# **When I Think About Climate Change**

By Kela Sunshine Roberts

As I sit here to write this, the humour of the situation washes over me. “What does climate change mean to you?” they ask. They also often ask, “as a young person how do you feel about climate change?”. It seems to be a common prompt amongst think tanks and at conferences on the issue. All the United Nations dialogues, all the posturing, question asking and the promises, it's humorous, because I know that in the end those in power will drag their feet, dragging us along with them. “How do you feel about climate change, what does it mean to you?”, feels like an insulting question at this point, almost as though someone just slapped me across the face, then asked me delicately, charmingly, “how do you feel about getting slapped?”. However, in the interest of catharsis, in the interest of that release you feel when you scream, I will tell you. This piece will be my scream into the void of the ears and eyes of all who read it. There may not be an echo, there may not be a response, it may not register, but all I have is this scream. This is what climate change means to me.

It is almost like a background noise, a low hum, a buzz. I would turn on the television, read the newspaper, scroll on my social media, and I would see it. It’s there, the hum of disaster, the thump of apocalypse. I would see my peers, people from my generation talking humorously about the end of the world. It isn’t coming from a place of apathy; it’s more like the kind of humour you use when there is nothing else left to feel. When crying and rage melt away to absurdity and all you really can do is laugh. Because what else can we really do? There is this wave of information, pings and clicks and dings all noisily telling us about the problems of the world that, without this new advent of technology, we would not even know about. More than ever before, we see how interconnected the disasters of the world are; we can’t look away from the fires of Australia because there are the floods of India and the oil spills of Mexico. There is no avenue to escape; our tools of escapism throw us right into the melee of cataclysmic headlines and information. This is what it’s like living as a young person in the 21st century, being bombarded with extremes, disaster, futile distractions, pain and humour, a twisted mix that forces you into the realm of insensitivity. Knowing that Greece, Turkey, the Amazon, California and the Gulf of Mexico are on fire does something to the young mind that most other forms of bombardment can't - it sinks it into nihilism. Nihilism is the darkest form of perception, and to me, the most dangerous. Bombastic headline after bombastic headline, another blow to the spirit of hope, another ‘too late, we have passed the limit’. As a Caribbean girl I detest this type of headline, all it does is exhaust us and add to our nihilism, and nihilism is counterproductive. It is lazy, it is giving up, and it takes away the colour and beauty of purpose and replaces it with a grey meaninglessness. There is no point to action, there is no point, and it is all meaningless, because it is all being destroyed. Many young people in the region feel this way; it’s a response to powerlessness. It is a response to not being heard; it is a response to our futures being devalued by the persons with the power to ensure it. The first thing climate change means to me is nihilism - painful and bleak.

When my peers and I talk about our futures we never think too far ahead. Ten years, maybe fifteen? And then it starts to look hazy, the crystal ball of our minds starts to get filled with a smoke, and the distant future is unclear, which makes planning anything useless. We always talk about the possibility of children, and how selfish it would be to want to have them when we know that resources might be scarce due to emerging food and water security threats. We talk about houses, how flooding might affect certain areas and what the heat might be like, and how air-conditioning might be a good option, but it might be selfish because it would add to the energy problem. We talk about jobs, job security; we talk about how the weather in the islands might get extreme, how hurricanes and the rainy season might make living in some places nearly impossible for half the year. We plan around the apocalypse, sometimes we comfort ourselves by thinking it might be further off than we might think, and nonetheless, we plan around it. It's normalized, assuming the future might not be here, assuming the planet might not be what we know it is. It is ridiculous to think about. It’s a strange kind of normalcy. When you think of the end of things, the fall of empires, the end of ages, you imagine it to be one swift action, one great tumble, a war that ends all wars, an atom bomb explosion, here one minute and gone the next. What I’m realizing is that the opposite is usually true; things fall apart, but gradually. It’s the classic frog in boiling water metaphor - you acclimatize until you can’t anymore, and by then it’s too late. We live in an era of things falling apart and we press on and plan anyway. Knowing that former generations never had to ponder on the future of humanity like this is jarring. For them there was no planning around the apocalypse, there was just the clarity of promise, of their youth. Climate change means that the future is foggy, smoke-filled, and too dark to see clearly.

When I think about climate change, there isn’t only stoic nihilism, or the preparation for the end. There is also a blistering, scorching fury. You would scroll on social media and see a press release from the president of a developed northern hemisphere country, saying that ‘someone’ should do something about climate change. It feels like a sketch, and not a funny one. The rage that I feel when I think about what is being done to the planet, the rage I feel when I see hurricanes batter my region and batter my people, the fury, my god the fury, it is hard to describe. Fury is the second response to the powerlessness we feel. It manifests itself internally. It is not loud and physical, yet, but you can see it in the comment sections of the political leaders of the world, when they make their baseless, empty, farcical statements about how someone should do something, while they sit on the mountains of money and power required to actually get that something done. You can see the comments lambasting them, questioning their apathy, but the rage hasn’t become physical and active. I believe my generation will eventually make it so. Because when I see images of koalas being burnt alive, or children being swept by monsoons, followed by promises of climate action tumbling aimlessly from the lips of those with political and economic power, who assume they will be gone before the destruction hits, I can’t help but feel an insatiable tempest within me. Greta Thunberg’s famous “how dare you?” cannot begin to encapsulate what her generation, our generation, truly feels towards all of this, but it is a start. Being held responsible, being told to drink through paper straws and carpool and take off our lights that are run on fossil fuels, that are privately owned and government-backed, feels like an insult. How could they ask this of us, how can you ask us to shoulder the weight of the world that you are paid handsomely to protect. It feels uniquely cruel that so much power is kept from us, yet so much is expected of us. The rage of the youth isn’t unique to our generation, but the cataclysms and information at our disposal is, the connectedness is, and those factors make for a distinct kind of firmament, one born in a powerlessness that I would hope, one day erupts into righteous ignition. Climate change to me means rage.

I think about our region, I think about my own country, Trinidad and Tobago and I worry about our stagnation in the midst of all of this. As a region we are heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Trinidad and Tobago specifically has no plans to restructure our economy and pivot away from natural gas and oil exploration and production any time soon. It feels sort of surreal to live in a country, a region, where leadership seems to be stuck in a time loop from the 1970s. It feels surreal to watch leadership hold on to the bones of prosperity past, failing to see how the world, the planet is leaving us behind, the light of progression getting dimmer as we settle for the comfort and familiarity of darkness. There are no attempts to change our direction economically or within the energy sector, with Trinidad and Tobago aiming to resume its natural gas production to pre-COVID levels by next year. I wonder if our leadership is even aware of climate change, and how vulnerable we are to its effects as both a small island state and a developing economy. But of course, they are aware. It’s more an issue of caring and having the foresight to think beyond what barely keeps us economically alive right now that seems to be lacking. Writhing under the effects of COVID and the economic hits we have taken, I see a precarious future for both Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) and the region at large with respect to the climate issue if foresight is not found. Eventually, I would hope that the world will pivot away from the burning of fossil fuels, possibly far too late, but eventually it will happen. What then for the oil-slicked economy of T&T, do we even plan for that reality? And even before then, with increasing weather anomalies due to the warming temperatures, with more destructive hurricanes battering the Windward Islands, what will become of our white sandy beach reputation, our tourism-backed economies? What will be left of these beaches, but tattered remains, debris and millions in damage to be fixed, only to have to prepare for the worst again? Climate change means the destruction of our economies, and insecurity of our nation and region’s futures. To me, apathy around it is unpatriotic, treasonous.

 I am left with this bundle of feeling, this flow of torrid emotion. I know that the solution would involve a world that is drastically different to the one I grew up in, the one my parents and their parents grew up in, but one we have been in before. For most of humanity’s infancy on this age-old planet, we as a species have survived without the systems of energy production and pollution we presently have, and we, as a collective, can be creative enough to find ways to survive without them again. As a young person from the Caribbean, you ask me what I feel, I tell you I feel everything, we feel everything. We feel hopelessness at the inactions of our leaders but hope in our own ability to consider our own future. We feel humour at the absurdity of it all, at the call to action by those who sit in overfed and happy catatonia with the actual power to act. We feel cold suspense for the future, sacrifice seems necessary. Most importantly, we feel rage. Rage against the institutions that have failed us. Rage at the people elected to protect us and secure our future prioritizing quick money over us. Rage at short sightedness, at selfishness and at greed. This is what it is; this is what being a Caribbean youth in the climate crisis means. This is my scream.