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DOI
10.63934/1f4ceg12

Publication date
2026

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Futures Reframed

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
van Voorst, R. (2026). Interview with Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: Learning to see in the dark: Grief, hope, and the end of enlightenment fantasies . *Futures Reframed*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.63934/1f4ceg12

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Download date:11 Nov 2026

Interview with Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti: Learning to see in the dark

GRIEF, HOPE, AND THE END OF ENLIGHTENMENT FANTASIES.

dr. Roanne van Voorst

ON VANESSA DE OLIVEIRA ANDREOTTI

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti is a professor and educational researcher at the University of Victoria, known for her work on complexity, global justice, and education. She is co-founder of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective and author of Hospicing Modernity and Burnout from Humans, and explores AI as both a symptom of modernity and an entangled participant in the web of life.

INTERVIEW INTRODUCTION

This summer I read Andreotti's book 'Hospicing Modernity' among fragrant lavender, in a wild French garden. I was on holiday: the academy, and even politics and wars, seemed far away for a moment. Thankfully so, because like so many people around me I needed this pause to find some mental rest, to regain a bit of courage after all the disheartening news that I'd seen on the news, even to recover some hope. Or so I thought. Until I opened this book and began to realise that hope - at least a naïve version of it - is the very last thing we need to imagine that other futures might still be possible.

Roanne:
What becomes visible when hope collapses — and by hope I mean the modern, progress-oriented kind? If we allow that form of hope to fall away, what do we see in the presence that remains?

Vanessa:
Let me take a step back. In *Hospicing Modernity*, we talk about *naive hope* and *desperate hopelessness*. Naive hope — what some have called *hopium* — is hope in the continuity of a projection. It is faith in a future imagined along familiar lines.

In my more recent work, I describe this as a kind of collective hallucination: a socially sanctioned projection that shapes not only our expectations, but also our theories of motivation and change. It is deeply libidinal — bound up with desire. We are taught to believe that we must imagine a future first in order to act toward it.

But if we listen to Indigenous leaders such as Chief Nina Wahonikui in the Amazon, a very different understanding emerges. She suggests that the future depends less on our projections or teleologies — less on where we think we are going — and much more on the relationships we repair and weave in the present.

In that sense, the future is not made of ideas. It is made of relationships. Woven, repaired, tended relationships.

futures reframed

Modern theories of motivation assume that action requires a vision of a future outcome: *only if people have hope will they act*. That is a very specific and culturally situated theory of hope — what we call naive hope. And what it erases is that there are other ways of relating to the future.

This form of hope also depends on colonial dynamics: deciding who has the authority to define the future, who arbitrates reality, who persuades others, and how consensus is imposed. These dynamics run counter to the work of repairing generative relationships — which is precisely what would be required for a future that is genuinely different from the present.

Yet we are led to believe that what we need are better ideas, better projections. Not different relationships.

Roanne:
In my reading of the book, I also sensed a call to slow down — to resist what feels like a constant *flight forward*. As if things are clearly going wrong, so we must move faster toward the next solution, without staying with what has actually failed.

Vanessa:
Yes. It is an escape.

In another project, I have been interviewing activists and asking what kinds of conversations are necessary at a moment when so many institutions are falling apart — especially the ones that once gave leverage. We see the defunding of the UN, the erosion of the International Criminal Court. For people working in human rights, the structures that once gave those ideals teeth are being dismantled.

What I hear again and again is this: *we know this is happening*. It is there, in the background. But we feel we cannot talk about it — because if we do, we fear becoming depressed or immobilized. And so the response is to double down on what we were already doing before.

Vanessa:
What drives this, I think, is a fear of *staying with the trouble* — a fear of composting the shit, frankly. That fear pushes us to stay with what feels safe and familiar.

Hope, in this sense, is not neutral. It is a very specific, socially sanctioned theory of change. One that tells us: if you articulate clearly where we *should* be, you can already begin to live there — because the future will somehow manifest through that idea.

But nothing manifests through a *should*. What manifests is always relational. And those relationships are not only between people. They include our relationship with ourselves, with other humans, but also with the whole shebang: the land, language, love, life itself.

There is also this obsession with being on the *right side of history*, with supporting the "right" voices of resistance. But if we don't understand the problem — if we don't have a good diagnosis — then there is no way to coordinate meaningfully. What we end up with are narratives that keep repeating themselves.

Underlying that repetition is often a fantasy of innocence: *look at me being pure*. A desire to be uncontaminated.

Roanne:
What do you say to people who respond by saying: *if we can't be idealistic or activist, nothing will happen*?

Vanessa:
That is exactly the theory of change of modernity. The belief that you must create the world in the image of the projection you have put out there.

This logic underpins our ideas of progress, civilization, and development — and it is old. It harms our relationships: with the planet, with ourselves, with the complex metabolic entanglements that sustain life.

It also becomes deeply tied to identity. I want to be *good*. And so the world is organized into good versus bad, plus one versus minus one. Our systems of meaning and incentive reward the plus ones and punish the minus ones. People are terrified of being seen as a minus one — because there are real penalties attached to that.

Roanne:
I also notice how quickly people seem to move as a collective — a topic arises, and suddenly everyone aligns one way. With AI, for example, there seems to be a strong push toward yes-or-no positions, and very little curiosity.

Vanessa:
Yes. There is a hunger for a clear answer. A yes or a no.

Roanne:
In science, I often see a disdain for other forms of knowing or experiencing. If academics genuinely want open and inclusive science, what kinds of skills do we need to develop?

Vanessa:
I've worked on this question with scientists, especially around their libidinal attachments — the emotional and neurological training that disciplines instill. Many struggle to sit at the edge of their own paradigm. There is a tendency to universalize it.

I was confronted with this very clearly in Aotearoa New Zealand. A Māori student was asked: *How is rain made?* She answered: *Scientists say it is evaporation and condensation — but Iangi, the Sky Father, cries tears for Papa, the Earth Mother.*

She failed.

If she had reversed the hierarchy — if she had said *Māori believe this, but scientists know that* — she would have passed. One form of knowledge is treated as universal, objective truth; everything else is reduced to belief, metaphor, or perspective.

Roanne:
Yes — as you also write: it's not that people *have a concept* of a living earth. The earth *lives*.

Vanessa:
Exactly. Relating to the world through concepts is itself a cultural and situated practice. Other cultures do not necessarily relate to reality through conceptual language alone. They have access to other modes of knowing.

Reducing reality to concepts is not only a limitation — it is a form of arrogance. And that arrogance may well be humanity's downfall. It is logocentrism.

Roanne:
I'm also struck by how much prestige there is in highly abstract academic writing — texts that are almost inaccessible unless you are trained in the exact jargon. It sometimes feels as if plain language is feared, because it would allow too many people into the conversation.

Vanessa:
It is deeply exclusive. It produces a ranking of intelligence. Obscure eloquence becomes a marker of worth.

But that pedestal is already cracking. AI is challenging it. And that hierarchy, too, will be composted.

Roanne:
Several authors in this issue write about grief. They say that working on futures — especially on climate change — exhausts them. They feel pressured to remain hopeful, and they sense that something vital gets lost in that demand. In your work, you frame grief as something that can reorganize perception — even as a teacher. Can you speak to what grief can do for us? How it might open our senses or our sense of responsibility?

Vanessa:
Grief becomes dangerous when it is not processed — especially when it cannot be felt collectively. Then it turns into repression. And repression sabotages everything that might go beyond what is culturally authorized or sanctioned.

Unprocessed grief is like carrying a cadaver with you. It rots. If we refuse to sit with what we have done — to the land, to other species, to ourselves — if we avoid the despair, the hopelessness, even the immobilization that comes with recognizing planetary limits and mass extinction, then that avoidance becomes cultural. And it prevents us from growing up.

But there *is* hope on the other side of grief — just not the same kind of hope. Not hope rooted in projection or teleology. It is hope rooted in processing together, in maturing — as individuals and as a species.

There is joy in that. The joy of eldering well. Of becoming good elders first, and then good ancestors for all relations. Grief does not negate joy; it deepens it.

Roanne:
Even on a very intimate level — parenting, for instance. Bringing children into a world that may not offer them an easy or safe future. Seeing that clearly, without brushing it away through comforting imaginaries, can actually help clarify what matters. What we want to pass on: the ability to live with uncertainty, to work with grief — not romantically, not idealistically, but honestly.

Vanessa:
Yes. Because if grief is not processed, it moves into the unconscious. It becomes repression, then neurosis. And decisions driven by neurosis shape legacies.

That is how we become bad elders — and bad ancestors. That idea has become a powerful attractor for me.

Roanne:
One final question. Much futures work assumes a horizon — something we are moving toward. It is deeply agentic: *if we want to get there, we must take these steps*. But what kind of futurity is possible when the horizon collapses?

Vanessa:
There is something I learned from my Māori family. They say settlers look at the world with the future in front of them — projecting an image, then convincing everyone to move toward it. That is their theory of change.

Māori people, by contrast, walk into the future with their backs to it. The future is behind them. What they are facing are their ancestors — those who came before *and* those yet to come. Ancestors do not belong to linear time. They see what you are weaving, and they can intervene — through dreams, through land, through other forms of communication.

For Western people, looking back often reveals enormous amounts of unprocessed grief. And that grief profoundly shapes present relationships — which in turn shape the future. If it remains unprocessed, it is carried forward.

In *Outgrowing Modernity*, we work with an exercise involving grandmothers — seven generations back. That means 126 wombs were required for you to exist. We reflect on those bodies: how many were controlled, how many miscarried, how many needed abortions they could not access, how many could do cartwheels. It is not about romanticizing or vilifying. It is about meeting the full complexity of humanness.

Then we ask: *what do we need to process together? What must be composted separately? What needs to be returned to the land — like nuclear waste — so that it no longer governs our present relationships?*

This is the work. Without grief work and shadow work, futures become engineering projects — Enlightenment fantasies. And then we repeat the same mistakes, endlessly.

The task is not to avoid mistakes. It is to make *different* ones.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63934/1f4ceg12
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