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(Another) Battle in the Clouds

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(Another) Battle in the Clouds

At the age of ten, Rachel Carson entered a writing contest and won. Her winning essay was called "A Battle in the Clouds" and was published in the *St. Nicholas Magazine* in 1918.[1] The short story is about looking at the sky as a battlefield. In it, she recounts something told to her by her brother about a soldier's life being spared because of an act so brave (a pilot standing out on a wing) that it was undeniable in its spectacularity even by the enemy. The enemy watched in awe instead of shooting him down, as ordered and expected. Later, Carson would write with as much grace about the ocean and with a growing sorrow about the effects of pesticides. She wrote so others could imagine a better world, and she did it by mixing fiction, observation, and scientific knowledge. Because of her writing style, Carson became one of the most influential environmentalist of our time, in part, given her stoic compassion; her laments were reserved for the natural world, which she would document beautifully as a science communicator in bestselling books such as *The Sea Around Us* (1951), *The Edge of the Sea* (1957), and most famously, *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson was a marine biologist and conservationist by training. She grew up with a mother well versed in the natural world that surrounded them. She, like you, and like me, is the sum of early influences, predispositions, priorities, privileges, and experiences. She remained very quiet about her personal life, her familial burdens, her ailing body, and her one love, which would forever remain downplayed in a world (still) too broken to imagine and accept bonds without men. In these ways, Carson battled only for a world outside of herself.

If we are now asking ourselves how the environmental humanities at large can respond with hope in a "post-truth world," it is Carson that I call upon again to help answer this question. I imagine she would first encourage us to question hope itself. What are we hoping for, and who is doing the hoping? Instead of countering "post-truths" with hard, scientific, objective facts, she might push us to collectively take up the challenge of inviting scrutiny into the process of truth-seeking, and to question the production of knowledge, by paying attention to the voices excluded from the conversation. She may also, as my own research has led me to understand, question the underlying infrastructures and logics that enable particular truths to take hold and shape the grids of future and futuristic possibilities. Having spent a few years researching data centres and the material networks attached to them as an environmental media scholar, I find it difficult to look to technology for signs of progress. While some inventions are technologically awe-inspiring, it is not hope that they elicit.

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[1] To read the original: http://brbl-zoom.library.yale.edu/viewer/1013352

What I have observed in my research is that there is another "battle in the clouds"; this time it is in the context of "cloud computing," which is increasingly and overwhelmingly shaping earthly possibilities and limitations. As many before me have noted, the material infrastructures of the world are deeply connected to the ways in which we come to know ourselves, as well as what we imagine possible now and for the future. Whether we look to Darin Barney's work on pipelines as sites of contestation/battlegrounds and Timothy Mitchell's "carbon democracy" that places oil companies at the centre of political-environmental crises, Angela Davis's work on prison abolition that calls our attention to the ways that incarceration becomes a response to problems of global deindustrialization, or Kim TallBear's work that shows how Native American sovereignty is threatened by the deployments of DNA (rather than political citizenship) as determinant of one's roots, we find that each points to overarching logics that, at different scales, treat nature as an infinite resource and place humans as malleable subjects maneuvered for and by profit-driven motives. In this new "battle in the clouds," there should be great concern over the ways in which big data is becoming the new dictator of truth, and an automated authority with the material infrastructures to support it. Like a carbon democracy, like a prison industry, and like a genetic identity, the cloud computing infrastructure is producing recombinant truths. In return, these truths support the ongoing development of those infrastructures. And so on and so forth.

What we might consider is that the data centre is now its own industrial complex, generating its own kinds of truths, but also, and more importantly, limiting the ways in which we come to understand, access, share, archive, and remember ourselves collectively. Big data is weather patterns, is global trade, is online shopping, is air pollution, is the quantified self, is melting glaciers, is voting, is driverless cars, is surveillance, is Facebook, is augmented reality, is the internet of things, is big oil, is mass incarceration, is GMO crops, is DNA, is war. If, as this call of *The Goose* asks of us, we consider the future as dark "with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave," how then might we imagine—as Carson was able to when she was ten years old— that this battle in the clouds becomes a gesture of bravery so great that the enemy does not shoot us down? What is the womb and what is the grave in this story? And, who is the hero and who is the enemy? Perhaps we are our own worst enemies, driven foremost by our limited abilities to deal with uneven and intergenerational traumas, which are masked and coped with through a desire to gain control and power elsewhere and outside of ourselves—via capitalism, technology, science, etc. We buy, build, and measure the world we live in with great enthusiasm, and yet, here we are, on the brink of global environmental disaster. Some of us have been in the thick of it for decades. Some of us have died by it. So, we grieve, destroy, and deny ourselves the world, too. We come back to this choice again: to shoot down or watch in awe. I end here, giving Carson the last word: "We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road / the one less traveled by /

offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth" (*Silent Spring* 277).[2]

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