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Trauma of Tomorrow

Environmental Breakdown, Affect, and Cultural Narratives

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16.1 Approaching Ecological Emotions from a Literary and Cultural Studies Perspective

The past few years have seen a dramatic increase in the pace, scope, and severity of various kinds of environmental degradation, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Moreover, according to a plethora of bleak scientific reports, these trends show little sign of abating, boding ill for the future of humanity and life on Earth in general. The experience and anticipation of environmental loss—whether of individual plant and animal species, entire ecosystems, cherished landscapes, or a livable planet—cause profound sorrow, fear, despair, guilt, and anger. These feelings are being experienced more and more acutely by a growing portion of the world's population as we move ever deeper into the Anthropocene, the new geological epoch marked by unprecedented human impact on the planet (Hickman et al. 2021; Leiserowitz et al. 2023).

However, as yet we are somewhat at a loss as to how to adequately navigate the affective 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, we tend to associate grief and mourning with human losses; more-than-human losses are traditionally seen as outside the realm of the grievable (Butler 2004). As Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman (2017, 16) argue in their introduction to *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, it is vital to "disrupt the dominance of human bodies as the only mournable subjects" 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" (7); indeed, extending grievability to more-than-human others can galvanize us to take positive environmental action.

The act of naming the often disenfranchised and marginalized emotions 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 and acted upon more adequately. Coming to terms with ecological emotions can reinvigorate practices of environmental advocacy in the face of the daunting ecological challenges confronting global society in the twenty-first century. 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 in *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*, 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" (25). However, "the muteness around environmental issues in psychoanalytic circles" that Lertzman diagnoses is increasingly being challenged (25). In recent years, environmentally induced distress has become a hotly debated topic not only within the psychological community (see, e.g., Clayton and Manning 2018; Davenport 2017; Hoggett 2019; Lertzman 2015; Macy and Johnstone 2012; Orange 2016; Stoknes 2015; Weintrobe 2013; Woodbury 2019) but across the humanities and social sciences, giving rise to a culturally resonant repertoire of new coinages, such as "eco-anxiety" (Clayton et al. 2017), "solastalgia" (Albrecht 2019), "ecological grief" (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018; Barnett 2022), "pre-traumatic stress syndrome" (Kaplan 2016, 2020; Myers 2017), "environmental melancholia" (Lertzman 2015), "petromelancholia" (LeMenager 2014), "ecosickness" (Houser 2014), "Anthropocene disorder" (Clark 2015), and "Anthropocene horror" (Clark 2020).

Lertzman (2015, 152) has called for arts and humanities perspectives to be "incorporated more actively" into psychosocial research on affect and environmental threats, and this does indeed appear to be happening. On surveying the existing scholarship on ecological emotions, one cannot fail to be struck by the

frequency with which the topic is approached via literary texts, films, and other artistic creations. These are seen to provide form and structure for grief and cognate emotions related to environmental loss, which remain largely unspoken and unrecognized, and to serve as a cultural laboratory for articulating and dealing with them. Literature and art play a crucial role, it seems, in mediating ecological emotions. In this chapter, I will make this case by discussing the conceptualization of pre-traumatic stress syndrome (PreTSS), to which literary and cultural scholars have significantly contributed.

16.2 The Beforemath of Trauma in Literature and Film

Amid the new vocabulary for mental anguish caused by environmental change, PreTSS stands out as having attracted the attention of prominent scholars in the field of cultural trauma research.[1] The term was allegedly coined by Lise Van Susteren, a psychiatrist who specializes in the psychological effects of climate change. In an interview, she describes the condition as follows: "[M]uch of traumatic stress disorder is how we imagine things are going to be. . . . [W]e have in our minds images of the future that reflect what scientists are telling us; images of people and animals suffering because of dumb choices we're making today. I would say it's an entirely legitimate condition—accompanied by a non-stop, gnawing sense that more needs to be done" (quoted in Myers 2017). However, the first recorded use of the term "pre-traumatic stress disorder" appears to be in a 2006 article on the satirical news website *The Onion*, which notes a rise in "pre-traumatic stress disorder" among US military service personnel. A fictitious Walter Reed Army Hospital psychologist interviewed about this "future-combat-related" psychological condition is quoted as saying that they are seeing more victims experiencing "flash-forwards" of roadside bombings and rocket attacks or repeatedly "preliv[ing]" landmine explosions and mortar shellings wounding or killing innocent civilians, fellow soldiers, or themselves. These soldiers are haunted not by traumatic memories of past events but by their own projections of events that they expect to experience or witness during their deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq. The article ends by pointing out that, according to unnamed researchers, it is not only members of the armed forces who are at risk for "Pre-TSD" but also other groups, including "parents of children approaching military age, Iraqi citizens, and any person who watches more than three hours of television news per day" (The Onion 2006).

In an instance of science following satire, a scholarly article published in 2015 in *Clinical Psychological Science* provided evidence for the actual existence of the condition identified by *The Onion*. Citing the *Onion* piece, Dorthe

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[1] This section draws from and expands on Craps (2020).

Berntsen and David Rubin (2015, 663) point out that "concern for future neg-ative events is to be expected" given posttraumatic stress disorder's status as an anxiety disorder. They contend that pre-traumatic stress reactions such as intru-sive images of and nightmares about negative future events, avoidance behavior, and increased arousal to stimuli associated with the events are "a real aspect of the phenomenology of PTSD" (663)—a central aspect even, which, however, has so far been largely overlooked. Presenting data from Danish soldiers who saw active service in Afghanistan, Berntsen and Rubin demonstrate that pre-traumatic stress exists and that it reliably predicts PTSD symptoms during and after deployment: past-related PTSD symptoms are found to be mirrored by sim-ilar future-related PTSD symptoms. Their findings suggest that the prevailing understanding of PTSD as a disorder primarily related to the past needs to be revised, as "intrusive images and dreams of future events and associated avoid-ance and increased arousal are experienced to the same extent as reexperiencing, avoidance, and increased arousal associated with past events" (672). According to Berntsen and Rubin, then, pre-traumatic stress does not constitute a separate, new diagnostic category that should get its own entry in the American Psychi-atric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*; rather, they argue for a more expansive understanding of PTSD that would explic-itly include pre-traumatic stress reactions. While Berntsen and Rubin focus on combat-related trauma, they leave open the possibility that other kinds of stres-sors may produce similar effects. Indeed, at the end of their study they write, "Future research should examine whether it [the pre-traumatic stress reactions checklist they created to measure soldiers' pre-traumatic responses] also may be used as a screening instrument in relation to nonmilitary traumatic events as well as other subjectively stressful events, such as exams, medical procedures, or childbirth" (671).

Paul Saint-Amour, the author of the first full-length treatment of pre-traumatic stress by a cultural critic, similarly discusses the notion initially in the context of military violence but later suggests that it could also apply to other phenomena. In *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (2015a), Saint-Amour calls for a reorientation of trauma studies from the past to the future. As he points out, the field lacks "an account of the traumatizing power of anticipation" (17). Due to trauma studies' dependence on a "largely psychoanalytic chronology" (13), the notion of a pre-traumatic syndrome is "practically nonsensical" as the symptoms of trauma and the syndrome they constitute are "emphatically and exclusively *post*-traumatic" (14). While not alto-gether oblivious to the future, the field tends to construct it as "a container for the repetition of past traumas" rather than as "a vector or agent of traumatization" (14n17). According to Saint-Amour, it is time for trauma studies to take seriously the suggestion that the dread of a potentially oncoming disaster can traumatize

as much as an actually realized one. *Tense Future* is primarily concerned with the prospect of total war in the literature from the interwar period. Saint-Amour argues that the years 1918–39 were characterized by a pervasive sense of anxious anticipation and were thus experienced "in real time as an interwar period" (8). In the wake of the First World War, the dread of an even more devastating future conflagration saturated the imagination, as evidenced by the cultural production of those years: canonical works of modernist fiction such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* (1924–28) are reinterpreted as meditations on impending disaster. While focusing on the interwar period, Saint-Amour expands the scope of his inquiry to encompass the Cold War and even our own early twenty-first-century moment, going so far as to characterize late modernity in its entirety as "perpetual interwar" (2015a, 305). After all, the experience of simultaneously remembering and expecting war is not unique to the historical interwar period but is all too familiar to those afflicted with anxiety about the prospect of nuclear annihilation or drone strikes. Indeed, Sarah Sentilles (2017, 300n215) has coined the term "anticipatory traumatic stress disorder" to denote "the 'anticipatory anxiety' that results from the constant worry and fear of never knowing when the next drone attack will come." In a *New York Times* essay that covers some of the same ground as his book, Saint-Amour (2015b) further specifies that "war has no monopoly on traumatizing anticipation." He points out that other "storms in our future," such as climate change, can also inflict psychic wounds.

  The hypothesis that the dread of climate change amounts to a pre-traumatic stress syndrome is central to another major work of cultural scholarship, E. Ann Kaplan's (2016) *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. If the more familiar PTSD is "a condition triggered in the present by past events," pre-trauma, according to Kaplan, describes how "people unconsciously suffer from an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future" (xix). Like Berntsen and Rubin and Saint-Amour before her, she notes that this phenomenon has been little studied so far, despite its increasing prevalence, and ventures that conceptualizing PreTSS offers "a new lens for an expanded trauma theory" (4). Taking a shorter historical view than Saint-Amour, Kaplan posits that we may now be entering a new era characterized by pervasive pre-trauma, in which people live in fear of a catastrophic future marked by environmental crisis. In the absence—as yet—of sound empirical evidence, it is unclear whether this collective anticipatory anxiety does indeed amount to trauma in the clinical sense, which is why it seems safer to label climate-related PreTSS a hypothesis for now (Kaplan 2020). In this post-9/11 era, media of all kinds bombard us with "catastrophic futurist scenarios," inviting audiences to project themselves forward into a devastated future world (Kaplan 2016, xix). According to Kaplan, this results in "a pretraumatized population, living with a sense of an uncertain

future and an unreliable natural environment" (xix). She expresses the hope that, rather than paralyzing audiences, these dystopian scenarios will serve as a warning and wake-up call to help to prevent the apocalyptic outcomes depicted. There is thus an explicit ethical dimension to Kaplan's project of analyzing dystopian fictions. Just as in art about past catastrophes such as the Holocaust we witness what must never happen again, she argues in an earlier article, in pre-trauma fictions we witness what must be stopped from happening in the first place (Kaplan 2013, 59).

Kaplan examines a wide range of futurist disaster narratives, both cinematic and literary, allegedly inducing pre-traumatic stress. Her prime example, though, is *Take Shelter*, a feature film written and directed by Jeff Nichols and released in 2011 that "embodie[s] exactly" the phenomenon she is theorizing (Kaplan 2016, 2).[2] Set in small-town Ohio, the film tells the story of a family man and construction worker, Curtis LaForche, who is plagued by a series of apocalyptic nightmares and visions. These take the form of thunderstorms, twisters, flash floods, motor-oil-like rain, swarms of menacing birds, and attacks by the family dog and zombie-like strangers as well as people close to him. They can be interpreted as relating to pervasive fears about the threat of terrorism, economic precarity, the implosion of the American dream, and—most literally and obviously—environmental devastation caused by climate change. Indeed, they prefigure the extreme and erratic weather conditions of the climate-changed future in store for us if not already upon us, such as severe hurricanes, torrential downpours, and massive floods, as well as hinting at the collapse of human civilization that climate change could bring about (with society overrun by zombies). Curtis's work and family life are thrown into turmoil and his sanity is called into question as a result of these unsettling premonitions of catastrophic climate change. At a community dinner, he gets into a fight with a former co-worker and unleashes a verbal tirade on everyone present, in which he announces that a devastating storm is coming for which none of them are prepared. His prophecy is apparently borne out in the film's epilogue, where an actual end-of-the-world storm is seen gathering over the ocean, not only by Curtis this time but also by his wife and daughter. Steeped in an inexorable air of dread and foreboding, *Take Shelter*, for Kaplan, perfectly captures "the psychic state of a human being who is traumatized by imagining future climate catastrophe" (2016, 53–54).

Another film showcasing this kind of anticipatory anxiety is Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (2017), which likewise features a leading character (as well as another key character) overwhelmed with dread about climate change. Literary examples include Jennifer Mills's *Dyschronia* (2018) and Liz Jensen's

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[2] For other discussions of *Take Shelter* as a film addressing climate anxiety, see Brereton (2019), Craps (2019), Paszkiewicz (2023), and Woolley (2014).

The Rapture (2009). The former novel's protagonist is a migraine sufferer, whose headache-induced visions of environmental catastrophe are not evidence of illness; rather, they turn out to be pictures of actual future events. She is wracked by foreboding, "sick" but a truth-seer—arguably, much like Curtis in *Take Shelter*, the only well one in a sick world, the only person who is duly distressed by the way the world is going. Something similar goes on in *The Rapture*, which features a teenage girl who foresees natural disasters. Her therapist initially thinks she is deluded but eventually realizes that her patient's disaster fantasies correspond to actual incidents happening in the world, that her alarming warnings are in fact accurate. Two other high-profile works of literary fiction that feature female protagonists wracked by anticipatory anxiety over climate change are Jenny Offill's novel *Weather* (2020) and Lauren Groff's short-story collection *Florida* (2018).

The fact that all these fictional examples of climate-related PreTSS are quite privileged in some (or many) ways raises the question of how race, socioeconomic status, and geopolitical location factor into this diagnosis. PreTSS would appear to be associated with a position of privilege keeping one physically safe, as yet, from the disastrous consequences of climate change that are already being experienced, in the present, by many less fortunate people around the world. As the Native American philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (2017, 88) argues, "Climate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the spectre of a new future and more like the experience of déjà vu." Or, as Heather Davis and Zoe Todd observe, "The Anthropocene—or at least all of the anxiety produced around these realities for those in Euro-Western contexts—is really the arrival of the reverberations of that seismic shockwave [of colonial earth-rending] into the nations who introduced colonial, capitalist processes across the globe in the last half-millennium in the first place" (2017, 774). Maybe worrying about the future impact of climate change is a luxury that only those who are lucky enough not to actually be living in that future already can afford, and maybe what they are really most concerned about is not avoiding a climate disaster for all of humanity but losing their privilege. This suspicion is also voiced by Sarah Jaquette Ray (2021) in an opinion essay published in *Scientific American* titled "Climate Anxiety Is an Overwhelmingly White Phenomenon," whose lede runs as follows: "Is it really just code for white people wishing to hold onto their way of life or to get 'back to normal'?"

16.3 Eco-Emotional Literacy and Norm Change

While we should be wary of uncritically embracing and promoting PreTSS and related concepts, forging a new emotional literacy adapted to the ecological realities of our age strikes me as vitally important if we are to adequately navigate the

challenges of environmental breakdown. Despite their pervasiveness, ecological emotions continue to be marginalized, downplayed, or ignored by society at large; instead of being socially recognized and validated, they are largely silenced in public discourse. Taking her cue from American feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar, Lisa Kretz speaks of "outlaw emotions," emotions that are conventionally unacceptable, yet which can be "epistemically fruitful" in that they can help us to develop "a perspective that is critical of dominant paradigms": "ways of seeing that have been lifted to the status of 'facts' are shown to be constructions that are to the benefit of some and the detriment of others" (2017, 270). After all, emotions reflect our understanding and interpretation of events (Clayton 2023). For example, we feel sad or anxious because something we value has been lost or damaged or is threatened. To avoid these emotional responses, we would need to reinterpret the event and convince ourselves that there is no real danger or that it is something we are not invested in.

This is not just an individual issue: emotions are not only psychologically but also socially relevant as they communicate particular interpretations to other people (Clayton 2023). If we talk to others about our grief or anxiety over wildfires, for example, we indicate to them that what is going on is a big deal. Conversely, if we do not express any grief or anxiety, we indicate that there is nothing to be sad or anxious about. The result of an apathetic response to environmental harm is that as a society we persist in collective denial about the gravity of the climate and ecological crisis (Norgaard 2011). Facing up to ecological emotions matters, then, not only for one's own mental health but also for the good of society as a whole. Indeed, just as emotions can be managed to help to keep in place social, political, and economic arrangements, they can be used to mobilize resistance to existing conditions and bring about much-needed norm change by cultivating recognition of humans' entanglement with the more-than-human world (Mihai and Thaler 2023, 2). Hence, in helping us to articulate, conceptualize, and activate ecological emotions, literary and cultural studies, along with their research objects, can offer a valuable public service in unsustainable social contexts characterized by a pressing need to address the climate and ecological crisis in a meaningful and responsible way.

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