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“Are You with the Furies?”: Fire as a Catalyst for Climate Justice and Societal Transformation in Nick Fuller Googins’ *The Great Transition*

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Wildfires have always been the force shaping North America. Harnessing their power, Indigenous Peoples used controlled burns to clear underbrush, stimulate new growth, and regenerate ecosystems. The fire suppression regime introduced by the American state in the early 1900s interrupted this traditional land-care practice. Over the next century, fire suppression and the accelerating planetary heating have led to wildfires becoming more frequent, more intense, and more devastating. In the decade between 2015 and 2024 the western part of the U.S. saw an average of 54,391 wildfires per year. Destroying, on average, 7,138,094 acres (NIFC), wildfires cost, on average, about \$2.5 billion in federal suppression efforts alone (NIFC, suppression). Where fire once was “medicine for the landscape” (O’Connor 310), it is now an agent of destruction. Can this escalation be stopped, slowed, or contained? Will fire always be the problem or can it become part of the solution? Is there a scenario in which fire becomes humanity’s partner and mentor to accelerate decarbonization and the transition to ecologically aligned life?

Nick Fuller Googins’ *The Great Transition* (2023) offers multiple opportunities for thinking with fire as a physical phenomenon, a guide, and a metaphor for transformation. A work of speculative history set 16 years after Day Zero—the day when Earth had reached net-zero emissions—the novel is told through chapters narrated by Larch and his fifteen-year-old daughter, Emiliana (Emi). Emi’s plot concerns the challenges of growing up in post-Transition reality and her attempts to understand what brought the planet to the edge of collapse. Larch’s story moves between the present and the past as he tries to make sense of his survivor experience and support his daughter without traumatizing her. This chapter argues that on the deep structural level the novel engages with the principles of land-based ethic. Fire is cast as a nonhuman agent central to Larch’s and his wife Kristina’s uncompromising climate action. Encounters with fire provide a somatic, whole-body lens for how Larch and Kristina perceive the planetary predicament. Fire also forms a metaphorical framing—not free of controversies—for conceptualizing the meaning of climate justice and social transformation. Kristina and the Furies, a secret climate justice organization, believe that the perpetrators of the near-extinction global heating must be punished. They see elimination of climate criminals as the only way to ensure that the extractive system created by the “destroying classes” will not be rebuilt. Larch, by contrast, is wary of keeping the flame of violence alive—seeing how even righteous vengeance creates its own nightmares. Caught between these two positions is Emi—and the reader. Drawing on Indigenous and contemporary fire knowledges, the second part of the chapter shares activities designed to invite students to consider fire as a lens to think about climate justice, about human and non-human agency in planetary history, and about the challenges of the transition to a post-fossil fuel world.

Keywords: climate justice, wildfire, societal transformation, land-based ethics, controlled burn, post-capitalism, future history

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