



Summer 2022

Book Review: Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future

J. Spenser Lotz
University of New Mexico

Recommended Citation

J. Spenser Lotz, *Book Review: Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future*, 62 NAT. RES. J. 317 (2022).
Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol62/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future by Elizabeth Kolbert (Crown Publishing Group, 2021)

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” - Albert Einstein

This quote is a theme that permeates Elizabeth Kolbert’s *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future*. Kolbert’s book is a fast-paced tour of the Anthropocene, examining issues caused by humans and the subsequent attempts to remedy them. Divided into three sections, the book delves into topics related to water, genetic diversity, and climate, serving to provide readers with a broad introduction to issues and potential solutions under the umbrella of climate change and adaptation science. The title of the book itself refers to geoengineering; specifically, an idea to release countless particles into the atmosphere to reflect sunlight and cool the planet. The result of the particles being released, it is speculated, would be a sky that is no longer blue but is instead white. Kolbert introduces this idea and others like it throughout the book, placing them into the larger social and historic backdrop while being careful to allow the reader to come to their own conclusions on the validity of the concepts. Hidden in the margins, however, is a note to the attentive reader that perhaps these ideas are in fact the progeny of the thinking that created the original problem they purport to solve.

The text is organized into three sections, with the contents of each loosely relating to a common theme. The first section, *Down the River*, serves to illustrate the idea that human efforts to control the environment have unforeseen “downriver” consequences. *Into the Wild*, the second section, explores efforts to preserve endangered species and eradicate invasive ones using assisted evolution and genetic manipulation. The final section, *Up in the Air*, concludes the book by noting how uncertain the outcome of any climate mitigation effort is, and how there are a myriad of different factors to be considered when deciding whether to implement such measures. Beneath these larger signposts runs an additional, more subtle, motif: a deliberate pairing of the old and the new. Often, Kolbert will discuss an effort employed in the past and how it had unintended and sometimes disastrous results. This will then be followed by the discussion of a new concept being developed, sometimes simply to address the issue the original effort caused. Although Kolbert rarely imparts her personal beliefs into the text, this juxtaposition calls to mind a warning followed closely by evidence that perhaps that warning is going unheeded.

This organization is generally effective, as the contents of each section flow relatively well into each other. Although each chapter tends to discuss a wildly different topic than the one preceding it, Kolbert remedies this by maintaining common threads throughout and referencing past material within the context of new discussions, weaving continuous themes between chapters to keep the reader engaged despite the rapid change of direction. The science discussed is also made more approachable by a mixture of history, sociology, and pop culture, which provide a useful backdrop for the ideas being discussed and help demonstrate how

these issues are not merely abstract concepts, but also have real, tangible effects on actual people. Kolbert also includes present sense impressions from various personal experiences that add a relatable, humanizing touch. Things that might otherwise seem horrifying—like the author being able to casually purchase a DIY genetic modification kit—are made more palatable with somewhat dark but also relatable commentary, such as the author stowing the *E. coli* sample from said kit in the fridge, next to the butter. The result is a text which has a pleasantly conversational style, pitching rapidly between the scientific, the grim, and the familiar, at a rate that keeps the reader engaged.

As part of this conversational style, Kolbert tends to stay firmly within the bounds of popular science writing. The book is written in such a way as to be easily understandable by the layperson; people unfamiliar with the various fields of science or policy will not find this book difficult to parse. Furthermore, it is not overburdened with quotations, charts of scientific data, and citations. While this does make for an easier read, it cuts both ways, and while she breaks down complex subjects into manageable sections, there tends to be a lot left on the periphery which is not discussed. The result is a book that serves as a primer for anyone interested in the somewhat outlandish science being developed in this field, but which might be found lacking in terms of serving as a jumping off point for self-directed or academic research.

That said, it would be a stretch to say that this was written to serve in that role. This is a book for the average person to take a peek behind the curtain and see some of the concerns in the environmental world today, the cause of those concerns, and the ideas that are being developed as a means of mitigating them. Readers are exposed to issues such as how scientists are selectively breeding coral to be capable of surviving in hotter, more acidic oceans caused by rising carbon dioxide levels. The book discusses how engineers in the South of the United States are building massive diversion works to circulate sediment from the Mississippi River to fight land subsidence directly caused by the dams and levees built to protect cities from floods. Kolbert also examines some of the more extreme solutions being discussed, such as research into programming invasive species with so-called gene-drives; genetic code used to infect a population and destroy its ability to reproduce. While not as rigorous as other texts in its exploration of these topics, *Under a White Sky* nevertheless references a wide array of sources and draws attention to them in the endnotes. While this book may not in and of itself provide the factual depth necessary for someone to come away fully understanding any of the issues discussed, there is a good chance that it can nonetheless serve as a useful signpost, pointing readers to sources which can open further paths of study.

Books like *Under a White Sky* have an important place in the academic world. Texts that explore a specific concept in depth with all of the accompanying jargon have a tendency to alienate the novice and fail to attract new interest to the field. Popular science books serve as friendly guides, inviting people to explore new topics in a setting that is familiar and comfortable. Should the reader wish to go further, the bibliography section will provide the next steps. Should they choose to end with the last page, they will at least come away with knowledge of an area that was previously foreign to them.

Regardless of whether you wish to take those next steps or end your journey at the back cover, *Under a White Sky* does an excellent job of providing real world examples of best intentions and unintended consequences in environmental mitigation and adaptation efforts. While lacking a legal focus, this book should be read by anyone who seeks to write environmental policy, or who has more than a passing interest in environmental law. While Kolbert does not call out the topics by name, this book is replete with allusions to environmental law, water law, and environmental justice. Ethics too is an ever-present specter in the book, and more than once do scientists and Kolbert, speaking for the audience, raise the question: what right do we have to play God? To this end, this book showcases not only some of the environmental policy failures of the past but provides a preview of the issues that we will certainly have to reckon with in the years to come. After reading this book you find yourself asking: Do we attempt to solve these problems with the same thinking that created them, or do we step back and look to something else?

J. Spenser Lotz
Class of 2023
UNM School of Law

