
THE SOUL OF CARBON DIOXIDE

Gökçe Günel

In May 2011, shortly before I left the United Arab Emirates, I took a long cab ride with Marco from Abu Dhabi to Dubai. Marco was in his late thirties, and had been working in Abu Dhabi as an environmental consultant for about two years, focusing on climate change policy. I had been an intern at his department for more than six months, but I had never exchanged words with him before. He occupied a private office a few feet away from my cubicle, which introduced a barrier between us, despite its glass partition wall. He also worked on a project that I did not know much about, and did not collaborate very often with my group. But on this afternoon, for reasons purely coincidental, we were both headed to our apartments in Dubai, sharing the backseat of a heavily air-conditioned Toyota.

For about 30 miles, the road from Abu Dhabi to Dubai is ornamented with date palms, green grass and at times wild flowers. Someone had told me that the Abu Dhabi government spent an extraordinary amount of resources to keep these roads verdant, second only to military expenses. They used desalinated water to take care of the imported plants. When these plants died, they quickly replaced them with new ones, within a matter of hours. The vegetation was even more manicured around our office, due to the construction of a VIP airport for members of the ruling family. It had taken such a short time for the airport building to be completed, what seemed like less than three months. But gardening work still continued on the verges of the



Date palms on the road to Dubai. Photo by the author.



Imported flowers on the road to Dubai. Photo by the author.

highway. The imported plants seemingly refused to remain sessile here.

Observing this, and drawing on his knowledge of ethnobotany, Marco suggested that the plants were actively rejecting their new locations. They did not want to be here. Then he explained to me that he had tried *yage* at the age of ten, in the jungle together with his parents, and argued that this experience served as the beginning of his cosmological education. The jungle had become alive, and demonstrated its interiority, in a way that astonished Marco and his family.

In further developing his ontological theories, Marco had been influenced by Carlos Castaneda, Richard Evan Schultes, Fritoj Capra, Albert Hoffman and Ken Wilbur. And now he was reading *Return of the Children of the Light*, which proposed that all matter was made of light. “The new worldview will make it evident that the world we live in is part of a larger whole,” the book stated, “We will be able to perceive that all matter is energy, that we are wave-like, that we are in constant communication with the whole. Through this shift in consciousness, we will begin to function as multi-dimensional beings, and we will realize we have potentials beyond anything yet dreamed of, adding our heightened light vibration to the Earth’s own.” By relying on ancient Incan and Mayan mythology, the author suggested techniques through which the readers could awaken their human potential.

And Marco believed that humans would soon awaken to a new understanding of how animals and plants—but most importantly carbon dioxide—have souls. As evolution continued, humans would be divided into subspecies. These formal and biological changes would shape how they reacted to the events around them. People used to think that certain races were inferior, but people have evolved, Marco exemplified, people will become more understanding towards animals and plants and carbon dioxide, in the same way that they became more understanding about race. Once their bodies transformed, humans would become more alert. We could keep our hopes high, because humans had made similar mistakes in the past. A more evolved human species, which could relate to animals, plants, and perhaps chemical beings, was in the making.

In the past few years, Marco had been developing some practical tools to acknowledge the soul of carbon dioxide. Before being recruited by his current employer, he had worked with many climate change consultancies around the world. He explained that he had started out at a critical moment, just as the global governance of climate change was becoming more urgent. Unlike many other consultants, he had faith that global governance could sort out the climate change problem, and reminded me that we were still at the very beginning of the Kyoto Protocol with policy makers paying attention to such instruments only since 2005. The climate change regime would improve, but it would take time. Carbon markets were small, roughly the

size of the flat screen TV market, but they helped everyone understand that the air was not for free. Through carbon markets, we could recognize carbon dioxide as a spiritual being.

According to Marco, humans and carbon dioxide differed not through their souls but through their bodies. In order to account for this difference in forms, we had to make use of a market based system, where all of these beings would become redeemable in cash. Providing an indiscriminate abstraction, a market platform would suspend the formal differences between humans, animals, plants and carbon dioxide. It would strip them of their bodies and expose their souls. This was not a mastery of nature, but rather an acknowledgement that nature consisted of singular beings, which could only be made equal under this common denominator. In some ways, the market was a way to fight the naturalism of the human species. We had to concentrate our efforts in this direction.

As we approached Dubai, the plants disappeared, the quality of the asphalt changed, and the road became slightly bumpier. We drove past billboards advertising recently shelved real estate development projects. One of them promised a city that would double the coastline of Dubai. Others pointed to theme parks, soon to provide rickety representations of a world beyond this geography. Through such bold gestures Dubai was going to recreate a nature for itself. There had also been plans to transport a blue whale to the city, which would live inside an aquarium in the largest shopping mall of the world, but no one really talked about this venture anymore. After the economic crisis, the city had transformed into a more honest wasteland of abandoned construction sites.

When I stepped out of the taxi outside my apartment building, Marco pleaded, “please don’t think that I have gone crazy.”

Columbia University