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The Tree Whisperer

Jared Farmer wants to change the way we think about climate change

By Brandon Keim | FEBRUARY 04, 2018

Mark Abramson for The Chronicle Review

Jared Farmer in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery: "Every tree you see here has been cared for, many for 150 years."

On a muggy August morning, Jared Farmer is taking a walk around Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Farmer comes here every week; the cemetery, spanning nearly two centuries and 500 acres, is a natural place to stretch his legs and compose his thoughts.

It's not just the obvious historical details that catch his attention — forgotten sculptural vernaculars, engraved names tracking New York's waves of immigration and assimilation. The landscape, too, is inscribed with history: The rolling topography, a product of boulders deposited by glaciers during the last ice age, would eventually make the area less commercially desirable in this rapidly urbanizing city, and therefore suitable for a graveyard.

City planners put David Bates Douglass in charge of the cemetery's forest-garden design. Some of the trees now dotting its slopes can trace their origins to his plantings. Like the gravestones the canopy also reflects time's passage — stately sassafras predating the cemetery, Eurasian exotics beloved of 19th-century colonial botanists, metasequoias rooted in 1960s botanical fashion, newly planted blight-resistant chestnuts. To a trained eye they reflect arborists' hands: limbs trimmed long ago, the verdancy given by fertilizer and extra attention.

"I'm very conscious that every tree you see here has been cared for, many for 150 years," says Farmer, a professor of history at Stony Brook University, in New York. "I think of

these trees as cultural artifacts, and also ongoing acts of care."

It's his kind of thing. Farmer, 43, is an environmental historian or, as he likes to put it, a place-based historian, or anthrogeomorphologist, or geohumanist. A chronicler of how what is perceived as natural is often a jumble of cultural legacies.

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Since 1999 he's published, amid a stream of scholarly articles, three books: *Glen Canyon Dammed,* about the physical and sociological construction of Lake Powell; the acclaimed *On Zion's Mount,* about the landscape of his childhood Utah home; and *Trees in Paradise,* a tale of post-Gold Rush California seen through the lens of four emblematic tree species. Cultural ecologies of conquest, folly, and grace.

These were stories of how our world came to be. Now Farmer is thinking of the future. In 2016 he received a $200,000 Andrew Carnegie Fellowship to study relationships between people and ancient trees; with a research leave that Stony Brook financed with $50,000 apiece from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, he hopes to find lessons for living in a world of climate change and upheaval. "Climate change is the problem of our time; it is also a problem of time," wrote Farmer in his Carnegie application. "It requires thinking — and caring — in the long term."

Yet people are notoriously terrible at thinking on that scale. Even as earth's temperatures are expected to rise dramatically by this century's end, making a world inhospitable to its inhabitants, that proposition remains for many people an abstraction. Efforts to forestall it are piecemeal and lack urgency. The culture of late-industrial capitalism, or whatever one wants to call the social and economic arrangements that have produced this pending planetary catastrophe, is fixated on the here and now.

In old trees and our relationships to them, perhaps, will be examples of thinking differently.

"There are continuous acts of caring in this place," says Farmer of Green-Wood's arbor.

These well-tended trees, bequeathed by prior generations of care, are living bridges between past and present, present and future. "A lot of these stones, even if you wanted to remember the person, the names and dates have already worn off," he says. "All these trees will last longer than the stones."

Mark Abramson for The Chronicle Review

Jared Farmer in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery.

Except for us and a few landscapers, there's nobody else at the cemetery, and hilltop views stretch across the Hudson River into New Jersey. Metaphorical significance aside, the open vistas remind Farmer of home.

He grew up in Provo, Utah, in the heart of Mormon country. His relationship to the religion and the culture was complicated. "I never believed in the doctrine," he says. "I never prayed. I wore my street clothes to church and had my hair in my face. I'd sleep or doodle or read a book." Yet aspects of Mormonism appealed to him: the grand narrative of a people who fled persecution and trekked 1,300 miles to build a homeland in the West's arid vastness. "That impulse to make land sacred, to feel that deep, deep belonging and attachment to a place — that was so attractive to me."

Hiking with his father on the Colorado Plateau's slopes, Farmer found the feelings missing from church. He devoured the writings of the great environmentalist Edward Abbey and archival accounts of the land's settlement. Because of a genetic condition that caused Farmer to experience severe headaches in hot weather, he spent much of his teenage summers in the air-conditioned coolness of university library archives.

"I sometimes think I would not have become a historian if it weren't for the headaches," says Farmer. There in the racks of microfilm he could satisfy a particular obsession: Glen Canyon, a series of gorges cut by the Colorado River and bisected in 1963 by the Glen Canyon Dam. It was one of the largest, most controversial engineering projects in U.S. history — "the damnation of a canyon," wrote Abbey — and the wonders submerged beneath Lake Powell, the dam's 186-mile-long reservoir, captured Farmer's imagination. "I read that this was the most beautiful place on earth, and I had just missed it," he remembers. "I was haunted by that. It became this obsession with something that was gone, that could only be known through texts, by going to the library."

This research gave rise to *Glen Canyon Dammed* (University of Arizona Press, 2004), which he began as an undergraduate at Utah State University and finished as his master's thesis at the University of Montana. Already it displayed the hallmarks of Farmer's later work: Though his own sympathies lay with environmentalists who lamented the dam, he treated as equal the perspectives of people who loved Lake Powell, who relied on its tourism revenues and developed new traditions and found their own wonders in what seemed, at least to their children, perfectly natural.

"Jared gives us both sides with empathy, which was not common in environmental historiography at the time," says Matthew Booker, an environmental historian at North Carolina State University. "What were the stories that helped create Lake Powell? What stories did people tell as they transformed the world to make it better?"

The ability to relay those with grace and historical rigor is a gift, says Booker, and Farmer took it to Stanford University for his doctoral studies. There he confronted the landscape of his youth: how Mormon settlers made it their own not just physically but culturally, investing locally beloved Mount Timpanogos with a reputedly "Indian" mythological significance the mountain had never possessed while ignoring the actual historical significance of Utah Lake, a center of Ute life before the tribe's violent displacement.

It was a story at once local and universal, grounded in one part of Utah but resonant with North America's settlement by Europeans. Published in 2008 after Farmer finished his Ph.D., *On Zion's Mount* (Harvard University Press) won five awards, including the prestigious Francis Parkman Prize. Farmer, then 34, was the second-youngest historian to receive it. The book also marked a losing-my-religion moment: not the actual religion, which he'd lost long ago, but his sense of connection to the Mormon cultural project.

"I thought there was something there that I could separate from the theology and doctrine and oppressive culture and all the things I disliked," Farmer says. Yet by the end of researching *On Zion's Mount,* "my belief in the Mormon sense of place was so drained." The environmentalist literature of Farmer's formative years in the 1990s had emphasized the virtues of cultivating a sense of place, but that's exactly what the Mormons had done "and I didn't like the outcome."

Despite that, Farmer remained sympathetic to Mormons. During the 2012 elections, he wrote two freely distributed general-audience books on Mormonism for people made curious by Mitt Romney's candidacy, and he takes umbrage at casual criticisms made by

outsiders, especially in academic circles. That *On Zion's Mount* was well received in the Mormon scholarly community is a matter of pride — but Farmer can't go home again.

When Farmer was a child, his father, a Los Angeles transplant, built a greenhouse to grow citrus and fig trees. It was, wrote Farmer in an essay for *High Country News,* something his teenage self saw as "further evidence of my family's peculiarity. Now, in retrospect, I regard it as a poignant expression of my father's personal California dream."

Not unlike Jared, the elder Farmer, a brainy and left-leaning professor of biochemistry and genetics at Brigham Young University, never quite fit in Mormon country. The trees he nurtured in that greenhouse grew poorly, no more suited for transplantation to the Utah Valley than their cultivator had been. And yet one tree, a giant sequoia purchased as a seedling from a gift shop at Muir Woods, improbably thrived.

That garden's example of identity and aspiration expressed through horticulture would help inspire Farmer's next work. Published after he took an assistant professorship at Stony Brook, *Trees in Paradise* (W.W. Norton, 2013) is a horticultural history of California after the Gold Rush framed by four iconic species: oranges, Mexican fan palms, blue gum eucalyptus, and sequoias. The trees are at once biological and cultural beings, their stories intertwined with our own, paradoxical impulses: triumphalism and humility, rapaciousness and care.

The orange trees, for example, reflected an impulse to afforest a once largely treeless region by settlers seeking "to 'complete' a land blessed with exceptional soil and sun." In the process they reconfigured hydrologies and destroyed ecosystems, and dreams of Mediterranean plenty became sites of worker exploitation. The eucalyptus, a species now viewed as a messy, fire-prone "alien," was once marketed as "the Miracle Tree" to people who saw in its fast-growing tendencies a booming future lumber industry. It never came to fruition. The wood they produced in their new climate was brittle and warped, something they realized only after eucalyptus was planted across much of the state.

The paradoxes of California's ecology of conquest were especially manifest in the near total consumption of sequoias — both giant sequoias and their coastal

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cousins, redwoods. "Enraptured by the tree's immensity, early Californians engaged in a perverse act of devotion by chopping it down," wrote Farmer of the first settler-documented redwood, which they named the Discovery Tree. That tale of veneration and desecration was repeated many times over, as trees described as having "sprouted from the damp Sierra soil in the time of Abraham" were felled in a few days, alternately turned into cheap housing materials or put on tour in Europe for crowds enthralled by their history-spanning magnificence.

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Yet those ancient, fast-dwindling groves would also stimulate the devotion of environmentalists like John Muir and late-20th century tree-sitters, with foresight and spiritual regard infusing now-mainstream scientific notions of old growth and so-called climax forests that have reached a stage of long-term stability. They inspired people to care about a time beyond their own. In a secular age, or at least a theistically jumbled age, old trees are among the few sources of near-universal veneration.

"It is a widespread cultural phenomenon," he says. "People caring for and about trees that live long beyond a human life, even long beyond a nation or civilization." It's an idea with urgency. Our scientific tools peer into a potentially catastrophic future, predicting vast suffering as a consequence of humanity's collective actions, especially our release of carbon into earth's atmosphere — yet our politics, economics, and popular culture are decidedly short-sighted, focused on election cycles and quarterly growth.

"The cultural imagination has not caught up" to the need for long-term thinking, Farmer says, "and I think the cultural has to precede the politics." His Carnegie, Sloan, and NEH grants support his present work on what's provisionally titled "The Latest Oldest Tree" (under contract with Basic Books). Exploring humanity's relationship to elderflora, as Farmer likes to call them, might seed a new type of culture, one in which the well-being of earth's future inhabitants is embedded in everyday consciousness. "In this time of rapid global change," he wrote in his fellowship application, "I hope to cultivate histories of long-term local solicitude. That is, survival stories for a time of extinction."

"The Latest Oldest Tree" will be more prescriptive than *On Zion's Mount* and *Trees in Paradise,* says Farmer. The moment demands not just critique and deconstruction, but vision; and that vision should be hopeful and helpful, not a gloomy lament. Yet Farmer distrusts the simplistic — this will not be, he stresses several times, a book about how old trees are great and will solve our problems. A tension exists between his desire to instruct and the historian's tendency to simply delight in history's complexities and richness.

The social construction of ancientness is particularly fascinating to Farmer. He riffs on how oldness is given meaning: Sheepherders used to throw 4,000-year-old bristlecone pinewood on their campfires, appreciating its slow burn. Now the trees' ancientness has made them floral celebrities, and dendrochronologists read their rings to learn about prehistoric ecologies. Late in our walk he mentions metasequoias planted on the cemetery's edge: A distant relative of sequoias, from which they diverged several hundred million years ago, metasequoias were "discovered" in 1944 and dubbed "dinosaur trees," which in turn influenced discourse around the logging of their redwood relatives.

"It became useful to harness dino-mania," explains Farmer. "Why would we cut down these trees that are as old as dinosaurs?"

Farmer's observations are rarely simple. He mourns the passing of elderflora from extreme weather, disease, and human consumption — "There is a crisis of old trees in the world," he says — and also thinks we should better come to terms with death as an essential part of ecological cycles. After our interview, he visited the University of Arizona's Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, the heart of bristlecone science, and returned brimming with stories of both that species and high-dwelling limber pine, which can live for 1,500 years yet go largely unappreciated. In some quarters the "overtaking" of bristlecones by limber pines is even bemoaned. Perhaps the limber pines' resilience to a fast-changing climate might be celebrated instead.

Farmer also plans to visit Hiroshima, where trees that survived the atomic bomb are lovingly, poignantly tended. Some geologists consider radioactive fallout a physical signature of the Anthropocene, a sort of Year Zero marker for humanity's enormous global influence — yet Farmer considers that notion problematic, as it puts our own fleeting moment at history's center. Such examples of arboreal culture tend to the oblique, though maybe that's part of the point.

"What a good historian does is to help readers think about change over time," says Matthew Klingle, an environmental historian at Bowdoin College. "They take what we think is natural and say: There's nothing natural about that. It was a complex of history."

An example Farmer is especially fond of: England's ancient yew trees. Longbow construction during the Middle Ages almost completely denuded northern Europe of mature yews, and the oldest are now found almost exclusively in the courtyards of rural churches. Often they predate the churches, their trunk a passage between Christianity and earlier traditions that involved tree worship. Their present shapes bespeak generations of pruning. Long unappreciated outside their communities, they're now considered a national treasure. "People have always looked at history to understand the present — but in terms of anniversaries, events, personages," says Klingle. "That doesn't mean thinking historically. That's why what Jared does is so exciting."

Farmer is quick to emphasize, though, that appreciating old trees is not automatically respectful of life. He's also written about America's so-called treaty trees, where settlers and natives supposedly came to peaceful agreements, and "liberty trees," which often did double duty as lynching trees, bearing strange and mostly dark-skinned fruit. These freshly hallowed plants were integral to a young nation's self-identity, but they also whitewashed a conflicted history. A certain ecological whitewashing can exist, too: There are sea-grass beds and fungi. There's also no guarantee that care for trees will extend to larger natural communities.

Farmer takes me to the grave of Henry Bergh, founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "The creation of the garden of California was a miracle for plants and insects; for animals, it was a holocaust," he writes in *Trees in Paradise,* and he describes the settlement of California as ecocide. That awareness of nature as containing many communities, only some of them human, is notable. People may treasure individual trees even as they clear entire forests. I ask Farmer: Will attending to ancient trees necessarily make us more attentive to the nonhuman world? Might it be warped by our own species-level self-absorption?

"I don't know," he replies. "That's one of the big questions I'm struggling with." Caring for old trees is gardening, he says, and the history of gardens can become tangled with colonialism and the conquest of wildness. Being in the presence of a 4,000-year-old bristlecone ought to cultivate inclusive, long-term thinking, but that's not an empirical assertion. "I'm a skeptic," Farmer says. "I'm quite prepared to find, when I get deep into

this research, that there are not many good examples of people being stewards over thousands of years in ways I'd say are sustainable or respect a larger community of life. I just don't know."

Another lingering question: At this turbulent cultural moment, what can a historian do? Farmer hopes "The Latest Oldest Tree" will reach a more general audience than his earlier works, but he knows that it will probably find a readier reception on one side of what's become an almost tribal political divide.

Such a challenge certainly isn't unique to Farmer, though, and you can see a hint of his work's potential significance in the way he has sometimes described the project: as a vehicle "to contemplate the ethics and politics of long-term thinking in the Anthropocene," the age in which human activities are ubiquitous and earth-shaping.

Scientists have debated whether the Anthropocene is a scientifically meaningful term and, if so, precisely when it started; some scholars dislike the term for fetishizing human primacy and making particular economic and social systems seem inevitable, even natural. Others view it as a concept that can help us grasp the enormousness of human power. Farmer hasn't engaged with this debate directly, but it's context. The Anthropocene frame suggests the importance of values. What people believe has planetary consequences.

In this light, how people understand and draw lessons from history takes on added significance, as does our ability to imagine better ways of being. The Anthropocene isn't fated to be short-sighted business as usual. "To a historian, the past is a way to show that things didn't have to turn out the way they did," says Klingle. "That's the power of someone like Jared and the work he does: to help us learn to think and see differently."

Farmer spoke to this in his 2014 acceptance speech for the Hiett Prize in the Humanities, where he said, "The very strangeness of the past is inspirational in the sense that it reveals to us the vast capacity of the human imagination, and allows us to imagine different futures." The very idea of long-term thinking expressed in the care of beings other than ourselves may be an act of radical imagination.

As we climb up a hill from Henry Bergh's grave, we pass a tiny gravestone carved in the shape of a tree. A common form on Jewish gravestones, it symbolizes a Tree of Knowledge. Nearby is a horse-chestnut tree. It brings to mind the horse chestnut outside

Anne Frank's attic window. "As long as this exists," she wrote in her diary, "how can I be sad?"

In 2005 it was discovered that the tree, reputedly one of the oldest in Amsterdam, was diseased. Proprietors of the Anne Frank House, the museum devoted to keeping her memory alive, gathered and germinated its chestnuts. They sent seedlings to schools around the world. With care and more than a little luck those trees will be standing long after the people who planted them are gone.

Brandon Keim is a freelance journalist and the author of The Eye of the Sandpiper: Stories from the Living World *(Comstock, 2017). He has written for* The Chronicle Review *about research on primates and the new anthromorphism.*

Correction (February 5, 12:52 p.m.): An earlier version of this story incorrectly attributed Green-Wood Cemetery's design to Frederick Law Olmsted.

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