on this continent and beyond – Snyder's "culture of wilderness;" Crist's movement "toward an ecological civilization."

In her final chapter of the "Discursive Knots" section, Crist takes on a topic that could have caused a less capable writer to stumble. Walking a narrow line, she analyses the divide between the freedoms becoming increasingly available to people of middle class economies around the world and the assumptions of "human supremacy" associated with that class, with the loss of freedoms inflicted upon the biosphere leading to the loss of variety, abundance, and complexity of the

more-than-human world – in short, the ecocide playing out in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

There is a rightful consensus that “every member of society should have a share in its goods” (Mumford 1964, 6, quoted in Crist 2019, 141), a consensus that has pulled millions of people out of abject poverty in recent decades. Yet with this achievement comes an inclination to look away from the impacts this has had on the “natural world and nonhuman autonomy” (142), either through denial or neglect. And, let it be said, this dark shadow is shamelessly aided and abetted by the so-called ‘free markets’ of corporate capitalism.

Through trenchant analyses, *Abundant Earth* examines “modern hegemonic freedoms secured by linguistic, technological, and institutional social structures, which work together reinforcing and supporting one another” (Crist 2019, 143), and how these structures play out in the beleaguered oceans, upon the web of infrastructure around the world, and across the ancient migratory paths of salmon and orcas, warblers and raptors, bison and caribou. Through these examinations, the reader gains a better sense of what freedom in the nonhuman world means, if only through the cataloging of what has been lost.

Crist begins, “At its deepest layer, the crisis of life in our time is a crisis of freedom” (161). And she continues, “We must deconstruct human entitlement ... while simultaneously opening toward an authentic and expanded understanding of freedom ... to envision a human way of life that will enable the realization of a broadly shared ideal for all inhabitants of the biosphere. We must cultivate new ways of speaking, new ways of seeing, and a new imagination of Earth and ourselves within it” (162). Crist concludes, “Freedom is the highest value in existence because it is the indispensable condition for the realization of the full potential of being and becoming ... [c]reating an ecological civilization is foremost about honoring freedom in its authentic and expanded meaning” (163).

The concluding chapters of *Abundant Earth* are framed as a “Scaling Down and Pulling Back,” presenting strategies of humility and restraint the human family will need to embrace if we are to make it through the bottleneck of the twenty-first century. Looking at the often quoted figure of ten billion people on Earth as inevitable by the end of the century, we are reminded that “the point to concentrate on [is that] a world of billions of consumers will only be possible by turning a life-abundant planet into a human resource base” (168), held together ““only through the infinite management of its own collapse”” (Invisible Committee 2009, 14, quoted in Crist 2019, 169). The chapter’s title, “Dystopia at the Doorstep,” suits such a prospect well.

Without doubt, humanity’s most destructive impact on the biosphere is industrial food production, through row-crop farming, livestock production, and the strip mining of the oceans’

once-fabulous abundance. In a statement characteristic of Crist's rhetorical voice, she writes, "If present trends continue ... in the next fifty years humanity will produce as much food as people have consumed over the course of human history – a statement difficult to wrap one's mind around" (177).

Abundant Earth makes a strong case for embracing sustainable agriculture systems rooted in ecological practices and, over time, put into place on a worldwide basis. Along with a humane and just reduction in worldwide population, such an agroecology would not only produce healthier food, it would restore the quality of soils and water, sequester carbon from the atmosphere, and support wildlife.

"Dystopia at the Doorstep" is followed by "Welcoming Limitations," taking us back to human expansionism and the overconsumption fueled by globalizing world economies. Much of this penultimate chapter is focused on strategies for "stabilizing and gradually reducing the global population" (186), an imperative to reducing consumption. Crist has written extensively on this topic over the years, and these pages reflect a lifetime of deep reflection on, arguably, the most significant issue addressed in this, her most substantive work to date.

In systematically addressing an optimal limit for human numbers in concert with Earth's carrying capacity, Crist examines a variety of factors. Even the most aggressive measures to reduce consumption will simply hold current rates steady if population continues to grow. Another factor is the manner in which the sheer number of people in the world conspires to diminish biodiversity and accelerate the extinction crisis, the poor through their direct impacts on the lands and waters they directly inhabit, and the consumers of developed economies not only through their direct impacts, but also through their ability to tap into worldwide mass-consumption markets. Finally, a lowering of human numbers achieved over multiple generations is called for if agriculture is to move from an industrial model to an ecological one. With industrial agriculture being the most catastrophic impact on the Earth, it should be no surprise that a fundamental shift in how we obtain our food to avert life's crisis on the planet is required.

Crist is forceful in her prescription:

All considerations in hand, a global population closer to two billion people is an initial ecologically sound and rational goal, enabling the conservation of a biodiverse planet, a connected global civilization, ... [an] equitable standard of living for all people, and the co-flourishing of humanity and the living world. (191)

Crist follows this prescription for two billion people with a call for a reframing of the population question and for a reduction of global population by enhancing human rights. These calls make a persuasive case for the elevation of women's status across the world in a variety of just and compassionate ways, notably, through the provision of education and reproductive health care.

Finally, she returns to food. In an ecological civilization, “[f]ood is the hub from which all spokes of life radiate” (211), and “[t]he heart of food is relationship” (212). She quotes Wendell Berry: “[W]hen we change the way we grow our food, we change our food, we change society, we change our values” (Berry 2009, xii, quoted in Crist 2019, 213). Closing this chapter on welcoming limitations, we read, “When humanity chooses to acknowledge and honor all the relationships that inhere in food, *everything* will change – indeed everything will fall in place. Oddly enough, it is (almost) that simple” (Crist 2019, 213).

The final chapter is eponymously titled “Restoring Abundant Earth,” and its early pages draw the reader into the plenum of the biosphere. From genes, varieties, species, and subspecies, to ecosystems, ecotones, and biomes; from the import of diversity for the continuation of life, to the role of ‘change’ in the perpetuation of that diversity; from the two million-year-old lifeways of gopher tortoises in Southeastern US longleaf pine forest ecosystems, to the abundance of life in the oceans sustaining ten million whales and billions of marine predators living in historical times; and on and on to the birds in the skies, the soil underfoot, and the thunderous migrations of wildebeest, bison, and caribou across planet Earth. Crist reiterates, “The nature of life is interdependent entanglement. The natural world is blended as a commonwealth – the wealth of Earth inhabited in common by all life” (221).

The places in which life, human and nonhuman, most fully discovers and expresses its freedom, are in the realm of wild nature. Along with population issues, wilderness has been a touchstone of Crist’s throughout her career:

Moving toward an ecological civilization begins by embracing the epic, deep truth of Earth as a living planet that creates diversity, complexity, and a stunning array of forms of awareness. Wilderness ... is the cauldron within which Earth performs the alchemies that create such splendor. Recreating civilization will have us turning toward designing a thriving coexistence of human and nonhuman communities, interpenetrating human history with natural history into uncharted realms of beauty, diversity, plenitude, and freedom for all. (224)

Putting forth such a vision in no way should be construed as a substitute or excuse for the urgent necessity to put aside vast reaches of the Earth’s lands and waters for preservation. This is imperative if the climate crisis and the unbearable loss of species we are experiencing is to be forestalled. Primary forests must be saved, protected areas in the oceans must be vastly expanded, and preserves must remain unfragmented, connected, representative of diverse ecosystems, and as large as possible. Crist is emphatic: “The urgency of expanding and connecting protected areas today cannot be overstated” (227).

The final pages of “Restoring Abundant Earth” put forth a vision rooted in ecoregional boundaries and manners of reinhabiting these homelands, the vision of bioregionalism. Crist, referencing

Jack Kloppenburg (Kloppenburg 1996, 36), anticipates those who might accuse her of being unduly utopian: “I offer a description of the bioregional ideal ‘not as a manifesto but as a conceptual vocabulary, not as a doctrine to be followed but as a set of principles to be explored’” (231).

Reinhabitation extends the reach of restoration to human communities living in a place – “‘a poetics of fit,’ in the words of Deborah Bird Rose” (Rose, 2014, quoted in Crist 2019, 231). In its original documents we are reminded of some fundamental tenets of bioregionalism: “becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it” and also “understanding activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place” (Berg and Dasmann 1977, 399). Furthermore, bioregions are both “a geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness” (399).

As Crist has exhibited throughout *Abundant Earth*, her handling of bioregionalism displays a scholarly grasp of the subject, and original turns of thought bring it into our immediate plight. She covers issues of indigenous wisdom, food sovereignty, education, politics, livelihood, the creative role of language, and the unique feel of different bioregions.

Addressing this last issue, she clearly has the vast riches of wild nature in mind, but she also takes on the charges of parochialism often leveled at the bioregional vision. “Far from being provincial and xenophobic, ... the bioregional way of life sides with the cosmopolitan aspirations of open communication and solidarity between peoples – a transcultural conversation of humanity” (Crist 2019, 235). A worldwide ecological civilization – “a federation of bioregions” (235) – might move toward a life imagined by the author Barry Lopez “to find some place between the extremes of nature and civilization where it is possible to live without regret” (Lopez 1988, 178).

In the epilogue to *Abundant Earth*, Crist revisits many of the themes critical to her arguments throughout the work. She returns to the unvarnished complicity of human supremacy and undercuts every proposal for protections of the biosphere not including full standing for the more-than-human world. She pulls no punches:

We should neither fear nor hope that nature ... will bring civilization down. We should strive to bring it down ourselves. ... When human beings become free to think and act without identifying with the supremacist worldview, they will break a chain that has linked countless generations. (Crist 2019, 245)

In recognizing the Achilles’ heel of human supremacy as just one of many ways we might navigate through the world, we deplete its power and create a space to begin moving toward an ecological civilization. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss is reputed to have written in his *Savage Mind*, “In a world where diversity exceeds our mental capacity nothing is impossible in our

capacity to become human” (Lévi-Strauss 1966, quoted in Shepard 1998, 57). Shepard elaborates, “the ‘civilized mind’ attempts to simplify and level the world, whereas the ‘[indigenous] mind’ is not afraid to become enmeshed in its complexity” (57).

Futureprimitive bioregionalists find solace in such views, acknowledging the transformation toward an ecological civilization, if it is to be realized, will be multigenerational. Arne Naess, the founder of Deep Ecology, is reputed to have said he was pessimistic about the 21st century but optimistic about the 22nd. If we are to make it through the coming decades, Eileen Crist’s *Abundant Earth* may be viewed as one of the maps that helped pull us through.

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