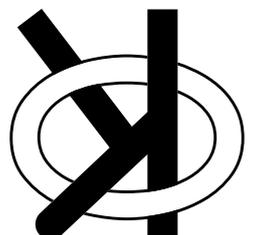
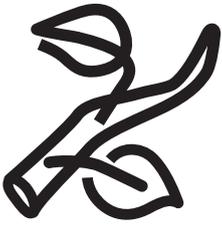


Dear Greta Thunberg,

My apologies for writing to you out of the blue. You don't know me. I understand that you and your fellow travelers, Vanessa Nakate, Dominika Lasota, Mitzi Jonelle Tan, and many other youth activists from all over the world—Jon Bonifacio in Manila, Adri Maffioletti in Porto Alegre, Nanna Chemnitz Frederiksen in Nuuk, and Roseline Mansaray in Freetown are just a few I read about recently—are relentlessly busy with the work of pushing for global governmental action at COP26 right now. I don't want to disturb you. In fact, this letter is not addressed to the now-you. In the intergenerational relation we find ourselves in, the now-you has temporally come after me, and I am in the place of the generation to whom you constantly address yourself: those who were born before you and seem unwilling to do the work of dismantling the present arrangement of things, without which, as you say repeatedly, there will be no inclusive planetary future for all beings that go on striving to live. You of all people are acutely aware of the temporality of the "now." You evoke it in almost everything you say: "wake up, the politics of waiting is over, and the time for action is now." Yet those you address hear "now" in a different way to how you mean it. Now is a present time that refuses its relation to its own future. In this other now-time, some kind of "world," one imagines, will go on, but as Achille Mbembe said in 2020, in a piece called "The Universal Right to Breathe," the future—unless there is a dismantling, or what he calls a "voluntary cessation" of the current way of things—will take the form of an "endless series of unforeseen events." I thought, therefore, to reverse our positions, to write you a letter to read some years from now, perhaps when you are in what may, by then, no longer be called "older age" as it is impossible to tell right now how people will live into





an age that is “older” or what this will mean in a world that may heat by more than the 1.5 degrees centigrade. I do not know, in other words, if you will get to read this letter and, if so, what kind of world you will find yourself in. It is addressed to you when you are 80 rather than 18 and I will be long gone, of course. It’s not perfect, but it’s the best I can do, in terms of the reversal of our positions.

Writing letters to those who live on after our death is a practice that some people engage in, in the final stages of their lives. It is not uncommon for a dying parent, for instance, to write a series of letters to their children to be read on their birthdays or another significant day as they get older. I’m not sure what to think of it. I know some children can’t wait, and end up opening all the letters at once. They are the children who cannot bear, or perhaps refuse, the impossible illusion that she can know them as they are now, some years later, rather than the child in her imagination at the point that she is dying. It’s her way of trying to make time move in sync, hers and the child’s, when they are radically diverging. Perhaps, then, it has more to do with the agony of waiting for death that the mother herself is enduring. Or the agony of knowing that the child will grieve after her death, without her support, alone in this sense, for years to come. It’s a kind of “future grief” that the mother feels towards her own impending death, and an imagined engagement with the child’s future grief; that sense of the world having become unknown, unpredictable, future-less in the sense of an unfolding or patterned mode of time. I’m sorry if this letter has taken a rather depressing turn.

Letters rely on a form of time—the delay between the address and its reception—that I have been thinking about lately as it relates to questions of care. Are letters a form of care in their capacity to contain time? This is a question my colleague Laura Salisbury has been asking in her work on time and war. I mean containment in a psychoanalytic



sense, being able to think about time rather than being bombarded by it, like one is with an endless series of unforeseen events. In writing to you, now you're 80, I've only extended, or made more manifest, what is always structural to the letter as a social but also temporal form. I guess I'm trying to take care of the possibilities that might still be held open in the time between us. It links to some thoughts I've had about whether delay can be a form of care. While we can think of delaying as holding us up, especially when urgent action is needed, perhaps delay also hinders "progress" in the sense that you are often pointing us towards. Delaying, in order to do the work of hindering, dismantling, enabling the kind of voluntary cessation that Mbembe is talking about, must also, a little tautologically, delay time. Delay's etymology hinges on a tension between delay as an apprehension or even detaining of time, and a meaning that is closer to deferral, a yet-to-come time that is, by definition, postponed in the time of delay. Delaying is precisely the opposite of what you call on us to do. Yet instilling even the shortest interruption into the empty time of more and more and more of the same, would be worth it.

The philosopher David Appelbaum tells us that in delay, something in thought slackens. Thought likes to run on smoothly, uninterrupted, reproducing itself as it is strung out between retention and projection, between what it already knows and what it throws of itself into the future. Synchronous thought is violent, he says, to the extent that it cannot apprehend anything other than more of itself; it is parthenogenic in this sense, it reproduces itself in the time without the other, without the help of others. Delay is that temporal element that breaks into the smooth running of thought, slackening thought, giving it pause for thought, stopping it in its tracks, causing it to listen to the somatic element—the heart—as it misses a beat. You called, when you were younger, for black-and-white thinking, for thinking that didn't dither or dally, that precisely didn't slacken, but was resolved as

it gathered itself towards action. It was a cry from the heart. But I am stuck in your past, in my now-time, and I'm still thinking about the time of dismantling the current arrangement of things. It brings me back to depression.

Ceasing, dismantling, undoing, stopping. Do these things happen in the temporality of revolt, or revolution, an overturning of a limit, or do they develop through social practices and cultural devices that facilitate loss, mourning, remembrance, and forgiveness? To agitate, as you did when you were 18, requires constant pressure, saying the same things again and again. You realized early on that activism was the practice of reiteration, a kind of re-activism. People who are depressed often talk about time not moving, of how the flow of time is suspended, but not exactly lifted. It can feel interminable, like a great weight pressing downwards. But depression also has something to do with knowing about the damage we do, and go on doing, especially to worlds that are loved and we depend on. So these are two forms of repetition that run alongside one another: the work of re-activism and that of de-pressing time. Depressing time allows a chronic action to unfold, I would say, which is the work of mourning. Desisting is one thing—the deviation from killing to talking during a peace process, for instance, the phasing out of harmful or cruel practices towards animals in the name of less harmful ones, “bla bla bla” as you said at COP26 when you were 18—but dismantling with mourning, living in the delay, the time of not knowing what comes after, dismantling the infrastructures of oppression, extraction, and exploitation without knowing how to rebuild an infrastructure that can sustain life: this is how I understand what you asked us to do. Whether we did or not, only you can tell.

Lisa Baraitser
London, November 2021

