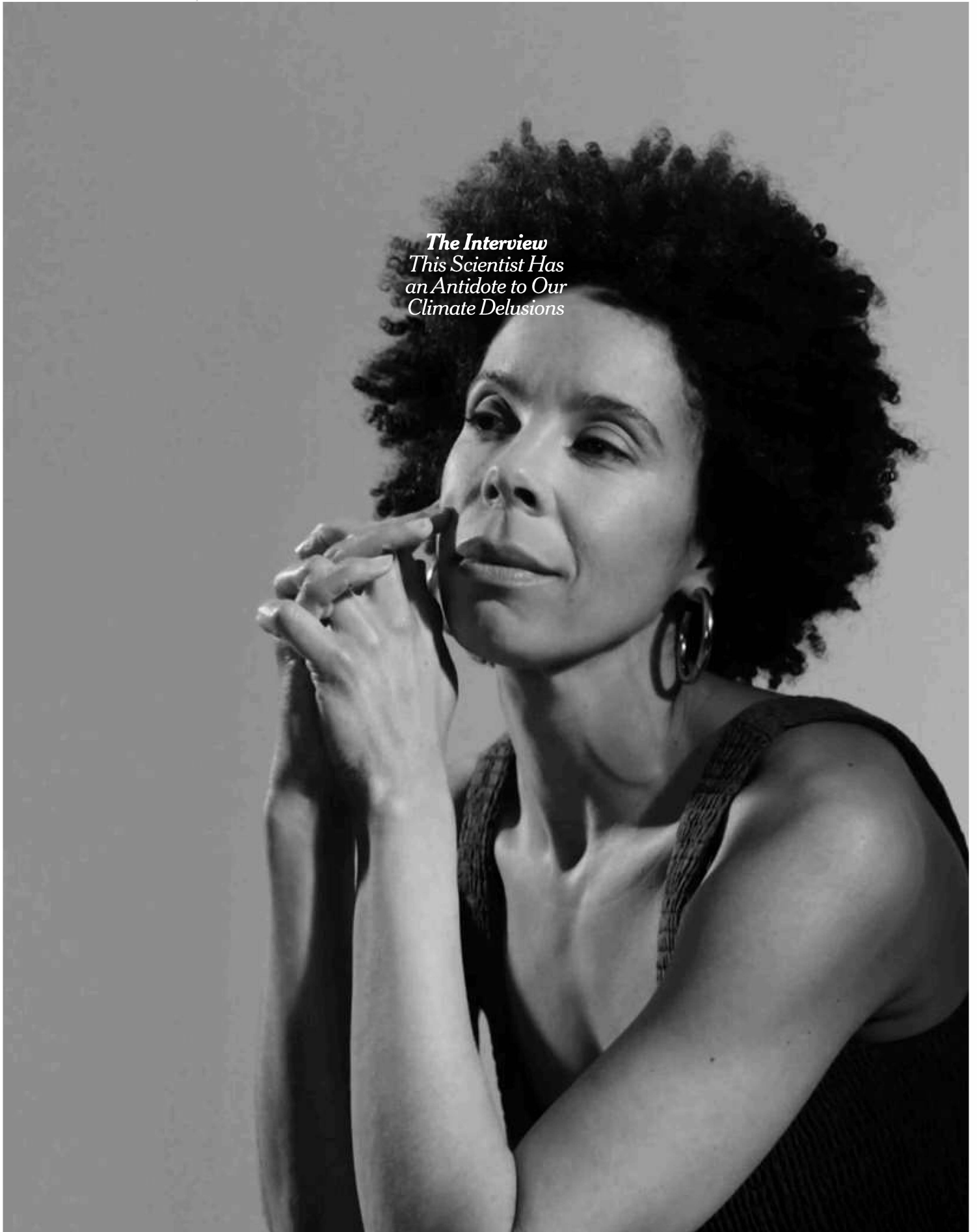


The Interview
This Scientist Has
an Antidote to Our
Climate Delusions





By David Marchese

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I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 2018 report on global warming drastically changed the way many people thought — or felt — about the climate crisis. That report laid out, with grim clarity, both the importance and extreme difficulty of preventing global warming from reaching 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. Its warnings about what was likely to happen to our planet if we didn't turn things around were severe.

The starkness of the I.P.C.C.'s report led to a surge of pessimism, fear and, in response to those emotions, climate activism that hasn't really abated. But recently there has been a growing counterresponse to those darker feelings, including from some experts who have a clear view on what's coming — and that response is a cautious optimism.

Though she doesn't go so far as to call herself hopeful, Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson is one of those experts trying to change the mood. She's a marine biologist and a founder of the Urban Ocean Lab, a think tank focusing on climate and coastal cities. She has also worked with the Environmental Protection Agency and advised lawmakers on climate policy. Additionally, Johnson, who is 43, is a leading climate activist and communicator. She was an editor of the best-selling climate anthology "All We Can Save," and her next book, "What if We Get It Right?" which will be published this summer, is a collection of interviews with leaders from various fields about promising climate possibilities.

The question posed by that book's title — what if we get it right on climate? — is one I think about often, and skeptically. I'm not quite convinced that people are motivated more by positivity than fear. But I would like to be, and I was hoping Johnson could help.

Recently there has been a concerted effort to make a kind of a vibe shift about how we talk about climate. [Laughs.] Climate action needs way better vibes.

Is it your sense that there are people who want to be involved in climate but are paralyzed by fear or despair? Or that there are disinterested people who are just waiting to be motivated by a softer approach? First of all, I don't think there's any one way we should be communicating about climate. Some people are very motivated by the bad news. They're like: "Whoa, that's terrifying. What can I do to prevent the worst-case scenario?" Some people need that jolt, and that's what gets them going. Some people are overwhelmed by that and don't know where to start. Sixty-two percent of adults in the U.S. say they feel a personal sense of responsibility to help reduce global warming, but 51 percent say they don't know where to start. So to me, the question is how do we harness and support these millions of people in this country who would like to be a part of the solutions? We have moved

beyond the platitudes of reduce, reuse, recycle. People don't even pay attention to the first "r" there. But how can we create a culture where everyone has a role to play? What are we going to do when faced with this problem? Are we going to put our heads in the sand, or are we going to pitch in?

You said the first "r" in reduce, reuse, recycle is one that a lot of people ignore. That makes me think about an idea that's difficult — the idea of sacrifice. People don't like sacrifice. People don't like bans. But I think there's a way to frame that as: This is an opportunity to live a different and better life.

Make the case that it's better. I don't think consumerism is that satisfying for most people. We're taught that we need to keep up with these trends and buy all this stuff, but it doesn't really make us happy. Happiness levels are declining. People have fewer close friends. It's not like the current status quo is awesome and we should be fighting to hold on to it. We just have a bunch of junk. Instead of being surrounded by beautiful, durable, repairable things that we love, we've got a bunch of single-use plastic garbage. Having piles of garbage everywhere is not super delightful. Having all this fossil-fuel-based plastic on every beach and in our drinking water and in our rain and in our beer and in our seafood, which is currently the case — it's not like that's a life I want to hold on to. Often we think about the changes that are needed, and we don't look at both sides of the coin. We think about, *This is going to be expensive*, or, *This is going to be inconvenient*, without thinking about, *Do you know how inconvenient and expensive climate change is?* It is so much worse.



Ayana Elizabeth Johnson during a TED talk in 2022. Gilberto Tadday/TED

Just because you mentioned seafood: Do people get anxious ordering seafood when you go out for dinner with them? Are you silently judging? I kind of wish they'd get more anxious. [Laughs.] I'm judging them out loud.

What do you say? Well, I will not let anyone eat octopus in front of me. That is a hard line. I mean, they're so smart. They're so cool. Why would you eat them? When people are like, Do you want to go have sushi? I'm like, Do you *really* want to have sushi with me?

And is it stupid for anybody to be buying a beach home? If you like to set money on fire, it's a great plan. The level of denial of the changes that are coming is off the charts. The way people joke about it — go to the Hamptons to a cocktail party and tell someone that you work on climate change, and they'll be like, "How soon until I have beachfront property?" As if it's funny and we don't actually have to prepare for things. But I get it. It's hard to get your head around the amount of change that's coming.

Does other people's denial make you angry? Anger is not a primary emotion for me. I mean, I'm a regular human. I experience the full range of emotions. Certainly anger is one of them, but heartache is another. If we think about how much we're losing, that can be hard. As a scientist, I look at all these graphs and projections, and I could cry because I know the amount of suffering and ecological loss that these numbers imply. But I feel quite lucky to have been born with a brain chemistry that's not prone to depression. Because given the amount of bad news I take in every day, that would be hard to deal with.

But there is this soft denial of the climate crisis that is extremely widespread, including for someone like myself. Describe your soft climate denial.

Well, I think I understand the scope and the horrifying scale of our climate future. But if that's true, why don't I do more than compost? I don't know. Why?

I'm supposed to be asking you these questions! It's going to be much more informative for the audience, actually, hearing you. Because we're all in that same boat.

This goes to the heart of one of my first questions. What motivates behavior? The small steps of personal responsibility and accountability I've taken in response to the climate crisis have been the result of feelings of anger and despair. Anger can be very motivating.



Johnson helping lead the March for Science in Washington in 2017. Kisha Bari

Over the last 10 years, there has been more anger and fear and fury about what's happening than ever, and that is coterminous with the biggest changes we've seen in terms of pro-climate policy, in terms of public awareness, politicians actually acknowledging that this is a problem. This, to me, suggests that anger works. Fear, too. They didn't get people to stop smoking by saying, Think of how healthy you'll be if you don't. They got people to stop smoking by saying, This will really hurt you if you continue. My inclination is to think that the same logic applies in climate. This is all tangential to the question you asked me, which is, Why don't I do more? I think I honestly find the climate crisis too big and too heartbreaking — and also, I'm comfortable. I think a lot of us are dealing with cognitive dissonance between the lifestyles that we have, especially those of us who have nice lifestyles, and the knowledge that it's probably unsustainable. And there are all these structural things in the way of us shifting our lifestyles. There's an enormous amount we can do as individuals, but the system around us is not set up for success. This is why I focus on policy and not shaming individual people into tiny actions in their own lives. We should all do more and better, but this is the need and the opportunity: How can people afford to electrify their homes? We need to take out all these boilers. We need to change our HVAC system. We need to put in heat pumps, induction stoves, electric water heaters, solar panels, green roofs.

The grid has to be transformed. The grid has to be transformed! We need to bring so much more clean energy on board. We need to train people for new jobs in this new clean-energy economy. We need to help people find work in making this transformation. So I ask what's holding you back not to shame you but to point out that we're all struggling with this. The context within which we're making decisions is a challenging one for getting it right, and the fact that I know you went out of your way to make sure to interview a climate person — that's something only you can do, right?

But are there historical models or parallels that you can point to where massive social change was rooted in feelings of joy and positivity and not indignation, moral outrage, conflict? I don't think there's any movement that's based on one emotion. The ways we are experiencing the horrors of environmental destruction are motivating people to get in the streets. But it's also, like, we love nature. We love clean rivers. We love all of these things: the susurrus of aspen leaves. It's just a matter of, what do you do with those feelings?

Can you remind me what "susurrus" means? It is the sound of leaves in the wind.

Tell me other good nature words. "Petrichor" is the smell of the soil after it first starts to rain.

That is a good one! Then there's the Latin names of Caribbean fish species, like *Lactophrys triqueter*. There's so many good ones.

I feel like I'm being David Downer: I just saw a study that said if we follow the most plausible possible path to decarbonization by 2050, the amount of carbon emissions already in the air will result in something like \$38 trillion worth of damages every year. That's baked in. A future like that is going to involve sacrifices. Whether we choose to embrace it as a sacrifice or reframe it like, No, we're actually helping — What is it that you don't want to give up?

I don't want to give up the range of possibilities for my kids. They're 7 and 9 — these are totally selfish things. I assume you care about other people on the planet, besides your children.

My wife. OK.

You seem nice! I hope things work out for you. [Laughs.] Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

You know, I just don't know how to think about the future. I've done a handful of interviews with people who are thinking about the climate crisis — in various ways — and the fundamental thing I'm trying to understand is how to think about the future, and I don't feel like I understand. What you mentioned about wanting to secure a good future for your children: This is the No. 1 thing that drives people to do something about climate change — love for the future. It really does come down to love as an enormously powerful motivator. I don't have children, but if I did, I would want to be able to look them in the eye and say, I did everything I could to secure your future. I think most parents feel that way. I feel that way about my godchildren, feel that way about children that I barely know at all. You see them skipping down the street — of course you want them to have a nice life in the future. Perhaps it's worth saying it's OK not to be hopeful. I feel like there's so much emphasis in our society on being hopeful, as if that's the answer to unlocking everything. I'm not a hopeful person. I'm not an optimist. I see the data. I see what's coming. But I also see the full range of possible futures. I feel like there's so much that we could create, and the question that motivates me right now is, What if we get it right? It's not going to be perfect. There's no scenario in which we have a perfectly pristine planet, given that we have eight billion people living on it now. But how can we each be a part of getting it as right as possible?

I spoke again with Johnson eight days later.

Near the end of our first conversation, you said the phrase that's the title of your book: What if we get it right? Can you give some examples of what getting it right on climate looks like? So many things. We know how to transition to renewable energy. We know how to insulate buildings. We know how to put reflective roofs on buildings. We know how to improve public transit. We know how to shift our transportation toward electric. We know how to avoid food waste. We know how to reduce our consumption. There's a million things we could do. It's just a matter of shifting the status quo, building the political will, shifting the culture in order to make all of these things happen as quickly as possible. There's room for innovation, but there's absolutely nothing that we need to wait for.



Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

I'm always impressed when people have reasonable answers to these big questions about life on earth. But tossing and turning in your bed at night, what skepticism do you have about your own ideas? What might you be wrong about? I think I don't engage as deeply as I should with the political divisions in America and around the world being a really enormous barrier to getting any of this done. We have so many people who do not appreciate the risks that we're facing and so are not motivated to do much to address them. We have a media that's covering climate less and less as the crisis gets worse and worse. We have a divided and underinformed populace, and that makes everything so much harder. The climate crisis is going to give us a lot of tests for how we can collaborate across various social divisions. People are excited about the new battery-manufacturing plants in deeply red parts of this country because they're good jobs. Texas and Iowa have the most wind energy of any place in the U.S. because it's profitable. The economics of the transition to renewable energy and implementing climate solutions make a lot of sense. So we may have to skip over some of these divisions and let self-interest, in various ways, guide us toward where we need to go, even if we don't all agree on the contours of the problem.

I gotta say, there was a response that I gave to you based on a question that you asked me in our prior conversation that I've been thinking about. You asked me what I was so afraid of giving up. I think the answer that I gave you in the moment was cockamamie. The real answer to why I might be reluctant to change behaviors actually has more to do with selfishness. That's good of you to admit. I think we all want to hold on to our comforts.

Is there an antidote to that kind of thinking? I think the answer is community. We have to be responsible to more than ourselves. We have to feel an obligation to more than our children. It can't just be a selfish desire to hold on to what we currently have. You can maybe grip tightly onto your comfort in the short term, but the more we resist being part of the collective solution, the less likely that collective solution is to happen. In a sense, you're echoing a bit of this bunker mentality where we have these megawealthy people who are buying up land in New Zealand and wherever else trying to save themselves. That seems like such a sad way to see the world. Like, do you want to live in a bunker for a year eating canned rations? Is that the life we want to build? Or do we all try to make sure we have a world where there's enough for everybody, where no one takes too much and we share what we have. I'd rather share.

This interview has been edited and condensed from two conversations. Listen to and follow "The Interview" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, Amazon Music or the New York Times Audio app.

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