



## FOREST NATIVITY Amazon Fires, State–Corporate Crime, Vulnerability

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Listening to Francis Bebey’s “Forest Nativity” (click image above) awakens my senses to the lush, pristine, cryptic rainforest. David Attenborough’s tales of the rainforest’s bizarre tiny denizens color my perception of sound. Now, the song instead warns me of smoke and ashes, greed and impunity.

The Amazon is burning. Smoke from the blaze is enveloping nearby cities and can be seen from space. Since the beginning of this year, over 76,000 fires<sup>1</sup> have been documented in Brazil, most of them in the world’s largest rainforest. “The ascension of the extreme right-wing politician Jair Bolsonaro to Brazil’s presidency profoundly exacerbates the country’s environmental and human rights crisis”, notes Amazon Watch in a recent report.<sup>2</sup> Companies operating in the Amazon—linked to illegal deforestation, corruption, slave labor, and other crimes—trading with European and North American partners, are aided and abetted by the Bolsonaro regime, its cabinet members “serving as political operatives for the country’s agribusiness and mining sectors.”<sup>3</sup> The ongoing ecocide in the Amazon is driven by deforestation, often followed by fires to clear areas for agriculture; environmentalists attribute slash-and-burn operations to cattle ranchers and loggers, emboldened by the state’s pro-business agenda and recklessness on environmental matters.<sup>4</sup> Within one year deforestation caused the loss of an area equivalent to nearly one million football pitches.<sup>5</sup> This environmental catastrophe, destroying rainforest ecosystems, debilitating indigenous communities, and contributing to climate change, seems to be the result of systematic state–corporate crime<sup>6</sup>.

The tragedy in the Amazon is not unique: this month forests and grasslands have gone ablaze in Siberia, Alaska, Greenland, the Canary Islands, California, Angola, DR Congo, and in other parts of the world<sup>7</sup>, driven by record heat, drought, and deforestation. Thousands of monitoring stations attest that July 2019 was the hottest month on earth since at least 1850 and by the end of the month 1 million square miles of ice at the Arctic and Antarctic had melted.<sup>8</sup> Only between 1–14 August 2019, Arctic sea ice had declined at a daily rate of 35,000 square miles.<sup>9</sup> Over half of the Great Barrier Reef, the earth’s largest single structure of living organisms, is already dead because of heat and acidity caused by human activity, leading to a rippling ecosystem collapse in the ocean, with devastating effects on the entire planet.<sup>10</sup> Confronting the terrifying evidence of the climate crisis leaves leading climate change scientists weeping behind closed doors.<sup>11</sup>

Massive deforestation operations globally are clearing space for cropland and pastures, both to feed the livestock we breed to then slaughter. Animal agriculture contributes to the global ecological crisis through its major role in climate change and air pollution, in water depletion and pollution, alongside its impact on biodiversity loss.<sup>12</sup> Almost a decade ago the United Nations Environment Programme cautioned that a reduction in this devastating environmental footprint “would only be possible with a substantial worldwide diet change, away from animal products.”<sup>13</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concurs that, since climate change is projected to negatively impact global food security, plant-based diets are significant, given their low environmental impact.<sup>14</sup> Recent research substantiates this transformative potential: excluding animal products would reduce by 76% the land we currently use for food.<sup>15</sup> That land could be dedicated to restoring and revitalizing ecosystems now compromised, which gradually would reduce the risk of ecological collapse. Besides concerns about animal cruelty and on the potentially detrimental health effects of eating meat, awareness of the calamitous environmental impact of animal farming is one of the main drivers of veganism, now one of the fastest growing movements in the world.<sup>16</sup>

The history of sexism and racism shows that the justifications used to render certain lives inferior (and thus suited for subjugation) are strikingly similar to how carnism<sup>17</sup> and speciesism<sup>18</sup> continue to operate: through denial, strategic invisibilities, and discrimination which legitimate physical, structural, and epistemic violence. Given the significant progress in recent decades on sexism and racism, scholarship and activism may gradually treat speciesism also as a transgression of individual and collective rights. These aspects have driven scholarly debates on whether nonhuman animals could be seen as persons<sup>19</sup>, as well as groundbreaking initiatives giving nature legal personhood.<sup>20</sup> The inevitable interdependence between different forms of life is increasingly recognized.

What can a vulnerability lens contribute here? Vulnerability theory<sup>21</sup> reminds us that vulnerability is not exceptional, but universal and constant. Vulnerability stems from our human condition: embodied (our existence depends on a fragile material case, the body) and embedded (we are never autonomous but depend on others in complex ways). Prof. Martha Fineman’s jurisprudence replaces the independent, self-sufficient liberal legal subject with the “vulnerable subject”. Within this approach, the opposite of vulnerability is not invulnerability but resilience: the capacity to withstand harm. Vulnerability theory shows that in charge of fostering resilience are law and of institutions (“the responsive state”) which are meant, ideally, to mitigate our inherent vulnerability. I believe the Amazon fires and surrounding debates on ecology, speciesism, and state–corporate crime can be critically revisited through vulnerability theory’s insistence on dependency and interdependence. Given our biological and social reliance on other lives to sustain our own, the destruction of ecosystems carries immediate and multigenerational effects on humans, flora, fauna, and other life forms. Ecocides make us all less resilient. The failure of Brazilian authorities and of the international community to protect nature puts a lasting dent in Forest Nativity<sup>22</sup>, literally and figuratively, and in our ability to cope with common, intersecting vulnerabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Amazon Watch (2019). *Complicity in destruction II: How northern consumers and financiers enable Bolsonaro's assault on the Brazilian Amazon* (p. 3). Washington, DC: Amazon Watch. <https://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2019-complicity-in-destruction-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Democracy Now (2019, August 23). How Jair Bolsonaro emboldened Brazilian agribusiness to torch the Amazon & attack indigenous people. [https://www.democracynow.org/2019/8/23/andrew\\_miller\\_amazon\\_fires\\_jair\\_bolsonaro](https://www.democracynow.org/2019/8/23/andrew_miller_amazon_fires_jair_bolsonaro)

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<sup>5</sup> Greenpeace (2018, November 23). Brazil: Deforestation in the Amazon reaches decade high. <https://www.greenpeace.org/brasil/press/brazil-deforestation-in-the-amazon-reaches-decade-high/>

<sup>6</sup> International State Crime Initiative (2014). A critical introduction to state–corporate crime. <http://statecrime.org/state-crime-research/state-corporate-crime-crit-intro/>

<sup>7</sup> Global Forest Watch Fires (2019). GFWF interactive map. <https://fires.globalforestwatch.org/map>

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