

# Listening to the Ancestral Wisdom of Diatomite Cliffs: Rethinking Danish History in Times of Climate Catastrophe

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## Abstract

This article focuses on green politics in Denmark, highlighting how mainstream political rhetorics with cruel optimism promote the country as a green world leader, while turning a blind eye to the ecocides that have formed its landscapes. The primary aim is to critically consider how the terraforming of farmland through ecocidal approaches has been naturalized and normalized as part of national identity-building. A second aim is, affirmatively, to explore whether affected and affecting creative writing and speculative story-telling can be used to counter-act the cruelly optimistic indifference and insensitivity towards the more-than-human world, cultivated through normalization and naturalization. The article uses a vignette methodology. Two vignettes focus on human-human power relations, reflecting on the formation of Danish national identity during modernity. The third vignette shifts the perspective through a writing experiment, telling a speculative-spectrally fictionalized version of Danish history from a *more-than-human* perspective. A cliff, made by the micro-algae, diatoms, 55 million years ago, performs as the protagonist of a folktale-inspired story about the coming into being of Denmark through series of ecocides. The conclusion reflects on the defamiliarizing effects of the posthuman poetics used in the third vignette's writing experiment, and compares notes with posthumanist and decolonial scholarship.

**KEYWORDS:** green politics, Danish history, cruel optimism, ecocidal approaches, speculative story-telling, defamiliarizing

## Introduction

“Blah-blah-blah” was Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg’s comment on the outcome of the UN’s climate conference, COP26, in Glasgow, October–November 2021 (Thunberg 2021). The “Blah-blah-blah” slogan was repeated on banners carried by activists who demonstrated in Glasgow to pressure world leaders to take more effective action against climate change. This article takes off from the “Blah-blah-blah” slogan, and the gaps in current political debates between climate activists and established politics on ways to ensure sustainable multispecies co-habitation on the planet. On the one hand, climate activists from all over the world articulate the urgency to radically rethink, reimagine and change current, modern worlding practices, shaped during the last centuries of capitalist and colonial expansion and extractivism. On the other hand, established, mainstream politics seems unable to detach itself from the pragmatics of here-and-now geopolitical and national power struggles, and is bent on promoting tech-fix solutions to the climate crisis without taking the need for radical change into consideration. ‘Green’ solutions such as the use of Power-to-X technologies<sup>1</sup> to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions into the atmosphere are, for example, called upon as if they were magic wands that can guarantee voters the smooth continuation of their current modern lifestyles and patterns of consumption.

The more urgent the climate catastrophe and the general ecological crises become, the more widely tech-fix rhetorics are mobilized to perform in the service of what cultural critic Lauren Berlant (2011) calls cruel optimism. Berlant defines cruel optimism as being attached to a desired individual or broader political goal, the materializing of which, at the same time, becomes an obstacle to the flourishing of those attracted to it. Even though Berlant does not discuss the climate question, her cultural analysis of cruel optimism fits the ways in which world leaders, governments and mainstream publics often approach ecological crises, including the climate issue. The desired goal is to maintain modern lifestyles and consumption patterns, and through utilitarian alliances provide

frameworks for eternally perpetuated capitalist profit-making. But the deepening of the ecological crises and the increasingly frequent climate change-related disasters demonstrate that the continued pursuit of these goals leads towards planetary depletion and environmental collapse. Nonetheless, a rhetoric of cruel optimism is mobilized to gloss over the dilemmas.

I suggest that what Thunberg and other climate activists do with the “Blah-blah-blah” slogan is to disrupt the cruelly optimistic, mainstream political rhetorics on climate change mitigation through tech-fix solutions. “Blah-blah-blah” is a precise diagnosis of the widespread, cruelly optimistic rhetorics of political establishments. The “Blah-blah-blah” response is a way of speaking truth to power – a critical-affirmative pinpointing of the urgent need for a radical shift of rhetorics to disrupt epistemologies of ignorance and to trouble the gaze that, with cruel optimism, normalizes the crises and mobilizes tech-fixes as magic wands.

In this article, I reflect upon the ethico-political and affective shifts that the “Blah-blah-blah” slogan calls for. But I also consider the ways in which investments in cruel optimism prevent such shifts from happening. The focus is green politics in Denmark – a country which cruelly optimistic, mainstream political rhetorics promote as a world leader in green politics, while turning a blind eye to the ecocides that have made it one of the most terraformed countries in the world, surpassed only by Bangladesh in terms of the compass of arable land (59.8%). On the one hand, it is my aim to critically consider the shaping of Denmark as a nation during modernity, which for specific historical and geographical reasons has normalized and naturalized the terraforming of farmland through ecocidal approaches in even more intense ways than is the case in the surrounding parts of Northern Europe. On the other hand, I wish to explore whether affected and affecting story-telling can be used to counter-act the cruelly optimistic indifference and insensitivity that have been cultivated and sustained through these processes of normalization and naturalization.

The article is structured as three inter-related vignettes that together critically address

Denmark's ecocidal necropolitics, and affirmatively try to trace more-than-human agencies with which green politics should create alliances rather than continue to ignore. Vignette 1 discusses how a specific kind of cruel optimism historically became part of Danish national identity-building during modernity. It focuses on the formation of a cultural imaginary, built on a narrative about compensating for drastically shrinking external borders through internal expansion of agricultural lands, set in motion as huge terraforming efforts to cultivate heathlands and drain peatlands. Vignette 2 highlights some disastrous contemporary effects of the intensive internal Danish expansion of agricultural lands in previous centuries. I exemplify with two currently ongoing ecological disasters, both involving crucial but submerged more-than-human agencies – of algae and peat – that call for attunement and alliance-building rather than neglect. I discuss how the cruel optimism that is analysed in Vignette 1 as embedded in a certain nationally cherished version of Danish history seems to sustain epistemologies of ignorance vis-à-vis these disasters and uphold an affective *indifference* to the crucial but submerged perspectives of dead and dying seabeds and peatlands.

While the first two vignettes consider Danish history with a focus on *human* power relations, Vignette 3 turns the tables. Through a fiction writing experiment, it presents snapshots from a speculative-spectrally fictionalized version of Danish history, told from a *more-than-human* perspective. A cliff, made by the micro-algae, diatoms, 55 million years ago, and located in the Danish fjord, Limfjorden, on the island Fur, is made to perform as the protagonist of a folktale-inspired story about the coming into being of Denmark through a series of ecocides. Through the story, I raise the speculative question: what if we started to attune to and listen to the spectres of dying seabeds, peatlands and cliffs scarred by commercial mining?

In the conclusion, I reflect on the narrative shift from a human to a more-than-human vantage point, undertaken through the move from Vignettes 1 and 2 to the writing experiment in Vignette 3. I consider whether the folktale genre, embedded as it is in ancient, a-modern<sup>2</sup> cosmologies which do

not differentiate between human and non-human, culture and nature, life and non-life, may be apt for eco-ethical kinds of story-telling that can contribute to defamiliarizing departures from the cruelly optimistic "Blah-blah-blah" discourses and their foundations in human exceptionalist thought. To sustain my arguments I reflect on the power of activism (Funderburk 2021), i.e. the mixing of art/story-telling/research/eco-political activism. Moreover, I compare notes with posthumanist and decolonial scholarship on indigenous modes of entering into more-than-human alliances.

### Vignette 1: Terraforming Denmark during Modernity

That Denmark's official promotion of itself as a world leader in green politics is built on shaky ground and embedded in a problematic rhetoric of cruel optimism becomes clear when we look at some statistics. If we consider the overall percentages of land that has been terraformed, i.e. transformed through human intervention from 'wild' to 'domesticated', Denmark stands out as the top terraformer in the European Union, and worldwide as well. With 59.8% arable land in 2021, Denmark shares the position as the most terraformed country on the planet with Bangladesh (Arp 2022; World Bank 2024).

The terraforming of Denmark has taken place in a highly accelerated form as part of the process of modernity. In the period 1750–1950, heathlands, which previously covered large parts of Denmark, particularly the peninsular of Jutland, shrank to a minimum due to systematic cultivation (Nielsen 2012). During the same period, peatlands, also widespread in Denmark before modernity, have been drained on a large scale, and, like the heathlands, transformed into agricultural areas. Around 1800 wild bogs and meadows constituted 25% of the Danish land area, whereas these types of wetlands today make up only 4.5% (lex.dk 2024).

Historically, the intensive cultivation of land in Denmark is linked to a national history of loss. Danish history throughout modernity is to a large

extent a history of loss of territory as part of the many bloody wars that characterized the formation of the European nation-states from early modernity to the two world wars of the 20th century. From the mid-17th century to the late 19th century, the Danish nation-state was formed through wars, in particular with the neighbouring nation-states of Sweden and Germany. It is a historical fact that Denmark lost most of these wars, and the nation-state-building was, therefore, accompanied by a drastic loss of the territory that the Danish kings and nation-builders tried to lay claim to. What is now considered Southern Sweden, the regions of Skåne, Halland and Blekinge, were before the 17th century considered Danish territory, and characterized by close cultural bonds with Denmark in terms of language and local customs (Sanders 2006). However, these lands were lost to Sweden in 1658; Øresund was constituted as a border rather than as a shared place for herring fishing (Christensen et al. 1987, 233ff). Furthermore, the whole of Norway, which since the late Middle Ages had been governed by the Danish king, was lost to Sweden in 1814 in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Finally, the duchies of Holstein and Schleswig, also for centuries defined as belonging to the Kingdom of Denmark, were lost to Germany in 1864. A small piece of this land was transferred back to Denmark after a plebiscite in the aftermath of WWI, in 1920. But the major part of the land of the former duchies remained German after 1864.

That the formation of the Danish nation-state took place against a background of drastically shrinking territories over several centuries had a cultural and historical impact on the building of a national Danish identity that took place in the same period. A tenet that became popular in Denmark, and which even today is widely considered to account for Danish national identity, says: "What has been lost externally must be internally regained" ["Hvad udad tabes skal indad vindes"] (Hansen 2014, Ch. 8, n.p.). These kinds of tenets, publicly adopted as a mirror which many parts of a population feel reflects their national identity, are to be considered empty signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). That is, they are flexible signifiers that can be associated with many meanings.

One of the meanings that has historically been attached to this tenet in Denmark is that some kind of compensation for the 'external' territorial losses could be gained through the hard labour of cultivating the heathlands and draining the peatlands, making both kinds of land available for agricultural production.

The transformation of heathlands and peatlands into arable areas that took place in the period 1750–1950 was far from an easy or straightforward project. To a large extent, it was carried out by poor people who saw the hard work required to transform the land as perhaps their only survival strategy. It is also part of the history that many of these people remained poor, even though they sometimes succeeded in making a living through the setting up of small farms on terraformed land.

The hard lives of the people who cultivated the heathlands have been portrayed and celebrated in Danish literature by writers who came from these areas, such as Steen Steensen Blicher (1782–1848) and Jeppe Aakjær (1866–1930). Most recently, the struggle to transform the heath into arable land has been critically explored in the novel *Kaptajnen og Ann Barbara* [The Captain and Ann Barbara] by Danish writer Ida Jessen (2020), and in a film based on the novel: the award-winning epic historical drama film *Bastarden/Promised Land* (2023) by Danish filmmaker Nikolaj Arcel. From a posthuman perspective, Danish artist Grethe Wittrock put the agencies of materials from the heathlands at the centre of the exhibition *At slå rødder* [To Root], at Museum Silkeborg (2024), also inspired by Jessen's novel.

The terraforming process that took place over a period of around 200 years resulted in heathlands and peatlands being transformed into agricultural lands to such a degree that, today, there are only a few areas of heath- and peatlands left on Danish territory. Historically, the cultivation process was accompanied by agricultural reforms and the development of farmers' movements. In the late 18th century, these movements led to the Danish peasant class being freed from the feudal dependencies of noble landowners. During the 19th century, the more well-off peasants slowly gained political power. In the 20th century,

the farmers and their political representatives in different kinds of liberal parties became a major force (next to the workers' movement and the Social Democratic Party) in the development of modern Danish society. The liberal parties, the farmers' movements and their trade and lobby organizations today still take much pride in the narrative of the formation of Denmark as an agricultural nation that has historically succeeded in spite of losses – resonating with the tenet of “What has been lost externally must be internally regained”.

There are resonances between contemporary Danish farmers' movements and farmers' movements in other EU countries which, today, are protesting against green politics. However, to understand these movements, it is crucial to look at their specific historical and identity political formations in different national contexts; this is what I have tried to sketch briefly in the first vignette.

## Vignette 2: Contemporary Disasters – Delaying Green Initiatives

The specific narrative of Denmark as a proud agricultural nation, forging ahead successfully in spite of a limited territory, as told in Vignette 1, has facilitated the ways in which farmers' trade and lobby organizations have today established themselves as an influential political force. The power of these organizations is nowadays often used to block or delay green initiatives that interfere with unsustainable practices of agricultural production. To illustrate this, I shall foreground two examples of green politics that, in recent decades, have been delayed with detrimental ecological effects.

One of these initiatives is political attempts to establish buffer zones between wetlands, rivers, estuaries and coastal waters, on the one hand, and fields, treated with fertilizers, consisting of nitrogens and phosphates, on the other. The lack of sufficiently large buffer zones has resulted in excessive discharges of fertilizers into wetlands, and is leading to major ecological catastrophes; Danish fjords and coastal waters are today dead or dying due to widespread oxygen depletion (Greenpeace 2022; Hansen & Rytter 2023). To illustrate

the seriousness and extent of the disaster, I quote from the most recent (2023) scientific report from the National Centre for Environment and Energy at Aarhus University that annually analyses the state of the art in Danish coastal waters:

*Oxygen depletion worsened markedly during the reporting period (24 August–21 September). High water temperatures and mostly calm wind conditions stimulated the development of oxygen depletion. For the first time since 2008, there was widespread oxygen depletion in southern and central Kattegat. The most affected areas in the inner Danish waters were Limfjorden, Mariager Fjord, the southern Little Belt, the south-east Jutland fjords, the South Funen Archipelago and Fehmarn Belt. In many of these areas the bottom water was anoxic, and toxic sulphide was released from the bottom. In these areas, a large part of the water volume was affected by predominantly severe oxygen depletion. Dead fish were observed in Limfjorden, and a shroud appeared on the bottom in several areas. The extent of the oxygen depletion was the second largest ever recorded for September. In several areas, the situation was highly critical, especially for benthic animals, fish and plants. (Hansen & Rytter 2023, 8)*

The immediate reason for the deadly oxygen depletion is excessive algal blooms. The underlying explanation for the disasters is unsustainable agricultural production, allowed to take place much too close to rivers, fjords and other coastal waters. The result is enormous discharges of nitrogens and phosphates into the waters (eutrofication). These discharges nourish excessive algal blooms that cause oxygen depletion which eventually kills all life in the waters. Climate change contributes as well. The algal blooms are accelerating with increased water temperatures during summers that become hotter and hotter. According to Greenpeace estimates, based on reports from the Danish Ministry of the Environment, 95% of Danish coastal waters are today dead, dying or in a very bad ecological condition (Greenpeace 2022, 1). It



is also asserted that 70% of the algal blooms must be seen as caused by discharges from agrobusinesses (Miljøministeriet 2021, 53; Greenpeace 2022, 2). The former heathlands of the peninsula of Jutland, now to a large degree taken up by pig and cow farms, are among the major polluters. The large fjord of Limfjorden, cross-cutting the northern part of Jutland, is registered as having huge problems with oxygen depletion and excessive algae growth due to discharges from these pig and cow farming businesses (Hansen & Rytter 2023, 14).

Another much-delayed green initiative is political plans to 'rewet' low-lying soils. Many of the low-lying soils in Denmark consist of drained peatlands. 'Rewetting' means undoing the drainage and allowing these lands to become wetlands again. The former peatbogs disappear when drained, and it will take centuries for them to regenerate. But a first step towards regeneration would be to allow the areas to become wetlands again. The delaying of the plans to rewet low-lying soils has dire ecological effects, insofar as peatlands sequester a lot of CO<sub>2</sub>, while continued draining and ensuring drying processes mean the areas emit huge amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>, formerly sequestered by the bogs. The rewetting would stop the emissions, and, in the long run, enable the restored wetlands to once again sequester CO<sub>2</sub>.

A recent scientific report by scientists from the Department of Agroecology at Aarhus University maps the low-lying soils in Denmark (Beucher et al. 2023), while pinpointing how disastrous the delaying of the rewetting is, because CO<sub>2</sub> is being emitted from the drained areas much more quickly than expected. According to the report's data sets, the area of CO<sub>2</sub>-rich low-lying soils has been reduced from 171,603 hectares in 2014 to 117,836 hectares in 2023. This implies that the peat in the 53,757 hectares that make up the difference between the 2014 and the 2023 measurements has finally died, and that all the CO<sub>2</sub> that this peat sequestered has been emitted into the atmosphere (Beucher et al. 2023, 9). This "reduction" is, therefore, a highly problematic expression of the fact that the peat could have lived on and a lot of CO<sub>2</sub> sequestered, had these soils been rewetted

during the 10-year period between the two measurements. Nonetheless, the Danish Minister of the Environment, Lars Aagaard from one of the liberal parties, Moderaterne, delivered a model example of cruel optimism on the occasion of the publication of the Aarhus scientists' findings. He declared the hectare reduction and the finally dead peatlands to be a piece of happy news, insofar as there were now fewer areas in urgent need of rewetting (Gjerding 2024)!

The delays of the rewetting of the low-lying soils and the lack of political will to establish buffer zones around coastal waters, rivers and estuaries, are detrimental. Still, they are not causing enough of a public outcry to push politicians into taking serious and immediate action. Even though green organizations, politicians and parties invested in green politics in Denmark try to draw attention to the problems, there is widespread indifference and lack of attention to the dead and dying seabeds and peatlands.

The public indifference is no doubt related to the ways in which the modern anthropocentric eye, not only in contemporary Denmark but in the modern world more generally, is highly selective when it comes to recognizing ecological disasters. Disasters are most often measured and evaluated from a human exceptionalizing and narrowly utilitarian perspective with a focus on what is good or bad for those humans who are intersectionally privileged with regard to race, class and geopolitical positioning. Moreover, it is clear that disasters that take place 'invisibly' so to speak, i.e. hidden beneath the nice-looking, blue surfaces of coastal waters,<sup>3</sup> or under the earth's crust in prospering fields of low-lying soils, tend to fall under the radar of public attention. Merging with these more general reasons for public indifference towards dying seabeds and peatlands in Denmark, I suggest that cruel optimism – the canonized history of the country as a nation of heroic farmers who succeeded in countering external losses through excessive internal terraforming of land – also plays a role. It is too painful for mainstream Danish national self-understanding to admit that the excessive terraforming efforts of the last 200–300 years, seen in retrospect, have had disastrous

and partly irreparable ecological effects (Hansen 2014).

In light of the climate catastrophe, all the other ecological disasters and the urgent need for radical change of modern capitalist modes of production and consumption, it is clearly time to rethink the cruelly optimistic story of the formation of modern Denmark. In Vignette 3, therefore, I will try to speculatively tell a quite different – more-than-human – story about Danish history than that of heroic farmers struggling to fulfil the demands of the “What has been lost externally must be internally regained” tenet.

As a caveat, though, before I engage in my story-telling, allow me to underline that I do not consider it possible for a human (me) to transgress a human vantage point, nor do I believe in ventriloquism for more-than-human existents.<sup>4</sup> So I do not pretend that Vignette 3’s alternative tale about Denmark’s formation is anything but speculative fiction. With this vignette, I want instead to pose the question of whether artistic/narrative techniques, fictional formats and experiments with posthuman poetics and speculative story-telling can prompt disruptions of indifference to other-than-human agencies, and initiate processes of re-sensitization and attunement to more-than-human worlds.

### Vignette 3. Memoirs of a Diatomite Cliff – A Writing Experiment<sup>5</sup>

Once upon a time there was a big old cliff, made of diatomite – a soft and light, siliceous rock, formed through sediments of fossilized micro-algae of the group, diatoms. The cliff was beautifully coloured, spanning most of the spectrum of brown, red, yellow, green, blue, black, grey and white. Before it became a sedimentary cliff, it had existed as multiple swarms of diatoms, which moved around in the warm waters of a subtropical sea that around 55 million years before the Danish nation-state was constituted had covered the same area. Diatoms, existing on Earth since the Jurassic period 150 million years ago, are unique among microscopic single-cell algae insofar as they are encased by

a silica shell, called frustule. The shell gives the algae a structural colouration due to iridescence. Through various chemical processes that take place during and after sedimentation, diatomite rocks can also come to appear multi-coloured.

The old cliff had for many years been stationary, and it felt happy about the ways in which grass, bushes, flowers and trees grew big on its top. But it also remembered its youth well, and enjoyed recalling how, back then, 55 million years earlier, on the threshold between what geologists called Palaeocene and Eocene, it had existed as swarms of diatoms that had been moved around by the lazy waves of the warm sea, and later, after death, sedimented to eventually become lithified as rock. The cliff remembered how its much younger self, these youthful swarms, had practised quorum sensing, i.e. acting in unison without a leader. To swarm around in the warm waters like this had been really fun and joyful. But like oysters who swarm as larvae but set as adults, the cliff enjoyed its post-death stationary life as a gigantic rock just as much as it had liked its early life as a swarming micro-organism. It was great to feel gigantic.

When the cliff remembered its swarming life, it sometimes thought about the ways in which it had diversified back then through what human scientists much later categorized as ‘asexual’ cell division, as well as through something which the same scientists named ‘sexual’ reproduction, because it implied the work of differently built germ cells. The cliff was amused when it heard scientists, sometimes standing on the beach in front of it, describe the ‘strange’ specificities of diatom reproduction to students:

*“Diatoms reproduce both sexually and asexually,” the scientists said in a serious voice. “Like other micro-algae, diatom cells divide into two genetically identical cells. Each of these cells keeps one of the two half shells of the ‘parent’ diatom and grows a smaller half shell within the original one. This process implies that new generations of diatoms get smaller and smaller. But this generational decrease has always been reversed. In longer*

*vegetative periods, individual diatoms grow sexually different cells, germ cells. When these germ cells are attracted to each other and fuse, they generate a so-called 'auxospore'. The 'auxospore' sheds the small silica shells, inherited from the 'parents', and develops into a much larger diatom, covered by an organic membrane, which eventually generates a bigger pair of shells. So diatoms are special because they combine sexual and asexual reproduction," the scientists ended their little lecture.*

Every time the cliff heard this story, it could not help but laugh. The scientists made diatom modes of going in and out of different kinds of reproduction and diversification, which had been their way of life since the Jurassic era, sound pretty perverted and anomalous. Well, the cliff pondered, perhaps it was rather these modern scientists who were a bit perverted and anomalous. Their obsession with sex and sexual difference, female versus male, was strange. But it was amusing to see one's life and habits reflected through the eyes of a different species with other habits and desires, the cliff thought. However, why were these scientists so obsessed by the difference between sexual and asexual diatom reproduction? Just because reproduction through germ cells seemed to mean so much to the reproduction of their own human species, why did they have to make it a norm and measuring rod for everyone else? Why didn't they understand that it is exciting sometimes to fuse and produce the auxospore, while at other times it is great to just divide and become multiple without having to take a detour through sexual difference? The cliff was always puzzled when listening to the scientists.

When remembering its aeons-long life, the old cliff also thought about the harder times that had led to mass death. It remembered all too well the roaring sound of volcanoes, and the enormous ash clouds that had sometimes covered the sky 55 million years ago, when its body of sediments was formed. These were terrible times. The air and upper layers of the waters became filled with ash particles that shadowed the sun, hindering

photosynthesis and forcing some individuals in the diatom swarm into a vegetative state, while most died. Gigantic numbers of dying or vegetating diatoms in these periods were sinking to the bottom of the sea together with other algae and plants that could not photosynthesize either. Mass rotting of dead diatoms and plants on the seabed used up all the oxygen in the waters there, resulting in anoxic conditions leading to the formation of hydrogen sulphide – a gas known as a chemical asphyxiant causing even more death. Alongside the joyful times of swarming around in the warm waters, the old cliff remembered these bad times of disruption and mass death very well, when the clouds of ash from erupting volcanoes rolled over the sky, hiding the sun.

However, the cliff remembered the periods when the ash clouds arrived not only as hard and terrible. These times had also somehow been invigorating, because the mass of dead diatoms, fossilizing and gathering as layers on the seabed, was also what had set the lithification of the sedimented algae mass in motion, laying the foundation of the gigantic cliff body as it existed today. The chain reactions, started by the ash clouds, were what had made a thicker and thicker diatomite seabed emerge. From looking back at the events, the old cliff also knew that the swarms of diatoms had always returned when the ash clouds vanished. Not all diatoms had died, because they had the ability to live in a vegetative state, a kind of hibernation. When the sky had cleared, the diatoms had started to diversify again, and soon the big swarms were back. It was truly sad and terrible when the ash clouds came, the cliff thought, but the good times of swarming returned regularly. The cliff had actually counted the ash layers in its giant body, and knew that, while the sediments were building up, there had been 187 anoxic events due to volcanic eruptions, ash clouds and instants of mass death. It had also calculated that this equalled a period of about 300,000 years in its 55 million years of life, and it remembered clearly that, in between the ash events, there had been long periods of happy swarming in the warm waters. So regeneration had always occurred.



Another period of turmoil that the cliff remembered well was not so long ago, around 10,000 years back. Long before that, it had come to maturity as a gigantic – 60 metres thick – lithified sediment of diatomite seabed, and had existed as such for aeons. During the later part of these aeons, the weather had become extremely cold, and ice had covered the area which, in the cliff's youth, had been a subtropical sea. The cliff remembered that the cold in itself did not matter much to its lithified body. However, what caused a stir was when the ice started to push it around. These were again strange times full of dramatic transformations. The cliff remembered how large parts of its body were made to fold upwards, transforming it from seabed to cliff. The push of the ice was pretty hard sometimes, but the bending upwards, and the becoming-cliff raising above the sea level, was also fun, the cliff thought. It opened new horizons and gave space for the unfolding of new sensibilities, related to air rather than water. It was interesting to think about how it was made to feel wind and air against the upper part of its body, while still being grounded in its old watery sea-home with the lower parts.

Over its 55 million years of life, the cliff had experienced a lot. Many shifts between dramatic and eventful periods, and more quiet times had occurred. However, in the memories of the old cliff, the most recent decennia and decades were what really worried it. None of the earlier transformations had happened with such a frenzied speed, which made it impossible for species and minerals affected by the changes to attune and unfold processes of regeneration or morph into new formations. Such processes of attunement, regeneration and generative morphing take time. The old cliff knew from experience that transformations can take aeons. Therefore, it was really worrying, the cliff thought, to see humans in frenzied haste make farmland out of the peatlands that together with a big fjord had surrounded the cliff since the ice had melted 10,000 years earlier. These strange human creatures also changed the widespread heathlands of the area into arable land. The cliff knew, of course, that the heathlands were an outcome of earlier human interventions. After the ice

had melted, big forestry plains had developed. But since humans had started to live there, when the climate became less cold, the big forests had over the years been cut down to provide grazing opportunities for domesticated animals, and wood for cooking and heating cottages. In the long run, the forests could not stand the pressure put on them by this human use, and the disappearance of the forests had given rise to a landscape of low hardy bushes such as heatherplants. But why, the cliff thought, should all these heather and other bushes that had evolved so beautifully over centuries now all of a sudden give way to farmland?

Not that farmland per se was bad, seen from the cliff's perspective. But the transformations went much too fast, were too all-encompassing and carried out with too much violence and a lack of respect for land, waters, soil, plants, animals, algae and their mutual ecological balances and entanglements. All land around the cliff and the fjord was forced into major human-generated processes of transformation during a period of less than 200 years. It was a process that was one-sidedly governed by a human-centric approach that neglected the needs and perspectives of other species, and that in utilitarian ways only served human consumption and profit-making. Heathlands were dug up, their plant and animal life disrupted and many species made extinct. Peatbogs were drained so that the peat that had grown thick in an unbroken intergenerational continuity for thousands and thousands of years was killed from one moment to the next. When transformed into agricultural lands, the former heath- and peatlands were made to host big cow and pig farms, where the animals lived a sad prison life. Many of these farms were also located much too close to the waters of the fjord. This meant that discharge of enormous amounts of nitrogens and phosphates came to seriously damage the fjord's ecosystems and balances. What a mess these humans create, the cliff thought. The excessive discharges led the living diatoms that still abounded in the fjord to proliferate so much that they soon covered the surface waters and no sun could penetrate to the bottom, making it more and more difficult for fish, plants and algae to live there. With much sadness,

the big cliff felt the seabeds around it becoming sicker and sicker; they transformed from places where balanced cycles of life and death could unfold, instead developing sulphur bacteria and toxic iron sulphide, and, in the end, dying completely.

It added to the worries of the cliff that the humans swarming around it had also started to mine its diatomite body, digging long craters into it, systematically extracting materials and transforming them into insulation bricks and cat litter to be sold commercially. The cliff actually heard some of the miners saying that Denmark had become the next biggest producer of diatomite in the world, mining 17% of the worlds commercially sold diatomite in 2023, surpassed only by the USA, which mined 32% (U.S. Geological Survey 2024). If this excessive extraction of riches from my body continues for very long, the cliff said to itself, then my 55 million-year-old body will disappear in a few decades.

At some point the mining of diatomite stopped in the areas along the coast, and the cliff experienced a moment of relief. Not for long, however, because the area was then transformed into a popular target for the tourism industry. This meant that hordes of fossil hunters were sent out from the local natural history museum with small axes, which they used to make thousands and thousands of small holes on the surface of the cliff body. These fossil hunters do not destroy my body on such a large scale as the miners did, the cliff thought, but they, too, are seriously wounding my body through their stupid fossil hunting. Why can't they just let the fossils of plants and animals from 55 million years ago rest in the graves that my body has caringly upheld for them for aeons?

When the cliff looked at all the human-made destruction going on around it, it became really sad. It saw how the human-induced changes were different from those that took place in the past, because they were so temporally accelerated that no attunement or regeneration was possible. What happened instead was what one of the smarter humans, an eco-activist and critical extinction studies scholar, Deborah Bird Rose, called 'double-death'. The cliff had grasped this term, 'double-death', when listening to a group of eco-activists who had visited the beaches in front

of it, and organized a workshop there. The cliff had found that the term 'double-death', which the workshop participants had talked about heatedly for a whole day, so well expressed the deep sadness it felt over the dying taking place around it. This dying was so different from what it had experienced in earlier times, and the cliff felt that Rose had explained this difference perfectly. With the term 'double-death', she had defined the kind of death that finally terminates intergenerational continuity, when it makes a group (e.g. a species) become extinct rather than giving rise to new life cycles. The cliff remembered one of the workshop participants quoting Rose, saying: "The notion of double-death contrasts with the ecological and evolutionary contexts in which death is immanent in and necessary to life" (Rose 2012, 128), and, moreover, added a quote explaining her notions of 'aenocide' (the discontinuation of a generational flow through aeons) and the 'murdering' of 'ethical time':

*Generational time is the time of aeons, and ethical time is the flow of death narratives across generations, aenocide is therefore "the murdering of ethical time through the annihilation of all following generations" (Hatley 2000: 2019). In considering the murder of ethical time in contexts outside the human, it becomes clear that to murder the ethical time of one group is to imperil the time of other groups, and that in fact there is no knowing where the destruction will stop. (Rose 2012, 137)*

Spot-on, the old cliff thought. The intergenerational dying that takes place in the ecosystems around me now, due to excessive human interventions, is exactly what fills me with so much sadness.

In spite of the increasingly sad feelings that seized the cliff, it nonetheless felt that it had allies among the humans. The workshop participants gave the cliff hope for different futures. However, most of them spoke predominantly about the dying fish and plants which they could see immediately in the fjord. The other kinds of more invisible death taking place, such as that of diatoms

or peat, were not discussed much. The cliff noted that even these eco-activists were rather selective when it came to deciding about ecological grievability. How can I bring them to a more comprehensive understanding of what to mourn, feel compassion and advocate for, the old cliff asked itself. Would these eco-activists perhaps be more able to sense things differently and more comprehensively if I told them my story?

The cliff decided to give the story-telling a try, and this is how the tale I just told you came about. I heard it, as I have now told it to you, while sitting in front of the cliff in a contemplative mood, trying to listen carefully to its murmurs and to understand its ancestral wisdom.

### Can a Shift in Vantage Point Disrupt the “Blah-blah-blah”?

In Vignettes 1 and 2, I briefly outlined the history of the Danish nation-state and national identity formation as a proud farming nation. I also reflected critically upon the excessive terraforming and extractivist efforts that accompanied the formation, and pinpointed specific kinds of cruelly optimistic and human exceptionalist discourses that have emerged from the process. In Vignette 3, I tried to imagine what an alternative history could look like, when, in a speculatively fictional mode, it was told from the submerged vantage point of the land- and seascapes being submitted to violent terraforming processes. With the telling of this alternative tale, I hope to contribute to a disruption of the “Blah-blah-blah”, through which Thunberg and other eco-activists diagnosed the cruel optimism and human exceptionalism that thrive in discourses on green politics by Danish politicians and world leaders more broadly.

The story-telling and the experimental shift in vantage point is, first and foremost, inspired by the ancient folktale genre – a genre found in most a-modern cultures, including those of Europe before modernity.<sup>6</sup> As an age-old genre, folktales are temporally set in a mythical past of ‘once upon a time’, which reflects the a-modern cosm-ontologies from which the genre emerged.

I have elsewhere (Lykke 2024b) analysed this mythical time as Aionic (Deleuze 2020), i.e. related to instants working in all directions and making touch across times possible, rather than to chrononormative linearity and progress. These are cosm-ontologies in which linear time and the related idea of development from ‘primitive animism’ to ‘civilized rationality’, as well as the dichotomous distinctions such as human/non-human, culture/nature, life/non-life, now/before, natural/supernatural, do not matter or make sense. When I recycle the genre in a contemporary context, I reclaim this a-modern way of thinking-feeling beyond dichotomies – a way of thinking-feeling that today is being recognized as articulating indigenous philosophies, but whose ancient wisdoms the European folktales also articulated.

Though recycling the folktale genre in a contemporary – modern – context, I do not claim to be able to simply shed my modern skin and reconnect with a body of ‘pure’ a-modern cosmologies laying there ready and untouched for me to immerse myself in. What I try to do instead is to poetically re-enact these cosm-ontologies as they are embedded in the folktale genre – and to use an artistic re-enactment with the purpose of defamiliarizing, denaturalizing and denormalizing the cruelly optimistic, human exceptionalizing narratives of the formation of Danish national identities that I critically analysed in the first two vignettes.

Artistically ignoring the distinction between life/non-life and human/more-than-human existents, I point towards the existence of other-than-humans who can lay claim to the lands which humans in recent history named Denmark, and terraformed without taking notice of the interests and perspectives of these other-than-humans. By subjectivating the more-than-human world, including even that part of it which, according to modern distinctions, is characterized as non-life, such as lithified rock/cliff, I raise ethical and ontological questions about my human relationship to all those more-than-human existents. The format of the genre gives me the artistic possibility to position my embodied human self as an object of the gaze/perception of the more-than-humans rather than the other way round, and also to question the

human exceptionalizing teleology of a linear progress narrative within which modern histories of nation-building are normally conceived. Recycling the genre conventions of the folktale in a defamiliarizing mode makes it possible for me to critically suggest that what from a human exceptionalizing and nationalist point of view was considered progress, should perhaps rather be called ecocide and extinction when seen from this more-than-human vantage point.

Integrating a writing experiment in my analysis, I am methodologically inspired by the growing trend in posthumanist art and scholarship towards mixed-genre writing/art-making and the blurring of boundaries between creative and academic working modes. I build on the now classic theorizations of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2000) and postqualitative writing (St. Pierre 2018), but also on my own earlier research on alternative writing strategies (Lykke 2014) and posthuman poetics (Lykke 2022; Lykke, Aglert & Henriksen 2024; Lykke forthcoming a). However, my use of the folktale is, furthermore, inspired by the ways in which both feminist science fiction theory (Barr 1993, 10–11; Bryld & Lykke 2000, 40) and decolonial feminism (Tlostanova 2024) suggest defamiliarization as an ethico-aesthetical writing strategy that can open new horizons, where epistemologies of ignorance and blind spots have cemented certain outlooks.

Finally, I am inspired by posthumanist and decolonial thinkers. I take clues from anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's work on geontopower (2016) – a power that, with climate change and the debates on the present period of the planet's history as Anthropocene, the Age of 'Man', is making itself more and more forcefully known as a power formation to take into account as perhaps even more important than biopower (and its derivatives) as analysed by Foucault ([1976] 2020). While biopower puts focus on questions of ways to govern life/death relations, geontopower, Povinelli argues (2016, 4–6), addresses the regulation of the relationship between life (bios) and non-life (geos), by maintaining a sharp distinction between the two. Such a distinction allows for a rejection of indigenous claims to land rights based on ancient,

ancestral cosmologies in which, for example, a mountain or a river perform as subjects. Povinelli's examples are drawn from her longstanding collaboration with indigenous people in the Northern Territory of Australia, and show the frictions between the practices of her indigenous friends which blur the boundaries between life and non-life, and the settler colonial establishing of geontopower.

Secondly, I draw on the work of anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2017). With her concept of the 'Anthropo-not-seen', and use of cases from Latin America, de la Cadena has provided a theoretical platform to rethink largely invisible aspects of the Anthropocene necropolitics performed by colonialism and extractivist capitalism towards world-making processes that do not enact divisions of human/non-human, culture/nature, life/non-life, now/before, subject/object, and natural/supernatural. De la Cadena argues that when modernity commonizes these divisions, alternative world-making practices of indigenous communities that do not enact them become violently forced into these distinctions. However, the alternative practices also keep exceeding the divisions, de la Cadena underlines. She emphasizes that a focus on the excesses is important in the search for alternatives. One of the examples of excesses that she foregrounds is the Quechua word *Runakuna*, used by her indigenous friends and collaborators Mariano and Nazrio Turpo to refer to earth beings, and to articulate the way in which they experience themselves as connected to instead of separate and different from the surrounding earth, rivers, trees and animals.

Povinelli's reflections on geontopower as a key supplement to biopower, and de la Cadena's on Anthropo-not-seen excesses, resistances and processes of uncommoning the divisions, installed by macropolitical power formations, have inspired me. Together with the spiritual-material practices of co-becoming together with the Fur cliffs that, as elaborately described in my book *Vibrant Death* (2022), I developed as part of the process of mourning the death of my lesbian life partner whose ashes are spread outside of these cliffs, Povinelli and de la Cadena have helped me rethink and reimagine my relations to the cliffs,

seabeds, peat- and heathlands of the land that around 200–300 years ago was made into the nation-state of Denmark. Their theoretical frameworks made it possible to theorize the ways in which terraforming processes happening in tandem with nation-state-building were based on commoning, on making divisions between human and other-than-human, culture and nature, life and non-life into a common – normalized and naturalized – understanding. In folktales, which articulate the cosm-ontology of my human ancestors in these lands, there are no such distinctions. Mountains, bogs, trees, cliffs, seabeds etc. can speak and act as can humans. So with my telling of Danish history from the perspective of Limfjorden's diatomite seabeds and cliffs, I want to contribute to a process of *uncommoning* and *undoing* the naturalized and normalized divisions.

Taking inspiration from rock formations, which Povinelli's indigenous friends wanted to protect in accordance with ancient cosmologies, and the *Runakuna*, discussed by de la Cadena and her friends, the Turpos, I want the tale of the old cliff to suggest not only an alternative – more-than-human – vantage point, but also an alternative worlding practice. What do I mean by that? I think that current radical efforts to establish mountains, rivers and so on as entities with legal rights are important, and it would certainly represent a

leap ahead in green politics in Denmark to start approaching its more-than-human world in this way. However, I do not think that the search for a proper ethical response to the “Blah-blah-blah” should stay on the level of demanding ‘rights’ for more-than-human existents. This can be a stepping stone, not an end-goal. The discussion of ‘rights’ for non-human existents stays within a humanist framework that does not challenge the exceptionalizing view of the ‘civilized’ modern human as standard and norm. Instead, we (humans) need to re-sensitize ourselves to an understanding of the more-than-human world and our place in it that leaves behind the modern divisions of human/other-than-human, subject/object, culture/nature, life/non-life etc. What a poetic-narrative revitalizing of the cosm-ontologies reflected in the folktales can do to push us (humans) in this direction is to defamiliarize modern instrumentalizing worlding practices. I see posthuman poetics and aesthetics which, in defamiliarizing modes, work to decentre modern human perspectives and re-centre other-than-human vantage points as a way of trying to catalyse re-sensitization processes – processes that are badly needed, as Thunberg and the activists protesting under the “Blah-blah-blah” banners have reminded the world. I hope my little cliff story will be read as a humble contribution along these lines.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Power-to-X technology is an umbrella term for many kinds of technologies that use electrolysis (separation of the components of a substance through electricity). These technologies have been promoted by the Danish government as one of the means to reach the country's goal of a 70% reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2030. Power-to-X technologies are to be combined with technologies to capture CO<sub>2</sub> from industries with high degrees of emissions. Instead of releasing the CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, it is to be captured, transformed through large-scale electrolysis and then stored in empty oilfields in the North Sea. There are many technical problems involved, and politicians have been criticized for promoting the idea before feasibility, risks and costs have been clarified. The optimistic Power-to-X rhetoric of Danish politicians is an example of the cruel optimism I am addressing in this article.
- <sup>2</sup> I prefer to use the term 'a-modern' instead of 'pre-modern' to avoid a linear way of thinking history as progress narrative.
- <sup>3</sup> In September 2022, Greenpeace organized a series of dives to the bottom of Danish coastal waters as part of a campaign to create public awareness about the catastrophe taking place beneath the surface. Noting the widespread public indifference to the disaster of mass death of coastal waters, Greenpeace suggested that "because it takes place under the surface of the sea, we do not see it, and the responsible ministries walk under the radar". See <https://www.greenpeace.org/denmark/div/se-videoen-af-havbundens-dod/> (accessed 9 October 2022, translated from Danish by the author).
- <sup>4</sup> I adopt anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's use of the term 'existents' (2016, 5), because it covers

subjects across borders not only between human and non-human beings, but also between life and non-life existences.

- <sup>5</sup> The geological and biological knowledge of the micro-algae, diatoms, and the mineral, diatomite (made of sediments of fossilized diatoms), on which my piece of speculative fiction writing is based, is collected through reading of scientific as well as popular science articles as part of my earlier published research and poetry on diatoms and diatomite (Lykke 2019; 2022; 2024a and b; forthcoming b; Hazekamp & Lykke 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> Danish folktales, myths and legends, like those from other parts of the world, are part of a long oral tradition, and were, in the late 19th and early 20th century, collected and published by folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen (1843–1929). Today, they can only be accessed through written sources, which nonetheless make it clear that they were shaped in a context where the divisions between human/other-than-human, culture/nature, life/non-life, natural/supernatural etc. (the divisions that were later commonized by modernity) were not part of world-making practices.