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Resilience

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A wall in Zimbabwe speaks of many kinds of resilience. There is the resilience of stones and rocks in the face of dust and wind, famine and plenty, memory and forgetting. There is the resilience of skill: stones that were cemented with air and gravity and the skill to see the relationships that each rockface could bring into being. There is the resilience



Fig. 1. Stone wall, Zimbabwe, in the style of Great Zimbabwe, c. fifth to fifteenth century. Photograph by Munyaradzi Mawere.

of the beetles and rats and puff adders who have begotten generations in the forgotten spaces between the stones. There is its resilience in the face of nationalisms that make of such stoneworks idylls past. There is the resilience of labor—whether labors of love lost or found, or labors of patronage, we cannot know. No one who made this clicked “Like.” The labors that set it in place were in the clicks of its language, in the clacks and chinks that cut the stones and set them in place: a rock concert, if you like; listen to the music of walking, heating, beating, cutting, carrying, and breaking. In the history of the Anthropocene, perhaps it will come to bear the description, “An early Iron Age wall. Heat was used to break the stones into shapes that could fit together without cement.”

Was the wall built by a household? Did small hands lay the smaller stones? Did the same hands tend it as they grew larger and then shrank into creased skins? Did they mark a line between humans and cattle, or between neighbors, or between predators and prey? What principles did the stones mark, and how did those change over time, and what quarrels erupted over them? What is their legacy now? Were the worldmakings in the walls of Zimbabwe part of the talk in the rock quarries of Robben Island, where Mandela and his fellow prisoners cut stone for two decades? What is the legacy of their resilience for the walls of South Africa’s parliament, where Mandela took up office as president in 1994?

A defining moment in my world, as a South African graduate student in the Mandela years, was the resignation of musician Jennifer Ferguson from her position as an African National Congress member of parliament, after she was told she may not sing her maiden speech. She had wanted to introduce a different storying of woman and womb and life and household—the worldmakings of a poet, a feminist, a mother. But as she warmed up her voice in her office in the chambers, an urgent message came knocking: in here you may not sing; you may only speak. She stood down. The revolution had been won by poets and by songs that laughed and wept and marched and wrought new selves and relations; the new parliament was beginning to usher in the bureaucrats. Linear reason won over the music that could chip away at tired words; her song was silenced in those hallowed chambers that celebrated instead the English parliament’s habit of heckling. “Something in one dies a little, as you experience the cemented walls of the patriarchy,” she wrote.¹

The revolution lost a song; it remade its world in ready-made words and schoolboy heckles. And day by day, new songs gather, as they must,

outside the old walls of parliament. The struggle now, in South Africa, is with the tenderpreneurs who have won over those who tend, and with the proceduralists who can tick all the boxes yet know no ethics.

Walls are resilient—think of the great walls of Rome and Greece and China. But when words are remade with new ideas, great walls—Berlin, Gaza, Jericho—can come tumbling down.

At least two new words are needed in parliaments everywhere, my colleagues in climate change tell me: adaptation and mitigation. Adapt what you do, or offset emissions, or both.

Indeed. But the ease of the words worries me. They make it easy for the tick-the-boxers who want their tax credits or their slice of the fiscus or their piece of the electoral pie. “Here are the solutions. Place your tenders, Ladies and Gentlemen.” Its certainty haunts a larger silence on relationships (class, race, and gender) and relationalities (scholarly assemblages, the predations of the knowledge economy).

Adopting the spirit of Wonderland—parody, fable, humor, satire, and song—is necessary to be able to ask questions that are almost impossible to publish in the annals of mitigation and adaptation. Will our response to the challenges of the Anthropocene be based on tenders, or tending? Who will tend landscapes and shattered biosystems and personhoods to nurture ecologies into flower? As we begin to relink earth systems and ecosystems and human networks to histories and futures long forgotten, we would do well to draw ideas from the stone masons of Zimbabwe. Can we build not with one-size-fits-all ideas, like bricks that are cemented together by something other than themselves, and instead work each idea carefully, mindful of the responsibilities that come with reforming concepts and ways of knowing in public debates? Could we form structures that not only adapt and mitigate, but also tend relationships?

What words can we rework so that the concepts hold together without need for a cementing authority? Which of our new structures will generate relationships with rock and air and critters and neighbors in which each of these find space? Which relationships will endure in the landscape beyond the Anthropocene? Dare we imagine songs for new kinds of parliaments?

NOTE

1. Jennifer Ferguson, e-mail message, April 23, 2013.