

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Environmental Martyrdom:
Re-Imagining the Posthumous Icon

By:

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June 2024

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in the
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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Abstract:

Through the study of related scholarship and new media, this thesis will analyze how the “martyr” re-emerges when conditions in relation to the current climate crisis resemble apocalyptic circumstances, initiating a cyclic set of events to construct the “eco-martyr” or “environmental martyr” that parallels that of the original concept of the martyr. This includes a transcendence from human to saint or cultural icon. The evidence examined here will support the theory that the increase in activist murders and suicides strengthens the influence of the eco-martyr in public consciousness, and distorts the characterization of the environmental activist, altering the future of the environmental conservation movement. I will posit that the validation of the martyr can be dangerous if considered as an appropriate expression of activist’s beliefs. Martyrdom and panic over the “end times” are characterized and rely on the public gaze as well as societal fear. With modern martyrdom, there is a stronger and wide-ranging presence of the witness. I will expand upon the emerging discourse of environmental martyrdom by focusing on the witness, but specifically this role in social media. Social media is facilitating eco-martyrdom and is a new step in the re-emergence of a martyr for present day.

Alongside this paper I have created a supplemental website that is a repository for sources related to the discourse of eco-martyrdom. While there is not a plethora of sources on this topic, a presence is slowly building and it will be important to this generation of environmental activism to capture this emergence; specifically at this moment in time.

Link: <http://eco-martyrs.squarespace.com/>

Introduction

The recorded number of environmental defenders that have been killed for environmental activism has steadily increased. 2019 saw the largest number of deaths globally (212) since these killings started to be recorded in 2012. An average of four people a week have been killed since 2019. The number is growing, and these deaths will no doubt continue if humanity taps into natural resources and acts unethically.

These “eco-martyrs” can be defined as, “individuals who are targeted for assassination for their environmental activism. This phenomenon is most pronounced in forest struggles around the tropics. Martyrs experience the immediate brutality of their individual experience, yet they are acutely aware of the slow violence of environmental degradation.” Through the study of related scholarship and relevant media platforms, this thesis will analyze how the “martyr” re-emerges when prevailing social conditions come to resemble apocalyptic circumstances, initiating an opportunity for the “eco- martyr” to exist in a way that sustains the original Greek concept of the martyr.

I would like to point out that environmentalism connected to religion, or a spiritual practice is not new. There is a deep and rich history of the environment, spirituality, and indigeneity around the world. This thesis will include some of that history, but more so will discuss the targeting of indigenous people for these killings and disproportionate awareness of it. For a more in-depth understanding of indigenous social-cultural relationships to the environment in climate injustice ‘hot spots’ of the world, see these sources (Whyte 2017, WinklerPrins and Levis 2021, Peluso 1995, Nadasdy 2007, Bird Rose 2017).

The climate crisis, human right violations, and the killings of environmental defenders- when layered upon each other- can feel disconcerting. The feeling of crisis is also obviously

quite different if one is in what is considered the global south. Those in the global south often experience the direct implications of climate change that threatens their ways of life. Watching the news and reading articles of these impacts can make one feel climate anxiety or panic. The threat of destruction or loss of resources can cause a sudden feeling of personal loss and suffering. Feelings of dire circumstances call for guidance or representations for a person or groups particular plight.

The rise in deaths for these causes may be new in some respects; what is certainly notable is the deployment of the term ‘martyr.’ A martyr is killed or sacrificed defending a belief or cause. The “martyr” originated as the Greek term for “witness”.¹ For the ancient Greek, A martyr also gives testimony in a court of law.² Evolving with time, the term was later used with Christians who refused to participate in state religious activity and often faced punishment.³

The evidence examined in the literature review and discussion will support the theory that the increase in activist murders and suicides will strengthen the influence of the eco-martyr and distort the characterization of the environmental activist. I will posit that the validation of the martyr can be dangerous if considered as an appropriate expression of activist’s beliefs. If this is to be a new generation of martyrdom, it is critical to acknowledge the witness element indicated by the term and how social media has aided in the facilitation of modern martyrdom through a new collective of witnesses.

My hope for this thesis is to examine the social, cultural, and environmental conditions that led up to the eco-martyr. Before delving into the characterization and comprehensive definition of the eco-martyr I share the history of the martyr and the related literature because it

¹ “Martyr (n.)” Etymology, March 9, 2024.

² “ibid.”

³ “ibid.”

is my opinion that the concept of the martyr can be layered with other evidence to understand how the situation has slowly presented itself.

Literature Review

To understand the context of an eco-martyr it will be necessary to understand the origins of a martyr. The ‘martyr’ began as a Greek term to describe one who testifies or is a witness. As it was adopted by different cultures the meaning became more set in religion and violence, mainly in Christianity. Its Greek origin relied heavily on the concept of the witness,

“...originally applied to the apostles who had witnessed Christ’s life and resurrection. Later it was used to describe those who, arrested and on trial, admitted to being Christians. By the middle of the second century, it was granted to those who suffered execution for their faith [...] The martyr, however, was very certain of an afterlife. Indeed, the martyr was certain not just of an afterlife but of salvation and reward in heaven.”⁴

Many martyrs were threatened with torture or killed, and those who died were regarded alongside the Christian saints. It was thought martyrdom was bestowed by God. With the rise of the Roman Empire, the martyr became something Christians aspired to. Between 250 AD and 300 AD individuals increasingly attempted self-martyrdom by way of suicide.⁵ The church had to come to terms with the now idealized glory of bestowing martyrdom on all who die for their beliefs and the individuals who were willing to commit the ‘sinful act’ of suicide to claim the

⁴ Phillips, Gervase. “The Violent Birth of ‘martyrdom’ – How the Ancient Concept Informs Modern Religious Violence.” *The Conversation*, March 22, 2024

⁵ “ibid.”

title. In 300 AD, as a result, the Christian church decided that someone could be denied martyrdom. Despite that, a new practice had been created in which people felt they could do extreme acts in the name of God to become a martyr.⁶

Martyrdom in its historical context, developed into an act of violence or extremism in which one's body acts as a last resort to emphasize their beliefs when they are left unheard. The eco-martyr, like the historical martyr, emerges at a historical moment fraught with social, cultural, political, or environmental instability. Before getting into a deeper understanding of eco-martyrdom, it is important to understand the literature that has contributed to the concept of modern martyrdom. It can be understood through scholarship on death as political power, bearing witness to environmental devastation and the racism that results from that devastation.

Power struggles are erupting in places where environmental activists clash with political leaders or companies that exploit resources. And in the Global South, activists may be killed for their disruptive actions and willingness to defend their cause to the end. Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* provides insight on power dynamics and violence between an activist and the opposing party. Mbembe argues that the connections between death and political power are critical to the contemporary rise of the martyr, who confronts an opposing party. for martyrdom to be achieved there must be a force to oppose. Mbembe discusses states "exercising the right to kill" as killing becomes part of the mechanism for state control.⁷ The basic idea of exercising power over others and the right to dictate who lives and who dies feels akin to a building block- a foundational step in circumstances that create a martyr. The contemporary development of understanding violence and power in Mbembe's work calls back to the dynamic of the origins of

⁶ "ibid."

⁷ Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." Duke University Press, 2019.

a martyr and its innate political identity. As the climate crisis grows, and the disproportionate affects between the Global North and Global South, environmentalism has become heavily politicized . The threat against human life, political freedoms, and the environmental are these foundations for what initiated the martyr and now the eco-martyr as well.

The catalysts for the rise of the eco-martyr become clearer when examining the literature on environmental racism and the abuse of power over the lives of low-income communities. There are indications that slow ecological violence against certain communities motivates individuals to use their own bodies as a last resort in the resistance against climate injustice. There are a few key scholars to mention that have led the discourse on what has shaped the environmentalism we possess today. All have alluded to the characteristics of eco-martyrdom through evidence that ecological violence and violations of human rights make the martyr possible. These conditions are common in areas plagued by environmental racism or the disproportionate treatment of the environment in which communities of color or lower income communities reside. Environmental racism is a threat to environmental activists around the world. In many instances, indigenous populations are often targets for environmental racism. This can include forcing people from their land, exploiting their resources, or polluting the area in which they live. Dorceta Taylor and Douglas Bevington argue that a change in conditions aided the re-emergence of the eco-martyr.

These communities are treated as waste disposal sites or overrun with manufacturing plants. In Dorceta Taylors work, *American Environmentalism: The Role of Race, Class and Gender in Shaping Activism*, she emphasizes that the environmentalism we experience today is built upon the history invented by white, middle-class citizens and their actions or opinions.⁸

⁸ Taylor, Dorceta E. “Race, Class, Gender, and American Environmentalism.”

While environmentalism today tries to separate from these dynamics, it can be difficult to escape the environmentalism that is practiced in the global north as opposed to the global south. To be an activist in the United States for example, may be safer than being an activist in Brazil. The direct threats to the environment in Brazil may call for more aggressive forms of activism. There is then a resulting atmosphere of violence that becomes common for this set of activists. One in which activists in the Global North don't often experience and the public is not bearing witness to. Douglas Bevington (2009), has described how exclusion and low resources of individuals or even grassroots groups led activists to often choose "direct action" as an outsider strategy. The insider strategy (political invitation) isn't accessible to most people; Direct action, including confrontation, disruption, mechanical sabotage, and sometimes even violent acts, is available to all.⁹ In these scholars' frameworks, the body itself becomes a sacrificial tool or a last effort when all else fails.

The speed at which climate change is causing environmental shifts may speed up human response and these violent acts. Social media has had an integral role in the environmental movement in recent years. Platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), Tik Tok, and Snapchat all have solidified their role in environmentalism as a communicative tool for its far-reaching network and speed. Scholars in this field argue that social media has created a new level of public engagement in environmentalism altogether. Nicole Nisbett and Viktoria Spaiser use the organization Fridays For Future as a case study to determine if social media has in fact altered the structure and discourse around the current environmental movement.¹⁰ They had

⁹ Bevington, Douglas. *The rebirth of environmentalism: Grassroots activism from the Spotted Owl to the Polar Bear*.

¹⁰ Nisbett, N., & Spaiser, V. (2023). *Moral Power of Youth Activists – Transforming International Climate Politics?*

found that not only did youth climate activists on social media change the normative discourse over environmental topics, but they also surpassed the most followed accounts on the X (Twitter) platform.¹¹ These activists that are attempting to share climate injustice and misinformation are developing a presence online that is noticed by international governments. Jill Hopke and Lauren Paris note parallels to classic actions in the history of environmental movements such as protesting and education.¹² Hopke and Paris propose that social media is used to be a “disruptive” action that ignites viral public attention as well as participation.¹³ The intrigue that comes with viral phenomena in relation to environmental movements also guide new education techniques in which information can be disseminated quickly and in more modern contexts. Hopke and Paris pose the example of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Dakota Access Pipeline conflict. The use of the hashtag #NoDAPL and the millions of responses online created viral attention with the intent to aid the protest of the pipeline development.¹⁴ The pipeline conflict also exemplifies the political power social media and public awareness have over society.

What these scholars above also emphasize is the public audience and political dynamics that result from the wide- array of content. Those that act as witnesses to conflict or major events tend to respond in polarizing ways and can instigate political action. Returning to the Dakota Access Pipeline, J.M. Bacon claims the public viewing of media relating to the pipeline is critical

¹¹ Nisbett, N., & Spaiser, V. (2023). *Moral Power of Youth Activists – Transforming International Climate Politics?*

¹² Hopke, J. E., & Paris, L. (2021). Environmental Social Movements and social media. *The Handbook of International Trends in Environmental Communication*, 357–372.

¹³ “ibid.”

¹⁴ “ibid.”

to the outcome for the future of this development.¹⁵ And there is no doubt that witnessing is political due to those in power seeking control over the lens in which one sees the content, “local media deploys frames of risk and security in order to minimize or invalidate Indigenous responses to ecological harms as well as to legitimate violence against those who resist pipeline development,”¹⁶ Bacon is stating the goals of larger media platforms and their curation of the content to target groups or provoke ideas in viewers. The media from this event also connecting people from around the world to somewhat exist in that space. These witnesses are more extensive and diverse than the original martyr figure, but it also appears the characterization of the witness has changed to consider media as well. Mette Mortensen offers the term “connective witnessing” as an additional configuration for the relationship between the object and the spectacle,

“... combines personalized political participation and connective action in the recording and sharing of visual documentation. Connective witnessing manifests itself in various situations, prompting the production and distribution of eyewitness images on a large scale, for example, citizens contributing to crisis communication and news coverage of man-made or natural catastrophe.”¹⁷

This is a valuable perspective from Mortensen given that traditional definitions of witnessing can be considered often in the realm of the physical. With major events or news, often witnessing is done at a distance and through a device. It calls the methods of communication and their value

¹⁵ Bacon, J. M. “Dangerous Pipelines, Dangerous People: Colonial Ecological Violence and Media Framing of Threat in the Dakota Access Pipeline Conflict.” *Environmental Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2020): 143–53

¹⁶ “ibid.”

¹⁷ Mortensen, Mette. “Connective Witnessing: Reconfiguring the Relationship between the Individual and the Collective.” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 11 (2015): 1393–1406

into question. Additionally, it underscores the gargantuan amount of content that is published by people who wish to tell their own stories.

A key figure in the discussion of eco-martyrdom is scholar Rob Nixon. Nixon has been crucial to understanding the evolution of environmentalism with his novel *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Rob Nixon (2011) examines the specific violence that characterizes this era of the modern environmental movement. He defines slow violence as, “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that it is typically not viewed as violence at all.”¹⁸ Climate change and deforestation are examples of slow violence that work alongside human injustice. In what Nixon calls the “environmental martyr belt”, many injustices against the environment are leading to conflict that guides the creation of the environmental martyr and incidences of martyrdom.¹⁹

I move to Nixon’s contemporary works that grew from *Slow Violence* into environmental martyrdom. In “Fallen Martyrs, Felled Trees”, Nixon defines environmental martyrdom and indicates the places where these killings most often occur. He finds that frontline defenders reside in the “environmental martyr belt”, these places include Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Columbia, Brazil, Nigeria, Congo, Gabon, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.²⁰ After *Slow Violence*, Nixon sought out to establish another way of describing violent acts related to environmental injustice,

¹⁸ Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

¹⁹ Nixon, Rob. “Fallen Martyrs, Felled Trees.”

²⁰ Nixon, Rob. “Fallen Martyrs, Felled Trees.” *Conjunctions*, no. 73 (2019): 8–29.

“Martyrdom is direct action in extremis. Some environmental martyrs remain anonymous, vanish unheard of outside their villages. But others achieve in their earthly afterlife a complex rallying power and an enduring force. To be a martyr is to become larger than life after your life has ceased. To be a martyr is to die for a cause in a manner that confers on your being posthumous power and purpose. When repressive regimes have shut their eyes and closed their ears to suffering, the martyr’s body—by shocking insensate senses back to life—demands that the inattentive pay attention. Where words no longer serve, the corpse silently conscripts witnesses.”²¹

This portrays how open the definition of environmental martyrdom is, leaving the possibility for many interpretations. Rob Nixon sets a precedent for understanding the roots of environmental martyrdom. For the public to see societal dangers of martyrdom, there must be a re-imagining of the role for modern times. The original definition of witnessing would no longer be enough to understand the contemporary martyr on its own. Going forward, to understand the environmental martyr, a new dynamic must be considered. One that puts witnessing by the outside party at the forefront of these killings. Enlarging the public gaze could be critical to decreasing these deaths or at least exposing the growth of this phenomenon. In the past the martyr could become a saintly icon or a figurehead for a movement while choosing to defend their beliefs. Today, there is still the potential for icons to emerge from environmental martyrdom.

Nixon stresses the need for extensive testimony in relation to the environmental martyr. There is potential to bring life into the data, or to acknowledge the importance to the information we are receiving. He implies that this includes a more thorough background on the lives of these

²¹ “ibid.”

individuals. I will turn to some examples of this type of data collection that includes examples of both websites and social media platforms that are aiding in eco-martyr characterization.

Discussion of Media as a tool for Witnessing

Global Witness is a non-profit NGO that was founded in 1993. Their mission: “justice for those disproportionately affected by the climate crisis: people in the global south, indigenous communities, and communities of colour, women and younger generations. We want corporations to respect the planet and human rights, governments to protect and listen to their citizens, and the online world to be free from misinformation and hate.”²² Since their founding, Global Witness has worked on numerous projects that focus on various areas of environmental conservation ranging from climate justice to human rights. The organization began with Charmian Gooch, Simon Taylor, and Patrick Alley. What the three founders wanted was to take this idea further and investigate the connection between natural resource exploitation and global environmental crime and corruption.²³ Global Witness is non-partisan and has offices in Washington D.C., London, and Brussels. Global Witness possesses a database that reports numerous deaths of land and environmental defenders around the world. Global Witness creates a report on the killings and threats made against these activists each year. This began in 2012 when a friend of the organization was killed in Cambodia. He was an activist and investigator of

²² “25 Years of Creating Change.” Global Witness. Accessed December 5, 2023.

²³ Connel, Christopher. “Q&A with Patrick Alley, Co-Founder of Global Witness, Winner of the 2007 Commitment to Development Ideas In Action Award.” Center For Global Development | Ideas to Action, January 15, 2010.

environmental crimes for over a decade; working to expose the illegal timber trade.²⁴ The first report that was released in 2012 covered deaths they could identify for that year as well as between 2002-2011. Their findings:

Across the world...711 individuals reported killed in the past decade - an average of more than one killing per week. Of these, 106 people were killed in 2011 – nearly twice the death toll in 2009. It includes those killed in targeted attacks and violent clashes as a result of protests, investigating or taking grievances against mining operations, logging operations, intensive agriculture including ranching, tree plantations, hydropower dams, urban development and poaching.²⁵

The first report gained a lot of attention, and it became an annual report. This has pushed the topic forward in the political sphere. It encompasses many areas of environmental conservation and land disputes around the world. Their methods of gathering data include technology that allows them to expose criminal practices such as hidden cameras and recorders. Photo, video, and audio documentation can be critical to capturing the scope of injustice globally. Due to the intricacy of the investigation, the reports on land and environmental defenders have their own clear methodology created by Global Witness. By their definition and criteria, a land and environmental defender is a “specific type of human rights defender” and are defined as: “people who take a stand and carry out peaceful action against the unjust, discriminatory, corrupt, or damaging exploitation of natural resources or the environment.”²⁶ They claim to be the first organization to create reports like this that are globally inclusive and detailed. With the word

²⁴ “Death of a Comrade.” Global Witness, April 26, 2012.

²⁵ “A Hidden Crisis.” Global Witness, June 19, 2012.

²⁶ “In Numbers: Lethal Attacks against Defenders since 2012.” Global Witness.

‘Witness’ included in their name, there is a call for people around the world to stop and observe the injustices they outline. In the data on environmental defenders, which, in my opinion, are eco-martyrs, the extensive list tries to be as detailed as possible.

Within the more popular platforms, I will refer to the example of the social media response around COP26 (Conference of the Parties). This was a key global event for social media action because the actual conference, while being set in Glasgow, was being attended by world leaders online. A more accessible stream and schedule for the entire event was set up as well for the public.²⁷ There was a great deal of advertising on social media for the event. COP26 also occurred during the COVID-19 epidemic; a time when many people were frequently online. The peak use of Zoom and other online communication also set apart this event from previous conferences.²⁸ At the Conference of the Parties in Glasgow in 2021, many activists and concerned citizens wondered what would result from this gathering. This was set to be a big year for multilateral approaches to mitigate climate change. Many countries came to agreement on their emissions and spoke their praises of a world united. But this year in particular was also one where communities took to the media to show their discontent. A coalition for COP26 and the group Fridays for Future sent out many social media posts speaking of a peaceful protest outside for the conference.²⁹ During the conference, there were over one hundred thousand people reported walking through the streets. A study on the event also found that online engagement across multiple platforms in response to COP26 were much higher.³⁰ One of the main

²⁷ Kaplan, Sarah. “At COP26, 100,000 March for Climate Justice - The Washington Post.” The Washington Post, November 6, 2021.

²⁸ Wade, Keith. “Lessons from the Pandemic for COP26.” Homepage, July 10, 2021.

²⁹ Bastida, Xiye. “Xiye Bastida on Instagram: ‘We’re All Thinking That #COP26 Was Too Much and That It Wasn’t Enough...’” Instagram, November 15, 2021.

³⁰ Falkenberg, M., Galeazzi, A., Torricelli, et al.(2022, November 24). *Growing polarization around climate change on social media*. Nature News.

determining factors for this was retweet count on X, another was searching trends on YouTube and Reddit.³¹ Many posts were showing their displeasure for the global actions being taken in real time. An impactful piece of witnessing that occurred, were brief moments by some of the world leaders broadcasting from countries typically associated as the Global South. There was a broadcast from the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, standing with his podium in the ocean to demonstrate the rising sea levels and need for change.³² The world was watching this event, and I do not think the heads of COP26 were prepared for such a response. The media platforms that share this content, alongside ones like Global Witness, create an external force of public witnesses outside of the martyr- originally defined as a witness themselves. The eco-martyr of today reflects the condemned witness (the martyr), being watched by the public (societal witnesses) while violence is enacted upon them or they do it themselves.

An individual example of witnessing can be found in the killing of Berta Cáceres. Cáceres was a renowned Honduran activist and forest defender. Her last activation was the protest of the Agua Zarca Dam, it was going to be one of Central Americas biggest hydropower projects. She knew the dangers of her work and the possibility for retaliation. Cáceres was assassinated in March 2016.³³ Her work did put an end to the dam project, and she won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015. Even so, the goal was not death for a cause, nor did she choose to become a figurehead in environmental activism. But, she was an activist that was

³¹ Falkenberg, M., Galeazzi, A., Torricelli, et al.(2022, November 24). *Growing polarization around climate change on social media*. Nature News.

³² Handley, Lucy. "Pacific Island Minister Films Climate Speech Knee-Deep in the Ocean." CNBC, November 8, 2021.

³³ University, Santa Clara. "Berta Cáceres." Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, March 15, 2017.

working on the ‘front lines’, and she had a social media presence before her passing. The news about Cáceres spread quickly. It continues to be a major loss in the environmental activist community, in which she is still on posters and social media posts with her own quotes attached. The death of Cáceres also brought awareness for this specific type of crime against environmental defenders. It was not unknown by any means, but more news outlets began to pick up these stories. In 2016, articles on began to come out more regularly citing Global Witness as a resource.³⁴ Reporters also began to draw comparisons of these crimes in relation to other forms of activism. There is a risk of the loss of agency for these ‘direct action’ defenders prior to their passing and in death they could lose the innate humanity they possessed.

Final Thoughts

1,910 individuals were killed between 2012 and 2022.³⁵ These were recorded, but still widely unnoticed. They have now joined this symbolic collective of people that are still widely unknown. An increase in eco-martyrdom could occur if the public chooses to view the eco-martyr as a force for genuine change and ignores their own role in the dynamic that facilitates martyrdom. There is a small collection of online platforms that record environmental activist deaths and attacks. Social media has the potential to re-define the role for the people witnessing the acts of the martyr. It will be important to make the world more aware of what these deaths are, and that there is an increase in violence against activists. I have created a resource in which

³⁴ Smyth, Frank. “The Legacy of Berta Cáceres: What Environmentalists Can Learn from Human Rights Groups | Commentary and Opinion | Features | PND.” *Candid.*, August 8, 2016.

³⁵ “In Numbers: Lethal Attacks against Defenders since 2012.” *Global Witness*.

these organizations are explained and given context as a part of a growing culture of digital witnessing. Link:<https://eco-martyrs.squarespace.com/config/>

As the climate crisis evolves, so does the power dynamic between humans. With humans around the world already unable to benefit equally from industrialism, and the environmental impacts of industrialism also not equally borne, discontent has grown in abandoned and exploited zones. In some sense, these conditions may mirror those in which we first see common usage of the term martyr. The historical martyr was first defined by witnessing and maintaining beliefs in the face of punitive social systems. Today's eco-martyr has emerged through the growing sense of injustice that dominates daily life for many.

The unfortunate circumstance of the world with the climate crisis on the rise has generated the ideal conditions for humans to be made into eco-martyrs or martyr themselves. The multidimensional nature of climate change and those it affects call for guidance or representation when world leaders refuse to aid these communities. When natural disasters or human rights violations reach chaotic levels and ignite panic, the opportunity arises for someone to act on those characteristics. Eco-martyrdom as a phenomenon is in part a return to the past. Human beings involved in advocacy for something they love are now being forced into these roles that often take a bit of their personhood. It chips away at who they were to their loved ones and replaces pieces of them into a symbol and public hero. Direct action or more radical forms of engagement that result in death of the activist can now be witnessed more thoroughly and that is the hope for the future of this phenomenon. The public should not simply accept the reverence given to human beings that often do not choose this fate. Instead, adopt a more engaged level of witnessing in the face of unprecedented level of climate crises and global environmental degradation during all our lifetimes.

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