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The Power of Play in Urban Environmentalism

Interview with Jenny Price

ALLISON CARRUTH

Jenny Price is a public writer, artist, and historian, and has written often about environment and Los Angeles, and about gun control, the Malibu beach wars, and public space. Author of “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA” and *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, she’s written also for *GOOD*, *Sunset*, *Believer*, *Audubon*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*, and writes the “Green Me Up, J. J.” not-quite advice column on *LA Observed*.

With the LA Urban Rangers art collective she has conducted such projects as *Downtown LA Trail System* and *Public Access 101: Malibu Public Beaches*, and has been a resident artist at the Orange County Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art. She is now creating *Play the LA River* with Project 51, a new public arts and humanities collective. She was a resident artist for the Mellon Tri-College Creative Residencies in 2012–13, and just designed *Nature Trail* for Laumeier Sculpture Park in her hometown, St. Louis.

She has a PhD in history from Yale University, is a Research Scholar at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, and was the Anschutz Distinguished Fellow in American Studies at Princeton University in fall 2011. Price will return to Princeton in 2014 as the Barron Visiting Professor in the Environment and the Humanities. She is currently working on a new book, *Stop Saving the Planet!—& Other Tips for 21st-Century Environmentalists*.

The following is a transcript of our interview conducted on June 28, 2013.



ALLISON CARRUTH (AC): I'd like to begin with a question about your first book. Given it grew out of your dissertation work in history at Yale in the 1990s, what has been most surprising to you about how your career has evolved since publishing *Flight Maps*?

JENNY PRICE (JP): Almost everything has surprised me about my career. When I moved out to LA, I thought I was going to write nonfiction books. I had wanted to be a writer since I was two. I always thought that I would write three-hundred-page books, and that's the only one I ever wrote. I do have a couple of other books that I want to write, but they're tiny. They're not three-hundred-page books, and I don't know if I will ever write another one of those.

Today I say that I do public humanities and arts. What's really surprised me is the ways that my writing topics in Los Angeles have led me into all sorts of new formats. And so now I think of what I do less as just writing than as using my training in the humanities to address topics—environmental topics especially, that I think are important and interesting—in a way that can reach broader audiences. I'm basically a storyteller.

AC: Let's jump from *Flight Maps* to the current book project, which builds on the two-part essay you wrote for *Believer Magazine* in 2006, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA." The essay made quite a splash and also generated controversy in environmental communities. I've taught that piece, and what my students find most provocative and compelling is the case you make for LA as "the ideal place to tackle the problem of *how* we write about nature." But you're not just talking about nature writing as a form. You're also thinking capaciously about the environmental movement in the twenty-first century and why we need new ways of thinking about nature that move beyond what you term the "earnest" and "pious" images of wilderness that a writer like Thoreau offers us. I think our readers would be interested in hearing you talk about the origins of this current book project, how it builds on that *Believer* essay, and what you're hoping in terms of the project's public impact.

JP: First of all, my current project is called *Stop Saving the Planet* (or maybe *50 Easy Ways to Stop Saving the Planet*). To my dismay, it is really close to *Flight Maps* and “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.,” and I feel like I’m becoming one of these people who has only one idea, and I keep writing about it in different ways. I actually thought this was going to be a very different project. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to be exactly the project that I’ve been doing since I left Yale, with the two main iterations being *Flight Maps* and “Thirteen Ways.” They’re really all about looking at this incredibly powerful American idea of nature as something that’s out there and that’s the counterpoint for modern life and all of our problems. *Flight Maps* was about that idea, the history of that idea, and the problems with that idea. After I wrote *Flight Maps*, I got some nice feedback and some mixed feedback, but then a close friend from graduate school said, “This is fine, this is smart, but so what?” Exactly what you just said: “What’s the impact?” And I thought, you know, that’s actually a great question.

I feel like the rest of my career has been an effort to answer that question. “Thirteen Ways” was really about looking at how that idea [of nature] has shaped the ways we build and inhabit cities, though it’s framed as a critique of the nature writing genre. My new project is about tracking ideas [of the natural world] through the “save the planet” rhetoric: a cultural critique of the contemporary green this, green that, green everything environmentalism. It tracks this rhetoric in very concrete ways through environmental actions and policy and asks the questions, “What do we talk about when we talk about environmentalism?” “What are we trying to do?” Because saving the planet is not what we should be trying to do, and it’s actually taken us off on a lot of wrong detours.

AC: What do you see as one of the most persuasive examples of the detours or misguided paths that the call to save the planet has led us to pursue?

JP: There are so many of them. First, I’m interested in the incredibly powerful historical connection between nature and virtue. When you have a world that’s out there, that’s authentic, that’s real, that comes before us, that’s outside of irony, that’s outside of human judgment (this is cribbing from Raymond Williams)—well, that place becomes the touchstone for what’s naturally right and virtuous. That is of course where we get the concept of natural. I think environmentalism has al-

ways been plagued by this association of nature with virtue, and one of the things that you see in a very concrete way in the [current] green explosion is this annoying, often wacky, and ridiculous connection to virtue. There is nothing more virtuous you can do than recycle or change your light bulbs.

My favorite example comes from the *New York Times*—an article about “carborexia” [that describes] a couple who refused to let their kid play baseball because the league was too far away. Being green becomes the ultimate virtue above and beyond any other virtues. [This connection of nature and virtue has] also led to an incredibly misguided emphasis on the importance of individual action. Much of what we do to be green these days is about demonstrating our personal virtue—it’s about our self-identity. And often those things are aggressively bad environmentally. For example, people will throw out a perfectly good car and buy a Prius instead, which ultimately is likely to increase carbon emissions. That’s about personal virtue, not environment. So I feel like the emphasis on virtue has gotten us off track in a lot of ways.

AC: I’ll pick up a thread here that I admire about all of your projects. A kernel of this is in *Flight Maps* and is enhanced in your current project, in your column “Green Me Up, J. J.,” and in the work you’ve done with the LA Urban Rangers—and that is your investment in satire, which you have argued is vital to the new environmentalist paradigm that you are outlining and calling for. Why is it that satire is so important? And you’re not alone in this. There are a number of environmental artists and activists and writers who’ve been exploring how satire, irony, and the comedic mode may be our best bets going forward.

JP: I think it’s enormously important. That’s why I’ve been playing around and experimenting with this satiric green advice column called “Green Me Up, J. J.,” which is really the same project as *Stop Saving the Planet*. They are just two different tracks. It’s important for a couple of reasons. One is that everyone thinks of environmentalists as insufferable—as so pious and righteous and humorless and so insistent on their surpassing virtue, and that’s a problem. But analytically this incredibly strong historical connection between nature and virtue makes irony and satire really important tools for going after that [connection]. The reason that environmentalism is so humorless has to do with the connection between nature and virtue and [the idea] that nature is out-

side of irony and postmodernism. The other thing I would say is that ultimately what my *Stop Saving the Planet* project is trying to do is to look at the class divide that has haunted the environmental movement from the very beginning and the ways in which I think that *that* is the biggest barrier to making progress on environmental troubles. I think this connection between nature and virtue is actually strongly bound up with why so many people think that environmentalism isn't about them.

AC: That made me think about not only the nature conservation strains within North American and Western environmentalism (which have been earnest and reverential, and hence the connection between investments in both nature and virtue) but also the environmental justice movements [around the world], for example the movement in India around the Bhopal disaster of the 1980s. Do you think that satire is equally germane for environmental justice as it is for more conservation-oriented environmental movements?

JP: Ultimately I think those movements should be one and the same, and that's a lot of my argument. The environmental justice movement has been very effective at showing us how environmental problems are connected to injustice. I think they've actually been less successful (I don't think they've tried very hard) at persuading us why justice is important to addressing environmental troubles. So a big part of my agenda is to come from the other side and talk to environmentalists and say, look, this is about justice, which is enormously important, but it's also about clean air and clean water and species diversity and climate change and all of the things you care about and you have been fighting for. You are not going to make significant progress on these things unless you really think about how they are connected to environmental inequities—the inequitable distribution of environmental problems and of who actually creates environmental problems and also the unbelievably inequitable distribution of environmental solutions.

AC: This is a great segue for us to spend some time on LA, where historically there have been conflicts between social justice and environmentalist conservation efforts. LA is obviously so central to all of your work of the last decade. Why has living in LA proven so fruitful for your work—from your unofficial tours of the LA River and your activities

as an LA Urban Ranger to that column “Green Me Up, J. J.” and your advocacy around the Malibu coastline. What is it about LA that inspires you to think about environmentalism in these ways and to provoke new ways of thinking about the natural environment?

JP: That’s a great question, because I think LA has been really important to the work that I’ve been able to do and the ways in which I’ve been able to develop as a thinker, writer, and storyteller. I think there are a number of reasons, one of them being what you started out with. Yes, there has been a divide between mainstream environmentalism and the environmental justice movement. At the same time, LA has been one of the key places where we’ve been breaking down those boundaries. LA has the worst environmental problems in the country, and we also have the biggest social inequities—the most serious social divisions and economic inequities. And so I think that’s forced us to look at the ways in which those are connected in a way that maybe you don’t have to in other places. One of the other things I love about living in Los Angeles is that the problems are so big and so obvious that you have a community of people coming from all different directions trying to address these problems. And it’s also such a messy place, so it’s really hard to come at environmentalism with this twentieth-century sense that we’re trying to preserve something wild and pure.

Another thing about LA is that it’s a flexible kind of place, where a lot of people don’t put down roots and where you can move around quite a bit professionally. The boundaries between academia and outside of academia are much more porous than in a lot of other places; [and] academics are deeply interested in what’s going on in the communities around them. It’s a place where it can be harder to tell who’s an academic and who isn’t, who’s a mainstream environmentalism and who’s an EJ [environmental justice] person, who’s an engineer and who’s an artist. All of those boundaries are really messy in Los Angeles, and I think my own weird stumbling into different formats is a product of that.

AC: In my short time here I’ve found this to be exactly the case, and it’s been incredibly exciting to me as someone who’s invested in the public humanities and in urban environmental justice and environmentalism. In just a year I’ve become involved in more collaborations that cross multiple boundaries than in a decade living in San Francisco.

JP: That's exactly it. There's a certain openness where you can move around. Within a year of being here, people were thinking about me as someone who talked about LA, and I was on LA panels at the *LA Times* Book Festival, and I was writing op-eds for the *LA Times*. That doesn't happen in New York or Boston or San Francisco. I accidentally co-founded this art collective the LA Urban Rangers in 2004, and by 2007 I am an artist all of a sudden, and I'm finding myself in art galleries at openings as one of the artists. I felt like [the lyrics from] that Talking Heads song: "How did I get here?"

AC: That is your theme song.

JP: Of course we have to recognize that some social stations within Los Angeles are very hard to move in and out of. But [for academics and professionals], you can, if you're doing good work, make it happen here.

AC: I think one of your recent collaborations—the Malibu Beaches app—is an example of this kind of unique collaboration that happens in LA and that you've been such a major figure for in environmental circles. This app, as you know, made national headlines over the last month. It offers an unbelievable guide to what I think of as both the public sand and the public access along this incredibly difficult to access stretch of California coastline, where there have been notorious conflicts between affluent homeowners and the wider LA communities that want to enjoy that part of the coastline. What is it about this project that you think galvanized so much media attention? I'm also curious whether the story the media has been telling is in line with or different from your own vision about this project.

JP: Those are really good questions—and I think they have basically the same answer. In fact it's been international attention. We were in all of the London newspapers, and I'm about to go out and talk to German radio. It's exceeded what we thought would happen, though I've been working on Malibu for a long time, and I've seen how battles for public beach access in Malibu make international headlines. I think it's because Malibu represents so much to people. To a lot of folks, it's about the rich and powerful taking what isn't theirs and privatizing it, and especially the beaches. There is something about beaches and water that particularly fires people up when you are talking about privatizing public resources, particularly in Southern California. So that tends

to make headlines. A lot of the media coverage has taken the tack of “We’re sticking it to the billionaires, and they should be scared of us.” Of course, they’re not scared of us—quite the opposite.

It’s really not about that. Most of my storytelling projects have been about trying to have some kind of impact, but they’re also heavily informed by my academic training and my commitment to critical thinking. So on the one hand, the app is very much an on-the-ground tool to help people enjoy these beaches that have been characterized by conflict and tension. People don’t even know how to get to them. And then if they get to them, they’re scared; they think someone is going to yell at them. That’s not what the beach is about. The beach is about having a great day, a great Sunday.

So [the app] is about facilitating that. But then within a larger framework, it’s about insisting on the importance of public space and on the viability of public space. For me Malibu is so important not so much because this particular rich or powerful person lives there but because Southern California is a place that symbolizes the violation of public space and the privatization of public space because it’s always privileged private property over public space. One of the few examples we have of really workable, successful public space is the beach! It’s one of the few places you can go where you see people from all walks of life. And yet, the twenty miles of the Malibu coast walled off by private developments add up to a quarter of the beachfront in the LA area. To me it’s one of the most egregious examples of the violation of public space in the country. So that’s why it’s been a really compelling issue for me. The two main places that I’ve worked on in LA are the LA River and the Malibu beaches. And both of them are tremendous, important public spaces that have not functioned as public spaces for too many decades.

AC: On that note I want to think together about the Malibu coastline and the LA River, because these are the two places in which you’ve invested so much of your time, creative energy, writing life, multimedia art practice, and collaborative efforts. And they are arguably the most different public spaces in the basin. Malibu is heartbreakingly beautiful coastline. Anyone who walks onto that beach feels that sense of the sublime. It takes their breath away. The LA River is a much harder sell as public space. And it seems that one of the things that connects these places is not just all that you were talking about public space in LA and

its importance but also your sense of playfulness and leisure and your effort to define those concepts in capacious ways that speak to different communities.

As a preamble, I've been thinking in preparation for this interview about all of the ways that LA has been depicted—from how scholarly work like that of Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear* imagines the megacity to how LA is described in everyday conversations around the country and around the world as the place of sprawl and smog, as the place where indeed there has been so much privatization of space but also the separation of different kinds of spaces. [According to this rhetoric] the freeway is the space that makes the city and the region cohere more than any other. Part of that is a truism, but this image is rooted in the history of how the basin has been developed. And it connects to all of the environmental challenges you were talking about earlier for environmental movements in LA because it is such a car-centered culture and because there are so many inequalities tied to land use and water. But it seems that one of your interventions (and it connects to our earlier thread about satire) is to respond to those challenges and to that cynicism about LA by offering us play. Is that accurate? And if so how do you see the different forms that play has taken in your work? Why do you think this is such an important kind of intervention?

JP: That is a huge question, but it's a great one. First of all, I love the LA River and I love the Malibu beaches, and any day I can spend on either of those is a good day and a day when I love my job. I might even love the river more. Also I would say, I have three older brothers, and youngest children often use humor as one of our only available strategies. At my core I'm a smartass with three older brothers making my way through the world. But other than that, I would say that my work has always been fundamentally about ideas. I think that's what I'm most passionate about. I hope the larger audience outside academia doesn't really see my work as cultural analysis, but that's what it is. And it's really about ideas of nature and trying to understand how these ideas do real work in the world and have real on-the-ground impact in ways that can be problematic. All of my work has been about changing the ways we think about things and imagine things, which I think is enormously important in a very material way.

Ideas have also been enormously important to the history of Los An-

geles, as you just said. To cite the Lévi-Strauss phrase, we've used Los Angeles to think. It's the place that we've used to articulate either the American Dream or the American Nightmare, and it's the place that symbolizes everything in America that's either gone wonderfully right or horribly wrong. The argument I make in "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA" is that ideas of nature are the most important ideas in Los Angeles historically. So, to get from that to play, I think a lot of what I'm passionate about and committed to is trying to find ways to reimagine nature as a way of reimagining places, our own lives, our connections to nature and to each other.

As much as I'm surprised at how deeply I've moved into what's now being called "social practice" art projects (I sometimes just call them art actions) these participatory events are forms of play. A wonderful way of getting people to reimagine and rethink is to get them to play. It breaks down their defenses. It puts them into action. I really see the public art projects that I do, and that you and I are working on now together, as being about creating stories that people can actually play [a role] in so that they can experience ways of connecting to nature and to each other that are both more problematic and less problematic.

So, for example, on the LA River and Malibu beaches, I've written op-eds shaking my fists and being polemical to say this is the problem with privatization of public space. As LA Urban Rangers, we don't do that. We take people down to the Malibu beaches and we perform the ranger character, which is all about public space, and we basically perform the beaches as public and we create activities [through which] people can experience the beaches as public. We are not lecturing. When I write about or lead tours on the LA River, I preach that LA's future requires the revitalization of the river for all kinds of reasons. The paving of the LA River is deeply implicated in most of the problems Los Angeles is notorious for. That's why the revitalization is so deeply important to the future of this city, and in ways that resonate outside of Los Angeles. As LA Urban Rangers, we [have] created an event where people could *experience* the river both as a river and as a major public space. So it's been exciting for me as a person who's always been playing in my writing and playing in my public speaking to accidentally stumble into this whole world of public art projects that emphasizes experiential play.

AC: It sounds like part of your creative energy inheres in exploring the potentials and constraints of these different formats, from your longest

standing practices as a writer to these relatively more recent involvements in social practice art and multimedia formats. You seem to see all of these different formats and media as serving different roles and as having different upsides and downsides.

JP: Absolutely. I feel like they are all part of the same project. I hope that I'm developing and improving my arguments and applying them in new ways.

AC: This is such rich terrain to explore, and to engage others in exploring with you in all of these different ways. I think that is what is so exciting about your work. Let me segue into a slightly more scholarly line of conversation. I want to come back to Thoreau. You may be aware of an essay Rebecca Solnit wrote in *Orion* a few years back: a very short piece called "The Thoreau Problem." She argues that we've wrongly compartmentalized him by neglecting his politics, as she puts it, neglecting what she calls Thoreau "the rebel, intransigent muse to Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr." There have been a number of these reappraisals of our most revered nature writers in the US—of Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Rachel Carson. What do you think of this recent scholarly reappraisal of or attempt to recuperate these nature writers and make them more relevant to environmental justice and to emergent ways of thinking about nature? Do you find such reappraisals compelling?

JP: Yes and no. First of all, I think these writers are still enormously important to the shaping of contemporary environmentalism. All four of those whom you just mentioned—Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Rachel Carson—were amazing, talented figures and have deeply informed our thinking. But you have to make sure we're treating them historically. We can learn from Rachel Carson, but there have to be things we can't learn from her because she was born in 1907 and lived in a completely different time, and there is no way that our ideas and our practices would be the same as what she advocated. I love the quotation "history is the art of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar." I feel like with these figures we often make the familiar familiar. We pull out what we recognize and what we like and we say, "That's it." But I think it's just as important to recognize that all four are enormously important figures for cementing this incredibly problem-

atic idea of nature at the very core and center of environmental thinking, whose impact extends far beyond environmentalism—into politics, economy, social relations. It's one of the most central ideas in American thought and American history. And we need to finally leave it behind. Though Edward Abbey is one of the very few twentieth-century nature writers who had any sense of humor at all. I love Edward Abbey.

AC: But he is certainly not someone who is thinking about environmental justice or thinking in ways that are nuanced and sensitive about race and class and access.

JP: He's a disaster [in those areas].

And Rachel Carson is the unquestioned saint. I can't think of [another] historical figure who has attracted so little criticism or so little critical thinking. She is the ultimate saint in world history, way beyond Jesus or Gandhi or Mother Teresa. We have to make her real and a person and understand the ways her thinking was shaped very much by the times she lived in. What is actually problematic and what is useful about her legacy?

AC: That is an interesting insight because in some ways environmental scholars and environmentalists have ceded all of the critique of Carson to the far right as well as to scientists in her own lifetime who disparaged her for reasons having to do with gender as well as to companies like Monsanto, which shortly after *Silent Spring's* publication produced an internal parody of its arguments. [You're suggesting that] it's a problem if you cede [any and all] critique to the other side.

JP: But I think it often works the other way. People say, "You can't critique her." And currently right-wing [bloggers are claiming] Carson killed more people than Hitler (blah blah) because of the consequences of not using DDT in Third World countries. So obviously that is ridiculous. But it's similar to when people say you can't critique wilderness because then we can't defend wilderness preservation. I have never agreed with the argument that if people you don't agree with are criticizing something, then it's dangerous to engage in honest self-critique. In fact, I think that is only going to do you proud and do you well.

AC: Let me go back to that Solnit piece for a moment. The other piece of it is her attention to the tensions between a nature writer's com-

commitments to certain social politics (in Thoreau's case to abolition and pacifism) and their love of what David Abram called "the more-than-human world." I was curious to what extent not only in your writing but also in other projects, like the LA Urban Rangers, that has been a tension for you to negotiate: between your commitments to social justice, to public space defined more broadly than an environmental issue, and to the herons and the watersheds that extend beyond the human. Are those tensions that you've had to negotiate?

JP: Maybe personally a little bit. But at the same time, I'm so instinctively ironic and skeptical that all of my work tends to integrate rather than emphasize [tensions]. A lot of my work now is about the connections between social justice and the herons and wild places, so that for me it's less about an environmentalism that preserves wild places and it's less about sustainable cities or social justice than it is about showing how those things are connected and how environmentalism should showcase those connections. I would argue that you can't have social justice in Los Angeles without healthy ecosystems in which herons and all of the birds I love—the Goldeneyes and the Spectacled Eiders (I kind of have a duck fetish)—can thrive. Those things are connected. You can't have healthy cities without healthy wild watersheds outside them. You can't have social justice without healthy riparian ecosystems. I think part of the problem is that we've had a kind of trickle-down environmentalism, which is too often about making the clean places cleaner. You will never have healthy riparian ecosystems if you only clean up the creeks in affluent neighborhoods. Though for me, this all does originate with a love of wild places and an Earth First-y attachment to wilderness that I've completely rejected now. So sometimes I [wonder] why I am not hiking once a week. I don't spend nearly enough time with the wild things.

AC: We've touched on this topic but I wanted to ask about it explicitly. When you were talking especially about *Stop Saving the Planet* this came out in terms of how you think historically as well as in a very contemporary way about the nature-virtue connection. How do you now see your training as a historian, and the kinds of work you do within university settings, shaping your critical practices as well as your creative work in other formats and media?

JP: It's absolutely the foundation. I'm sorry I took as long as I did to get the PhD, but I feel enormously appreciative of that experience of actually finishing the dissertation and finishing graduate school and of that graduate (and undergraduate) education. I really couldn't do the work I do now without it. I learned so much about how to think critically, how to think historically, about power, about all kinds of things that you can definitely learn without going to graduate school but that's where I was really able to learn how to ask questions and think about how the world works. Again, I don't see a tension at all. I feel like all of my storytelling [is informed by that training]. And again, I hope that foundation is invisible to the people who are not in academia and don't care about those conversations, but I hope and assume that it's visible to scholars. I assumed when I left academia that I would have trouble establishing and maintaining my legitimacy as a scholar. And it's been pretty gratifying that people have continued to be welcoming and accepting and have seen my work as substantial despite the language I use and the formats I use.

AC: I think this is one of your many accomplishments. In a single piece of writing, in a single project, there are these layers that speak to these different audiences at the same time. I think that is distinctive, and it's very exciting.

JP: I really appreciate that. If I had stayed in academia one of the battles I would have taken up would have been about writing and language. Because I feel like the first thing you have to do as someone who wants to communicate is to think about who your audience is. And that's not really a question we're trained to ask as academics. And it's not just who your audience is, it's what you just said: Who are your *audiences*? And how are you going to talk to all of them without alienating any of them?

AC: I think this is one of the things that *Resilience* as a journal is going to be experimenting with in the coming years.

JP: Which is really exciting.

AC: Two more questions. The first has to do with the term "sustainability," which is of course everywhere—in energy politics, urban planning, higher education. It's everywhere you look. But as we both know, it's also been a term that environmentalists and artists and scholars have

critiqued for various reasons. We're curious at *Resilience* if you use the word. If you do use it, how are you using it? If not, what are your reasons for eschewing it? Are there other words you find to be similarly aspirational but somehow better terms?

JP: Yes, I use it. I've used it unapologetically, and I don't worry about it. I understand some of the problems historically with sustainability connected to international development. Ultimately I've gotten to a point where I've stopped angsting about this question. Like nature. The very term presupposes a dichotomy that I've spent my entire career trying to break down. But at the same time, if you don't use the word "nature," people don't know what you're talking about because it's such an amazingly powerful word. I feel the same way about most of these words—nature, sustainability, the West. Resilience, I know, is the subject of a political tussle. And ultimately I'm like, "Chill, everyone." Yes, you have to think about the politics of language, but you also have to think seriously about how you are going to communicate effectively, and you have to use words that people are going to understand. If I use "environment," people are not going to necessarily understand what I'm talking about if I'm critiquing ideas of nature.

And that's a mistake in academia, I think. There is a tendency among many scholars to say we have to invent a new language. Well, go ahead, but then no one is going to know what you're talking about, and then what's the point unless you are just going to talk to yourselves. Imagine if Martin Luther King Jr. had made his "I Have a Dream" speech in the language that Judith Butler uses. It just wouldn't have been very effective. I think it's more effective to think about co-opting language rather than worrying about whether it's politically correct.

AC: And perhaps thinking about how we can attach new images and new ideas and new practices to the language we already have.

JP: Yes! It can be really frustrating on the political stage to watch Democrats cede words like "liberty" and "freedom." No, take them back. You have had trouble with "resilience" [along these lines] right?

AC: Definitely. Because in government and military simulations around climate change the [current thinking] is to test how resilient the species is and how resilient certain communities are going to be. That's not the set of stakeholders we're speaking to or that the journal wants to align

with of course. But the term is seductive; it's accessible, and it's capacious. And so that's why it excites us as a term.

JP: It's a wonderful term.

Let me make one quick comment about this topic of resilience. My experience among my friends within academia is that there is an incredible hunger to communicate more widely. The problem is there have not been a lot of outlets to do that. I think *Resilience* is now one of a few outlets that have emerged [to provide this forum]. People come to me because I've had this weird hybrid career and they say, "You know, I really want to write about this topic. Where should I write about it?" And I'm always a little bit stymied. But now I think we have *Resilience* and a few other places, where you can say, "Yeah, this is where you can do that." I think it's really exciting.

AC: That is gratifying to hear. It will probably get put in the interview transcript as a plug you gave us!

So if sustainability is the term that's everywhere, then climate change is the crisis that's everywhere. One of my concerns as a scholar working on food is that there are a host of environmental challenges and also environmental movements that don't fit primarily under the climate change umbrella. When we have a singular focus on this particular crisis—as crucial as it is to have that focus—other things drop out or become less important. In some ways, Bill McKibben is the human equivalent to sustainability in terms of omnipresence. Of course he is an incredible leader, and his involvement at the forefront of 350.org and his authorship of *The End of Nature* in 1989 have been very important. With that as fodder, what is your own sense of climate change and particularly of the apocalyptic rhetoric that, having crossed the 400 ppm mark of CO₂ as measured on the Big Island of Hawai'i this year, we may have crossed a point of no return.

JP: I feel exactly the same way you do. I think it's enormously important, and I think it's enormously dangerous that we haven't been able to make the case widely to get the broader public to understand what's happening so that there is more political pressure and less political resistance. At the same time I think it actually plugs really fundamentally into the problems with contemporary environmentalism. There are cultural reasons as to why it has become *the* environmental issue that don't

have to do with how important it is. Climate change is the ultimate save the planet issue, right? If there were any issue about which you could argue the whole planet is at stake it would probably be climate change. Though that's actually not true, exactly. But also it plays into the apocalyptic tradition in environmentalism, which you can also trace back to Rachel Carson and which has also been very problematic. So it embodies all of the problems of contemporary environmentalism, which begins to explain why the resistance to climate change has been probably stronger than the resistance to any other environmental issue. I think it's because the issue of climate change encapsulates most of the ways in which how we talk about the environment doesn't address inequality, and also doesn't articulate how we can inhabit—versus save—the environment.

Why do people talk about climate change as something you believe in or don't believe in? It's a cultural issue. Scientists think we just need to explain it more rationally. We have to work with humanities folks and writers, because we have to figure out how to explain it better. But the resistance doesn't have anything to do with reason. Anyone who would look at the issue in a rational way would say, "Oh, my God, let's do something about it." It has more to do with cultural resistance and people's long-simmering resentments—class resentments—toward environmentalism. And their conviction that environmentalism is about saving the planet and isn't about *them*. There are very logical reasons that climate change has triggered so much resistance. And for that reason, I think it's important to look at how climate change is connected to social justice and to make climate change specific so that it's not about the whole planet. It's really about being geographically very, very specific about what's going to happen where and to whom.

AC: That is very astute. And so given that it is indeed a major crisis confronting communities around the world and certainly is something that demands a sense of urgency, are there creative practices or projects that you've seen around climate change that you think are working in a fresh, exciting, and ultimately more productive ways than the apocalyptic register that has been so dominant?

JP: There is a lot of art happening around climate change. I have to say that I'm not that knowledgeable about most of it. There was an exhibit called *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change* that Lucy Lippard cu-

rated. There is an annual Fourth of July parade in Whitefield, Maine, that is always themed [about] climate change. They have had people skiing in bikinis. While I'm not that familiar with this [specific area], these kinds of art projects can be very useful at breaking down people's resistance because they are often very playful and very non-confrontational.

I had never thought about it before, but now that you say it, it's so obvious why Bill McKibben has been the central climate change activist. I feel ambivalent about McKibben. He's a terrific writer, and I really admire him for that, and I think he's done tremendously important work. But at the same time, like Rachel Carson, he's one of the major figures who has perpetuated the idea of nature as something that is not fundamentally human. So I guess it makes a lot of sense that he would go from *The End of Nature*, which I actually see as an exceptionally problematic book, to working on climate change.

AC: That is compelling as an account. Let me ask you one last question. Could you tell readers of *Resilience* about one or two projects that you have in the works or that are even just in your mind's eye. What are you most excited about right now?

JP: A couple of projects. I'm doing a nature trail for Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis. I'm their resident environmental historian! I'm from St. Louis, so that's fun to have a project there. It riffs on all of the conventions of a nature trail. It's a loop route around the whole park. There are fifteen stops, but the stops include things like the power lines, where the sign explains where the electricity for the park comes from (these power plants that are some of the biggest polluters in Missouri and in the country). And it has a stop in the bathroom, which tells you where the water comes from and where it goes after the flush. There's a stop in the parking lot, about the relationship between highways and parks. So it's basically taking again all of these ideas that are very established in my work, but finding a new format. And I think it's potentially a format that could reach the unconverted in some numbers, which is always a challenge when you do projects. I'm really excited about it. For each sign, there is a little set of arrows to connected places. So for example, the power lines sign shows arrows to three different power plants and also to the coal mines in Wyoming that supply St. Louis's power plants. It's also my first solo artist project. So that has been fun, but also reminds me why I prefer collaborative projects.

And that brings me to the project that you and I are doing together with a number of other people: Project 51, which I'm equally excited about. I would say we call ourselves a public humanities and arts collective, depending on the granting organization we're talking to. Our launch project is about the LA River. I'm about to leave LA and I've wanted to leave my work behind both on the LA River and in Malibu. Not to leave me behind, but so that all of the work I've done doesn't come to naught and can actually continue to have some impact. I've been doing public communication about the river for so long, and the [Project 51 project] is a way to blow that up and expand it in a really exciting way. And so, as you know, we are creating a project called "Play the LA River." Our future projects might not be LA River-related, but our launch project is. It's going to be a booklet of fifty-two sites in the form of a card deck that will in all kinds of ways encourage hopefully tens of thousands of people over the course of fifty-one weeks to come and play, eat, sing, picnic, tango, salsa, horseshoe, play telephone, play Go Fish, kayak, hike, and so on—on the LA River.

It emphasizes these elements of play that you've been talking about as a strategy. The idea being that the revitalization of the LA River is critical to LA's future, and not just to LA's future but to the future of water supply in the West. Anything that happens in LA already has a lot of symbolic resonance, and the LA River has had a lot of symbolic resonance for representing LA as the city where everything has gone wrong. So the revitalization projects that are going on are enormously important, but the reengineering is way ahead of the reimagination. This is a river that people have forgotten exists. We somehow managed to take this fifty-one-mile river and disappear it. The LA River is one of the best cases that I can think of for how important reimagination is to doing things differently environmentally on the ground in very practical, political, economic ways—material ways. This is a massive project to call people to the LA River to reimagine it, to reestablish it, and to think about the city and what LA can be.

AC: I'm so grateful to be a part of Project 51. It's been to date one of the most intellectually and creatively exciting projects with which I've been involved. One of the reasons I'm drawn to food is that even when you are dealing with some of the most difficult challenges (the patenting of seeds and what that's meant for farmers around the world or the huge

inequalities related to food access or the realities of how agriculture itself has harmed environments), food remains something vital, creative, and pleasurable at the same time. There's something about the LA River and this project that's similar; we're making the case that it is a space that has been and will be ripe with pleasure and play and leisure alongside all of the challenges related to water and water inequalities in Los Angeles.

JP: And I think LA is a very interesting place [for these kinds of projects]. Artists founded the project to revitalize the LA River when no one was taking it seriously in the mid-eighties, and now it's a massive civic and engineering project. LA is a place where the importance of art has become very apparent to the engineers and the policy people. And so artists are very much involved in policy in Los Angeles. Fallen Fruit, for example, just built their first public fruit park. Or think about Fritz Haeg with his gardening projects. It's a place where the city understands the importance of art and artists to what they are trying to do.

AC: I think that's the perfect note on which to close. Thank you, so much, Jenny!