

The Latest Oldest Tree: Survival Stories for a Time of Extinction

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In my RCC project, *The Latest Oldest Tree* (under contract with Basic Books), I will bring together the history of trees and the science of longevity to contemplate the ethics of long-term thinking.

Climate change is the problem of our time; it is also a problem of time. It requires thinking—and caring—in the long term, beyond the moment, beyond the individual, beyond the species. To help promote such solicitous thinking, I am writing a book about long-term human relationships with long-lived nonhuman organisms.

Primarily I am researching trees, but mine is not a “plant book.” It is an environmental humanities book about the Anthropocene. In addressing that topic, I want to avoid a misanthropic story of anthropogenic action. Instead, I emphasize human acts of caretaking, caregiving, and care-making, and themes of survival, adaptation, and resilience. I do this because what we call “climate change” is in part a crisis of narrative. If the inescapable storyline is declension and degradation—how modern people disenchanted the world, became addicted to fossil fuel, then precipitated a mass extinction event—the ending is a foregone conclusion and the narrative becomes the property of dystopian futurologists (or technological utopians).

Without diminishing the ongoing environmental crisis, one can tell slower stories with older beginnings. As a historian, I am struck by how people have been using trees to think about deeper time for all recorded history. This respect for ancient plants—“emblematic elder flora”—is an instinct shared by any number of ethnic and religious groups. In the age of secularization, old trees—especially big old trees—are among the only non-animal living things honored as fellow beings. Arboreal Old Ones are more than carbon sinks and providers of ecosystem services; they help enlarge and sustain the human spirit. At the same time, old trees are technical tools for scientists who reconstruct past climates and model future ones. As objects of empirical inquiry as well as spiritual reverence, ancient trees bridge both the nature/culture divide and the science/religion cleft.