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David K. Hecht

Rachel Carson and the Rhetoric of Revolution

Abstract

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is justly remembered as a landmark in the history of modern environmentalism. It is, however, a more complicated text than cultural memory tends to acknowledge. Blending conservative and traditional elements with more progressive and pioneering ones, *Silent Spring* is marked by a complexity that extends to its reception and legacy. This article argues that—in a seeming paradox—it was the more conservative elements of *Silent Spring* that allowed it to be considered a revolutionary book. Carson carefully constructed her argument in ways that facilitated its initial acceptance. But those same decisions made it easier for supporters to de-emphasize its more radical implications, even as they granted it revolutionary status.

INTRODUCTION

A writer is a frail means by which to turn men from the momentum of destructive exploitation.

— John Hay, "This Is Not Disneyland."

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In one poignant sentence written in 1972, John Hay offered a compelling counter-narrative to the usual story of Rachel Carson. Although unstinting in his praise for Carson, Hay seemed unable to shake a sense that *Silent Spring's* effects were limited—perhaps inevitably so. Lamenting that “you still hear talk about the benignity of DDT and how much Rachel exaggerated,” he wondered whether “perhaps men are not destined to live in any reasonable degree of harmony with the earth environment.” This was not just the fault of small-minded critics, he felt, but rather a result of the short-sightedness and inclination toward “lazy apologies” that characterized all of society, and perhaps the whole human species.¹ As historians, we may or may not agree with Hay’s assessment. But we should be mindful of the fact that in 1972, amid a string of successes for the emerging environmental movement, a prominent nature writer decided to use appreciative, but melancholy, tones when talking about *Silent Spring*. He was not alone. Six years later, the entomologist Robert van den Bosch tried to raise awareness of the continuing threat posed by pesticides—a threat that *Silent Spring* had highlighted but not solved. “Rachel Carson’s was an isolated voice in the vast human chorus,” he wrote, “and though clear and sweet and strong while it lasted, it was mortal, and it was abruptly silenced by death.”² Like Hay, van den Bosch admired Carson but was cautious when addressing the question of her legacy.

We should take their caution seriously. Just as Rosa Parks did not act spontaneously, and Stonewall was not the only site of gay resistance to intimidation, *Silent Spring* was neither immediately nor inexorably constructed as a foundational text of the environmental movement.³ Instead, it emerged as such through the actions of specific people who decided whether, how, and when to speak about the book. Like other activist histories, stories of *Silent Spring's* success are necessarily partial; those who tell them need to interpret the text and how it applies to the political conditions of the day. Writing of gay rights activism, for example, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage have contended that “the Stonewall story is thus better viewed as an *achievement* of gay liberation rather than as a literal account of its origins.”⁴ The comparison with *Silent Spring* is not exact. But their argument does suggest that we might productively reflect on the conditions that render historical events or texts iconic. And, in the case of Rachel Carson’s most famous book, such reflection has some important—even unsettling—implications.

The unsettling possibility is this: might *Silent Spring* have produced liabilities as well as promise for environmentalism? Several recent scholars think so. Yaakov Garb, for example, has underscored the book’s political moderation, which may have obscured the true dimensions of the pesticide problem. Michelle Mart has noted that, despite its prevalence in cultural discourse, *Silent Spring's* direct effects

on policy were limited. And Jenny Price has suggested that the particular vision of nature in the book may have slowed the campaign for environmental justice.⁵ These (and other) scholars share a desire to complicate the prevailing cultural memory of *Silent Spring* even as they retain respect for both the book and its author. Their efforts have helped create a richer, more nuanced picture of Carson and her work. But their very success in doing so raises new questions. If *Silent Spring* was a moderate text—even a conservative one—then how did its author come to be seen as a kind of revolutionary? Carson’s status as a founding voice of modern environmentalism makes sense as long as we consider her work to be groundbreaking. But the more we begin to question the simplistic narratives of *Silent Spring* as a watershed text, the more we become forced to explain, rather than assume, its exalted place in cultural memory.

The puzzle deepens when we consider the surprisingly conservative nature of not just *Silent Spring* but also its reception and legacy. It is certainly possible to read the book in an expansive way, using it as inspiration for an agenda that is either broad or radical.⁶ But this has not been the norm. Stories and images of Carson’s life have tended to delimit, rather than enlarge, the scope of environmentalism. Most frequently, these remembrances feature the Arcadian elements of her vision: of nature as a place of virtue and purity, of timelessness and stability. Despite the increasingly obvious problems with this conception of nature, it holds a cherished place in American cultural mythology—a place that *Silent Spring* both reflected and helped shape.⁷ This suggests that the book constitutes a more problematic piece of environmental history than the cultural memory of it generally acknowledges, and we would do well to wrestle with that possibility. But the deeper issue is that *Silent Spring* contains multiple elements that may not be fully reconcilable. Garb writes that “there are places where her account can barely sustain the logical strain of not pursuing its own implications.”⁸ It is this tension—not simply the usual vagaries of audience interpretation—that allows for a range of reactions to the book. Conservative and traditional in some respects while progressive and forward-looking in others, the text resists rigid characterization.

The tensions within *Silent Spring* have been essential to creating narratives of its revolutionary impact. Carson became an iconic figure precisely because she was able to do justice to conflicting ways of seeing the world. This article opens by re-examining the book itself. Carson had a vexed relationship with modernity; she was no Luddite, but she did have an affection for non-human nature that seemed increasingly out of step with mid-twentieth-century culture and practice. This perspective helped produce a text that—like many revolutionary visions—is backward- as well as forward-looking; it is not easily characterized as one or the other. The second section

explores how and why this approach resonated with reviewers and readers of *Silent Spring*. Its acceptance was not total, of course. But it was surprisingly quick and widespread, a phenomenon attributable to the elements of the book that were (and were not) picked up. In part because readers and policy-makers focused on determining the risks of pesticides, they were able to de-emphasize the book's broader ecological messages and contradictions. The final section considers the creation of Carson's status as a founding voice of modern environmentalism. This has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, but it was retrospective assessments in the 1990s and 2000s that most clearly tell the story of her ostensibly revolutionary impact. During these decades, selective readings of *Silent Spring* proved at least as prominent as they were in the immediate aftermath of the book's publication, and they reflected the same uneasy relationship with modernity that characterized the original text. *Silent Spring* is often studied for its role in launching modern environmentalism, but it is perhaps even more interesting for the way it embodies the movement's enduring tensions.

THE CONSERVATIVE RACHEL CARSON

In June 1962, when the *New Yorker* serialized three lengthy excerpts from *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson was already a well-known and critically acclaimed author. She had published three previous bestsellers, garnering a reputation as a gifted and eloquent science writer. This fame would prove essential to the visibility of her new book. The *New Yorker* excerpts generated considerable press, so that by the time Houghton Mifflin published the book itself in September of that year, pesticides were very much in the news. *Silent Spring* would provide a focal point for book reviews, editorials, and publicity campaigns throughout the fall and winter of 1962 and into the following spring. In April 1963, in an episode of *CBS Reports* that attracted millions of viewers, Carson acquitted herself superbly. She was able, on screen as she had in print, to articulate environmental concerns in a way that audiences of the time found acceptable. An official report from the President's Science Advisory Committee the following month confirmed many of her contentions, and Carson would soon testify before Congress. By the time of her death in 1964, the problem of pesticides was on the national agenda. Actual regulatory reform was slower, but the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) banned DDT from most domestic use in 1972. In the years since, both Carson and *Silent Spring* have remained touchstones for activists, writers, artists, and politicians concerned with environmental issues. She is frequently cited when conversations turn to toxicity and has become an inspiring figure for her celebration of the beauty of the natural world.

Carson now enjoys a place alongside Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and other iconic defenders of nature.

But there is another way to tell the story. Yaakov Garb has suggested that we might consider whether *Silent Spring* was “an extraordinary balancing act or a disappointing compromise.”⁹ Carson certainly proved masterful at making unfamiliar and uncomfortable realities believable to a mass audience. But she had to make a number of sacrifices and compromises to do so. Like many activists, Carson had to balance the need to reach broad audiences with the desire to faithfully convey her ideas. These goals are often in conflict, and it is rarely obvious where tactical compromise crosses the line into unacceptable dilution or distortion of principle. Might Carson have edged toward the wrong side of this line? Was the price of *Silent Spring*’s success a diluted message that nudged environmentalism away from its most effective path? Garb points out that the book rested on a “reformist framework for thinking about pesticides, which sent future efforts down the track of remedial legislation rather than the fundamental democratization of research, technology, and production.”¹⁰

Like all decisions, Carson’s choice to moderate her approach had a range of consequences, not all of them good. As Garb has argued, “*Silent Spring* opened a space that might have been occupied by an attempt to answer the difficult and messy political and economic questions of how pest control might be guided by biological knowledge and democratically determined priorities, rather than the logic capital accumulation. Instead, this space was more palatably filled with the hopeful ideal of biological control as Yankee ingenuity in service of a pastoral ideal.”¹¹ Garb acknowledged that *Silent Spring* “opened a space” for debate about the underlying causes of pesticide overuse. But, he contended, Carson ultimately backed off from the radical implications of her argument, instead focusing on a technical solution that allowed her readers to sidestep “difficult and messy” issues. Michelle Mart extended this argument to encompass both the construction and the reception of the text. Carson and her various audiences, Mart wrote, “highlighted the conservative aspects of her argument and thus made those aspects a safer fallback position from overly radical change.”¹²

This approach was critical for creating broad acceptance for her book—a phenomenon that Mart, Garb, and others have recognized. But Carson’s moderation co-existed, at times uneasily, with a worldview that offered a more extreme critique of modern society. “Rachel Carson,” wrote Jenny Price, “is one of the great American apostles for the vision of nature as the real and timeless world outside the troubled human world.”¹³ Price, while making clear her deep admiration for her subject, has sketched an alternative biography that sees Carson’s turn to nature as a retreat from the human world. She was particularly struck by Carson’s choice to focus on the sea—the part of

nature “that’s *least* human, that’s outside human control and governed instead by timeless eternal rhythms.”¹⁴ Her three previous books—all bestsellers—had done just that.

But separating human beings from nature is a problematic vision for environmentalism, and *Silent Spring* forced Carson to confront that reality. Nevertheless, the pages of the book are deeply marked by her enchantment with the idea of a nature that, in her words, “was forever beyond the tampering reach of man.”¹⁵ Consider, among many examples, the opening of chapter 9, “Rivers of Death”: “From the green depths of the offshore Atlantic many paths lead back to the coast. They are paths followed by fish; although unseen and intangible, they are linked with the outflow of waters from the coastal rivers. For thousands upon thousands of years the salmon have known and followed these threads of fresh water that lead them back to the rivers, each returning to the tributary in which it spent the first months or years of life.”¹⁶

This passage sets up a declension narrative, as Carson goes on to describe the threats to this hallowed ritual. It also decenters people. The fish are the actors, and the author’s task is to render visible their “unseen and intangible” world. Carson gives them the authority of time: “Thousands upon thousands of years” long predates any claim that modernity might have on the planet. Such imagery held a prominent place in *Silent Spring*. Although Carson tried to keep the focus on human beings as much as possible, her deep respect for the non-human world suffuses the entire book.

Throughout *Silent Spring*, modern social arrangements appear as disruptions to the balance of nature. They are, at best, necessary evils: things humans should manage and contain. In the book’s famous opening fable, Carson writes of a fictional “town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings.”¹⁷ Harmony is the important concept here, as the residents accommodate themselves to the environment, not the other way around. The first actors she introduces are barking foxes and silent deer, and the first human participant she mentions is a traveler—not a resident—whose eyes are “delighted” by this beautiful, pastoral scene. The visual impact of the opening text intensifies the effect.¹⁸ The “Fable for Tomorrow” consists of two pages of text, but the layout is such that only eleven lines appear on the first page. They are consigned to the bottom right-hand corner, tucked underneath a sprawling, panoramic view of a small town nestled among rolling hills. This image takes up the entirety of the left-hand page and the top half of the right-hand one, and its composition in black, white, and shades of gray make it reminiscent of an artist’s or naturalist’s sketchbook. The reader sees trees, grass, hills, clouds, small houses, a meandering stream, and a church steeple. No people are visible. Evidence of their presence is clear as the town is near the center of

the image. But the pastoral scene frames and encloses the town, and the overall visual impact amply reinforces the message of her opening line. Carson created a nostalgic vision of a place (and time) unsullied by either urban or industrial development.

This vision permeates the book. There are many junctures in *Silent Spring* where Carson could have included an urban vision, but she consciously or unconsciously chose not to do so. In a passage meant to establish the aesthetic and leisure-time value of nature, for example, Carson writes of “the bird watcher, the suburbanite who derives joy from birds in his garden, the hunter, the fisherman or the explorer of wild regions.”¹⁹ None of these examples necessarily excludes the city dweller, but all direct attention away from urban settings. In a later passage describing potential links between chemical pesticides and leukemia, she lists examples of the “everyday people” victimized. She cites examples of farmers, a college student, a cotton fieldworker, and “two young cousins” from the same town in Czechoslovakia who died of leukemia traceable to their work at a farm cooperative.²⁰ Carson has many such lists in the book, and they are instructive because she had wide latitude in picking the examples. Yet, in the course of prose specifically geared toward showing the wide range of people affected by pesticides, she consistently chose to de-emphasize the urban. This is not because city dwellers were unaffected. In fact, David Kinkela has offered a compelling exploration of the parallels between the ecological visions of Carson in *Silent Spring* and of Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. But these parallels do not alter the fact that “Carson’s vision of nature was exceedingly pastoral.”²¹ Whether or not her readers were conscious of it, Carson’s words resonated with their imagined past as much as with their urban (or suburban) present.

Silent Spring is thus a difficult book to characterize. It mixes some very different approaches: traditional nature writing, up-to-date scientific synthesis, implicit radicalism, and carefully moderated advocacy. Nor is it easy to locate the book politically. In their recent history of conservative environmentalism, James Morton Turner and Andrew C. Isenberg have noted that *Silent Spring* emerged at a moment in which “the nascent environmental movement’s tactics and goals were so multiform that both Republicans and Democrats could find space under the new movement’s expansive political umbrella.”²² Many different sorts of readers could—and did—find themselves attracted to parts of Carson’s message. Brian Allen Drake, for example, has made a compelling case that anti-fluoridation activists drew directly on her book as inspiration for their brand of anti-statist environmentalism.²³ Recognizing this complexity in the reaction to *Silent Spring* might lead us to appreciate anew Carson’s success in crafting a book with broad appeal. Much of the book’s radicalism, Michael Ruse has suggested, exists in its subtext. This appears

to have been a conscious decision, as Carson deliberately de-emphasized intellectual debts that might have linked her advocacy to movements on the political and cultural fringe.²⁴ But Ruse also makes the point that these debts were real. Readers who noticed them, whether to praise or criticize, were not necessarily misinterpreting the text. This suggests that we do not need to think of the multiplicity in *Silent Spring* only as evidence of its careful construction. There may well be actual contradictions in its pages. At times, Carson seems to be trying to have it both ways: to use the moderate interventions of a reformist politics to bring about the far-reaching ethical changes implied in the images and subtext of the book. This confusion, too, is part of the book.

WHAT KIND OF REVOLUTION?

Reviewers and readers hailed *Silent Spring* as a seminal and revolutionary work almost immediately after its publication. Though the book was also the subject of much controversy, Carson maintained the steadfast support of both *The New Yorker* and Houghton Mifflin. She was the subject of a sympathetic portrayal in *Life* magazine and used personal connections to the ownership of the *Washington Post* to help put *Silent Spring* in the hands of influential people. Senators William Proxmire and Abraham Ribicoff were early supporters, as was Congressman John Lindsay and Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. *Silent Spring* was the October 1962 selection of the Book of the Month Club, whose members received that recommendation alongside a glowing testimonial from US Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.²⁵ Editorials across the country supported her position—or, at least, signaled that she had opened an important debate. In April 1963, less than a year after the excerpts from *Silent Spring* had appeared in the *New Yorker*, millions of viewers saw her favorably portrayed on a special episode of *CBS Reports*. The following month, a report of the President's Science Advisory Committee was released and widely seen as vindication for her arguments.²⁶ Such support was not accidental, as both Carson and her literary agent were savvy marketers committed to making the book a political and commercial success as well as an intellectual one. The fact that they accomplished this feat is further testament to the (apparent) moderation of the book; ideas that flout convention rarely garner mainstream support as quickly as *Silent Spring* did. Of course, *Silent Spring* was also the subject of vitriolic and vocal criticism. But even this suggests that the book had broad enough acceptability to be worrisome to pesticide manufacturers and their allies.²⁷

Very little of this support drew on the implicit critique of modernity in the book. Editorial commentary presented her work as being

exclusively about pesticides, either de-emphasizing or ignoring the larger environmental politics it implied. On July 2, 1962, for example, the *New York Times* editors wrote that “her subject is the controversial one of our increasing use of chemical poisons in a generally unsuccessful effort to eliminate insect pests and the extent to which we are, in the process, subjecting ourselves to the hazard of slow poisoning through the pollution of our environment.”²⁸ Modern ears might hear the phrase “pollution of our environment” as referring to a broad and multicausal phenomenon. But while it is certainly possible that some readers would have compared pesticides to other sources of environmental contamination, the editorial itself clearly limited the issue to “our increasing use of chemical pesticides.” The *Washington Post* also framed the issue narrowly. The editors concluded that “if, as Miss Carson contends, the new poisons are threatening the extinction of wildlife and menacing the health of human beings, then assuredly a full-scale investigation could provide the groundwork for a legislative remedy.”²⁹ Again, the issue at hand was limited. It concerned only the “new poisons,” the uncertainties surrounding their effects, and the consequent need for research. Furthermore, the editorialist’s call for a possible “legislative remedy” recalls Garb’s suggestion that *Silent Spring* pushed environmental activism toward a “reformist framework” for change.

Early reviewers of *Silent Spring* tended either to ignore her politics or to emphasize their moderation. The zoologist Marston Bates credited Carson with having “made a real contribution to our salvation” through effectively publicizing the dangers of pesticides. “She has written,” he declared, “incidentally but clearly, a treatise on ecology, on the interrelations of animals, plants, and the environment.”³⁰ He also made something of a cultural critique, comparing pesticides to other environmental hazards and asserting that all such issues were rooted in humanity’s reckless disregard for nature. Bates, however, came to the matter as a scientist, and his review contains little hint of what actually acting on Carson’s information might require. Another prominent ecologist, Paul B. Sears, explicitly defended her from charges of radicalism: “Miss Carson makes clear, although less emphatically than I could wish, that she is not opposed to the prudent use of chemicals that aid in food production, sanitation, and the abatement of nuisance. She is no cultist, as are those who ignore the fact that the earth and all on it are chemically composed and who condemn all ‘chemicals’ as evil.”³¹ Not only did he commend Carson’s moderation, but he also suggested that he would have been less likely to favor the book had she made a more extreme case.

Perhaps the most widely viewed commentary on *Silent Spring* also took a comparatively moderate stance. On April 3, 1963, *CBS Reports* featured Carson and her book in a thorough examination of the pesticide debate. Viewers could see Carson and hear her message directly,

as the program included both interview clips and segments in which she read key excerpts from *Silent Spring*. It also included interviews with government officials, industry representatives, and other scientists. What emerged was important validation for Carson. While the documentary acknowledged uncertainty, its overall message was that her critique was a legitimate one. Throughout the program, Carson appeared measured and moderate—an important depiction, given how hard her critics had tried to portray her as irrational and extreme. Furthermore, most of the policy changes mentioned were regulatory and mild, extensions of existing practice that suggested no hard choices or fundamental restructuring of priorities. At one point, the interviewer asked the secretary of agriculture to clarify why there had been more funding for research into pesticides than for studies of biological control (Carson's preferred approach). The secretary then confirmed that industry bankrolls the former, while the latter depends on taxpayer largesse. There is a hint of social critique in this exchange, suggesting as it does the dichotomy between private and public interest and the different research agendas that result from privileging one or the other. But the critique is both subtle and brief, and viewers may well have missed it.³²

Moreover, in a move strikingly similar to what Carson herself had done, the documentary uses imagery of nature—seen as being separate from the human world—to obscure the real political questions at stake. Gary Kroll has argued that Carson was not “coded” as a scientist in the program. Instead, she possesses an almost grandmotherly presence, at one point reading from *Silent Spring* from her porch in Maine.³³ This contrasts sharply with the appearance of Robert White-Stevens, a scientist working for American Cyanamid, who defended pesticides sitting in a laboratory while wearing a tie, white coat, and thick black glasses. Viewers were thus presented with a contrast between the natural world (represented by a gentle, grandmotherly figure on the Maine coast) and the world of science (represented by men and machines). In mid-twentieth-century America, this was a natural distinction to make. And, as it had in her book, Carson's authority derived from the particular imagery of nature deployed to present those claims as well as from the arguments she had made. Underscoring this emphasis are the final moments of the program, in which we see Carson standing, back to the camera, against an idyllic wilderness scene. She is the lone observer, and there are a few seconds in which she stands perfectly still in front of a river whose flowing water calls attention to her own motionlessness. As in the opening fable of *Silent Spring*, the human observer is transient and passive, and non-human nature takes center stage. It is the timeless reality against which the reckless use of pesticides is measured and found wanting.

These interpretations, whether by editors, scientists, or television producers, were not wrong. But they were selective. And that may

well have been intentional. Mart argued that “the evidence indicates that those who supported the book wanted to emphasize that it was not a radical statement by extremists.”³⁴ Nevertheless, media coverage managed to present this moderate message in dramatic terms. Newspaper titles like “Man’s Struggle against Pests May Endanger Life,” echoed the urgency of Carson’s warning, and one writer commented that “mankind now not only has the capacity to blow up the planet but also the means to sterilize it.”³⁵ And even at this early stage in the cultural life of the book, some commentators were comfortable using the language of revolution. At one point, for example, the *CBS Reports* documentary compared *Silent Spring* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the anti-slavery text remembered as a key tipping point in the nation’s march toward civil war. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel is the classic example of an (allegedly) revolution-inducing book, and contemporary assessments frequently granted *Silent Spring* that status as well. After Carson died in 1964, one obituary called her “one of those rare authors who could shake the world with one thin book,” and another held up her life as a rejoinder to those who might “question the power of a single individual to move mountains.”³⁶ This is the language of revolution, and many editorialists were comfortable using it in their tributes. We should not mistake rhetoric for reality, particularly given Mart’s argument about the limited effects of the book. But this should make us more interested, not less, in the emergence of a rhetoric of revolution around Carson. It was an early step in the creation of an origin story for environmentalism—an “achievement” of writers, reporters, and activists that couched moderate interpretations in decidedly immoderate terms.

These early paeans to the impact of *Silent Spring* were necessarily projections; they were assessments of what its legacy might turn out to be. But, in 1972, when the EPA banned most domestic uses of DDT, it became possible to tell a different sort of story, one focused on a concrete policy change. Writing about the EPA decision, for example, *New York Times* reporter E. W. Kenworthy credited Carson with having begun the debate: “The decision came 10 years after Rachel Carson, the biologist, set off the controversy with her book ‘The Silent Spring.’”³⁷ An Associated Press article made a similar point, calling the decision a victory for environmentalists “in one of their earliest and toughest battles that began with the publication of the late Rachel Carson’s now-famous book, ‘Silent Spring.’”³⁸ And William D. Ruckelshaus, the EPA administrator who made the final decision, also identified *Silent Spring* as having started the controversy.³⁹ Unlike the early 1960s editorials, these accounts did not feature the dramatic rhetoric of shaking the world or moving mountains. But they still told narratives of revolution, beginning with Carson. In hindsight, it was easy to create straightforward stories in which Carson’s work became the turning point in DDT’s three-

decade march from technological savior to dangerous environmental contaminant.

Like most simple narratives, however, this one obscures as much as it reveals. Perhaps most obviously, it misses the fact that many people had raised significant concerns about DDT, and the overuse of pesticides more generally, before *Silent Spring*.⁴⁰ Carson herself drew consciously and gratefully on the work of a number of predecessors, including an anti-spraying lawsuit brought in Long Island, New York, in 1957. Indeed, hers was not the only book published in 1962 to make the critique she did; six months earlier, Murray Bookchin had published—to much less fanfare—*Our Synthetic Environment*.⁴¹ Moreover, placing Carson at the start of a victory narrative masks important questions about whether a “success story” is the only possible interpretative framework. Frederick R. Davis, for example, has noted that an entire group of pesticides—organophosphates—initially escaped the scrutiny that DDT and similar chemicals received; the continued use of these acutely toxic chemicals raises legitimate question about the extent to which banning DDT actually accomplished Carson’s goals.⁴² Similarly, David Kinkela has directed our attention to the varied effects of the campaign to ban DDT. Writing of the adversarial tactics of the Environmental Defense Fund, he noted that “not only would this approach quicken the regulatory process within the United States, but it would sharpen the lines between technological enthusiasts and proponents of ecology.”⁴³ And even in the midst of the initial debates about *Silent Spring*, newspaper reports noted that pesticide sales had not seriously declined in the wake of the book.⁴⁴

Simplified or not, success stories about Rachel Carson were easy to tell in 1972. They also had consequences, privileging some ways of understanding *Silent Spring* over others. In a thoughtful article on the dynamics of social change, David S. Meyer and Deana A. Rohlinger argued that exclusive focus on what they call the “big books” myth of social change is not only historically inaccurate but also actively detrimental. “The myth suggests,” they write, “that a valuable idea, if effectively presented, will find a base of support and generate appropriate responses from government and society.”⁴⁵ This is the logic of the market. It suggests that a powerful and compelling idea is all that is necessary for great social change. Not only does this render invisible all other factors, but it also implicitly reinforces the status quo by delegitimizing any alternative perspective that has not garnered sufficient “market share” on its own. Such stories are neoliberal visions, celebrating the efficacy of individual action rather than the importance of collective effort. Thus, the very form of how Carson’s stories have been told, quite apart from their content, can have a conservatizing effect. In the early 1970s, most such news coverage focused primarily on explaining the history of regulatory reform. A

generation later, similar storytelling would help define a much broader environmental legacy for *Silent Spring*.

SUCCESS STORIES

In 1987, the twenty-five year anniversary of *Silent Spring*'s publication, the American Chemical Society issued an edited volume reprising and updating the controversy. The editors opened with an overview of the book itself since copies "are no longer readily available."⁴⁶ Whatever the accuracy of their assessment at the time, it would no longer be possible to even imply a diminished cultural presence for either Carson or *Silent Spring* within a few years. Both enjoyed an intensifying cultural presence throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 1994, for example, Vice President Al Gore, who, owing to his position, was perhaps the most prominent environmental advocate in the country at that time, provided the introduction to a new edition of the book. "*Silent Spring* came as a cry in the wilderness," Gore wrote, "a deeply felt, thoroughly researched, and brilliantly written argument that changed the course of history."⁴⁷ He credited her with having started the environmental movement and wrote that "her work, the truth she brought to light, the science and research she inspired, stand not only as powerful arguments for limiting the use of pesticides but as powerful proof of the difference that one individual can make."⁴⁸ Even accounting for the reality that Gore was a politician and saw an instrumental value in making this argument, the praise he offered Carson was impressive. And given his long-standing involvement in environmental issues, it is not difficult to believe that he regarded *Silent Spring* as an inspirational and influential text.

Yet there is something that rings a bit odd about this praise—whether offered by Gore or any of the many voices that assign revolutionary value to *Silent Spring*. It posits a very simple narrative of change. "Without this book," Gore wrote, "the environmental movement might have been long delayed or never have developed at all."⁴⁹ As historians, we are rightly suspicious of such mono-causal explanations; it takes only a quick perusal of the years before and after *Silent Spring* to find other developments that were critical in the formation of modern environmentalism. It is also obvious that many environmental problems intensified between the writing of *Silent Spring* and the appearance of Gore's praise. The vice president was certainly not blind to this reality. "Despite the power of Carson's argument, despite actions like the banning of DDT in the United States," he declared, "the environmental crisis has grown worse, not better."⁵⁰ But he was uninterested in exploring the seeming contradiction between his assertions of revolutionary change, on the one hand, and a worsening crisis, on the other. We can certainly imagine why Gore

made those choices. Among other things, he was trying to use the memory of one of environmental history's best stories to prompt renewed dedication to the cause. But it underscores how a revolutionary narrative about Rachel Carson was grounded in the rhetorical needs of a later author as much as in the actual historical record.

Other invocations of Rachel Carson raise different questions about the limits of *Silent Spring*. In 1992, for example, the actress Kaiulani Lee began performing *A Sense of Wonder*, her one-woman play exploring Carson's life and legacy. The title itself is a tribute to her subject. It carries virtually the same name as Carson's final (posthumously published) book, *The Sense of Wonder*. Lee has performed it widely—at universities, high schools, the Smithsonian, the United Nations, the Department of the Interior, and Congress. And, in 2008, she created a film version of the play.⁵¹ Both the text and visuals show Carson's lifelong veneration of the natural world, and she comes across as an eloquent spokesperson for the importance—personal, ethical, societal—of appreciating nature.⁵² The film is structured as a pair of interviews in which Carson talks at length about her life and work. Both are set in the fall of 1963, approximately a year after the publication of *Silent Spring* and less than a year before Carson died of cancer. The first takes place at her cottage on Southport Island in Maine and features ample shots of the picturesque coast. The dialogue, sometimes taken from Carson directly but all written after Lee's extensive research into the life of her subject, contains abundant references to the beauty of nature and its importance to individual lives. The second interview is in her home in suburban Washington and focuses more directly on the *Silent Spring* controversy. But it too makes clear her insistence upon nature as a source of beauty and inspiration. The emotional power of the film is considerable, established in part by Lee's choice to make the interviewer merely an implied presence. Her own facial expressions and verbal inflections make clear that it is a conversation, but one in which the questions (if any were actually asked) have been edited out. The resulting "interviews" feel more like gently guided musings than a structured discussion. It becomes easy for viewers to imagine that they are accessing the real Rachel Carson.

Lee's on-screen version of Carson is unapologetic about her love of nature, which is portrayed as less populated, less developed, and somehow more authentic than the contemporary world. In the first interview, she muses about her summer life in Maine and the cottage she knows she is seeing for the last time. Carson tells the viewer that "this place fills me with peace" as she prepares for her reluctant return to Washington and "our more public selves." The conversation unfolds amid a backdrop of rustic beauty and the sounds of birds and waves; at one point, she breaks into a warm smile when talking about the call of a hermit thrush. The natural world is not just a backdrop but also an active partner in Carson's life, as she describes the need to

inculcate “a sense of wonder” to serve “throughout life as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the alienation from the sources of our strength.” In her formulation, nature—and our wonder at it—is a source of strength. Both interviews make this argument clear. Toward the end of the second one, for example, she says simply that “I believe that natural beauty has a necessary place in the development of any individual or any society.” She contrasts this need with what she sees as the unfortunate developments of modern life, in which “mankind has gone very far into an artificial world of his own creation. He has sought to insulate himself in his cities of steel and concrete.”⁵³ The natural world is the real one, standing in opposition to the artificiality of modern society. Lee does not overdo this message. Her Carson does not advocate a return to pre-twentieth-century ways of living, and she is fully engaged with the present moment. But the peace she has made with the modern world is a reluctant one, and she remains ever vigilant to the risk of losing touch with nature.

There is certainly much to commend this vision, and it has inspired many activists and writers.⁵⁴ But it does not represent all possible environmental attitudes, and it may well work against the expression of alternative formulations, as Jenny Price has suggested. It is hard to find a place for urban life in this vision, for example, or for environmental justice. There is also, as Mark Stoll has suggested, a particular kind of religiosity suffusing Carson’s work.⁵⁵ None of this was out of step with conventional thinking about nature in postwar America. In fact, Carson seems to have pushed those conceptions as far as mainstream thinking would have permitted; Garb contends that her book “stood at the outer limits of acceptability” for its time.⁵⁶ This liminality is crucial to the rhetoric of revolution surrounding Carson, as it places the undeniably forward-looking aspects of *Silent Spring* within imagery that was quite comfortable and familiar to her audiences. None of this should detract from her contributions nor from those of the people inspired by her. But it should alert us to be clear about the particular sort of environmental vision celebrated in Carson stories. Lee’s play is of interest not only as a powerful representation of Carson but also for how it embodies what has become a very common way of remembering its subject—one in which older, prelapsarian views of nature continue to play a prominent role.

Consider another example: children’s literature. There are many books about Carson aimed at young readers, and their authors frequently celebrate her love of a nature that is virtuous and unsullied by contact with human society.⁵⁷ Thomas Locker and Joseph Bruchac’s *Rachel Carson: Preserving a Sense of Wonder* epitomizes the genre. Both Locker and Bruchac were widely published authors at the time they collaborated on this project, which they, like Lee, named in tribute to Carson’s own work. Their book provides an inspirational

story of Carson's love for nature from childhood to *Silent Spring* alongside more than a dozen beautiful illustrations. The layout stresses the pictures, all of which appear on the right-hand side, where the reader's eye naturally looks after opening the cover. The left-hand pages contain brief bits of text, centered on the page amidst softly colored backgrounds designed to accentuate the image on the right. The overriding message is one of a sacred and beautiful natural space threatened by human action and protected by the virtuous Rachel. (The authors refer to her by first name.) The first page of text introduces the young Carson as "a child whose love of nature would one day lead her to write a book that changed our world."⁵⁸ This line makes a clear connection between her "love of nature" and the "book that changed our world." It accepts the revolutionary story and finds the cause of that change in the virtuous innocence of a child's love for the natural world. The rest of the book unfolds as an explanation of the short narrative in that first sentence, tracing Rachel's emergence as a writer of "true stories of nature's wonders" through her awakening to the disruptive effects of human activity to her successful intervention with *Silent Spring*.

The text provides a clear indication of two common narrative tropes about Carson: the idea of individual success and the primacy of her connection to nature. The pictures intensify this message. Most of them are sweeping, panoramic shots of natural scenes—from ocean sunsets, to country walks, to animals in forests. The scale they depict is vast. Even in one close-up depiction of a bald eagle on a branch, we can see other birds, trees, and the outline of mist-covered mountains in the background. Only one of the fourteen pictures is of the indoors (of Carson looking into a microscope). Just as in the fable that opens *Silent Spring*, these images de-emphasize people. Some pictures have no people at all, and others depict only a small figure set against an immense natural backdrop. The overall effect is to create a sense of awe about the natural world, to re-create the sense of wonder of the book's title. The tenth picture—of a plane spraying pesticides—is the disruptive moment. In that image, factories and smokestacks line the background, while the foreground shows farmland being doused with pesticides. The narrative then turns to Carson's efforts to combat this disruption, a clearly technological, man-made ruination of the natural world she loved. "Because of Rachel and her powerful words," the authors write, "the rivers of our land now flow cleaner, the songbirds still sing from the apple trees, and the fish still swim in Rachel's beloved sea." Alongside these satisfying words is a picture of someone (presumably Carson) walking toward an expansive ocean. As in the closing moment of the *CBS Reports* program, the human figure is a minor player set against outsized nature. And as with that program, the book uses a nostalgic view of the natural world to describe and explain a purported revolution.

Al Gore, Kaiulani Lee, Thomas Locker, and Joseph Bruchac are hardly the only people to celebrate Rachel Carson's legacy. She has been commended by politicians, remembered fondly by colleagues, used as an exemplar of model environmental activism, and held up as a feminist hero. Schools in (at least) six different states bear her name, she appears on a postage stamp, and she has been mentioned in multiple *Peanuts* comic strips.⁵⁹ The scope is too vast and too varied to permit universal statements; just as the text of *Silent Spring* allows multiple readings, so does Carson's legacy. I do not claim that the three examples analyzed in this section are the only important interpretations of her life and work. But they are plausible, prominent, and consequential. And they all show a continuing tendency to use the language of revolution to frame stories that have at least some traditional, and even conservative, elements. Al Gore was certainly oversimplifying in 1994 when he wrote that, "without this book, the environmental movement might have been long delayed or never have developed at all."⁶⁰ But he was also missing what is perhaps the truly salient historical question. The question is not if the movement would have developed without the book, nor when that might have taken place. Instead, we should ask how it impacted the nature of modern environmentalism. And this means, among other things, coming to terms with the limits and liabilities of the book as well as its successes.

THE LEGACY QUESTION

Complicating the story of *Silent Spring's* legacy is a daunting task, and the challenge is as much political as intellectual. Many of the authors who have been critical of Rachel Carson have produced harangues notable for their *ad hominem* character and intellectual disingenuousness.⁶¹ No scholar wants to be associated with that project—one that has been used to protect special interests and disparage environmentalism.⁶² But the uncomfortable fact is that there is a similarity—faint, perhaps, but real—between some of the reassessments of Carson discussed in this article and the more irresponsible attacks on her work. The biochemist William Darby, for example, made one of the more infamous comments about *Silent Spring* in a 1962 book review, writing that Carson's vision would result in "the end of all human progress, reversion to a passive social state devoid of technology, scientific medicine, agriculture, sanitation, or education. It means disease, epidemics, starvation, misery and suffering incomparable and intolerable to modern man."⁶³ This interpretation is obviously overblown and disingenuous. But its particular manner of exaggeration is significant. Darby identified a threat to the world of "modern man." His reasoning is wrong; Carson did not oppose technology,

medicine, agriculture, sanitation, or education. But *Silent Spring* did question several key assumptions of modernity. As her biographer Linda Lear noted, the book can easily be read as “a fundamental social critique of a gospel of technological progress.”⁶⁴

It is striking to reflect on how much more readily critics, rather than supporters, have embraced the language of radicalism. This may be changing as writer/activists such as Sandra Steingraber, Devra Davis, and Terry Tempest Williams have all used her legacy in novel and progressive ways.⁶⁵ But it remains a historical reality that her detractors saw more utility in emphasizing the radical subtext of *Silent Spring* than her supporters did. Part of this can certainly be attributable to the book itself. Since Carson chose to err on the side of acceptability and broad appeal, she made it easy on her supporters. It is difficult to argue with a moderate statement such as: “It is not my contention that chemical insecticides must never be used. I do contend that we have put poisonous and biologically potent chemicals indiscriminately into the hands of persons largely or wholly ignorant of their potentials for harm.”⁶⁶ This statement is easy to defend; it issues the qualification in the same breath as the claim. It is the detractors who must do the heavy lifting, pushing past the surface moderation into what they can present as a more extreme subtext. Perhaps this accounts for why we have seen more William Darbys than Sandra Steingraber acknowledge the radicalism of *Silent Spring*.

But there is something else at work. *Silent Spring* appeared toward the end of what Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have termed “the long exception” in US history. They question the idea that the liberal triumphs of the mid-twentieth century augured a lasting change in our political norms. They suggest instead that the singular events of the Great Depression temporarily changed the rules of the game. “While liberals of the seventies and eighties waited for a return to what they regarded as the normality of the New Deal order,” Cowie and Salvatore have written, “they were actually living in the final days of what Paul Krugman later called the ‘interregnum between Gilded Ages.’”⁶⁷ There is not a lot of good news for progressive activists in their argument. They noted further that “absent major national shocks, the capacity for fundamental political change is limited in the American context.”⁶⁸ They did not present this as something to celebrate but, rather, as something critical for historians and activists to understand. They suggested that activist models that give pride of place to individualism—more Progressive Era than New Deal—seem likelier to succeed. For environmental activists like Carson, and the scholars who study them, this presents a challenging situation. Perhaps the harshest reality she faced was the high standard for what counts as a “national shock” that is large enough to alter the rules of the political game. For even the most eloquent of

environmental advocates, this was—and remains—a tough bar to clear.

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Notes

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24. Michael Ruse, *The Gaia Hypothesis: Science on a Pagan Planet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 131–37. I thank Michael Ruse for helpful discussions on this point.
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