

Introduction: Ecological Grief

Now is a time for grief to persist, to ring throughout the world.

—Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 2007, p. 185

Marybeth Holleman's poem "How to grieve a glacier," published in *ISLE* in 2019, starts by noting the difficulty if not absurdity of the process the title promises to guide the reader through. After all, as a non-human entity, a glacier is an unusual object of affection: "It's not something you can hold in your arms. / You can't rock with its image in a blanket / and keen away the nearing pain" (Holleman, 2019, p. 441). Even so, the speaker insists, "I do love this blue-white giant, / and grieve its leaving," though she admits that her grief is mingled with excitement at witnessing the sublime spectacle of glacier calving: "I thrill to watch / thunderbolts of ice crash into azure seas" (Holleman, 2019, p. 441). Painfully aware that "it is leaving, abandoning us / to what our kind has created" and that "its gift of rarified water / will only bring more sorrow," as sea-level rise caused by climate change-induced glacier melt is expected to have dramatic consequences for many coastal areas around the world, she cannot help being struck by the terrible beauty of the unfolding environmental tragedy: "Yet it is a gorgeous deterioration" (Holleman, 2019, p. 442).

Also in 2019, the *New Yorker* published an article by Lacy Johnson titled "How to mourn a glacier" that addresses the same problem identified by Holleman, albeit in relation to a glacier that is no longer in the process of retreating but that has disappeared altogether. What occasioned the article is the official demise of the Okjökull glacier atop Iceland's Ok volcano, which was marked with a memorial ceremony and the installation of a memorial plaque warning of the impact of climate change at the site of the former glacier in August 2019. Attended by "about a hundred scientists, activ-

ists, dignitaries, farmers, politicians, journalists, and children” (Johnson, 2019), the event was widely reported in the media, and photographs of the plaque even went viral. The funeral for Okjökull was echoed by a similar ceremony for the Pizol glacier above Mels in eastern Switzerland, which has also been lost to global warming, one month later. A scientist familiar with the Pizol glacier who attended the ceremony in which it was declared dead was quoted as saying: “It is like the dying of a good friend” (Baynes, 2019).

The same analogy is used by journalist Dahr Jamail in *The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption*, which also came out in 2019. This non-fiction book follows Jamail’s journey to the frontlines of climate change—from Alaska to the Great Barrier Reef via the Amazon rainforest—chronicling the catastrophic consequences of the loss of ice for both nature and humans. Apart from providing plentiful scientific information, *The End of Ice* testifies to the emotional and spiritual turmoil the author experiences as he confronts the evidence of climate disruption across the planet. Jamail explains how the book arose from his realization of “the need to share my grief with others about what was happening to nature.” In the concluding chapter, he likens his experience of witnessing environmental collapse to the intense moments he spent at what he thought was his friend Duane’s deathbed: “Reflecting on what is happening to the planet, I realize that the intimacy I shared with Duane when I thought I was losing my best friend is the intimacy we should have with the Earth.” Venturing that, “[i]n an analogous way, we may be watching Earth dying,” he is suggesting that regaining an intimate connection with the natural world could help us to begin to know, love, and care for the planet.

The various cultural responses to the experience of environmental loss described in the preceding paragraphs indicate that the question of how to grapple with climate or ecological grief is very much in the air these days. There is indeed a growing awareness that environmental degradation is taking a toll on people’s mental and emotional well-being. Not only has environmental devastation dramatically increased in pace, scope, and severity over the last few decades—making it harder and harder to ignore—but scientists’ warnings about what the

future might hold are becoming ever more alarming, while the refusal of our political leaders to take meaningful and timely action on climate change was on full display at the UN's COP25 summit in Madrid in December 2019. Moreover, the media have finally started to pay proper attention to climate change, the biodiversity crisis, pollution, and other global environmental challenges after years of underreporting. Anxiety around climate disruption in particular is now so pervasive that in November 2019 the leaders of more than 40 psychological associations from around the world signed a resolution at a conference in Lisbon acknowledging that climate change poses a serious threat to mental health and signaling a desire to deal with the problem (American Psychological Association, 2019).

However, the fact that Holleman's poem and Johnson's article style themselves as how-to manuals suggests that, as yet, we are somewhat at a loss as to how to adequately navigate the emotional terrain of environmental breakdown. Lacking standard protocols and procedures, we do not quite know how to make sense of, channel, or cope with its psychological impact—we are in need, it seems, of instruction, guidance, and direction. After all, as the anthropomorphizing analogies that run through the works discussed above imply, we tend to associate grief and mourning with human losses; more-than-human losses are traditionally seen as outside the realm of the grievable. As Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman argue in their introduction to *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief* (2017), it is vital to “disrupt the dominance of human bodies as the only mournable subjects” (p. 16) and to expand the circle of the grievable beyond the human. Transcending human parochialism in this way might “help us live better with others” and “bring us closer to a different form of ecological ethics” (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017, p. 7); indeed, extending grievability to more-than-human others can galvanize us to take positive action on their behalf.

That we are struggling to articulate our environmental anxieties is also apparent from the fact that environment-related language dominated the Oxford Word of the Year 2019 shortlist, reflecting the increased sense of urgency around the issue. While “climate emergency” was chosen as Word of the Year 2019—“a word or expression shown through usage

evidence to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the passing year, and have lasting potential as a term of cultural significance”—another contender was “eco-anxiety,” which the Oxford website defines as “[e]xtreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change” (Oxford Languages, 2019). If the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg became a figurehead of the global climate movement in 2019, this is in part because her history of climate depression resonated with many people around the world. Her “narrative of being paralyzed by climate fears, before discovering that activism could be an outlet for them, is one of the biggest sources of her appeal,” as the climate anxiety she channels in her speeches is not an aberration but “an increasingly common collective sentiment” (Onion, 2019). The concurrent success of the Extinction Rebellion protest group can be partly accounted for by its similarly “unflinching relationship with grief” over the state of the environment (Green, 2019). Extinction Rebellion frequently uses funeral symbolism—such as coffins, silent processions, black veils, and white roses—to create a space where ecological grief can be openly acknowledged and expressed (Dillon, 2019).

As Renee Lertzman (2015) observes, with some notable exceptions (including Harold Searles, Hanna Segal, and Robert J. Lifton), psychological scholarship has been slow to address environmental issues. Primarily concerned with “intra- and interpersonal relationships and social issues, such as class, race, gender etc.,” it has yet to fully engage with “how humans interact with our nonhuman environment and, in particular, how we live with and relate with our natural, often vulnerable and threatened world” (Lertzman, 2015, p. 25). However, “the muteness around environmental issues in psychoanalytic circles” that Lertzman diagnoses (2015, p. 25) is increasingly being challenged. In recent years, environmentally induced distress has become a hotly debated topic not only within the psychological community (see, e.g., Clayton & Manning, 2018; Davenport, 2017; Hoggett, 2019; Lertzman, 2015; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Orange, 2016; Stoknes, 2015; Weintrobe, 2013) but across the humanities and social sciences, giving rise to a culturally resonant repertoire of new coinages such as “solastalgia” (Albrecht, 2019), “pre-traumatic stress disorder”

(Kaplan, 2016; Myers, 2017; Saint-Amour, 2015), “ecological grief” (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018), “environmental melancholia” (Lertzman, 2015), “petromelancholia” (LeMenager, 2014), “ecosickness” (Houser, 2014), and “Anthropocene disorder” (Clark, 2015).

This special issue explores the myriad ways in which environmental change wreaks havoc on the human psyche by bringing together essays on a wide range of psychological and affective responses to our dire environmental predicament. The essays gathered here, written by well-established as well as emerging voices in the field, reflect on the manifold theorizations, manifestations, and representations of ecological grief and cognate emotions pervading contemporary culture, as well as on attempts to counter, overcome, or cope with these feelings, or to leverage them as an incitement to activism. Due attention is paid to the role played by issues of race, gender, class, and geopolitical location in determining how ecological grief is experienced, expressed, and managed. Moreover, many contributors approach the topic via literary texts, films, or other artistic creations that are seen to provide form and structure for grief related to environmental loss, which remains largely unspoken and unrecognized, and to serve as a cultural laboratory for articulating and dealing with it. In addition to scholarly essays, this issue features an interview with the artist Chris Jordan, whose film *Albatross* (2017) is a remarkable portrayal of ecological grief and mourning, as well as reviews of three important recent books tackling the same theme.

The act of naming the often disenfranchised and marginalized forms of grief arising from environmental loss is a major step in bringing them to public awareness and granting them social acceptance and legitimacy so that they can be processed more effectively. Coming to terms with ecological grief can inspire efforts to work through it and reinvigorate practices of environmental advocacy in the face of the daunting ecological challenges confronting global society in the 21st century. In this spirit, this collection aims to help us to engage more constructively and productively with the psychological and emotional dimensions of environmental loss as individuals, scholars, and citizens.

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