

Biophilia & Military Degrowth

Julie Livingston

This essay responds to Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe's essay on the potential for biophilic institutions, lauding their focus on labor justice and the body of the worker as a route to institutional change. Using the U.S. military as an example, this response asks if all institutions can become biophilic or if some must instead be shrunk, dismantled, or radically reimagined? It goes on to consider the collateral impact of the military in terms of labor justice and environmental damage to call its biophilic potential into question.

The aftermath of a storm or other disaster offers an apt context in which to assess the damage to our world, to consider its broken relationships, its toxic irrationalities, its predatory impulses, its false promises, but also its nascent possibilities. These days, there's plenty of aftermath to go around. Out there in the clean-up, Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe have found an encouraging domain of biophilic possibility: the nonprofit Resilience Force toiling away, quietly organizing amid the disaster capitalism that profits from misfortune of many kinds.¹ Iskander and Lowe's grounded yet hopeful essay reminds us that social and political pressure can foster institutional change in ways that affirm how the environment and the economy are two sides of the same coin. It is hard to stress how important this is in the face of problems so grave and so mighty that fatalism beckons many instead of the creativity and justice we so desperately need. Iskander and Lowe draw our attention to the social contract that underpins systems of labor – and find biophilic potential in the body of the worker, which is porous to the environment in which she labors.

I appreciate this example and the linking of labor and the environment, but ultimately, I think biophilic potential must be found before the storm and not only in its aftermath, because we are trapped in an unending cycle of destruction that must be dug out at its roots. To explain what I mean, let me shift the analytic gaze from Resilience Force to an adjacent presence in the aftermath: the U.S. military. How might we think about an institution that may not be sufficiently moral to be part of a political moral economy? Can an institution organized around violence of many kinds become biophilic or must it be shrunk, dismantled, rethought, reworked? The U.S. military is an example of what I call “self-devouring growth,” a paradoxical formation that furthers the very problems it aims to solve.² Vast re-

sources are invested to ensure our security even as military consumption and its attendant waste undermine our collective future on a massive scale.

The U.S. Department of Defense is both the world's largest employer and its single largest institutional consumer of oil.³ This military department works hand in hand with the Federal Emergency Management Agency on many projects, from search and rescue to debris removal and infrastructure remediation. They were in New Orleans to remove debris and rebuild the levee system after Hurricane Katrina. They were in Florida after Hurricane Irma, and in Houston after Harvey. They cleared debris from the fires in Northern California in 2017, and National Guard troops were deployed to clear debris after the deadly tornadoes in Kentucky in 2021. Yet unlike Resilience Force, the U.S. military helped to foster the deadly power of such storms in the first place. With a massive carbon footprint, the U.S. military warms our planet while securing the global flow of petroleum.⁴ It may clear debris after a storm, but for nearly a decade in the early 2000s, soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan were ordered to throw debris into giant "burn pits" comprising waste from their bases' daily operations: waste doused in jet fuel and set alight.⁵

The U.S. military was on the ground in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. But the U.S. Navy has long failed to clean the toxic mess they left behind through decades of bombing the small Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Our national landscape is littered with several hundred superfund sites on former military installations totaling many millions of acres of profound environmental damage.⁶ Soldiers and military families, as well as those living in the shadow of weapons facilities and military installations, face exposure to harmful chemicals including PFAs (so-called forever chemicals) that have seeped into the groundwater.⁷ The military has drenched Vietnam in Agent Orange, covered Iraq and Syria with depleted uranium weapons, and saturated rural Colombia in glyphosate, with long-term effects ranging from loss of biodiversity to human birth defects and cancers to heightened antimicrobial resistance.⁸ Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands is now uninhabitable; Guam is awash in radiation. The planes dropping the chemicals and the bombs are also spewing carbon.

On the labor front, things are looking equally counterproductive. Soldiers suffer high rates of disabling injury and suicide. There is widespread food insecurity among military families, a seemingly intractable problem of sexual harassment and assault within the ranks, as well as a substantial and seemingly growing problem of white nationalism.⁹ According to an NPR study, nearly one in five defendants in the January 6, 2021, insurrection were veterans of the U.S. military.¹⁰

The Department of Defense has identified climate change as a problem of national security and worked to reduce its consumption of fossil fuels.¹¹ As a major employer of working poor people, it provides training and educational opportunities, and offers a potential pathway to citizenship for the many thousands of

noncitizen soldiers. They also manage pensions and health care through the Department of Veteran Affairs. But its efforts to care for its workforce and for the environment are dwarfed by the destruction and death it brings in the false name of something called security. From the war on drugs to the war on terror to the dirty wars and the proxy wars, the growth of the U.S. military helps drive the migration crisis. Biophilia remains out of reach.

I think Iskander and Lowe are right to point to institutional change through an interlinking of labor and the environment, locating the paradox that biophilic potential can be found in the very institutional processes that exacerbate inequality. But while I hold out hope for their vision of a “pathway for change that runs through established institutions,” I also think false promises abound in certain established institutions, which leads to self-devouring growth.¹² If we see the military deployed to the aftermath, we are missing how they caused the event. We might think it makes sense that they command nearly half of all discretionary spending in the federal budget. What if we went about shrinking the military in a determined way?¹³ What if instead of a national guard, there were a national resilience force? What if this national resilience force worked through labor justice and biophilic principles and offered a ladder for those it employed through job training, educational opportunities, pathways to citizenship, and an emphasis on green technologies and projects? New institutions cannot become the site of hope so long as the old institutions, such as the military, continue to operate in their paradoxical mission, generating disasters and taking charge in cleaning them up. Our environmental problems are so extreme that a new moral political economy will require a fundamental transformation of the existing order. Only then can the biophilic potential of labor-justice institutions like Resilience Force be realized in full.

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Julie Livingston is the Julius Silver Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and History at New York University. She is the author of several books, including *Cars and Jails: Freedom Dreams, Debt, and Carcerality* (with Andrew Ross, 2022), *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa* (2019), and *Improvising Medicine: An African Oncology Ward in an Emerging Cancer Epidemic* (2012).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe, “Biophilic Institutions: Building New Solidarities between the Economy and Nature,” *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 81–93.

- ² Julie Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press: 2019).
- ³ Henry Taylor, “Who is the World’s Biggest Employer? The Answer Might Not Be What You Expect,” World Economic Forum, June 17, 2015, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/worlds-10-biggest-employers>; and Neta C. Crawford, *Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War* (Providence, R.I.: Watson Institute, Brown University, 2019), <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/ClimateChangeandCostofWar>.
- ⁴ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso Books, 2011).
- ⁵ Kenneth MacLeish and Zoë H. Wool, “U.S. Military Burn Pits and the Politics of Health,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly Online*, <https://medanthroquarterly.org/critical-care/2018/08/us-military-burn-pits-and-the-politics-of-health>.
- ⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) Task Force, *Progress Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), https://media.defense.gov/2020/Mar/13/2002264440/-1/-1/1/PFAS_Task_Force_Progress_Report_March_2020.pdf; and The United States Environmental Protection Agency, “The Environmental Challenge of Military Munitions and Federal Facilities,” last modified August 30, 2022, <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/environmental-challenge-military-munitions-and-federal-facilities> (accessed March 7, 2022).
- ⁷ See, for example, Sunaura Taylor, “Disabled Ecologies: Living with Impaired Landscapes” (PhD diss., New York University, 2021); Emma Shaw Crane, “Counterinsurgent Suburb: Race, Empire, and Repair at City’s Edge” (PhD diss., New York University, 2021); The Union of Concerned Scientists, “Analysis of Water Contamination at Military Sites Finds Health Risks Due to Toxic Chemicals Worse than Thought,” September 25, 2018, <https://www.ucsusa.org/about/news/water-contamination-military-sites>; and Tara Copp, “DOD: At Least 126 Bases Report Water Contaminants Linked to Cancer, Birth Defects,” *Military Times*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/04/26/dod-126-bases-report-water-contaminants-harmful-to-infant-development-tied-to-cancers>.
- ⁸ Kristina Lyons, “Chemical Warfare in Colombia, Evidentiary Ecologies and Senti-Actuando Practices of Justice,” *Social Studies of Science* 48 (3) (2018): 414–437, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312718765375>; Wael Bazzi, Antoine G. Abou Fayed, Aya Nasser, et al., “Heavy Metal Toxicity in Armed Conflicts Potentiates AMR in *A. baumannii* by Selecting for Antibiotic and Heavy Metal Co-Resistance Mechanisms,” *Frontiers in Microbiology*, February 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.00068>; and Anh D. Ngo, Richard Taylor, Christine L. Roberts, and Tuan V. Nguyen, “Association between Agent Orange and Birth Defects: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35 (5) (2006): 1220–1230, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dy038>.
- ⁹ Caitlin Welsh, “Food Insecurity among U.S. Veterans and Military Families,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/food-insecurity-among-us-veterans-and-military-families>; and Leo Shane III, “Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops,” *Military Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops>.
- ¹⁰ Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, “Nearly 1 in 5 Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in The Military,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 21, 2021, <https://www>

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¹¹ Neta C. Crawford, “The Defense Department Is Worried about Climate Change—and Also a Huge Carbon Emitter,” *The Conversation*, June 12, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/the-defense-department-is-worried-about-climate-change-and-also-a-huge-carbon-emitter-118017>.

¹² Iskander and Lowe, “Biophilic Institutions,” 82.

¹³ William Hartung, “Pathways to Pentagon Spending Reductions: Removing the Obstacles,” Quincy Brief 21 (New York: Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2022).