



## Guilty Grieving in an Age of Ecocide

Stef Craps 

### The Enemy Is Us: Mourning What One Has Destroyed

In the introduction to their seminal edited collection *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman observe that while ecological mourning – the process of grieving losses related to the degradation and destruction of the natural environment – is becoming an increasingly common experience as the global environmental crisis worsens, denial and avoidance of such mourning are on the rise as well. This is due in part, so they surmise, to the fact that opening ourselves to ecological mourning entails facing up to our individual and collective responsibility for environmental loss, a profoundly disturbing prospect for many:

We are all implicated in this loss; indeed, our very lives and existence are predicated on the deaths of other bodies that have come before us – human and more-than-human – and on the promise of future deaths. How do we even begin to think and feel that?<sup>1</sup>

Cunsolo and Landman’s use of the word ‘implicated’ in this context is apt, as Michael Rothberg’s influential recent work on implication, despite only touching on environmental issues in passing, helps us

conceptualize collective responsibility in the age of what many have called the Anthropocene: we citizens of the Global North are not precisely perpetrators of climate change, yet we certainly contribute disproportionately to current and future climate-based catastrophes and benefit in the here and now from the geographically and temporally uneven distribution of their catastrophic effects.<sup>2</sup>

Glenn Albrecht, the philosopher best known for coining the term ‘solastalgia’, agrees with Cunsolo and Landman that feelings of environmental guilt are central to what in his contribution to their volume he calls ‘the new mourning’. One characteristic feature that sets this ecologically attuned mourning apart from the dominant mode of mourning familiar from the Western tradition is the role of ‘[t]he awareness of human culpability at a global scale’, which, as he points out, is ‘a relatively new experience in the history of human mourning. Many humans now understand that we are often the primary agents of our own disasters’.<sup>3</sup>

The prevalence of this understanding is apparent from popular culture. The notion that we only have ourselves to blame for the destruction of our environment is captured by the line ‘We have met the enemy and he is us’, which has its origins in an anti-pollution poster designed by the cartoonist Walt Kelly for Earth Day in 1970. The phrase parodies the famous battle report ‘We have met the enemy and they are ours’, a message sent during the War of 1812 announcing a victory for the United States. Having coined the punning phrase in 1970, Kelly used it again in a special animal comic strip created for Earth Day the next year, where he attributed it to the character Pogo. The expression caught the collective imagination of the public and continues to be used to this day.<sup>4</sup> The same idea can also be found in Timothy Morton’s book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, where he compares ecological attunement to a work of noir fiction with a surprise ending, in which the detective discovers their own complicity in the crime they have been investigating: ‘[j]ust like in noir fiction: I’m the detective *and* the criminal!’ (original emphasis).<sup>5</sup> Ecological awareness, for Morton, is ‘that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal’, an ‘astonishing reversal’ that disrupts hegemonic narratives about the human and the West.<sup>6</sup>

This uneasy position of being both detective and criminal corresponds to a difficult tension in the emotional realm, where environmental loss tends to elicit both grief and guilt, an urge to mourn and to atone. As Nancy Menning explains, unlike grief over the loss of a loved one, ecological grief is often intermingled with feelings of guilt, which pose an obstacle to the process of ecological mourning:

Ecological losses differ in important ways from human deaths. In particular, we are often complicit in these losses, if only by virtue of living in the Anthropocene. We must mourn not only what we have lost, but also what we have destroyed. [ ... ] When one feels complicit (directly or indirectly) in the loss being mourned, guilt entwines with sorrow, complicating the grieving process.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, environmental guilt now even complicates simple pleasures such as enjoying the sun on an unseasonably warm winter day. A *Politico* headline describes the state of mind in which many Californians found themselves during a stretch of unusually mild weather in February 2022, which they could not help but regard as an ominous portent of another devastating drought and wildfire season fuelled by human-caused global warming: ‘Soak Up the February Sun? Not without Climate Change Guilt in California’.<sup>8</sup> Starting with a brief review of the scant existing scholarship on such feelings, this essay seeks to demonstrate the value of literature, documentary filmmaking and an extreme form of activism in helping us develop the new emotional literacy around collective responsibility that the spiralling ecological crisis evidently requires.

### Theorising Environmental Guilt: Promise and Pitfalls

Despite the pervasiveness of feelings of guilt related to environmental issues in our daily lives, the topic of environmental guilt has received little academic

attention until recently.<sup>9</sup> As far as I am aware, the only scholarly books to have been devoted to it to date are environmental ethicist Sarah Fredericks' *Environmental Guilt and Shame: Signals of Individual and Collective Responsibility and the Need for Ritual Responses* and rhetoric scholar Tim Jensen's *Ecologies of Guilt in Environmental Rhetorics*. Advocating 'an ecological turn in affect theory',<sup>10</sup> they aspire to offer new ways of approaching guilt, just as affect theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich and Sara Ahmed have offered fresh perspectives on compassion, optimism, depression, fear and happiness as culturally and politically constructed feelings.<sup>11</sup> Fredericks and Jensen concur that environmental guilt can have positive as well as negative consequences. It can inspire reparative, ecologically restorative behaviour, but it can also lead to paralysis or worse. While environmental guilt can motivate those feeling it to do better, to act more morally, it can also fuel denial and avoidance behaviour. Engaging with environmental guilt can make us more effective at addressing the ongoing ecological crisis – indeed, the woefully inadequate response to it that we have seen so far may well be due, at least in part, to our impoverished frameworks for contemplating environmental guilt. Hence the importance of fashioning new emotional literacies adapted to the ecological realities of our age that can help us productively navigate the challenges of our complicity in environmental degradation.<sup>12</sup>

A major obstacle to be overcome is our tendency to conceptualise guilt as a property of individuals rather than collectives. As a collective form of guilt, environmental guilt is cast into the shadows and rendered illegible by the prevailing individualistic frameworks. For the most part, environmental discourse interpellates audiences as individuals, assigning individual culpability for collective wrongdoing. Both Fredericks and Jensen show how the corporate world has long abused, exploited and weaponised feelings of guilt for participating in environmental destruction to obscure issues of actual culpability and undermine collective action for environmental protection. As Jensen puts it,

corporations have intentionally employed rhetorics of personal responsibility to contain political pressure and diffuse demands for more corporate accountability. The strategic dispersal of accountability into individual acts of 'eco-friendly' consumerism both provoke and alleviate collective guilt for the individual, yet mitigate environmental damage in only the most minimal and marginal of ways.<sup>13</sup>

Environmental marketing campaigns tend to obscure corporate accountability by scapegoating individual consumers and urging them to take individual responsibility for redressing environmental harm. Thus, corporations deliberately constrain environmental activism and inhibit effective action on environmental issues. A famous and influential early example of an advertising campaign that promoted individual behaviour change over system change is the 'Crying Indian' commercial of the 1970s, which showed a Native American man crying when he saw people littering and polluting the

environment. The organisation behind the ad, Keep America Beautiful, pretended to be a grassroots activist group but actually was a front group for the firms that manufactured or used the disposable, non-recyclable drink containers that constituted much of the country's litter: beer bottlers, can companies and soda makers. The campaign shifted the guilt and responsibility to individual consumers, suggesting that the solution to the problem of roadside litter was not to avoid disposable containers in the first place – which would require a collective effort to change the law – but for people to use litter bins instead of car windows. It thus skilfully deflected attention away from the corporations that profited from beverage bottling. According to Fredericks, '[t]he Keep America Beautiful campaign was one early initiative in a long and growing strand of environmentalism that presumes individual responsibility to be the root cause of environmental degradation and thus the necessary type of response'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Jensen argues, '[b]y instrumentalizing collective guilt in this manner, the PSA helped entrench an individual-focused approach to environmentalism for decades to come'.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the fact that feelings of distress and remorse for belonging to a group that has inflicted harm on the natural world can manifest as an individualising force, there is also a risk of conflating guilt and shame, two moral emotions that orient action in radically different ways. Guilt is related to behaviour, shame to identity. While people feel guilty for what they have done, they feel ashamed for who they are. Guilt orients us towards action to undo the damage; shame, however, internalises our focus: it frames the situation around our intrinsic inadequacy, a condition that cannot (easily) be changed and typically leads us to hide, deny and escape from our culpability. Instead of motivating reparative action, shame tends to constrain our capacity to redress the wrong.<sup>16</sup> Both Fredericks and Jensen worry that the 'Anthropocene', which has emerged as a pivotal concept in contemporary environmental discourse, orients us towards shame and away from taking responsibility for the ecological crisis by attributing acts of environmental harm to humanity as a species. While the term has received a great deal of interest from humanists and social scientists over the last decade or so, discussions of the emotional orientations it invites have so far been largely missing, even though the term arguably owes its rhetorical power to its 'culpatory connotations'.<sup>17</sup> The Anthropocene concept can be credited with bringing much-needed attention to pressing environmental challenges, but this comes at a price: insofar as it attributes environmental abuse to an innate trait of humanity *in toto*, a constitutive aspect of our collective character, it 'activates an emotional framework of shame rather than guilt, which undermines an ecological perspective'.<sup>18</sup> After all, it implies that the ecological crisis is a result of who we are rather than what we have done, redirecting attention from problematic actions (which can be redressed) to our problematic nature (which is fixed).<sup>19</sup>

These common pitfalls and abuses reveal the need for improved engagement with the notion of environmental guilt, which, as Jensen maintains, can be

rendered ‘edifying’: if we were to regard it as ‘a teacher and source for revealing and refining our values’, this would allow us to ‘expand our emotional capacities and engage our ecological work with more energy, clarity, and efficacy’.<sup>20</sup> Environmental guilt can instruct us and guide us in cultivating ecological attunement. While Jensen is primarily interested in building new conceptual frameworks attuned to the unique dynamics of environmental guilt, Fredericks turns to rituals as a means of responding to environmental guilt as well as shame. She studies two contemporary environmental rituals – online confessions by everyday environmentalists and military veterans apologising to Native Americans at the Standing Rock prayer camp – in an attempt to determine the conditions under which such rituals may enable the desired transformation of one’s behaviour and/or identity.<sup>21</sup> For both Jensen and Fredericks, then, the guiding concern is to harness environmental guilt for positive change, to use it as a motivating emotion to expand our sense of ecological connection and care. In the remainder of this essay, I will further explore the nexus of environmental guilt and grief in this light via three case studies that not only demonstrate the need to develop greater emotional literacy around these issues but – in different ways and to varying degrees – also help set us on that path: the novella *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* by the New Zealand writer Octavia Cade, the documentary film *Albatross* by the American artist Chris Jordan and the self-immolation of the sixty-year-old former civil rights lawyer and environmental activist David Buckel in a New York park in 2018.

### Devastating and Destructive: Environmental Guilt in Octavia Cade’s *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*

If, as I have argued elsewhere, literature and art more broadly can serve as a cultural laboratory for articulating disenfranchised ecological emotions,<sup>22</sup> the first case study I want to look at here is a case in point. In Cade’s novella, which tells the story of a deadly global pandemic of ecological grief, the (self-) destructive potential of environmental guilt is on full display, while its reparative dimension is notable for its absence.<sup>23</sup> *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, published in 2021, shows how feelings of guilt related to climate breakdown and mass extinction isolate those afflicted, drive them to despair and lead them to harm themselves and others. The text is a strange, genre-defying tale with elements of sci-fi, fairy tale and horror that plumbs the emotional depths of climate change and biodiversity loss. Written during the COVID-19 lockdown, as the author states in the acknowledgements,<sup>24</sup> the novella tells the story of a mysterious pandemic that is slowly spreading among the global population and for which ‘there was no vaccine’.<sup>25</sup> Cade takes the phenomenon of ecological grief and turns it into a lethal contagion known as ‘the Grief’, a debilitating mental illness linked to global ecological disaster that manifests in different ways in different people.<sup>26</sup>

All those who suffer from Grief – defined as ‘the undermining upwelling of loss in response to ecosystem devastation, the failure of conservation’ – are

afflicted with unbearable feelings of guilt, which are brought on by the species extinctions that humans have caused through colonisation, hunting and environmental destruction.<sup>27</sup> The centrality of guilt to the experience of Grief, which is repeatedly emphasised, is first mentioned by the narrator-protagonist early on in the narrative:

‘It’s the experience of loss,’ the psychologists said, but more than that it was a loss underlined by guilt, because that loss had no natural cause; not if you didn’t count humans as natural, and I didn’t. We weren’t thunderstorms, nor did we blunder about, blind as bacteria. We had the capacity for choice, and what we had chosen – what we continued to choose – was death.<sup>28</sup>

While they had paid lip-service to preventing climate change, the humans referred to in the novella were ‘practised at looking away’ and had ‘ignored it for so long’ that it ultimately led to the extinction of cherished animal and plant species living around and among them.<sup>29</sup> This loss caught them unprepared, ‘for all [they] had allowed it [...] encouraged it, even, through [their] choices’, and plunged them into intense mourning.<sup>30</sup> Irrecoverable, this loss ‘will never lack culpability’, the narrator insists: ‘[i]t’s the guilt that makes it so devastating [...] and so profoundly destructive’.<sup>31</sup> For most sufferers, the Grief leads to bizarre behaviour and ends in suicide. Some desperately try to recover the losses, through de-extinction efforts or by creating replacements such as lifelike robot birds or holograms of lost habitats, but these resurrectionist endeavours always seem to turn sinister.

In a near-future climate-ravaged Australia, we meet the marine biologist Ruby, who is passionate about jellyfish – one of the few creatures who ‘flourish in a warmer ocean’<sup>32</sup> – and deals with the fallout of her colleague and friend Marjorie’s succumbing to the Grief. Marjorie is less fortunate than Ruby in that her research object, the Great Barrier Reef and its inhabitants, is not thriving but dying as a result of climate change. In despair, she falls victim to the global pandemic, reinvents herself as the Sea Witch from Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ and moves into an abandoned salt-water swimming pool. Ruby tries to save her friend by supplying her with plastic bags and research papers that Marjorie uses to create jellyfish of her own but cannot satisfactorily answer her question, ‘[c]an you bring it back?’<sup>33</sup> After Marjorie’s apparent death by suicide, Ruby struggles with the ramifications of her loss and her fear of descending into Grief herself. She follows a trail of clues left by her friend that takes her to Tasmania and New Zealand in an effort to better understand Marjorie and the psychological condition that led her to want to take her own life. Ruby describes Marjorie as ‘a woman who could no longer bear what she had made of the world’,<sup>34</sup> and the latter confirms that guilt is at the heart of her predicament.<sup>35</sup>

In Tasmania Ruby finds an elderly woman infected with Grief (‘Granny’, she calls her) who has secretly managed to bring the famed thylacine or

Tasmanian tiger, which had gone extinct in 1936, back to life through genetic engineering in an isolated facility. De-extinction emerges here as a mad attempt to assuage environmental guilt, likely intended to result in bloodshed. Rescued from a threatening situation (the prospect of being served as bait to the thylacines) by her soon-to-be-ex-husband George, Ruby travels on to New Zealand, where she meets another Grief sufferer, an artist friend of her husband who uses artistic means (animatronics and hologram technology) to resurrect another extinct animal species – the rock wren – as well as a kettle hole, that is, ‘a small lake, sometimes only a pool, left behind when glaciers departed’.<sup>36</sup> Ruby sees a pattern emerging: ‘[t]his recreation of an ecosystem on the brink [i.e. the kettle hole] was the wrens all over again. It was opportunity wrapped up in regret, an attempt to absolve the shame of negligence and indifference by restoring as far as possible what had been lost’.<sup>37</sup> Once again, there is an element of madness and menace in these resurrectionist ventures, with Grief leading to vengeful bloodlust instead of ‘mere’ self-destruction, as in the case of Marjorie. Clearly, resurrection is not the way to handle Grief – as the novella’s title already implied.

In fact, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* expects little good to come from Grief, no matter what response it provokes in those affected. The novella does not appear to view Grief as a potential catalyst for positive action on climate and environmental issues. Conceived of as a disease in need of a cure or vaccine, both of which are non-existent, Grief is framed in strictly negative terms, as a purely destructive force that causes one to either direct violence inwards and commit suicide, or turn it outwards towards others on whom one takes revenge: ‘Grief had turned resurrection into something that had smacked of murder’.<sup>38</sup> Either way, then, it ‘end[s] always in death’.<sup>39</sup> The notion that grief might serve as a basis for collective political activism is not given any credence in the narrative. As far as Ruby is aware, ‘the Grief-stricken never worked together’; after all, ‘[t]hey lacked the capacity to focus, because they were locked in on themselves and their experience of loss’.<sup>40</sup> While Marjorie’s reappearance at the end of the narrative suggests that there must be at least some degree of coordination between the few Grief-stricken individuals we have encountered, this is not actually spelled out, and the impression we are left with is that of a bunch of isolated people ‘forg[ing] [their Grief] into weaponry’<sup>41</sup> largely by themselves, and with no other objective than to inflict harm on themselves and/or others.

At the same time, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* is merciless in exposing the denial and avoidance behaviour of the unafflicted, like Ruby, as a no less dubious response to the demands of our age of ecocide and environmental distress. Ruby admits that ‘Grief was never something [she] was comfortable thinking about’, which is why she ‘acknowledged it as little as possible’.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to denial, Grief is said to involve ‘an unshrinking look at the inevitable’.<sup>43</sup> Those who do not look away from environmental devastation and yet do not fall prey to Grief come off as ethical monsters. A refrain running through the narrative is this damning question, which Ruby, to her shame

and horror, realises she has to answer affirmatively: '[c]an you watch something die and let it die?'<sup>44</sup> 'I'd managed to distance myself from loss', she confesses, 'I'd become inured to loss'.<sup>45</sup> The ability to maintain one's sanity and composure in the face of ecological breakdown is not something to be proud of or celebrated. Indeed, Marjorie, who turns out to still be alive after all, harshly diagnoses Ruby's equanimity as a case of '[m]onstrous self-interest masquerading as emotional stability'.<sup>46</sup> The word 'monstrous', which Ruby had earlier used with reference to the obsession of Grief,<sup>47</sup> reappears here to characterise her own value system. What sets Ruby apart, according to Marjorie, is her callous egotism: 'Grief was never about the loss. It was about the killing, the sheer culpable *scale* of it. You're selfish enough to survive the knowledge, that's all' [original emphasis].<sup>48</sup>

Through the protagonist's husband, who is a New Zealander of Maori heritage while she is a descendant of white settlers in Australia, the novella also repeatedly highlights the fact that the Grief brought on by climate change and biodiversity loss does not affect all communities equally. Indigenous people are said to be especially vulnerable, as for them '[t]he experience of watching the world change around them, the loss of land, was an old wound kept open'.<sup>49</sup> This observation is reminiscent of the philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte's point that '[c]limate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the spectre of a new future and more like the experience of *déjà vu*'.<sup>50</sup> The wreckage of climate change dreaded by white people are not so different, after all, from the hardships Indigenous people have already endured for centuries due to colonialism. Or as Elizabeth DeLoughrey puts it, 'catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological systems have already been experienced through the violent processes of empire. In other words, the apocalypse has already happened [...]'.<sup>51</sup>

According to Ruby, the higher rate of Grief in Indigenous populations is a metric white people did not want to acknowledge 'lest it highlight their own culpability and continued privilege'.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the characters we see wrestling with Grief all occupy positions of power or privilege further complicates the morality of their ecological mourning. In the Tasmanian episode, George reminds his wife that 'Tasmanian tigers weren't the only living things that went extinct here [...] There's a long history of hunting on this island'.<sup>53</sup> His allusion to a suppressed history of Indigenous genocide prompts Ruby to ask an awkward question: '[h]ad the destruction of Tasmania's first peoples ever induced someone like Granny – someone like me – to Grief, or was it only the absence of those so little like us that was memorialized in this way?'<sup>54</sup> Grief is thus intermingled with guilt not only over ecocide but also over genocide and its continued denial.<sup>55</sup>

The overriding impression that the reader of *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* is left with is one of stuckness. This bleak and disquieting text exemplifies how crushing feelings of environmental guilt bordering on shame can derail or block the process of ecological mourning, inducing a melancholic sense of



impasse instead of encouraging reparative action. If guilt over environmental loss remains individualised, unattended and unresolved, its affective intensity threatens to become all-consuming and destructive. By vividly evoking a condition of arrested mourning that Renée Lertzman has called ‘environmental melancholia’, Cade’s novella can be seen to highlight the need to develop the kind of emotional literacy around environmental guilt that Jensen calls for and the kinds of ritual responses that Fredericks sees as facilitating the work of ecological mourning.<sup>56</sup> In their absence, grief over environmental loss risks turning toxic, as the mourning process is inhibited and the moderation and transformation of grief and the reorientation to the world that it entails fail to take place.

To be clear, I am not arguing here for ‘successful’ or ‘healthy’ mourning in the classical Freudian sense, where mourning is understood as a kind of abandonment whereby the mourner liberates themselves from the lost object, ‘getting over’ and ‘moving on’ from the loss. I am sympathetic to attempts to reconceptualise mourning as unfinished, sustained and persistent yet constructive, active and resistant, such as the one undertaken by Joshua Trey Barnett with regard to environmental loss. Taking his cue from Jacques Derrida’s destabilisation of Sigmund Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia, Barnett calls for what he terms ‘vigilant mourning’, that is, ‘a practice of tarrying with our grief, of remaining awake to those beings and ways of being on earth which have already been lost and of staying alert to those which today find themselves under threat of erasure’.<sup>57</sup> However, this is a far cry from what is on display in *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*; Cade’s novella at best underlines the importance of such mourning through its absence.

### Grief, Guilt and Ecological Attunement in Chris Jordan’s *Albatross*

In *Albatross*, guilt for environmental devastation is felt no less acutely than in *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, but it is processed more productively. Jordan’s documentary film, offered as a gift to the world (meaning that it can be streamed and shared for free), bears agonising witness to the often fatal encounters of Laysan albatrosses on Midway Island with ocean plastic pollution, in which the viewer is – and is made to feel – implicated. Located in the North Pacific more than 2000 miles from the nearest continent, Midway Island is part of the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. It is home to a myriad of different animal species, including a large colony of albatrosses that serves as the focus of Jordan’s poetic film. Through a mixture of photographs and video footage, combined with an immersive soundtrack and thoughtful voice-over narration by the artist himself, the film depicts in intimate detail the albatross life cycle and the devastating effects of ocean plastic on the birds’ lives.

*Albatross* opens with a Gustave Doré illustration of an albatross and a quotation from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem ‘The Rime of the Ancient

Mariner' that immediately announces the film's concern with feelings of guilt and grief over environmental destruction: 'He loved the bird, that loved the man / Who shot him with his bow'.<sup>58</sup> This is followed by a photograph of a plastic-filled albatross carcass on Midway, an iconic image of the Anthropocene, which establishes that the bird's suffering in the present is caused by our plastic pollution of the oceans. '[k]neeling over these scenes is like looking into a mirror', Jordan observes a few minutes into the film as a series of similar images is shown: '[h]ere we face one surreal consequence of our collective choice. This is our culture, turned inside out'.<sup>59</sup> Though never explicitly named as such, human culpability for the plight of the albatross is thus highlighted right from the start. However, so is the attempt to ritually transform environmental guilt: the haunting first photograph of an albatross carcass is surrounded by mandala patterns that become superimposed on the screen, combining beauty and horror as the film's journey begins. As Jensen argues, *Albatross* offers a fresh perspective on ecological mourning by adopting a constructive approach to grief and guilt, framing these emotions as 'teachers' that 'help[] orient us toward love, care, and connection with the ecosystems that sustain life'.<sup>60</sup>

The results of runaway consumerism remain an uncomfortable presence throughout the film, but Jordan also focusses on capturing the non-human perspective, exploring the experience of what it might be like to be an albatross. In this way, the film is closer to a work of art than to a nature documentary. Something else that sets *Albatross* apart from most other animal documentaries is that the filmmaker features heavily in it. He is not just an off-screen voice but also an embodied presence in the film: the viewer sees Jordan pulling the plastic out of the albatross carcasses and witnesses his emotional response. Asked in an interview about his decision to include himself as a character in the film, Jordan has said that he saw himself as a guide charged with carrying the audience through the story. The 'challenging emotional material' he wanted the viewer to explore required him to be 'present in a personal way that might break some rules' and to steer clear of 'the standard "voice of God" type of narration', where the viewer never meets the narrator, let alone has any relationship with them as a fellow human being. He set out to make the narration very intimate, 'as if I had brought the viewer alone to Midway to guide them on a private journey of witnessing and healing'. He aimed to create a space where the viewer could have their own emotional experience, with the filmmaker acting as 'a gentle guide' or 'a meditation teacher' who steps in to discreetly draw their attention to something only to then step back out.<sup>61</sup> While Jordan's emotional response might help the audience find theirs, it was not meant to be the centre of attention.

His emotional journey, on which the viewer is invited along, is a painful and deeply transformative one. Jordan explains early on in the film that 'I was drawn to Midway because it offered a chance to face a global issue on a personal scale. I knew it wouldn't be easy. I came here as a witness, with no story or answers in mind'. He goes on to observe that 'my experience here would

change the way I see the whole world'. In a later voice-over, he affirms his belief in 'facing the dark realities of our time', not 'as an exercise in pain or punishment, or to make us feel bad about ourselves', but because 'in this act of witnessing a doorway opens'. The final voice-over in the film, which follows harrowing footage of dying and dead albatrosses, reveals where that newly opened doorway leads:

Grief is the same as love. Grief is a felt experience of love for something we're losing or have lost. When we surrender to grief, it carries us home to our deepest connection with life. I didn't know I could care about an albatross.<sup>62</sup>

The transformation that witnessing brings about, then, is a reframing of grief as an expression of love for and connection to the natural world.

Without being named explicitly, environmental guilt plays a crucial role in this reconfiguration of grief. Jordan's epiphany about the true nature of grief is introduced by the following statement acknowledging the weight of his knowledge of human responsibility for the birds' suffering: '[t]he most difficult thing to bear, for me, was what I knew, but they couldn't know, about why they were dying'.<sup>63</sup> By this point in the film, which is suffused with dramatic irony about the fate of its non-human subject, the audience has been made to witness an albatross chick's lethal consumption of plastic waste fed to it by its mother, who, as the voice-over narrator explains, unknowingly swallowed plastic items dumped in the ocean while foraging for food. This tragic viewing experience elicits a strong emotional response, as the audience is forced to confront its implication in the processes through which plastic finds its way into the ocean and ends up in the stomach of an albatross chick. That painful confrontation does not leave the viewer in a state of despair or apathy but paves the way for the aforementioned rethinking of grief. As Jensen comments on the artist's voice-over statement about the unbearable nature of the knowledge that humans are responsible for the albatrosses' suffering, '[i]t is through attunement to environmental guilt [...] that Jordan reorients his understanding of grief'.<sup>64</sup> Rather than having a strictly negative valence, then, as is the case in *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, environmental guilt helps accomplish the work of ecological connection in *Albatross*. It emerges as a powerful source for revealing what we care for and expanding our sense of ecological attunement:

Just as grief is a felt experience of love for something we are losing or have lost, *guilt is the felt experience of care for something we have harmed*. From this perspective, grief and guilt orient us to what we love and what we care for and about. They become teachers, guiding us toward our affective attachments and emotional investments. Environmental guilt, I'm suggesting, can guide us toward a deeper understanding of our care by illuminating the boundaries that have been transgressed, and by leading us to

recognize the ethical systems that create and constellate those boundaries.<sup>65</sup>

*Albatross* does not assign blame to any specific governments, corporations or individuals, nor does it offer any resolution or issue a call to action. In fact, Jordan has spoken out in interviews against what Joanna Zylińska calls ‘easy solutionism’<sup>66</sup> or what Barnett describes as our tendency to ‘turn quickly to the work of fixing what appears to have been broken in hopes that we might soon be able to forget again the destruction, the transformation, the loss’.<sup>67</sup> In Jordan’s view, the rush to jump to quick-fix solutions effectively amounts to a form of avoidance and resistance to actual change; it functions as ‘a collective trance induction’ allowing us to ‘stay in denial together, and avoid deeper responsibility for our collective effects on the world’.<sup>68</sup> The film encourages us to ‘get more honest and sophisticated about our emotional relationship’ to the grim facts of environmental destruction.<sup>69</sup> Jordan goes so far as to say that witnessing is ‘the opposite of talking about solutions’; it is ‘an experience of deep presence in the absence of any solutions’.<sup>70</sup> That experience entails an element of what James Hatley, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, calls ‘penitential witness’, as distinct from ‘indexical witness’. The latter, according to Hatley, involves righteous anger and projects all the blame onto others; the former, by contrast, acknowledges one’s own guilt and thereby enables a fundamental shift in one’s sense of self and way of being in the world.<sup>71</sup> *Albatross* calls for a spiritual transformation or re-awakening that involves approaching grief and guilt over environmental harm not as foes to be vanquished or viruses to be fought but as orienting forces directing us towards ecological attunement. In developing literacy around ecological emotions and responding to them through ritual practices that allow grief and guilt to be recognised and processed, Jordan’s film harbours the potential to inspire the kinds of attitudes and behaviours that are critical to addressing the global ecological crisis.

### Man and Planet on Fire: The Self-Immolation of David Buckel

Guilt and grief over environmental loss also converged in Buckel’s dramatic action, which is believed to be the first climate change-related protest suicide.<sup>72</sup> The incident not only captures the self-destructive force of environmental guilt, which is evident as well in Cade’s novella, but also illuminates its restorative potential, as does Jordan’s film. In the early morning of Saturday 14 April 2018, Buckel walked the short distance from his Brooklyn home to Prospect Park, where he doused himself in petrol and set himself on fire. Moments earlier, at 5.55 a.m., he had sent an email to several news outlets, including the *New York Times*. He had also left a copy ziplocked and taped to a nearby litter bin, adding a note to first responders apologising ‘for the mess’. In his final message, he explained what had led him to take this drastic step and what he hoped to achieve with it. ‘[m]ost humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels’, Buckel wrote, ‘and many die early deaths as a result – my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves’.<sup>73</sup> He went on to observe that he had come to

understand that individual choices to live in an environmentally ethical way make no significant difference: '[m]any who drive their own lives to help others often realise that they do not change what causes the need for their help'. He had arrived at the conclusion that 'no other action [than his protest suicide] can most meaningfully address the harm [he saw]'. The letter ended, '[h]ere is a hope that giving a life might bring some attention to the need for expanded actions, and help others give a voice to our home, and Earth is heard'. His goal in killing himself in this horrific manner, then, was to shock others – the country or the whole world – into paying attention to the escalating ecological death his self-immolation was meant to mirror and making collective change. His actions were motivated by grief for the systematic destruction of the planet and its inhabitants, and guilt and despair over being caught up in an ecocidal system and being unable to substantially change it.

It has become painfully obvious since then that Buckel's action did not have the desired effect of waking up and mobilising the public, though it did manage to provoke a brief flurry of press coverage. Much of the media discussion concentrated on and questioned his mental health status. As one journalist noted, '[a]fter he died, many people seemed to dismiss Mr. Buckel's statement because of the nature of his suicide, and focused only on his mental health'.<sup>74</sup> His political message barely resonated with the public, if it paid attention at all.<sup>75</sup> '[H]is death made no difference either', one observer wryly noted half a year after Buckel's death: '[t]he ultimate sacrifice, and all it left in its wake were a few thousand words and a wounded family'.<sup>76</sup> However, I would like to push back a little against the view that Buckel's protest suicide was but a case in point of how nothing constructive can come from the combination of grief and guilt. In recent years there have been a number of thoughtful engagements with this incident that shed a somewhat different light on it and suggest that it has in fact been successful in some ways in furthering the work of ecological connection and attunement.<sup>77</sup> It was not just 'a cry against life', but also 'an act of defiance', as one eye-witness wrote of Buckel's macabre demise, which did in fact spark a transformation of sorts.<sup>78</sup>

According to the performance scholar Victoria Scrimmer, both the press and the public have largely failed to appreciate the full subversive power of Buckel's extreme act of protest because of the way it challenged conventional expectations of political activism: 'Buckel's self-immolation successfully interrupts our politics of spectacle, gesturing towards a new aesthetic for environmental activism that eschews conventional dramatic narratives and decenters the human'.<sup>79</sup> For one thing, like Jordan in *Albatross*, he does not point the finger at a clearly defined antagonist whom the audience is meant to blame. In this respect his self-immolation is markedly different from the rash of political suicides carried out by Tibetans who set themselves on fire to protest Chinese rule, to which Buckel – a Buddhist himself – compares his own action in his final message, or other famous self-immolations with which both he and the audience would have been familiar, such as those of the Czech dissident Jan Palach, the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and

several US citizens protesting the Vietnam War. The site Buckel chose for his act, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, is 'a shared community space' rather than 'a symbolic seat of corporate or political power chosen to implicate a CEO or politician',<sup>80</sup> nor does he explicitly mention any leaders, institutions or companies in his letter. Instead, he focuses on how, as consumers, we are implicated in the exploitation of humans, animals and the planet – an emphasis that, as we have seen, runs the risk of letting the capitalist system and its enablers off the hook. Buckel writes:

Privilege usually comes in some way from others' pain, whether intended or, more often, not. The pain may be from exploitation, as is often true in the making of clothes and food crops, and our choice to buy such clothing or food supports the harm to exploited humans, animals, or the Earth. That harm can live on through so many other choices we make, not just with what we wear and what we eat.<sup>81</sup>

Importantly, Buckel uses the pronoun 'we' throughout his suicide note. His death, he writes, reflects 'what we are doing to ourselves'. By casting the audience as both victim and villain, he urges us to face up to 'the seemingly inescapable culpability we all bear living in a global society in which systems of oppression are obscured, multiarticular and always fluctuating'.<sup>82</sup>

The sheer unobtrusiveness and modesty of Buckel's self-immolation, typically a spectacular protest practice, can also be seen to pose a challenge to the accepted norms of political protest in our society of the spectacle. To begin with, he made a conscious decision to die alone rather than in front of thousands of people. The early hour he chose reduced the likelihood of the grisly sight of a burning man traumatising passers-by or being caught on video. He did not record or live-stream his protest himself either. The exact location, an unremarkable strip of grass off the road, also seemed intended to make his self-immolation as undisruptive as possible. It is telling that the only published eye-witness account of which I am aware describes only the aftermath of the event, when the police were already on the scene:

I saw a body lying face up with arms reaching into the air, as if trying to grab at something, but not quite reaching it. His legs were stretched out and appeared to be covered in something brown, what I initially thought was mud. Around him was a circle of dark dirt that almost made him look like he was emerging from the earth.<sup>83</sup>

This 'circle of dark dirt' refers to some soil that Buckel had presumably taken with him, hauling it in a shopping cart, when he went to Prospect Park that morning and spread out around him to prevent the flames from spreading.<sup>84</sup> As Scrimmer points out, his 'conspicuous invisibility', which led many to brand his action a failure, 'forces audiences to engage with the aftermath of Buckel's performance – that which is distinctly postdramatic, that which erodes the boundaries between the human and the non-human earth'.<sup>85</sup>

The eye-witness's description of Buckel's deceased body looking as if it were 'emerging from the earth' is indicative of this blurring of boundaries between the human and the more-than-human world. Further evidence of the 'perceptual shift'<sup>86</sup> away from anthropocentrism that his death called for can be found in the work of the American photographer Joel Sternfeld, whose book *Our Loss*, published in 2019, seeks to honour Buckel's memory. Beginning with an excerpt from the *New York Times* article announcing his death, the book contains photos of the site where Buckel set himself on fire.<sup>87</sup> Sternfeld, who happened to be in Prospect Park with his son later that day, went back the next day and began documenting the spot. Returning over and over in the course of just over one year, he recorded the changing seasons, the gradual regeneration of the site and the continuation of life in the park. We see some visitors paying their respects, but also children's birthday parties and outdoor yoga sessions being held near the site. In November we witness the beginning of a memorial grove, and by April the following year the new saplings are blooming. The title of the book, to which the *New Yorker* devoted a feature article upon its publication, refers to a collective loss that Buckel's suicide helped bring into view: the loss of a liveable planet due to climate change that his death by fossil fuel was intended to reflect.<sup>88</sup> Scrimmer interprets Sternfeld's images as showing how Buckel's death

invites and makes room for a response not just from its human audience but from the entirety of the natural world. [...] His death disrupts the dramatic paradigm of protest and calls for the slow, quiet decomposition of our favorite protagonist: man.<sup>89</sup>

It fosters an ecocentric mindset that might just help stop climate change, as Buckel hoped it would. All of Sternfeld's proceeds from *Our Loss* are going to the global climate protest group Fridays for Future, which ensures that, in a further ripple effect, Buckel's drastic act is in fact contributing, in some small way, to supporting the very kind of collective engagement in climate action that he believed was desperately needed but did not live to see. For all its unobtrusiveness then, Buckel's public act of guilty grieving over planetary destruction, in letting 'Earth [be] heard' and making the more-than-human matter, amounts to a poignant form of political and ethical resistance to the untenable status quo of everyday climate denial.

### Conclusion: Towards a New Emotional Literacy

Through the analysis of three case studies, I have tried to demonstrate how forging a new emotional literacy around the environment and collective responsibility would allow us to engage our implication in environmental damage more productively. By portraying a situation of stuckness, where the only options offered – to the characters and, by extension, the reader – are monstrous denial of environmental destruction and crushing feelings of guilt over it, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* asserts the need for a paradigm shift in how we approach and process feelings of environmental guilt lest they

obstruct the work of ecological mourning. In *Albatross*, environmental guilt is shown to play a crucial role in reconfiguring grief as an expression of love for the natural world, as it leads us towards a deeper understanding of what we care for and illuminates the ethical boundaries that have been transgressed. Grief and guilt over environmental harm are recast as orienting forces that guide the filmmaker and, through him, the viewer on a spiritual journey towards ecological attunement. Buckel's extreme act of protest, finally, reveals not only the self-destructive effects of environmental guilt but also its reparative dimension, as its cultural reception evidences the perceptual shift away from anthropocentrism that his death called for. Like Cade's novella and Jordan's film, the Buckel case and the cultural archive it has generated can be seen to provide valuable resources for harnessing the potential of the guilt-grief nexus to promote sustainable environmental futures. By exploring different guilt-ridden and grief-stricken cultural forms and social practices, this essay has attempted to show, without meaning to downplay the harmful side of environmental guilt, how the distinctly uncomfortable experience of feeling implicated in global environmental devastation can also be a powerful motivator for change and stimulate positive outcomes.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cunsolo and Landman, "Introduction," 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 12. See also Rothberg, "Preface."
- <sup>3</sup> Albrecht, "Solastalgia and the New Mourning," 296.
- <sup>4</sup> "We Have Met the Enemy."
- <sup>5</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Menning, "Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination," 39-40. Or as Owain Jones et al. succinctly put it, 'To grieve is one thing, but to grieve as one kills off what is to be grieved is quite another' (Jones et al., "Everyday Ecocide," 396).
- <sup>8</sup> Kahn, "Soak Up the February Sun?"
- <sup>9</sup> Fredericks, *Environmental Guilt and Shame*, 7; Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 23.
- <sup>10</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 21.
- <sup>11</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)"; Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*; Ahmed, "The Affective Politics of Fear"; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.
- <sup>12</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 4-5.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>14</sup> Fredericks, *Environmental Guilt and Shame*, 131.

<sup>15</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> While this is arguably the contemporary consensus on the relationship between guilt and shame, alternative perspectives that elevate the role of shame are provided by Jennifer Jacquet's *Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool*, Tanveer Ahmed's *In Defence of Shame* and Julien A. Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno and Fabrice Teroni's *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*. Jacquet and Ahmed both lament the stigmatisation of shame in Western societies, interpreting its decline as a sign of growing individualism and hailing its alleged beneficial potential as a proxy for group ties and a shared morality. Deonna, Rodogno and Teroni for their part articulate a novel, positive account of shame that rejects the mainstream view of it as an essentially social and morally dubious emotion.

<sup>17</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> This distinction is not absolute or clear-cut, though, as our being informs our actions, and our actions help shape our being.



<sup>20</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Fredericks, *Environmental Guilt and Shame*, 165.

<sup>22</sup> Craps, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>23</sup> The following discussion of Cade's novella draws from and builds on Craps, "Ecological Mourning."

<sup>24</sup> Cade, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> The same conceit of grief as a pandemic is used by adrienne maree brown in her novel *Grievors*, which also came out in 2021. Exploring racial rather than ecological grief, *Grievors* is a plague story in which a mysterious new illness sweeps through Detroit, devastating its struggling Black communities. The illness, which causes its victims to suddenly stop moving and speaking, and to slowly deteriorate until they die, crystallises the compounded griefs of living under racial capitalism.

<sup>27</sup> Cade, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See also *ibid.*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, passim [original emphasis].

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 72 [original emphasis].

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Whyte, "Is It Colonial Déjà Vu," 88.

<sup>51</sup> DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Cade, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> As Deborah Bird Rose points out, '[s]ettler colonies are built on a dual war: a war against Nature and a war against the Natives' (Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 34). Australian history is marked by both ecocide and genocide: 'the loss of large numbers of plant and animal species' as well as 'the loss of around 90 per cent of the

original Aboriginal population', along with most of their languages and cultures (Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 35).

<sup>56</sup> Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia*. The condition of the Grief-stricken characters in *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief* also recalls the kind of impossible mourning or melancholia described by Margaret Ronda in her essay "Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene". Ronda focuses on Juliana Spahr's Anthropocene poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache", which she analyses as a failed elegy that 'lingers in self-punishing grief because there is no way to cope with or atone for the sense of human culpability that emerges here, no way even to grasp its material or psychological consequences' (Ronda, "Mourning and Melancholia").

<sup>57</sup> Barnett, "Vigilant Mourning," 14. See also my discussion of Derridean 'mid-mourning', which disrupts the Freudian distinction between successful mourning and pathological melancholia, in Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, 62-63.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Jordan, dir., *Albatross*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Craps and Olsen, "Grief as a Doorway to Love", 127.

<sup>62</sup> Jordan, dir., *Albatross*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Jensen, *Ecologies of Guilt*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 143 [original emphasis].

<sup>66</sup> Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> Barnett, *Mourning in the Anthropocene*, xi.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Craps and Olsen, "Grief as a Doorway to Love", 117.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 121.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 118.

<sup>71</sup> Hatley, "Blaspheming Humans," 13, 16. See also Jones, "Everyday Ecocide," 399-400.

<sup>72</sup> Correal, "What Drove a Man." Buckel's action was followed in 2022 by a similar protest suicide by the fifty-year-old climate activist Wynn Bruce, who set himself on fire on the steps of the US Supreme Court on 22 April – i.e. Earth Day – and died from his injuries one day later (Cameron, "Climate Activist Dies"). Moreover, it had been anticipated in a 2016 cli-fi novella by the Dutch author Jan Terlouw, *Kop uit 't zand* ("Head Out of the Sand"), which features a fictional climate activist who burns himself to death in a public square opposite the Dutch parliament in The Hague to denounce inaction on climate change.

<sup>73</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Buckel’s letter, which to my knowledge has nowhere been published in full, are taken from Koulouris, “Honorable Death.”

<sup>74</sup> Correal, “Very Real.” See also Van Susteren et al., “Viewing a Suicide as an Environmental Protest.”

<sup>75</sup> Englander, “A Man Set Himself on Fire.”

<sup>76</sup> Kathan, “Killing Yourself in the Anthropocene.”

<sup>77</sup> Hughes, “Lamentation for Songbirds”; Scrimmer, “The Self-Immolation of David Buckel”; Sherrill, “Letter to an Unborn Child”; Sternfeld, *Our Loss*.

<sup>78</sup> Pilon, “I Found a Dead Body.”

<sup>79</sup> Scrimmer, “The Self-Immolation of David Buckel.”

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Pilon, “I Found a Dead Body.”

<sup>84</sup> Correal, “What Drove a Man.”

<sup>85</sup> Scrimmer, “The Self-Immolation of David Buckel.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Mays, “Prominent Lawyer.”

<sup>88</sup> Riley, “The Site.”

<sup>89</sup> Scrimmer, “The Self-Immolation of David Buckel.”

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### ORCID

Stef Craps  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6720-1689>

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**Stef Craps** is a professor of English literature at Ghent University in Belgium, where he directs the Cultural Memory Studies Initiative. His research interests lie in twentieth-century and contemporary literature and culture, memory and trauma studies, postcolonial theory, ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. Recent publications include the New Critical Idiom volume *Trauma* (Routledge, 2020), co-authored with Lucy Bond, and a guest-edited special issue of *American Imago* on ecological grief (2020). Email: [stef.craps@ugent.be](mailto:stef.craps@ugent.be)