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Navigating Women Scientist & *Unnatural Selection* Through *The Nest* (1987) and *Splice* (2006)

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Abstract

The Nest (1987) and *Splice* (2006) use fear as a method of generating anxiety, helplessness, and even hostility towards its subject—the female scientists. This character stereotype is the source of treacherous and destructive acts that jeopardize the future of the environment and the human race. These female villains have desires deemed unnatural by traditional conservative society, are destructive to the environment, and operate outside the norm of both social and biological ecology. This paper argues that the stereotype of female scientist as portrayed in *The Nest* and *Splice* is destructive to the cultural progress of women. In addition both films assert that women scientists are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanity's ability to survive. Ultimately humanity will fail to exterminate the unnatural species we have created and we must adjust and accommodate for a new existence.

Introduction

I clearly remember the first horror film which terrified me and kept me awake at night for over a month. I was seven, and the film was Terence H. Winkless's *The Nest* (1987). One of the main characters, a woman scientist named Dr. Hubbard, had collected a fish tank full of flesh-eating cockroaches (her genetic experiment gone wrong) which she kept in her lab. To examine the roaches she wore a thick rubber glove and reached into the tank to inspect the insects by hand. The roaches were so fierce that they chewed through the rubber glove and began to consume Hubbard's arm. Rather than pull her arm out of the glove, Hubbard smiled and stared in wide-eyed fascination. Her face reflected this horrible insane delight. She "enjoyed" watching her arm being consumed by insects. She was so engrossed in watching the roaches eat her flesh that a colleague had to grab her arm and pull it from the glove only to reveal a bloody mess. It was not the situation that I feared, then, but rather Hubbard's reaction to the situation. Hubbard defied the laws of nature, finding more enjoyment in her own destruction than in survival.

Re-watching the film now, (thirty years later, pregnant with my first child, and a PhD candidate in Environmental Biology), the film alarms me in a way that my seven-year-old self did not understand. The current state of my body and being has made me highly aware of the stereotype of my own existence and encouraged my exploration into the topic of fear of female scientists. In films such as *The Nest* and *Splice* (2006) fear functions as a way to create feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and even hostility towards its subject, in this case the female scientists. *The Nest* and *Splice* use the character of the female scientist as the source of treacherous and destructive acts that jeopardize the future of the environment and the human race. These female villains have

desires deemed unnatural by traditional conservative society, are destructive to the environment, and operate outside the norm of both social and biological ecology. According to Eva Flicker, author of *Between Brains and Breast* (2003),

The mass media, including film, have a central function in the creation of opinion and myth. Film functions as more than a simple mirror, it also works as social memory and cultural metaphor. In contrast to purely linguistic media, film creates pictures that continue as social myths. (2)

The Nest and *Splice* perpetuate the “social myth” that women scientist are selfish, arrogant and reckless to the point of creating environmental degradation. The images produced by these films linger in the mind of the viewer long after the film has ended, such as Hubbard’s wide-eyed fascination with the mutant roaches and scenes of her blatant disregard for human life. These films portray female scientist as destructive to social order – they occupy traditionally masculine professions, are emotionally unavailable, and reject the conventional role of motherhood. In addition, their research becomes their means to procreation. They bring to life, or “birth” unnatural creatures defying the laws of natural selection and disrupting the natural order. For Hubbard this is the creation of genetically modified cockroaches and for Elsa Kast (*Splice*) this is the creation of a human-animal hybrid, which she uses her DNA to produce. This representation of female scientist disseminates what Simon Estok theorizes in his text, *Ecomedia and Ecophobia* (2016) as “ecophobia; a term used to analyze human action as an opposing force to the natural environment. Estok notes that media language often perpetuates the idea that “nature (and women) are to be controlled” (130).

Both Hubbard and Elsa challenge women’s roles in the social order as their research breaks down the natural order – their existence representing a double threat. This paper argues that the stereotype of female scientist as portrayed in *The Nest* and *Splice* is destructive to the cultural progress of women. In addition, both films assert that women scientists are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanities ability to survive. Ultimately humanity will fail to exterminate the unnatural species we have created and we must adjust and accommodate for a new existence.

The Nest and *Splice* are not the first (nor will they be the last) media to cast progressive female characters as villains. Some of the first fictional evil female scientist appeared during the emergence of the *New Women* feminist movement in the late 19th century. During this time women began to focus on education and career over marriage and family, attending university and pursuing studies as doctors, professors, and scientists. Feminism became associated with evil women, because female liberation was seen as threatening to the social order and traditional way of life. Women who could rival men intellectually were seen as a menace and thus produced a new type of fear—a fear centered on loss of control and a changing way of life. One way of responding to the new women was the creation of negative female stereotypes such as the mad, or evil scientist. In his text *Daughters of Frankenstein: Lesbian Mad Scientist* (2015), Steve Berman writes, “the fictional female mad scientist was one of the many negative fictional reactions to the New Woman. Most novels of the 1890s portrayed the New Woman as coming to bad ends, and the novels with fictional female scientists are one version of this reaction” (6). *The Nest* and *Splice* maintain the

harmful stereotype of women scientists by portraying the characters of Hubbard and Elsa as mad or evil, and their progressive scientific endeavors ultimately leading to “bad ends.”

Although the past one hundred years have seen significant progress in the advancement of women’s rights, there is still much to be desired. In a 2019 study published by Isabelle Régner et al. titled *Committees with Implicit Biases Promote Fewer Women When They Do Not Believe Gender Bias Exists* “...the gender stereotypes of scientist are still considerably significant. However convinced we may be that science is not just for men, the concept of science remains much more strongly associated with masculinity than with femininity in people's minds” (198). Media characters such as Hubbard and Elsa help to further perpetuate the association of masculinity with science. According to Flicker one of the prominent stereotypical portrayals of women scientists in feature films is the *male woman*. “This woman scientist is a member of a male team and stands up for herself. She has learned to be assertive within a male environment, has a rough, harsh voice, dresses practically and from time to time succumbs to an unhealthy lifestyle” (311).

Hubbard and Elsa are strikingly assertive in their male dominated environments (as will be further discussed) to the point of alienating and disenfranchising their male counterparts. In addition to their masculine roles, they also exemplify the stereotype of the evil female scientists, bringing her to a new level of maliciousness with disregard for scientific morals and human life. Hubbard and Elsa are young, beautiful, intelligent, and determined to push the limits of modern science even if it jeopardizes the existence of humanity. Rather than use their looks and sexual prowess to achieve their goals (another stereotype of the female scientist) both women show contempt for their male counterparts, forcing aside male relationships to focus on their research. Hubbard alienates her male associates when she says “I so admire these nymph cockroaches, their ability to reproduce without the contribution of their male counterpart” (*The Nest* 0:30:53-01). Hubbard’s statement plays upon fears of misconstrued feminism, and the idea that women desire to be more powerful than men. Elsa finds Clive’s request for a future with children “unreasonable” as she will be “the one who has to have it.” Elsa argues that she “doesn’t want to bend my life to suit some third party that doesn’t even exist yet” (*Splice* 0:17:44-52). This scene supports the false narrative that feminists are career women who do not support motherhood.

Like nymph cockroaches, both women find a way to create life without the assistance of men. Clive supports Elsa in bringing forth her creation, but ultimately it is Elsa’s assertion and DNA that make it happen. Both films argue that women scientists, who shun motherhood and desire to create unnatural organisms, are “unnatural” themselves. That is to say that they go against biological programming. Hubbard exhibits lack of self-preservation and a willingness to sacrifice herself to further her scientific goals. Elsa displays the inability to nurture natural offspring and also the willingness to sacrifice herself for scientific progress. Flicker argues that these stereotypes of female scientists represent the

“...ambivalent relationship of society and science. This stereotype presents a mistrust of scientific research, and emotional categories and according to traditional assignments of gender, is tied to female roles. This depiction of the role of the woman scientist thus contributes greatly to the discordant social image of science.” (313)

The evil female scientist stereotype propagates mistrust of science and constructs a state of ecofear. Both Hubbard and Elsa secretly use their research to permanently alter the planet, bringing about ecological destruction and threatening the wellbeing of future generations. This ecofear is the result of not understanding how ecology and the environment will change, and how humanity will move forward. The films offer no answers, but function as fear generators with their open endings and contemptuous predictions. The films promote the ambivalent relationship between society and science by reinforcing mistrust and fear, but also provide a source for that fear: evil women scientists.

Women's rights and the advancement of science are paramount issues that have long remained at the forefront of world conversation. Despite the importance of these social concerns, few films generate a discussion of the combined issues. According to Kendall Philips, author of *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (2005), some films are able to "combine familiarity and shock—resonance and violation—in such a way that audiences left the theater feeling that each film was both vitally important and disturbingly new" (8). *The Nest* and *Splice* offer social commentary on the changing role of women in society coupled with scientific advancements in genetic research, thus equaling something "disturbingly new." These films combine fear of female empowerment and fear of unnatural selection in a way that produces a state of ecofear. This fear arises from humanity's inability to comprehend the world's changing political and environmental existence. Filmatic images of female scientist manufacturing unnatural organisms works to bring the unsettling fear of our changing environment to consciousness. Career oriented Hubbard and Elsa challenge the role of motherhood by creating progeny through scientific endeavors rather than traditional copulation. Their "evil" or "mad" actions generate ecological fear as they push scientific boundaries, creating new and uncontrollable organisms. These organisms are the result of human selection, rather than natural selection—a demonstration that humans have the power to alter biology. Hubbard and Elsa's hacked organisms ultimately lead to environmental devastation and threaten the future of the planet.

According to Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007),

When you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us. When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink. (1)

The Nest and *Splice* offer commentary on nature, ecology, and the role of women scientist as a way for viewers to think about their place in a rapidly changing world. Unfortunately, what could be a constructive conversation about women, scientific progress, and environment, is instead a platform for the dangers of science and women scientists as culprits. Both films pursue female empowerment as a harmful ground for society and the scientific community, resulting in research gone awry and the inevitable destruction of the natural environment.

The Nest

Darwin's theory of natural selection is the "process through which populations of living organisms adapt and change. Individuals in a population are naturally variable, meaning that they are all different in some ways. This variation means that some individuals have traits better suited to the environment than others" (Natural Selection). This genetic struggle acts as the regulating factor that determines the evolution of a species. Advancements in science and genetic technology have resulted in natural selection being replaced by human selection, or *unnatural* selection. This concept contributes greatly to fear and anxiety surrounding ecology, the environment, and the future of the planet. These unsettling emotions leave people with a sense of helplessness and a struggling ability to cope.

The Nest proliferates ecofear by conceptualizing on filmatic encounters with genetically modified animals and ecosystem destruction. The film's premise is that of a young female scientist, Dr. Morgan Hubbard, and her attempt to find an alternative to chemical pesticide by genetically engineering a species of cockroach to consume other roaches. "Good intentions" result in the creation of a manageable new species intentionally released into the environment. Only after release does Hubbard realize she is unable to predict the roaches' ability to adapt and survive. This new species is uncontrollable and quickly multiplies, bringing death and destruction to each ecosystem it invades. Rather than feel remorse, Hubbard is fascinated by the roaches' ability to survive and acclimate. She decides to study and understand, rather than destroy the creatures she has created.

The film's very introduction of Hubbard indicates that she is going to be a "challenging" character. Hubbard arrives via plane to be greeted by the town's mayor, Elias. She steps off the plane and confidently extends her hand, and says in greeting "Mayor Elias." Elias responds with "Oh, no, please just call me Elias. We're not very formal here, on the island." Hubbard smiles, and offers her title as "Dr. Hubbard." Hands on hip, Elias responds "Of course, we could change that" (*The Nest* 0:23:48-59). Hubbard refuses to drop formality, preferring to be addressed by the title of doctor; a decision which is met with contempt from Elias. Her reserve and assertiveness portray her as a problematic woman - she does not conform to the male authority or the social "rules of the island." The ominous non-diegetic sound upon Hubbard's arrival signals that the viewer should be apprehensive of Hubbard as well, queuing us in to a secret deception. This scene lays the groundwork for future encounters with Hubbard. Neither Hubbard, nor her scientific research are to be trusted. She is cold and distant and her research secretive. Hubbard is an ideal evil scientist; harsh voiced, masculine and smartly dressed in a suit. The viewer is told to fear her and her research—she is the unknown, the problematic. Hubbard produces a psychological ecofear resulting from her unknown intentions and incomprehensible, yet implied, changes to the environment.

Hubbard's evil character is further illustrated in a later scene when she begins her investigation by inspecting the carcass of a dog. Mayor Elias and Sheriff Tarbell (the film's male authorities) exchange eye contact behind Hubbard's back as she kneels to inspect the carcass without hesitation. Their facial expressions signify that Hubbard's actions are strange and repugnant. They question her behavior by asking if she has "ever owned a dog" to which she

replies “I do now” (*The Nest* 00:25:24 -31). Hubbard’s dark wit further solidifies her cold and callous nature.

Hubbard’s cruelty is later extended to the use of a cat as “live bait” to lure the flesh-eating roaches into a glass tank. Hubbard’s trap works, and in a horrific scene, the cat withers in agony as it is consumed alive by roaches. Hubbard’s lack of empathy for animals demonstrates her absence of compassion and nurturing; traditional “womanly” traits. Her depraved and unethical behavior is used as justification for scientific progress. Her actions exemplify fear that lives will be sacrificed in order to push forth scientific research, bringing to consciousness our own inability to intervene with progress. Hubbard’s behavior and the creation of her roaches leaves the viewer to feel powerless in preventing ecological disaster. Our planet, our home, is threatened and there is not going back. Humanity must adjust and accommodate for a new existence, while dealing with the emotional devastation of ecofear.

Hubbard’s fascination and interaction with the roaches serves to enhance the complexity of her character. The roaches are the only organisms that Hubbard shows both concern and affection for. They are her creation, her progeny and her legacy. She treats her human counterparts with contempt, and is prepared to sacrifice their lives in order to safeguard her experiment. According to Davis Skal, author of *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (1998) “our prevalent, hyperbolic images of the madly overreaching scientists may be a half conscious balloon-popping response to the perception—correct or not—that too much of modern life is controlled by arrogant and irresponsible science-related structures and systems” (27). Hubbard’s disregard for the law, and overall lack of morals and concern for human beings allows her to conduct her experiments without fear of consequence. Even after the death of several characters, Hubbard’s arrogance and desire to continue her study leads her to assure the townspeople that she has control of her experiment. In reality, Hubbard understands she has lost control, but desires more time to collect and study the roaches. Again this leads to scientific progress and profit valued over human life and the environment. Hubbard does not recognize significance in human life, and she shows no remorse or concern for the deaths she has caused. Her scientific research advances recklessly without thought of the potential impact, resulting in disastrous effects on humanity and the environment. This unrestrained scientific progress leads to fear of our own adaptability and capacity to survive.

Hubbard’s overconfidence and captivation with the roaches ultimately leads to her death when she comes face to face with her experiment outside the protection of the lab. In the film’s most horrific scene of violence and gore, Hubbard’s arm is torn from her body and her head bitten in half. Like the New Women, Hubbard is met with a “bad end” as punishment for her scientific endeavors and working an occupation outside of the conservative norm. Her gruesome death serves as justification for her wants and desires. Hubbard has violated the boundaries of what is morally and socially acceptable behavior for a both a women, and a scientists. This scene serves as a warning to not push boundaries, to recognize ones societal position, and to adhere to the social norm.

Hubbard’s death leaves the remaining characters to deal with the situation; science has abandoned them and they must find a way to survive on their own. The film’s protagonist, Sherriff Tarbell, attempts to eradicate the unnatural offspring and save the island, but fails to do so.

Hubbard's creation is outside Tarbell's understanding and he is powerless to stop it. What remains is a new world of change and a future of uncertainty. The genetically modified roaches cannot be exterminated, and the survivors are left to adjust and accommodate for their existence. The film's depiction of science as unreliable and uncontrolled resonates within the viewer, rousing emotions of ecofear. The final scene of *The Nest*, features an image of a squirming cockroach, suspended under the bright light of a microscope. There is no way to eradicate the new species and the world has been forever altered. Humanity must find new ways to survive and move forward, for there is no going back.

Splice

Vincenzo Natali's Frankenstein-like film *Splice* explores the moral and social concern of unrestrained science in areas of genetic research and gene mutation. Like Victor, the young intelligent scientist Elsa Kast, pushes the boundaries of modern science along with her partner Clive. Together they produce Dren, the world's first human-animal hybrid. Like Frankenstein's monster, Dren is a patchwork of different organisms, but rather than a collection of human corpses she is crafted from an assortment of DNA. Dren's existence creates emotions of ecofear surrounding ethical boundaries of scientific research that must not be trespassed. Elsa is fixated on making scientific history to the point of irresponsibility. Early in the film Elsa refuses to put her half complete genetic experiment into storage claiming "biotechnologies most startling breakthrough in decades...on ice" (*Splice* 0:12:42-46). In a scene of reckless abandonment Elsa locks Clive from the lab (he calls her out on "emotional hijacking") and injects a genetically modified egg into a giant mechanical ovum. Like Hubbard, Elsa's boldness is received with disdain from her male counterpart. Rather than showcasing her decision as brave and innovative, she is shown as uncontrolled and selfish. Later it will be revealed that Elsa has tricked her intelligent male companion, by having inserted her own DNA into the experiment. Elsa showcases another trait of the evil female scientist stereotype, what Flicker refers to as the *evil plotter*,

Remarkably attractive and young, this woman scientist is a scrupulous egoist ready and willing to cooperate with evil forces. She is corrupt and uses her sexual attraction to trick her opponent with a "woman's weapons." Even the cleverest male scientists fall into her trap. (7)

Before injecting the egg into the mechanical ovum, Elsa manipulates Clive with a speech about how their experiment is a moral obligation to help humanity. We later learn that Elsa is not concerned with either morals or serving humanity, but rather in pushing her own scientific agenda. She is reckless to the point of evil, willing to jeopardize the lives of others in order to make her own scientific mark on the world.

Elsa's experiment results in the organism, Dren, will become Elsa's research and offspring—a child produced from the desire to push the limits of science and free herself from the traditional role of motherhood. Dren becomes an ideal child for Elsa, whose own traumatic past leaves her emotionally disinclined to produce biological children. Again we see the misrepresentation of feminism in that career orientated Elsa shows disdain for motherhood. Like Hubbard, Elsa is portrayed as cold and callous, lacking the warm nurturing qualities that are deemed necessary for traditional conservative women. This supports the idea that both Hubbard and Elsa

lack the biological necessities of women. This outdated argument stems back to J. McGrigor Allan “*On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women*” (1869), where he writes:

Her pleasures and duties are widely distinct from those of man. She is content, in most instances, to let others think for her, and trusts to that faculty, where she is really superior—her intuition—to discover the most proper person to do so. Nature has declared, in language which cannot deceive, that woman's chief mission is maternity. Woman craves to be a mother, knowing that she is an imperfect undeveloped being, until she has borne a child. There is a grand physiological truth expressed in the pathetic words of Rachel to Jacob: “Give me children, or else I die.” (8)

Elsa’s reckless scientific pursuits stem from her “womanly emotions” and her biologic shortcomings in her desire to be a mother. Clive (the voice of reason) chastises Elsa for creating Dren, exclaiming “Why the fuck did you want to make her in the first place? Huh? For the betterment of mankind? You never wanted a normal child, because you were afraid of losing control. But an experiment, that’s something else” (*Splice* 1:23:01-29). This scene illustrates Clive’s levelheadedness and emotional stability. Like Sherriff Tarbell, Clive is the male authority and the voice of scientific reason in the world of chaos created by women scientist.

As the film progresses, Elsa discovers she is unable to separate her experiment from her child. In one scene Elsa is nurturing and affectionate to Dren, treating her as a human child by dressing her in clothes and applying makeup to her face. In a later scene Elsa treats Dren as animal, violently stripping the clothes from her body and strapping her naked to an examination table. Elsa’s conflicting nature supports the stereotype of the emotional and irrational woman. Elsa is ill-equipped at being a scientist and a mother—two occupations that the film demonstrates conflict with one another.

Elsa’s emotional instability leads her to make these reckless scientific endeavors. Elsa’s behavior breeds an erroneous fear of feminism, implying that women are incapable of objectivity and rational decision making, and therefore should not be in positions of scientific authority. In addition to the fear of feminism, Elsa’s actions bring to consciousness the ecological fear of science gone morally and ethically wrong. Like *The Nest*, scientific progress is carried out by self-interested scientists who lack regard for both social and moral law. Elsa and Hubbard reflect a fear that science works outside the constraints of modern society, and that scientist make decisions based upon progress and profit. This idea is illustrated by Elsa and Clive’s decision to carry out their genetic research in secret. According to Elsa “scientists push boundaries—at least the important ones do.” A mixture of arrogance and intelligence, Elsa feels confident in her ability to objectively study a human-animal hybrid. But after the creation of Dren, both Clive and Elsa discover they are unprepared for the emotional conflict they encounter. Unlike Hubbard, Elsa and Clive struggle with the morality of their creation. This internal conflict leads to extreme interactions with Dren. Clive recognizes Dren as human and engages in sexual intercourse with her. Elsa identifies Dren as animal, and mentally and physically dehumanizes her in a horrific rape-like scene. Elsa and Clive’s conflicting interactions with Dren demonstrate that this area of genetic research is a realm of scientific advancement that scientists themselves are emotionally unprepared to deal with.

Like the townspeople from *The Nest*, Elsa is abandoned by science and there is no path to redemption. Ultimately Elsa loses control over Dren, the situation, and herself. This argument becomes even more clear when Dren metamorphosizes into male and escapes into the woods. According to biologist Tillmann J. Benfey's *Effectiveness of Triploidy as a Management Tool for Reproductive Containment* (2016):

The only way to ensure that transgenic animals can have no environmental impacts is to make their escape or intentional release into the wild a complete impossibility, something which can never be assured. (266)

Dren's escape leads to the death of several characters, including Clive, and the rape of Elsa. The transgenic Dren is better suited for survival than his human counterparts, and he becomes a dangerous new species unleashed on the earth.

"The planet has been permanently altered and there is no recovery."

Splice concludes with a scene of Elsa and her round stomach displaying the unborn child within. Like Hubbard, and the enlightened New Women who came before, Elsa is met with a "bad end" as punishment for her behavior. She becomes another progressive woman used as a scare-tactic stereotype to manipulate public opinion about the conservative role and place women should occupy. This is demonstrated through Elsa's forced role into biological motherhood. From the film's very beginning, Elsa clearly states her views on motherhood and it would seem likely that she has taken action to assure there is no unwanted pregnancy. The film strips away Elsa's authority over her own body, forcing her to carry a child she never wanted.

Like Hubbard, Elsa appears cold and emotionless towards other human beings, to the point of willingness to sell her unborn baby to a research institution. Her decision to allow the creation of another human-animal hybrid shows little regret and remorse for the environmental damage she has already caused. The human deaths are seen as casualties of science, a necessary sacrifice in order to achieve global leadership. As Elsa stares out the window overlooking the seemingly endless city streets below, life continues as normal for the unsuspecting community: people are unaware of the danger so close to their daily lives. "What's the worst that could happen?" (*Splice* 1:39:12-14). Elsa whispers. The worst that could happen is the underlying question that stems from a physiological state of ecofear. The planet has been permanently altered and there is no recovery. The unnatural organisms persist and humanity must acknowledge this permanent change and adapt. A new understanding of nature will develop, one in which humankind adjusts and accommodates for the existence of unnatural species. This ecofear arises from the actions of evil female scientists who are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanity's ability to survive.

The Nest and *Splice* perpetuate these stereotypes and ultimately hinder the cultural progress of women. According to Lauren Padilla, author of *Inspirational film depictions of women in STEM* (2019) "Representation matters. Studies have shown that a major factor driving young women away from STEM careers is the lack of female STEM characters in modern media" (1). It is past time to depict women scientists as positive leaders and contributors to the world. There exists real and serious concern of ecofear, such as global warming, pollution, species degradation, and natural

disasters, all of which effect the future of the planet and cause anxiety in our daily lives. By continuously holding women to these stereotypical characters, society discourages future generations of potential women scientist. The roles and performance of women scientist in media can shape our cultural identity and transform gender inequality. Humanity is at the point of acknowledging what is happening to the planet and what needs to be done to save it. It is only through equality, compassion, and partnership can we rise as to meet this challenge.

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