

Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal

Issue 4: June 2023

Widening the frame



**FACING
DIFFICULT
TRUTHS**

Climate Psychology Alliance

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Cover photo, *Extinction Rebellion protest in Parliament Square*, *by Maggie Turp*

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Widening the frame

By the Editorial Team

This issue's front cover shows a 10,000-strong gathering of XR demonstrators in Parliament Square, London, preparing for a grand biodiversity procession on Earth Day, 22 April. As many readers will know, part of the new XR strategy focuses on inclusivity and making common cause with a wider range of organisations and campaigns – something that resonates strongly with the 'Widening the frame' theme of Issue 4 of *Explorations*.

Inclusivity, and broadening out the discussion, have been part of the work of the CPA from the start; reflected in particular in the work of subgroups that explore meeting points between the climate crisis and racism, the climate crisis and decolonisation, and the climate crisis vis-à-vis young people. In this issue, our contributors reflect the wide reach of climate psychology in relation to these and a number of other issues.

In widening the frame, we find ever-more systemic connections and resonances, which invite psychological engagement and reflection. One of the key themes arising in the group dialogue convened by Rembrandt Zegers is the desire for co-created spaces where people's voices can be heard, with greater attention being paid to everyday experiences of being in the world. We honour this desire through the inclusion of two, moving, personal stories, one from Cath Falco, describing her experience of being marooned in life-threatening floods in Australia in 2022, and another from John Keane, describing how his search as a young man for purposeful and meaningful work led him to Zambia; first designing and installing solar aid in remote areas of the country, and then transferring his skills to local people to continue and extend the work.

Fieldwork features strongly in both John Keane's and Pushpa Misra's articles. In Pushpa's account of her research in rural Himalayan communities, we learn how local people experience climate change, and hear them eloquently describe their relationship with the natural landscape and the more-than-human world. Then, with the focus shifting to South Africa, Garrett Barnwell writes about his work supporting communities in South Africa that are pressured and silenced by mining companies. Garrett witnesses community members' experiences and helps them to restore 'empty speech' to 'full speech', drawing upon political and psychoanalytic perspectives, in particular the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

To bring the issue to a close, we have an intriguing cluster of book reviews. For the first time – and we very much hope not for the last – we have a teenage contributor, Mila Boldon, who reviews *Green rising*, a young adult novel by Lauren James. Cli-Fi Corner reproduces an out-of-print short story, 'We are where we are', by Kevin MacCabe; a story at once relatable and absurd, which brings a welcome note of humour into the climate discussion. In response, Maggie Turp reflects on the psychological processes evident in the (in)actions of the story's protagonist, Leo. Finally, Toby Chown reviews *Earth grief*, by Stephen Harrod Buhner, a writer described by Toby as "a polyphonic author", who speaks by turn in the voices of a "medical researcher, coyote trickster teacher and animist mystic".



'Biome' by Alissa Di Franco

Helping us to further widen the frame and deepen the imagination in this the journal are poems by Abbie Eve Valentine and Denis Postle, artwork by Alissa Di Franco, and a piece of flash fiction written by Bernadette McBride. Thanks to all our contributors, with particular thanks to Toby Chown for digging out so many of the striking images that complement *Exploration's* articles and poems.

We hope you enjoy this expansive issue. Please write in to us with feedback or if you feel you have something to contribute to our next issue in November. We are always happy to hear from you.

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The river wants to move

By Catherine Falco

*“In the sublime and unnoticed artfulness of its presence,
the wisdom of a river has much to teach us.”*

John O'Donohue

I belong to Italian migrants and the first generation of my family to be born on Aboriginal land. I live and work on the stolen lands of the Moorung-moobah people of the Bundjalung Nation, whose knowledge and care have stewarded this country for centuries. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present, acknowledging their unceded sovereignty, and I am grateful for the unbroken connection between First Nations peoples and Country.

On Sunday 27 February 2022, I drove down the hill to check the causeway. I had been flooded in since Thursday and hoped to get into town for work the next day, but the creek was higher and moving faster than I'd seen before. It's common for the causeway to go under during a rainy period, and in usual circumstances, the creek recedes as quickly as it rises. Bowled by an extinct volcano in the very north-east of New South Wales, this lush ancient landscape pulsates with a youthful green – the combination of soil fertility and an abundance of water. But with our third La Niña event, the ground was saturated. Even a 12-metre wattle, not far from the house, had fallen, taking out smaller trees on its way down, its trunk and roots sodden and unable to hold itself in the land any longer.

Rain kept falling. I wasn't able to make phone calls. Then texts became fickle. Not long after, the internet wasn't working, which meant I couldn't check the Bureau of Meteorology for updates. When the power went, I wasn't surprised, but I also hadn't prepared very well. I rely on electricity to power the pump that sends rainwater up pipes and into taps. I don't have a generator, so I filled big buckets from the small tank under the house, lugging them to the kitchen and bathroom. The two enormous tanks were overflowing and spewing water down the hill. With so much collapsing, I felt the weight of being on my own.

The next night I ran out of food in the fridge. I scoured the pantry with my headtorch looking for dehydrated hiking meals, or even leftover powdered milk. Nothing. But the light beaming from my forehead did find something – a strange texture on the walls and ceiling. After close inspection, I realised all the boards in my raw timber home were covered in a fine light green furry mould, undetectable in daylight. I could even see airborne particles. Breathing felt dangerous and I started searching for vinegar. I also started compiling a list: *Things a person needs when a disaster is happening.*

It occurred to me to tune my clock radio and try to pick up a local signal. Human voices! I heard story after story – helicopters lifting people off roof tops, a mother holding a baby in floodwaters, both crying for help – each led to a surge of tears. Knowing more about



Photo by Sal Singh Photography (@salsinghphotography_)

what was happening out there, realising there were people in real trouble, my grief rushed to the surface. So did fear. I began worrying about everyone and everyone mattered to me. When I learnt that cows were drowning, and understood that many animals would not survive, my sadness grew deeper.

Falling asleep was becoming difficult and the once soothing rhythm of rain landing on the tin roof was now the pounding sound of torment. Fleeting images of a tree falling on my sleeping body, crushing me to death, kept me wide-eyed. Other thoughts that the tree would fall but I might only be injured seemed an even worse

fate with medical care neither contactable nor physically accessible. I yearned for warmth and light and the outside. I reassured myself that despite the inexorable rain, there was still a moon and a sun up there in that dark wet sky.

Eventually, desperately, I could step into the world again. The water over the causeway was too deep for my car, so a neighbour took me to the village in her four-wheel drive, where the general store had no milk or bread but was filled with the chattering of a community in shock. We went to inspect the road that connects us with Murwillumbah and saw cars lining the roadside, more people gathering, marvelling. The entire width of the road had been sliced and crumbled by a landslide; sunlight touching the earthen cake layering beneath thin bitumen. A flash of panic – would we ever get out? A couple of days later, a friend picked me up for our first trip into town with gloves, mops and buckets in hand. Massive chunks had dropped away from the longer, alternative route, but it was travelable, just. Knowing what we were about to see, I was grateful for the company and the ride – my car's gauge showed it was close to empty and there were no operational service stations in town.

Small mountains of muddy rugs, appliances, furniture, books and precious belongings lined the streets of town. My counselling room is perched atop a flight of steps, but the ground floor of the building flooded, as it did in 2017. We, too, made piles of things ready for trucks to take to landfill. The rubbish bins outside, waiting for a collection day that never came, had been toppled by floodwaters, and a few dozen plastic containers floated in the now ever-expanding pond in the park across the road. A home for ducks, corellas, ibises and swamp hens, I too had to stop myself from wading into the murky water.

Inevitably, as my clients' stories unfolded, themes were emerging. Absolute shock that floodwaters rose so quickly: *"But it's never come up that high."* Guilt that their house didn't flood as badly as their neighbour. Guilt that the clean-up had to begin with their own mud-filled home, before helping those who'd lost everything. Guilt that they hadn't lost everything. Shame for believing they had been complacent: *"We thought we lifted things high enough."* Regret. Anger. Let down by an underprepared and overwhelmed State Emergency Service, the delayed army presence and a lack of federal concern. The beginnings of grief. Pangs of sadness. Heads bowed with tears: *"But the last flood was only five years ago."* Uncertainty sinking into all of our bellies and bones.

In late March 2017, ex-tropical cyclone Debbie swept through this flood-prone part of northern New South Wales, known as the Northern Rivers, bringing heavy rain and strong wind. The Tweed River overtopped the levee in Murwillumbah and a little further south, Wilsons River breached the 11-metre Lismore levee for the first time since its construction in 2005, flooding the regional city. When questioned by the media about inaccurate forecasting, the Bureau of Meteorology described the deluge as a "one in a 1,000-year event" and "extraordinary". It would take merely five years for the Wilsons River to overtop the levee again, peaking at a never-seen-before 14 metres.

Like rivers, emotions want to move, and I've learnt to let them flow. When my paternal grandfather passed away, I was 13 years old and my family was living with my grandparents in their Brisbane inner-city workers' cottage. Nonno was sick with lung cancer and when he died, Nonna wore black clothes and a black veil, covering her face for three months. She continued to dress completely in



Photo by Sal Singh Photography (@salsinghphotography_)

black until the one-year anniversary of his death. Over that time, landline calls to and from Italy filled the house with elongated sounds of a heart shattered – full-bodied, high-pitched, moaning and uncontrolled howling – at all hours of the night. The phone was on the other side of our bedroom wall and there was no sheltering us. We witnessed our grandmother allow the truth of what was inside her be expressed in ways that had been passed down to her. She showed us how to trust. Grief moved out of her so she could, once again, step into her colourful floral dresses, cook up family feasts and serenade us with *Arrivederci Roma*.

As the one-year anniversary of the floods was approaching, in late summer, I woke to the faint smell of smoke; my deck view to the Border Ranges that forms the Caldera wall obscured by haze. My senses clocked the wind pick-up and it was already hot. I grabbed my phone and opened the 'Fires Near Me' app, hand frantic, full of memories of our Black Summer in 2019 and 2020. There was a fire 26 kilometres away, as the crow flies, up in the escarpment. And although I read and reread the status: *under control*, I went about my day with caution, more alert. I know my out-of-town, surrounded-by-trees, small timber home will vanish to ash if met with the power of fire.

These days, the ecoanxiety that rumbles in me sometimes feels like disaster anxiety. But I belong to a community, a region, an interconnected ecosystem whose whole is more than the sum of its parts. I remind myself that when big rains are forecast, or when thick grey smoke rises into the sky, so too will our collective

PERSONAL REFLECTION

anxiety. Our bodies remember. Our bodies want to live. We need our neighbours to live, for creek life to thrive, for our rivers to be healthy, for trees to stand tall, for all the beings to be safe.

What gentles anxiety and grief when they call for my attention? Soothing arrives sensually – through what I hear, touch, taste, scent and see – and is easily found in the natural world. There is the beauty of the coming together of people, too. The endless stories of the panicked and disorientated placed into boats of kindness. Make-shift volunteer hubs abuzz with willingness. And Aboriginal organisations, like the *Koori Mail*, with their well-networked arms out-stretched, teaching state and federal governments about true leadership and what it means to holistically care for community. It was sometime later that I realised my sobbing to radio rescue stories was not only grief – it was the spontaneity of a heart overwhelmed and profoundly moved by a glimpse of human beings living out the most astonishing beauty.

A man-made levee, no matter how tall and rigid, cannot confine a wild body of watery depths from curving into the landscape. Can we accept that this power-over relationship, based in the coloniser mindset, is not working? That it's hurtling us headlong towards ecocide? Building inner levees to keep our emotions at bay doesn't work either. Instead, we can allow them to take shape and become their own river within us. When feelings flow, we are nourished and connected because our feelings are shared. And not only our grief but the necessary experiences of our shared joy. The joy of a lifetime on this exquisite planet. A love that wants to entwine with bodies of water, lifegiving trees and the animals and people we share this home with. The floods taught me so much, and I'll keep refining my *Things a person needs when a disaster is happening list*, but the first thing will always say: other people.

Catherine Falco (she/her) is a psychologist and clinical family therapist, with a private practice, Caldera Psychology, located in Bundjalung Country in Murwillumbah, NSW, Australia. She lives on a 12-acre patch, tending a young eucalypt forest; a home for an abundance of birds, goannas, raucous frogs, magical dragonflies, wallabies with joeys, and the occasional koala.



Photo by Sal Singh Photography (@salsinghphotography_)

Let's be kind to refugees Some day we might be one

By Denis Postle

First there was smoke.
Three hillsides away
The Geronde was burning,
Ten thousand evacuated.
There was smoke
Three hillsides away.
We went to bed.
Slept soundly.
Hot. Dry. Still. Silent.
Morning came.
Three hot dry hillsides away
Smoke towering into the sky.
Flames. Huge. Explosive.
A fiery necklace.
Three hot dry hillsides away
The wind? South east.
A helicopter and planes
Water bombing the flames
A climate spectacle.
Three hot dry hillsides away
We watch. Photograph. Film.
Late afternoon.
Thirty-two Centigrade.
On the distant road north
an ambulance wails.
Correction.
Incandescent with blue light.
The Gendarmerie arrive.
'Get out, now.'
'Where to?'
'Vallons.'
'We have to go, now, to Vallons.'
Nicola heard first, then Elmer.
We stared urgency in the face.
Didn't like what we saw.
But action came easily.
For me a spasm of hot dry attention
What was essential?
What could be left?
And some whispers



Photo by Denis Postle

Of what might be lost.
Thirty years of loving this old place
Thirty out of over four hundred years.
Since it had been dug into the hillside.
M. Amand very elderly
(more elderly than me) appears.
'Will he leave with us?'
'Après' (later).
We have to go.
Will he come with us?
'Après'
He declines to get in the car.
(We later discover he thinks
we want to take him to England?)
We have to go.
The nuclear glare in the sky
is relentless
Thirty-four degrees centigrade.
'But what about Yvette?'
Very elderly
(more elderly than me).
She heard no Gendarmerie alert.

Continued overleaf

POEM

A theatre of miscommunication
begins to play
Minutes of broken French later
We back off and ask Barbara, a
familiar fluent French voice, to
call Yvette.
'She is reluctant to
accept your help.'
'They aren't from here,
what do they know?'
Behind Yvette's house
smoke fills the sky.
We are care-stalled.
What to do?
Eight hundred kilometers away
A tie-breaker emerges
Barbara on the phone
'I'll call the Mairie.'
She does that.
Ownership of our problem
shifts to them.
We are free to leave.
Refugees.

As we drive to Vallons
In the centre of a
large plowed field
stand three refugee motor bikes
looking as if they had grown there.
Vallons Pont d'Arc
A camping, canoeing megacentre.
Time, around seven pm
Refugees have needs
Sleep and possibly eat.
We are not penniless.
We have booking.com
Options, options, options.
Discussions are held
Charm is out-voted
by immediacy/exhaustion.
After twenty kilometers
on the road north
through the smoke
and water-dumping helicopters.
we roll our suitcases into a
Minimal, charmfree
bed for the night.
Refugees.

Exhaustion doesn't need food.
I have a peach for dinner.
The shock of being homeless
Coupled with the possible
loss of one deeply loved
iota of civilization
is enough to digest.
But the network is alive
Very late evening
Barbara wakes me.
The wind has changed direction.

We can go back.
In the morning.
Refugee status
has been switched off.
Very un-expected that.
Relief surges gently in.
Two days later.
Three months late
There is rain at last.

Denis Postle, Steel town childhood, grammar school, Sunderland College of Art, Royal College of Art, film director BBC and ITV, 30+ TV films, five books. Group facilitation, University of Surrey, human condition work therapist, co-founder Independent Practitioner Network. Three grandchildren, 40 years on a sailing barge on the Thames. After Brexit, Brussels.

In that loneliness of your spring...

By Pushpa Misra

In an interview with Stephen Bodian, Arne Naess, the founder of the Deep Ecology movement in environmental ethics, says:

When I was nine or ten, I learned to enjoy the high mountains where my mother had a cottage. Because I had no father, the mountain somehow became my father, as a friendly, immensely powerful being, perfect and extremely tranquil [...] Nature is overwhelmingly rich and good and does not impose anything upon us. We are completely free, our imagination is free [...] I never have had the feeling that nature is something to be dominated or conquered; it is something with which we coexist.¹

For some reason, this passage has remained impressed in my mind. I have always felt that we have deep emotional connection with nature, where nature often becomes a substitute for our internal significant objects. Though I am an ardent admirer of Naess, I have often wondered whether it is true of the hilly people of my country, India. My experience of the Himalayan hamlets has one vivid characteristic, namely, the abject poverty in which the people of the hills spend their lives. Naess comes from a rich socio-economic status, but do the people living in the small hamlets of the foothills of the Himalayas have similar sentiments about their surroundings? Or do such refined sentiments evaporate when people have to constantly think about where their next meal is going to come from? Hence, some empirical research was needed in order to understand our psychic reality vis-à-vis nature. I present here some of the findings of the research work done in 2022-2023 from a psychoanalytic point of view, regarding the problem mentioned above.²

Jhelum Podder and myself walking along the hilly road to reach a village near Kalimpong Town for an interview



Development: a necessary evil?

Our research brought out many important parameters in this important relationship. However, I will concentrate only on two parameters and very briefly:

- the current status of the environment in the northern and eastern foothills of the Himalayas, and
- the deeper emotional connection with nature.

I shall begin with the first.

For our field work in the northern foothills of the Himalayas, we chose Suwakholi – an adventure town, about 23 kilometres away from Mussoorie – often called the Queen of the hill stations in India. Mussoorie is situated at a distance of 33.8 kilometres from Dehradun – the capital of the state of Uttarakhand of India. The altitude of Suwakholi is 2,159 metres. We made Suwakholi the centre of our work and visited a total of six villages, including Suwakholi, within a radius of 20 kilometres. The other four villages are: Buranskhanda, Rauto ke Valley (often pronounced as Rauto ki Beli), Dhanolti, Landour and Almas.

For the Eastern foothills we chose the hilly towns of Siliguri, Kurseong and Kalimpong, in the state of West Bengal in India. Kalimpong (altitude 1,247 meters) is 51.3 kilometres from the hill station of Darjeeling, which is famous for its extraordinary scenic beauty, the 8,586-metre-high Kanchenjunga Mountain and its flavourful tea. All three towns are well-developed spots of tourism.

When we asked about the environment, D.S. of Buranskhanda, who was about 53 years of age and looked quite well-off, said:

What to say about environment? I am telling you about our daily routine. In the morning we would get up and go to bring water from spring or somewhere in the forest, then go to school. I had to walk 15km to reach my school. After returning from school, we used to go to the forest again either to cut and bring it home for our cattle or to bring firewood. There was no light, so with the advent of evening, the entire village will drown in darkness. The entire village will be asleep by 8/8.30pm. We used to wake up early in the morning, follow our routine, and amidst all that, we went to school, even to college, we had to do a lot of household work, had to bring our oxen, till the agricultural land, during holidays had to go to the forest, bring firewood, cut grass and do many other household activities. These

1. Bodian, S. (1994). Simple in means, rich in ends: an interview with Arne Naess. In Sessions, G. (Ed.) *Deep ecology for the 21st century*, p.26. Boulder CO: Shambala.

2. This work was done under the supervision of Prof. (Dr) Jayanti Basu of the Applied Psychology Department, University of Calcutta, and I had Dr Jhelum Podder, psychoanalyst, as my assistant. The research was financed by a grant from the International Psychoanalytical Association.

things have become easy now. Now the children don't have to walk that far to go to their school. Schools have come closer now. There is motorable road, there is gas, so no need to bring firewood.

In fact, I myself was surprised seeing the so-called 'development' in the hilly areas. The general lifestyle of the people in hilly areas has improved 10-fold over what it was, say 30 years ago. To prevent the destruction of forest, cooking gas is now provided on a priority basis to every household in mountain areas. Running water is available, so people don't have to walk miles to fetch drinking water. The houses were well-maintained and generally clean. There has been so-called development and there is no doubt that the people of hills now have many more facilities necessary for leading a normal life. There needs to be a lot more done, especially in the health and education sector, but a lot has already been done. One may ask, however, at what cost?

We found a strong, ambivalent attitude in the hill people regarding this development process. They desire the development that has provided them with the basic amenities of life which they were deprived of for hundreds of years. But they all know what it has cost them. The building of big hydroelectric dams has given them electricity, but has drowned many villages. Wild life has become disturbed; the ecological balance has become shaken. Hills are being blasted to widen the roads to increase tourism, leading to the loosening of the roots of the hills and causing much more frequent landslides. They live in constant fear over whether the next landslide will be in their areas.

Children are going out for higher studies and also to foreign countries to earn money; mostly in the Middle Eastern countries. They do not want to engage in the labour-intensive work of agriculture. Also, agriculture has not remained a lucrative option. Rhesus monkeys have proliferated in numbers and destroy the harvest. Hundreds of people are deserting their villages and going to the cities in search of jobs. Those who come back, do not do agriculture, they start some hotel, for example, which is less labour intensive.

Tourism is important, they realise, but it is a necessary evil. Tourists destroy the environment; litter the area with plastic wrappers and bottles. More and more construction is being done to accommodate more and more tourists, which leads to the destruction of forests. Trees are felled. Almost everyone agrees that the atmosphere has become hotter now.

J.R. of Buranskhanda village, 55 years of age and running a very small restaurant, said:

Mam, previously we used to have five feet deep snow. Now we have hardly half-a-foot snow, which becomes clear by itself. About 20/30 years ago, it was very cold during winter. The village used to remain covered in snow for two months [...] The roads used to remain closed for six months – no transportation. But now, even if it is snowing, people will open up a tea stall on the roadside. Cars are coming and going, so business continues.

Interviewer: Did you like it before?

J.R.: Yes, Mam, I liked it before. Now people earn money, but things also have become dearer. Tourism has increased. Previously, no-one bought land here. Now there is no land. Every saleable land has been sold. People from downhill

have come and settled here. There the population has decreased and here the population has increased.

What J.R. said has been echoed by almost everyone we talked with. Rashmi of Landour, a female of 53 years of age with a Master's degree, said:

Mussoorie (claimed to be the most beautiful hill station of India at an altitude of 7,000 feet) used to have heavy rain previously. The wind was clean [...] In November, December, January you will not meet a single person on the road. There were no tourists and there was no smoke from their cars. There used to be heavy snow fall in Mussoorie. Because of this tourism, trees were cut down, so rainfall has become less, landslides have increased, because trees used to hold the earth on the hills, and snowfall has decreased.

However, no one decried the increase in tourism. They accepted it as a necessary evil. It was their main source of income and provides them with the means of buying the basic amenities of life. They know the damage the proliferation of hotels has been doing to their environment, but still they did not condemn it.

I was trying to introspect whether I felt somewhat disappointed with their approach towards nature. Did I harbour the belief that living in the midst of hills, rivers, forests, and being surrounded by mountains, is enough to make people satisfied with their life? Was I expecting too much from them? In spite of whatever facilities they have, they still have to work very hard to earn money. Somewhere, there was a thought in my mind that the people here should be satisfied with less. Could it be that, 30 years ago, I saw them being satisfied with very little, and that I am guided by the image formed so long ago? I remembered Mahatma Gandhi's saying: "The earth has enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed." But isn't that applicable for the people of plains as well? Being discriminatory is not ethically justified.

The northern foothills of the Himalayas near Suwakholi in Tehri Garhwal district



Relationship with nature

Humanity's relationship with nature has another aspect as well. This aspect is free from any materialistic gains, any demands from nature. It is related to the deep connection we form with what nature has given us, silently, without demanding any price – the freedom of imagination, liberation from narrow selfishness, a place to weep and cry and laugh, to talk with the trees and feel the coolness of the wind – all the priceless commodities! Below is part of a conversation I had with R.P. of Landour:

Whenever I had a fight with my mother or my brothers/sisters, I would put on my shoes and run towards the forest. Didn't care whether it is hot or raining. After entering the forest, I used to scream loudly, Ohhhhhhhhhhh, and I would feel peace slowly creeping in my mind. The voice would come back to me. As I screamed, my mind became calm, peaceful.

I went to Ireland and sometimes, when I missed my family strongly, I would go near the Atlantic Ocean, which was about three and half miles away from my place. I would sit on the shore and my mind would become calm. I like the strong wind near the ocean. I think the forest, the ocean, the high wind – they all somehow enhance our personalities [...] if I had to cry, I used to go near the spring and drench my face with the spring water so that no one could see that I was crying [...] if I ever cried, I cried only in the forest

Pushpa: *So, when you feel troubled and sad, you get relief from nature only. You feel comforted in the lap of Mother Nature. You shout, you communicate your sorrow to the nature [...] and nature provides you with a shelter like a mother.*

This is another parameter of our relation with nature. As I uttered these sentences, I thought of Arne Naess.

I also thought of T.S. of Kalimpong. T.S. is a highly educated man in his mid-40s. Coming from a rich family, his father had a lot of land and had planted many trees. T.S. took care of those trees – mostly bamboo trees which grew up into a forest. Many people advised him to sell the trees, which would bring him a huge amount of money. T.S. refused. He has preserved all the trees, and showed us the bamboo forest he has created. Their land is slightly downhill, and T.S. often goes there for an hour or two. No-one knows what he does there. He said: "My wife asks me what do I do during those one or two hours. I tell her, come, and see for yourself." He relaxes there, remains in the midst of nature all alone and sometimes even sleeps there at night. He said: "When I come back, my face changes. There is a shine on my face and that is why my wife asks this question." Forests and mountain also give you a transformative experience.

I thought too that very few people in the hills had explicitly talked about their surroundings or any uplifting experience as T.S. had done. I had asked them: "Do you think of your beautiful surroundings and what does this mean to you?" Almost everyone had replied: "Our mountains and rivers and springs are always with us. We do not have to think about them separately." I had asked them: "Suppose you were given all the amenities and facilities in the plains. Would you like to go and live there?" The answers were always negative. Nature probably works within our psyche silently. It remains in our mind as the background of our experiences, our thinking and our



emotions. Many of the people who had gone to cities from the hills, come back after retirement and also during festive occasions, consciously to feel the surroundings they had grown up in.

Is the return of hill people to their original villages like coming back to Mother Nature, like coming back to mother? As Kohut has said, we need our self objects throughout our lives. Does the natural environment become their self object, the image of which becomes part of our psyche? In spite of all the trouble and deprivations the hilly people had experienced during their childhood, they still cherished the walks they had had through the forests going to school, the free, unrestricted, natural environment, and the vastness of the expanse.

Let us see what G.G., a 55-year-old woman working in an organisation related to the prevention of domestic violence in Kolkata, says:

I had a very ordinary life. I was thinking how nature came in my life. I remember that the house I lived in during childhood had many small plants [...] It's not that I had strong attraction towards trees, sky, nature, etc. But as I became older, I started looking for an organisation that works with nature and within nature. I cannot grow plants and that is something that pains me very much [...] I did not have any specific liking for mountains, but now these days mountains attract me very strongly – their immensity, tranquillity, attracts me very much.

She feels very troubled and sad that half of the Amazon Forest has been destroyed, that there is illegal mining of sand and rocks, that land is being lost in the stream of the Ganges. She further said that, after retirement, she would sponsor a baby elephant.

Pushpa: *Why a baby elephant of all the animals?*

G.G: *First of all, elephants are very intelligent. The strange immensity of elephants attracts me very much. Also, that they live in herds very peacefully. I have a strong craving*

GROUP DIALOGUE

for that. I just want to hug a baby elephant [...] I just want to live in nature when I retire. That's a very, very strong desire.

Pushpa: Could it be that you have turned to nature because of the troubled married life you had?

G.G: Possible. Though we all say, we are alone as human beings, but we all seek some kind of shelter. Some seek shelter in books, some in other people, and some in nature. I have probably taken shelter in nature. Somewhere I feel it gives me a strange kind of peace... to be one with nature! I feel that so long as your parents are alive, they accept you as you are. After that, where do you get this kind of shelter? Everyone else judges you, nature does not.

R.P., T.S., D.P.S. and G.G. live thousands of miles apart. They have never seen each other, never known each other, yet their craving for nature is related to the same emotional need of having someone hold them, to contain them in a silent, non-demanding way. All of them have talked about the immensity and the vastness of nature. Is this the reason why hilly people have ambivalence towards development? They get something in a concrete way. But they also lose a lot that is abstract and non-material, and they are aware of it. Somewhere, this conflict in their minds gave me some peace of mind. I felt I could understand and feel their helplessness.



Pushpa Mishra After doing her PhD at the University of Rochester, New York, Dr Misra did her post-doctoral research as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research work, *The scientific status of psychoanalysis: evidence and confirmation*, is published by Karnac. Dr Misra is a practising psychoanalyst and a former President of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society.

Power to the people

By John Keane

I grew up in south Wales into a life many across the UK would recognise. School, playing sports, rugby, football, doing the local paper round. When the time came, I headed off to university in Cardiff to study a subject I knew very little about, but one which I felt was important in helping shape the world we live in and experience each day – something I felt would help make the world a better place: town planning. I realise that might sound like a joke!

After graduating, I became a professional town planner, working in the private sector. I had a decent job and, from a certain perspective, you could say I was doing well. But I was not happy. As an energetic 25-year-old, with dreams of making the world a better place, I was devoting most of my time to things like helping large supermarkets get planning permission for extensions. This was not the dream. That is not to say town planning is not important – it just was not inspiring me. Surely there was more to life.

So, in December 1999, I wrote down 10 New Year's resolutions. I no longer have that list, but I know it included things like: 1) Forge a career path which improves the environment, which promotes renewable energy; 2) A career which does not keep me behind a desk most of the time; 3) Something which inspires me and makes the world a better place; 4) Work internationally.

In short, I was searching for a stronger sense of purpose. I had resolved to leave my career and start afresh. In doing so, I was also leaving behind my long-term girlfriend of the time, who must have found it difficult to deal with someone dreaming of something more. An unhappy person can't be a very fun person to be with.

Ten months later, I had moved into the village of Uhomini in rural Tanzania, as an SPW (Student Partnerships Worldwide) volunteer, to work within their Environment Programme. This was a world I very much did not recognise. I remember panicking slightly on the bus to the village for the first time... My Kiswahili was only a month old and pretty basic, so I spent a couple of hours cramming some vocab for words I thought would be useful, like 'firewood' (*Kuni*). As volunteers, we were there to help promote fuel efficient stoves and partner with community groups to help set up income generation projects – including small pig farms.

I would say that I learned a lot more from this wonderful rural community than it learned from me. I learned how wonderful rural communities can be – full of life and children. I also got a glimpse of how hard life can be with people living in basic homes with mud walls, no running water or electricity and drop toilets. No trappings of modern life here. We carried water into the house in buckets. People were cooking with firewood collected from the local forest; inhaling smoke every single day. Candles and kerosene lamps were being used to light homes. One of our neighbour's homes, with a straw roof, burned down while we were there.

The fumes of kerosene made me feel sick, so I found it easier to cut my days short and just to go to bed early. With walls and floors of mud, rats and mice moved into our home. All in all, our living standards were not high and I began to understand why life expectancy is so much lower in communities like these. Indeed,

within just a few months, we had attended many funerals and I myself had managed to fall ill with typhoid, malaria and other infections – none of which could be diagnosed or treated in the village and would necessitate long, uncomfortable, bus journeys back to Iringa town.

After months of living in the village, I wondered to myself: "Will life in Uhomini be the same next year? Answer: Yes." "Will it be the same in 10 years? Answer: Pretty likely." I started thinking: "How can we overcome these challenges?"

It was then that I really focused my mind on whether small solar panels could help provide clean, safe, energy to improve this rural context. I enrolled on Open University courses to study renewables. I also searched on Yahoo for small, affordable, solar solutions (this was in 2001). I found a retired teacher in Ashford, Kent, promoting 'DIY solar', which involved using handheld glass cutters to slice up large solar panels into small ones, in order to power small devices like radios and LED lights.

I decided to devote the next phase of my life to trying to change the way rural communities powered their homes. Working together with other like-minded spirits and communities, I began to introduce the concept of small solar solutions to youth groups in Kenya and Tanzania. The work began to gain the world's attention, with articles appearing.¹ CNN also covered these projects on their Global Challenges programme. These were projects that I was essentially funding from the £10,000 of wages I had saved up as a town planner.

I say I funded this – but that is not quite true. Everything I did was in partnership. I was not giving solar panels away. I was working with local entrepreneurs, helping them to set up businesses making and selling solar panels. The goal was for these entrepreneurs to grow and no longer be reliant on me. It worked.

1. Such as this one: Hicks, C. (2004). *Kenya slum turns sun into energy* [online]. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4001061.stm> [Accessed 18 May 2023]



Photo: SolarAid/Thoko Chikondi

PERSONAL REFLECTION

But I then ran out of money and did one of the hardest things I have ever done. I returned to my old town planning job... but only on an interim basis. I had seen and done enough to know I had to continue this solar journey. It was now 2006 and the stars aligned. A new charity called SolarAid was being established and they loved the concept of the work I was doing, which was, essentially, trying to pioneer a solar revolution, using business-based solutions to fighting poverty. The goal was simple: to help create a solar market which would change the way some of the world's poorest people power their homes, one solar panel at a time. I joined SolarAid as its second member of staff and we quickly realised that the name SolarAid was imperfect.

With a long legacy of aid work across Africa, it was obvious that the name SolarAid should not be at the forefront of the work we do to help entrepreneurs establish solar enterprises. Instead, we set up SunnyMoney as a social enterprise that could partner with individuals and groups to set up local energy businesses. Today, SunnyMoney has worked with entrepreneurs across Malawi, Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal, helping distribute over two million solar lights and products.

At one point in time, SunnyMoney was the largest distributor of solar lights on the continent; going from sales of a couple of hundred solar lights a month to over 60,000 a month. It was working. But, the long hours, fuelled by the passion of helping effect such rapid and meaningful change, was taking its toll. By the end of 2015, with a young family, I was on the verge of, what felt at the time like burn out. I was proud of the work we were doing, but I needed time out.

The good news here, however, is that I got that break and, more importantly, a vibrant solar sector was now growing across the

Photo: SolarAid/Thoko Chikondi



Photo: SolarAid/Jason J. Mulikita.

continent, helping power tens of millions of rural homes each night. The crucial point being that we were not trying to create a culture of 'beneficiaries', but one of partnership and enterprise. We were trying to put ourselves out of a job and we could, right now, close down and feel proud of what we have achieved.

Indeed, in 2019, when I was diagnosed with stage 3 blood cancer and faced with the very real threat of impending mortality, I was grateful to have had the fortune to be able to pursue a dream. I was also fortunate that a brutal, but life-saving, few months of chemotherapy, was able to save me and I had the choice of being able to continue the journey.

So, of course, that's not the end of the story.

While there are now more people using solar to power their homes across Africa than ever before, there are limits to market-based approaches, which struggle to serve the poorest, hardest-to-reach populations. It is these very populations, meanwhile, which are the most vulnerable to the effects of the unfolding climate crisis.

With over 570 million people still living without access to electricity across sub-Saharan Africa, there is still a long way to go to ensure that everyone has access to electricity by 2030. This is why SolarAid exists: to fight poverty and climate change. Access to electricity not only helps increase standards of living, it also helps to build stronger, more resilient economies and communities.

The next great challenge, therefore, is to find new, game-changing, innovative models, which work hand in hand with the solar marketplace, to bring solar light and power to homes and communities currently being left behind. With an estimated three out of four health facilities lacking reliable access to electricity, un-electrified schools across the continent and rural economies unable to thrive due to lack of electricity, this is one of the world's great challenges. I feel privileged and energised that I am no longer an individual with a dream to effect change one solar panel at a time, but part of a growing movement – a movement fighting poverty, fighting climate change, working to make the dream of a world where everyone has access to clean, renewable energy, a reality.

John Keane is the CEO of the international charity, SolarAid and its social enterprise, SunnyMoney. The charity exists to fight poverty and climate change by increasing access to solar-powered light and electricity across sub-Saharan Africa. John is based in Lusaka, Zambia, together with his wife and two daughters.

An imperceptible boundary

By **Abbie-Eve Valentine**

An imperceptible boundary
Is all sharp edges,
It splits me in two –
I'm ruptured and ripped, like a birthing pain.

It's an agony of aeons,
whose form is a sisterly sorrow.
Some do not see
This red hollow.

It swallows sides in the stillness.
Still and silent.

All except that thump
The sound of my sister's fists
beating on the drum:
This will end
This will end
This will end.



Photo by Toby Chown

Abbie Eve Valentine MSc. I am a mother, climate café facilitator, environmentalist, and postgrad student. I have written poetry and short stories since I was a child, and use this as a creative outlet for climate distress. I grow food for my family and seem to spend most of my free time picking slugs off my lettuce.

Witnessing in the accompaniment of frontline communities resisting mining

Text and photos by Garret Barnwell

I have worked for several years with fenceline communities (people affected by and living adjacent to mines) who are resisting exploitative and violent conditions associated with establishing and expanding mining in South Africa. Through this work, which spans research, documentation and advocacy, I have come to understand how mining takes hold in communities as another form of alienation – a robbery.

To understand this robbery, we must step back to see capitalism as a language that structures a particular way of knowing and being. For example, as it operates worldwide today, mining is integral to capitalist modes of being. Capitalism devalues and exploits the more-than-human world through language, by deeming life an economic object and a commodity for constructing its identity (Shapiro and McNeish, 2021).¹ Through mining, capitalism thus reaffirms itself. This *modus operandi* is sometimes in stark contrast to other ways of knowing and being in the world.

For instance, Indigenous ways of being in the world may listen to, and speak of, the world as being co-created through kinship between other beings, spiritual connections and place relationships. Moreover, values may be attributed differently, with nature having specific rights to co-exist, reproduce and thrive – as we see with traditional rights of nature discourses (Shiva, 2020).² Also, unlike capitalism, which treats territories or other beings as open-access systems to be colonised, Indigenous ways of being in the world recognise the sovereignty of the more-than-human world.

1. Alienation

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan reiterated throughout his work that we come into being through the language of the Other: (Fink, 1995 and Lacan, 1975).^{3,4} He meant that, as speaking beings, the meanings, symbols and laws that structure our world are inscribed by the language of other people in society. What is communicated or withheld, what is allowed or not allowed to be said, largely influences our sense of becoming in the world and shapes our knowledge.

For example, when we are born, we enter into the language of our parents (Cantin, 2002).⁵ What they name us, their desire for us and how they communicate their understanding of the world, all contribute to how we become who we are. Their language is interwoven with the broader language (e.g., laws, norms, cultural meanings) structuring society, which Lacan calls the ‘Symbolic Order’. Whether our parents recognise us through love, respect and genuine interest determines how we relate to and enter into this Symbolic Order.

At these moments, Lacanians assert that we encounter a choice of taking on the language of the Other (Fimiani, 2021).⁶ When we are younger, this choice is false. Lacan compared it to being robbed: “Your money or your life.” If we do not take on the Other’s language, we may not survive. For instance, we must communicate to meet our needs and adapt and thrive within a world already

structured by language. Taking on this language can be seen as a life-affirming act because, if we do not, as in the case of domestic violence, we can put ourselves in radical opposition to the rest of society.

However, in taking on this language of the Other, we undergo an alienating process where aspects of ourselves that are beyond language, and at times, in closer attunement with the more-than-human world, can become alienated. This is because our relationship with the corporeality of the material world can never be fully articulated within language. Importantly, through this process, we become split subjects whose unconscious is ordered by society’s ideals, demands and desires, while also being alienated within this existence due to the indescribable losses we suffer (Fink, 1995).⁷

2. Empty speech

In the establishment and expansion of mining in communities, capitalism presents a similar choice through the guise of public participatory processes that allege communities have the right to say ‘no’ to mining. Some people are placed in impossible situations – “Your money or your life”.

For instance, in one of the areas where I’ve worked, land defenders who have received death threats because of resisting mining take on these risks as they still have deep spiritual connections to their ancestors and their grave sites. Traditional beliefs come up against the desire to extract at all costs. In this situation, one of the herders

1. Shapiro, J. and McNeish, J.-A. (2021). (Eds.) *Our extractive age: expressions of violence and resistance*. London: Routledge. (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003127611>)

2. Shiva, V. (2020). *Reclaiming the commons: in defense of biodiversity, traditional knowledge and the rights of mother earth*. Santa Fe and London: Synergetic Press.

3. Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: between language and jouissance*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

4. Lacan, J. (1975). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book 1: Freud's papers on technique 1953-1954*. Reprint, translated by Forrester, J. and edited by Miller, J.-A. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc (1988).

5. Cantin, L. (2002). The trauma of language. In: Apollon, W., Bergeron, D., and Cantin, L. (Eds.), *After Lacan: clinical practice and the subject of the unconscious*, pp.35-48. State University of New York Press.

6. Fimiani, B. (2021). *Psychosis and extreme states: an ethic for treatment*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. (<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75440-2>)

7. Fink, B., *op. cit.*

I spoke with described how he was making a terrible choice in taking what the mine had financially offered him to mine his ancestral land:

I would rather deal with the pain of exhuming my family members' bodies – even though I would not want to – rather than placing the rest of my family at risk of being killed.

Such terrible choices are common. They are also reflected in public participatory processes which are similarly structured by capitalism's logic – a language that stifles open communication and closes speech – or, let me say, promotes empty speech.

Lacan differentiates between empty and full speech (Hook, 2011).⁸ To simplify, empty speech is devoid of the subject's knowledge, such as when they are being talked at rather than being heard. In contrast, full speech recognises the subject's knowledge concerning the Symbolic Order; providing them with a set of socio-symbolic coordinates, which tie them to roles and social contracts. Therefore, closing down public participatory spaces is a form of empty speech, as it consolidates the egoic nature of capitalism, disregarding social links and a meaningful role in public participation processes. Communities cannot speak freely, remain unheard, and are presented with hard choices of life or death.

For instance, discussions I have witnessed often focus on the measurable impacts of mining, such as the relocation of communities to avoid exposure, rather than what Skosana (2022)⁹ refers to as the intangible losses, such as the loss of ancestral connections to place and the meanings inscribed in a homestead. Those who speak of indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world are often labelled as “anti-development” and “backwards” and consequently silenced as a threat. Participation is closed down through labelling, as well as excluding specific topics, misrecognising discussed issues through exclusion in report writing, and coercion – such as targeting or killing those resisting (Lawlor, 2021a; Lawlor, 2021b; Menton and Le Billion, 2021).^{10, 11, 12} Many people are killed yearly, protecting their way of life (Le Billion and Lujala, 2021).¹³ It is important to emphasise that this process of coming into being through the Other's language – in this case, extractive capitalism – can be traumatising (Cantin, 2002).¹⁴ By entering into the Other's language, something is always left behind that cannot be entirely spoken and doesn't quite fit within the Other's language or desires. I would argue that depending on what language is taken on, this loss can be insurmountable. The desire of the Other can be brutal – as fenceline communities resisting mining around the world well know.

Taking on the language presented in these public participatory processes guarantees irreparable alienation from one's way of knowing and being in the world. Succumbing to the Other's language leads to the clearing of indigenous vegetation, displacing peoples from their ancestral land, and severing the psychological relationship to place; a traumatic process, which I have termed *place severing* (Barnwell et al., 2021; and Barnwell, G., 2022).^{15, 16}

3. Witnessing

Land and environmental defenders resisting mining are often engaged in life struggles that go beyond the economic and environmental impacts of mining (Menton and Le Billion, 2021).¹⁷ These struggles are rooted in the community's intangible cultural and social fabric, including their connection to the land, their traditions and their identity as a people. As a community psychology practitioner, I

recognise the importance of strategically witnessing and accompanying these struggles (Watkins, 2019).¹⁸

I am approached by communities or others accompanying such struggles (e.g., legal organisations) to document the impacts of mining. My praxis in the process of documentation and participation is always consensual. For example, I have worked with communities in Limpopo Province in South Africa, witnessing their psychological relationship with place, the significance of indigenous knowledge systems and their solid psychological connection to place and identity, despite historical land dispossessions under the apartheid regime. Many of these forceful removals took place to establish commercial pine farms, game farms and even nature reserves.

In at least one case, where mining threatens sacred sites and associated public participatory processes are sidelining people,

8. Hook, D. (2011). Empty and full speech. In Hook, D., Fransk, B., and Bauer, M. W. (Eds.) *The social psychology of communication*, pp.187–208. Palgrave Macmillan UK. (https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230297616_10)

9. Skosana, D. (2022). Grave matters: dispossession and the desecration of ancestral graves by mining corporations in South Africa. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 40(1), 47–62. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2021.1926937>)

10. Lawlor, M. (2021a). *Final warning: death threats and killings of human rights defenders – report of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/46/35> [Accessed 16 May 2023]

11. Lawlor, M. (2021b). *States in denial: the long-term detention of human rights defenders – report of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/76/143> [Accessed 16 May 2023]

12. Menton, M., and Le Billion, P. (2021). *Environmental defenders: deadly struggles for life and territory*. Abingdon: Routledge.

13. Le Billion, P., and Lujala, P. (2021). Environmental defenders: killings, perpetrators, and drivers of violence. In Menton, M., and Le Billion, P. (Eds.) *Environmental defenders: deadly struggles for life and territory*, pp. 64-75. Abingdon: Routledge.

14. Cantin, L., *op. cit.*

15. Barnwell, G., Makaulule, M., Stroud, L., Watson, M., and Dima, M. (2021). The lived experiences of place severing and decolonial resurgence in Vhembe District, South Africa. *AWRY Journal of Critical Psychology*, 2(1), 49–68. Available at: <https://awryjcp.com/index.php/awry/article/view/39/18> [Accessed 16 May 2023]

16. Barnwell, G. (2022). *Psychological report: everything for dust: the collective trauma of opencast coal mining on residents in Somkhele, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*. ALL RISE Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dGITzkBi6SLPe5s5WxwOs7ZQ1NDLDPDy/view> [Accessed 16 May 2023]

17. Menton, M., and Le Billion, P. (2021), *op. cit.*

18. Watkins, M. (2019). *Mutual accompaniment and the creation of the commons*. New Haven and London: Yale Books.

FEATURE

guardians formally asked me to be a witness to community-self-organised hearings, depicted in the image below (Earthlife Africa, 2021).¹⁹



In response to this witnessing, I submitted a report, documenting the clear psychological connection between guardians and their sacred natural sites, to the public participatory processes. Such reports have been cited in legal challenges contesting land clearing for the purpose of establishing extractive industries in the area.

More recently, I have also documented the violent process and psychological consequences of dislocation from ancestral lands to allow for the development of an opencast coal mine in KwaZulu Nata in South Africa (Barnwell, 2022).²⁰ For example, the image below portrays water contaminated by coal dust.



This report has been used to raise awareness of the atmosphere of violence that mining creates, calling for reparations and challenging how mining engages with the community.²¹

My process varies, but what is central is the act of witnessing, whereby I listen to the voices and experiences of community members, particularly those that are often silenced or ignored in capitalism's language. I usually begin by walking the land with them, listening to their stories, and recognising the significance of their indigenous knowledge so that I can better understand their struggles and the depth of the impact that mining would have on their lives. I often take photos to show the relationship with place. For example, the image below shows a picture being drawn by an Indigenous beekeeper while mapping his connection between his identity, bees and ancestral obligations.



This process centres the psychological connection to place and may to some extent counter the pain and trauma of being forced into the language of the Other. It seeks to witness what is often alienated.

In addition, we discuss the process of adopting the language used in public participation and I inquire about any threats encountered during such processes, whether directly in meetings or perceived to be associated with the broader process. I have come to recognise through the testimonies of others that the language and procedures used in public participation are often designed to prevent the voices of these communities from being heard, misrecognising

19. Earthlife Africa (2021). *With people's public eco-mapping hearings, locals get a chance to decide on MMSEZ Plans*. [Online] Available at: <https://earthlife.org.za/with-peoples-public-eco-mapping-hearings-locals-get-a-chance-to-decide-on-mmsez-plans/> [Accessed 16 May 2023]

20. Barnwell, G. (2022), *op. cit.*

21. All Rise (2022). *Everything for dust*. Webinar available at: <https://allrise.org.za/psychological-report-released-highlighting-the-mental-health-harm-to-communities-living-next-to-open-cast-coal-mine%E2%80%9C/>

and silencing them. Incidents often involve extreme acts of silencing, such as acts of aggression and killings outside of meetings.

These situations are examples of empty speech. To counter them, I pay close attention and document engagements that lack the subjective experiences of those affected in the interactions between mining companies and communities. I formulate what is spoken into a report, which is then utilised by the community through legal organisations representing them, or through their own emergent process. As an accompanying witness, my role is to give community members space to speak and find ways in which there can be amplification, if I am called to do so (Watkins, 2021).²² For example, my reports act as evidence to support people's resistance, and to challenge structures of power, such as through litigation.

Finally, the witnessing process empowers community members to speak openly about the potential impacts of mining on their lives and future. By recognising the potential benefits, as well as the intangible losses and compromises that would be made, they can express their desired choices grounded in their cultural values, sense of identity and vision for their community's future, without the extreme pressures that are placed on them in other mine-related processes.

Allowing a person to speak freely and avoiding closing down speech by asserting a bias of opinion or desired outcome is crucial, as the act of listening and documenting brings to light what is not permitted or is misrepresented through capitalist logic.

To ensure the contextual validity of my writing before the reports are released, I may gather with those who participated in the process.

For example, the image below was taken when I was working through a report with an Indigenous environmental justice group, Dzomo La Mupo, which is seeking to protect sacred natural sites in Limpopo Province in South Africa.

During our discussions, each paragraph and conclusion is reviewed, and it is decided whether it accurately reflects the community's experiences. I seek their consent for any information to be included in the report. Where reports offer recommendations, I also ask community members what they would like to have, rather than formulating these solely relying on my 'expertise'.

In feedback, I was told that my reports had witnessed aspects which often felt unseen, silenced and excluded. I am not fixed on

the report's use and have seen how reports are taken up by those whose stories they tell. For instance, recently, I was contacted by a Chief who said he was using the report as part of their formal land restitution process.

I believe such witnessing can surmount to an act of full speech, which Lacan explains, "aims at, which forms, the truth such as it becomes established in the recognition of one person by another".²³

I believe that such approaches – rooted in decolonial and psychoanalytic knowledge – are critical in these times to resist capitalism and prevent further estrangement from the more-than-human world.



Dr Garret Barnwell is a South African clinical psychologist and a research associate at the University of Johannesburg's Psychology Department. In addition to a psychotherapeutic practice, he provides expertise on various issues, including for Doctors Without Border, the youth-led #CancelCoal case for the Centre for Environmental Rights, and for All Rise Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice.

22. Watkins, M. (2021). Toward a decolonial approach to psychosocial accompaniment from the "outside". In Stevens, G., Sonn, C. C. (Eds.) Decoloniality and epistemic justice in contemporary community psychology. *Community Psychology*. Cham: Springer. (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72220-3_6)

23. Lacan, J. (1975), *op. cit.*

Widening the frame of climate psychology

A group dialogue among CPA members, convened by Rembrandt Zegers

Edited by Rembrandt Zegers and Sally Gillespie

For this edition of *Explorations*, we sent out an invitation to CPA members to join a group dialogue on the theme of 'Widening the frame of climate psychology'. The invitation highlighted two avenues of possible exploration. Firstly, widening the conceptual frame of climate psychology, looking at the entanglement of climate with political, economic, ecological and justice issues. Secondly, widening the geographical frame to take in situations and understandings from all parts of the world. Jennifer Fendya, Jenny O'Gorman, Denis Postle, Rebecca Weston and Rembrandt Zegers all answered the call. This is what emerged.

We began by answering the question: "What resonates with you when thinking about widening the frame of climate psychology?"

Jenny: Well, part of what drew me in when I saw the invitation was the sense that there are actually a lot of conversations around climate breakdown and environmental disruptions going on which often get turned into a frame of experts giving information, or one person or a group of people presenting what needs to be done. This often feels to me like a replication of the current systems in the world, the idea of doing to or providing, or experts having information which is extracted from the planet, in a similar sort of way as fossil fuels are.

I like co-creative spaces where there's more of a flat or self-organising structure. I don't see that in too many spaces, although I do see efforts to create them. But then, often, hierarchy is developing, or people are maybe expecting a hierarchy, treating the organisation or the group as if there is one, even when there is no intentional development of one. I guess part of widening the frame for me is to continuously challenge myself to notice when these things are happening; to be able to address them. And then, rather than to allow these shadow hierarchies to form, I like to be open to include whatever it is that wants to be said.

Since I am disabled, I often think about ways of bringing conversations and points of activism into different formats. So, things like protests, for example. I can join them, but I'm limited in how long or how much I can do. And there's often a sense within me of not doing enough. I guess, thinking about all of the different ways that activism can look is also part of widening the frame to me. There is no one way of doing it. That's part of this same idea of replicating old structures. I think the drive to be perfect or 'enough' is something to do with the sense of always having to be productive in this capitalist mindset, which I think needs to be dislodged in order for us to create something new. A world that fits everybody, regardless of what standard we set for ourselves or each other; just being able to accept ourselves as we are, rather than always having these imaginary goalposts. That is what drew me into this dialogue; the idea of having a conversation in a different kind of space.



'Flying' by Alissa Di Franco

Denis: For me, it has been very difficult for a long time to find other people who want to have this sort of conversation about widening the frame. I see myself as the relative newbie; five or seven years of researching movies about the climate. One of the things that I discovered in a way quite shocking is that we could do more with looking at scale. It's all very well doing what we normally do and what we can do well, but then I discovered the global scale of the issue. Partly, I found this through a practical thing that really anybody can do, which is to get a copy of Google Earth and look at the scale of human occupation of the planet, the scale of palm oil production in Indonesia. I find it difficult to believe that there is so much of it. Similarly, cities. For instance, looking at Tokyo, just the sheer scale of cities. The enormity of scale of the climate crisis is very present and it shocks me.

Two other notions I'd like to share which are coupled. First of all, this sense I have of 'category error', that there's nature and there's us. The idea that there's any distinction between what we consider human activity and the rest of nature's activity. I think of it as a mistaken framing that we apply to 'the problem'. I also see it shifting somewhat into the direction of a bit more awareness that we're all nature. And the other shift of frame that goes with that is seeing the combination of forests, fields, oceans, cities and even business, all as a life form, including, I hesitate to say, even capitalism, as a form of wilderness. Birds build nests, beavers build dams, people build houses and bridges. All of it is structured as wilderness, of growth and decay, and so on. I wanted to join the dialogue because of a widening of the frame; both in the direction of conceptual changes, but maybe more so due to how they direct my experience.

Rebecca: I find a lot of value in what has been said already, triggering my curiosity and interest. My own history is that I was a social and political activist before I was a clinician. I focused a great deal on the civil rights movement in the United States, the divestment movement in South Africa, workers rights, abortion rights, police brutality. And I have always been one who organises protests, strikes, marches on capitals, occupations of offices. Those are the things that I have done a great deal. I've gotten arrested. None of those things strike me as outlandish, or scary, if anything quite the opposite. So, I come from a place of a very specific and traditional political activism. And that always felt really important; the collectiveness of it, the way in which people change through collective struggle. Their ideas change, their sense of capacity changes, their sense of themselves, and what can happen in the world changes in those processes. I continue to find that extraordinary. And at the same time, it never felt it was fully speaking to the interpersonal and what needs to happen at the individual level. How do we understand the way the world impacts our individual psyches and our individual sense of self and capacity and alienation? I have always struggled to know how to think about those frames. What's the dialectic between the individual, the collective, the broader social and the systemic? I'm drawn to that question and always have been. I think climate psychology is, in some ways, the most recent iteration.

I think for people who've struggled against imperialism, against nuclear war, against racist housing or policing, people who struggle against oppression and for justice in all sorts of ways, the frame has always been a question and has always been politically and ideologically challenged. I don't think this is the first time. And I don't think my ideas are particularly new. It is just the newest iteration, the newest challenge to the politics of the frame. It is a most vital moment that we do that, because of what it implies globally and for species survival. So, when I think about widening the frame, the first way, certainly is about how do we genuinely and creatively address that issue of scale. Denis referred to it. How do we do that? Because I don't fundamentally believe we will survive as a species if we don't address it at scale. And I don't mean that metaphorically. I wish I did. I guess the second way I want to think about the frame is I believe that the professionalism of the whole process is a problem. And I think that is what Jenny was saying about the experts' idea. I am moving in the direction of anti-professionalism, of anti 'the expert'. What we need is to broaden who is able to speak on these issues, who is able to provide care on these issues and draw on healing and resiliency practices that have nothing to do with the letters behind our names. Professionalism is part of the problem. It is a way in which people start to make exceptions about whether or not they should or can be involved. I don't think, frankly, it's rocket science. I don't think we need extraordinarily complex theoretical orientations to justify why we need to be part of solving the climate crisis. If anything, I want to break down that distinction between a professional and a human. I want us to break out of the professional and respond to the crisis as human beings fighting for our children, our loved ones, our planet. And I want to think about how to do that.

Jennifer: I've jotted down a few things, knowing I would join this dialogue. I will pick a few. I thought about widening the frame in terms of myself internally. My training is in depth and Jungian psychology, so I thought about doing my own shadow work. And I think that is a thread throughout my considerations, it is really about humility, about my knowledge or lack thereof, about earth

systems, and the narrowness of our Western educations. I guess I am feeling the frame of my limitation, the limitations of my understandings of how things really work. Then, within my practice of psychology, again thinking about diverse ways of knowing. And, as I have moved out of my office as a nature and forest bathing guide, expanding or widening the frame that way, of being in nature and exploring non-human languages that are tied to place. And how do we understand these other beings? And then, within our field, I think embodiment is really starting to make a whole lot of sense to me, and the somatic practices, about how we carry ourselves, how we express ourselves, what is happening with our bodies as we move through time and space. And with that comes translation rather than interpretation, and concern for wholeness and interdependence, rather than mastery and homogenisation. I think that speaks to both Jenny and Rebecca's concerns about hierarchy and experts and professionalism, and all the 'problems' that come with that. I came across a phrase this morning in a book – "brain chauvinism". We walk around thinking that our thinking is kind of the be all and end all. Well, there are lots of intelligences in the world that don't rely on a brain. I find that very fascinating. Can we think beyond our expectations for how things should be, or how things are?

Rembrandt: I want to start with saying that the Climate Psychology Alliance is a place for me where I can have conversations like this. I can jump in because I trust that I am part of this network which I trust. I'm very much into this question of widening the frame or, if I rephrase it, this question of what is happening, what is real, and not a conspiracy. For instance, when I do my yoga, which I have taken up again, I have a sense of the presence of people and things and a sense of connection. To me, that is interesting and difficult to grasp other than through my body. When it is about my brain, I find myself grasping fragments. Still, I guess I try working with these fragments.

At the moment I am trying to grasp climate psychology in political terms. For instance, the people who talk about Degrowth provide me with new insights, I feel like this thinking is a new resource. I am not an expert in economic theory, but Degrowth comes to a different position or an idea about economy. I find that important and interesting. I am also trying to learn more of Indigenous wisdom. Other worlds are helping me to see more sharply Western ideas about humans or Western views of the world. I think I am closer to sensing what dominant Western ideas do to me and others, what we are caught up in. Lately that is stories about capital. The grip of capital accumulation starts to make sense to me, I start to see and feel it. And it helps me to feel more confident, to understand that there are conversations to have and directions to take.

Although I don't believe we will survive, I have hope. Now I think that the meaning of this conversation is actually us. It's for us as an experience in the moment, although writing it up and sharing it can mean something for others.

From here, the conversation opened up into an exploration of ways of being which challenge dominant frames, while energising relationality.

Rebecca: The longer I'm engaged in clinical practice – and I've been doing it about 25 years – the less convinced I am that what I read theoretically is all that useful in the room, in the work. I do find it incredibly interesting and engaging, but I have found returning to some very basics in the psychotherapeutic space is most helpful.

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All the studies in the world that talk about therapeutic efficacy, the relevance of theoretical orientation, “treatment models” and relationally and so forth – they all confirm that so much boils down to authenticity, genuine regard, a belief in the capacity to tolerate, grow, receive care and love. I’m not trying to be anti-theory or anti-intellectual. Not at all. It’s not that I don’t believe in skills and vital experience. But I guess the reason I’m saying all this is to question: to what end are our theoretical discussions? I ultimately think the point is not just to understand it, but to change the world. I think, to that extent, I’m a Marxist. Ultimately, I care about these things, they help us improve the quality and the emotional connectedness of everybody alive; to the planet, to each other, to the more-than-human world. And so I want our theoretical questions to inform what we do. How do we change how we operate in the world? How can we use and resource our skills, not just to understand this, but to actually create conditions for change? Because we need it. I’m finding myself trying to figure out even the best place for myself in these questions. Is it as a clinician? Is it as a human? Is it as an activist?

I don’t know, but I am very frustrated by the limitations. As Jennifer was saying about history, the whole way things get framed. So, I’m stumbling now. Maybe that’s where I’ll end, that the point isn’t to just understand it, but to actually change things. And how do we do that? How do we do it at a scale? Where we actually have a shot at preserving what we’d love most on this planet?

Denis: I completely agree with that. I mean my activism has been based on ceasing to be part of a psychological profession that is devoted to hierarchy and ‘power over’. But I think what gets left out, and that is part of extending the frame, is ‘feeling’. Feeling the situation, having the emotional feeling, the emotional weight, for instance, about the scale of the crisis and then making something in response. Personally, films/videos, because I am not a street fighter. What if we all make something, make some movement? Then that’s probably the best we can do. And that has been my take on it. And to an extraordinary extent – though I think understandably – feeling the weight, feeling the extent of the difficulty that we’re in may not be that widely in place. People know about it but don’t want to feel it. Even part of my family doesn’t want to know about any of this. That is shocking to me.

Rembrandt: The film work – is that a way that opens up things differently for you, Dennis?

Denis: Yeah, a form of creativity for me. I made 20 or 30 films, then I became a practitioner. And then around 10 years ago, when the economics of the techno shifted, I came back to being able to make videos, movies. And so I started off thinking, well, okay, so I can do this. What would be some sort of a film that would be relevant to my grandchildren? And that’s been difficult; what started off as something for children began to be something that was nothing like ready for children. And I’ve been doing very little else since.

Jenny: I am really experiencing the words of others. What I’m putting together is what Denis was referring to at the beginning and what I think Jennifer, Rebecca both alluded to as well; in being part of the world, in reconnecting with our bodies as sites of nature. The experience of being, rather than always doing. Maybe there can be active ways of being in the world without necessarily doing harm to others, or the planet, or other forms of nature. I think part of this is wanting to be able to be, without always having to be in a fully formed state before something is presented. A sense of things

being a bit messier in client work, in my life, in the world, in general, being willing to make mistakes, but also having the space and resilience built into societies for those mistakes to happen because that’s the only way that creativity happens. And I think we’ve mentioned briefly about economic ways of being in the world. How there are so many more meanings to growth that don’t just mean increasing the value of something, or increasing the numbers. We can grow in so many different ways, but only if we’re allowed to get things wrong, only if we’re allowed to see what happens, be curious and to try to take a new route. These are all things that are firing up as I’m listening and experiencing this conversation.

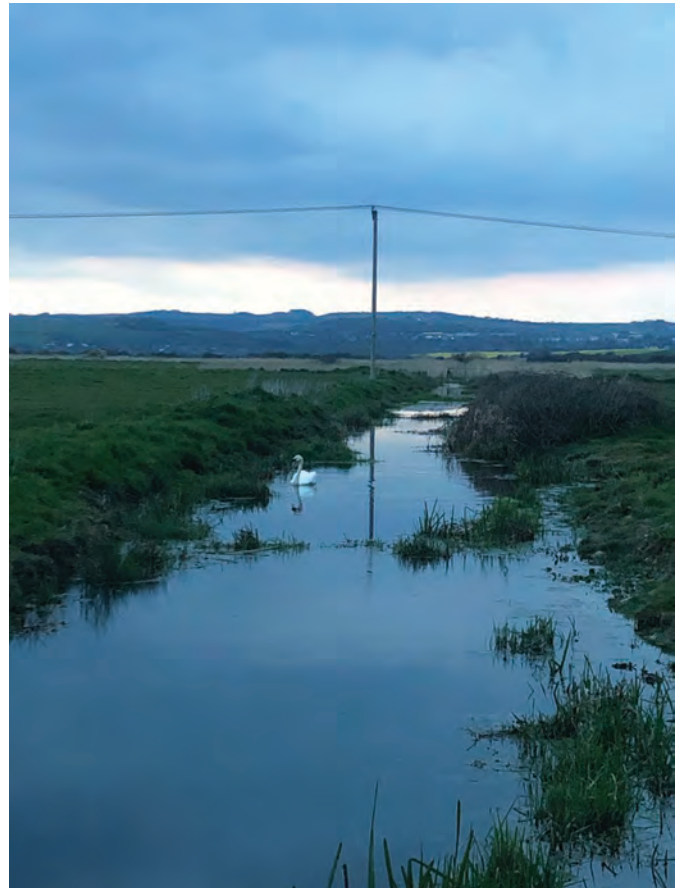


Photo by Toby Chown

This brings us to reflect on paradox and the confusion of differing frames and scales in our relating to life and world.

Rembrandt: Jennifer, you spoke about forest bathing going into the field. There’s a kind of a conundrum for me that I’m struggling with. I want to be in the garden, with my nose on a square centimetre. Because there is a whole world there. But then when we speak about scaling up, I feel a strange paradox. Scaling up seems to have both the engaging with smaller wholes, and bigger wholes at the same time. Do you have thoughts about that?

Jennifer: I was just thinking about the paradox between systems that are so big that they can’t pivot in the moment to be responsive. There are developments happening here in my city that, you know, are so behind the climate times. They’re already problematic. They haven’t even been completed yet. It is that lack of responsiveness in systems and yet the need to really slow down and not make these quick changes. And that paradox is mind boggling. And I’m also thinking that when Jung talks about individuation, he’s not talking

about individualism. He's talking about becoming one's true self. So, what would that look like? Actually, if we all became our true selves and contributed that back to the world, rather than being concerned with normativity, what could happen then? The way I read Jung was that he was a radical in the sense of not talking about normative behaviour but talking about authenticity. So, what if we had that? We're trapped in these frames that we think we have to act, you know, feminine, leader, psychologist [...] and these put limitations on us. And we carry those around, and they become these narrow views. Those were some of my thoughts listening to others talk. It's interesting even thinking about making a film, and having to choose the frame and the setting and the lens, the angle; each shows such a different view. So, I'm sort of feeling a bit Alice in Wonderland. It's like everything, expanding and interacting.

Rebecca: That Alice in Wonderland feeling! Every time someone speaks, it opens up layers of a direction. It's a mosaic that's really pretty extraordinary. And what you were also saying is that we think we're getting someplace and then there's more we don't know, and that is what's exciting about being alive. Right? That's the joy of life; that there's so much more we will never know. And yet we get to think about how it's all related. I am most moved to go back to what Denis said about feeling. How, even in our own families, we hold different parts of the emotions of what's happening in the world. I think about Sally Weintrobe's book,¹ about the culture of care and disavowal. And I think about Erich Fromm and his ideas about alienation and what it means to be living in a social, economic, political, systemic world that thrives on alienation of all kinds at the individual interpersonal level and, obviously, at the economic and social level, where consumption is the aim – to address all of the ways in which we are all feeling so alone; so disconnected from things that really matter. And how do we deal with that larger system if we're alienated as we try to fight it? It strikes me as the biggest of the conundrums that we're fighting for. That is, for our own internal sense of capacity to care and for our own ability to stay connected to our bodies, to the planet, and to each other, even as the systems we are in keep producing the dynamics of alienation over and over. It is like expecting somebody who has just been traumatised to resolve their own trauma. I'm just humbled. I'm humbled by the conversation and humbled by the scale, and humbled by the intimacy of, yes, the patch of garden that we have in our yard. It's all so profoundly humbling.

Denis: Part of the difficulty it seems to me is that feeling that the state we're in, along with the conceptual, leads to pessimism. It leads to a sense that we are headed on a catastrophic trajectory. And that is really hard. Because of realising the extent, the scale of denial and other issues to do with alienation, and so forth. Denial as protection. Understandably, people don't want to know about something so appalling. I feel often quite despondent about that. I mean, despondent in the sense that, while we can grow in ourselves – I certainly feel that there's been growth in me – how many people really have got the feel of the last 60 years where, for instance, the global economy has doubled? Not just a bit bigger, but doubled four times. And present intentions of 3% economic growth per year means it will double again in around 20 years. How does that affect our psychology? How does it affect our state of being? I find that

converting that to feeling and not only to an intellectual appreciation or understanding, is very rare – which is really alarming. In that sense, I welcome being able to sit with two or three younger people, where this could be appreciated. I have some community where I can share these notions; but not a lot, not enough.

What then are we doing in our being in the world and in our work as climate psychologists?

Jenny: I was struck when Rebecca mentioned the trauma, and this ties to what Denis is saying about the alarm of everything continually spiralling. This sense of living through a collective trauma of what is happening. It makes me think of work around witnessing, and the importance of trauma being seen and acknowledged – even if not by the individual, then by a third party and in a way that connects me to all of the different forms of activism of climate psychology. That we are doing the work of witnessing, as well as experiencing, and trying to change. All of those things are happening at once. I also kind of want to acknowledge, as part of this conversation, and I don't want to assume or speak to anyone else's heritage, that it feels like we're in a very white Western space. And that there are voices missing. So, as we're trying to widen the frame, we're also limited in this space. And I'm conscious, as we speak, that we are kind of coming towards the end of the time, but we haven't acknowledged that, and that feels really important.

Rebecca: I guess I'm thinking a little bit about it. I don't know if people have ever read or listened to Ezra Klein and some of his comments about artificial intelligence. He was writing about the pace of change, the pace of growth, the doubling that Dennis referred to – about how it feels like it is moving past our capacity to rein it in. That's especially true when the system is governed by the profit motive and not by relationship and care. We talk a lot about capitalism and Marx talked about the capitalist system developing to the point of destroying human existence, destroying nature. It sometimes feels as though we have created an economic and social system that is like Frankenstein: beyond our ability to control. And it goes back to what it is that we do and in what we have trained ourselves as professionals? How do we repurpose ourselves now, so that we can remain in contact with our own personhood. To me, it goes back to the art of connection, the deep need to build relationship. I guess when I bring it back down to scale, the answer is simple – even as it is hard and breaks familiar frames: we need to go out into the world, connect with each other, move beyond our discipline, build a movement. The hard work of going to meetings, the hard work of creating space to feel the feelings necessary, so people can get involved and not have to avoid the news, not to disavow what they're seeing. Again, the answer to the scale and to the Frankenstein we've created, is relationship. I don't mean that all people share equal levels of blame – by no means do I mean that. But it's back to what we all know, which is the power of relationship, the power of attachment, the power of connecting, and what happens when that's all ruptured?

Jennifer: I would say, for me, that goes back to biodiversity and cultural diversity; you know, that monocultures don't work. They don't. They're not systems. They are a narrow frame. They are not healthy. They're not generative. And so, yes, we need all of the voices in the room. That's not 'normative', it's diverse, all those voices, all of those species. Now all those other ways of knowing, and those intelligences, weave the fabric of our planet, of our biosphere. And to not come to terms with that, I think, is a huge

1. Weintrobe, S. (2021). *Psychological roots of the climate crisis: neoliberal exceptionalism and the culture of uncare*. London: Bloomsbury.

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part of our undoing. We're not living in a natural system now; our culture. But I have hope. I think there's wisdom coming from the youngers. I don't have any of my own biological children, but I remember being a child, and I am around children. And there's an inherent wisdom that I hope we don't educate out of them.

Rembrandt: I listened to the radio this morning to a programme and there was a 17-year-old boy who won a prize for nature photography. He had taken a picture of a ladybug; one of those little beetles with little red scales and black spots. But he had taken it through a window from underneath, so, you had a whole different view of the ladybug. He was congratulated. Then the story of his family, and his father was there as well. His father had been a naturalist for all his life. And the father said that he was now doing a project of counting all the species in his little garden, just in the city, a small plot of land. He had counted 1,600 different species of creatures in just one little garden.

In finishing we choose to leave things open, inviting others in.

Rembrandt: How are we doing? How do you feel as we are getting to the time to finish?

Jenny: I think it's also nice to leave things open. To invite a further conversation, not to have it closed.

Denis: My sense, or a way of bridging across this, which can be quite difficult, is that humanity has become a kind of planetary phenomenon which is carcinogenic. In particular, capital has to grow, and in support of it, even though I try to reduce it, we all buy and consume and buy and consume. The urge, the need to be a part of that and not to be able to stop it is growth, is exactly the phenomenon of cancer.

Rembrandt: Addiction.

Denis: Yeah, and I find that really hard.

Jennifer: This meeting, I am recognising again the diversity of perspectives of where we come from and what we are bringing to it. And I would love to continue this conversation. And speaking of widening the frame, I don't know how it works with the journal but I would love to invite other and more people to add their own perspectives, and widen the frame that way. There is just so much here to talk about, I feel we have merely scratched the surface.

In the spirit of this dialogue, the Editorial Team invites you to share your responses to our group dialogue, which will be shared with the dialogue's participants. Please send to: rembrandt.zegers5@gmail.com

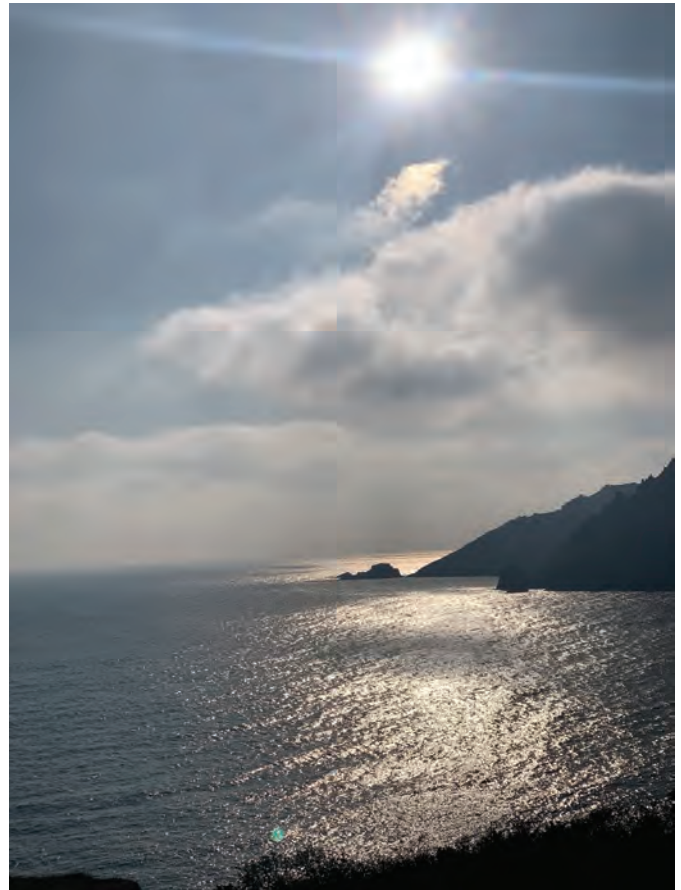


Photo by Maggie Turp

Jennifer Fendya is a psychologist, sandplay practitioner, forest therapy guide and contemplative photographer in the Great Lakes/Rust Belt city of Buffalo, NY.

Jenny O'Gorman is a queer, disabled, working class psychodynamic therapist and writer. They currently practice within a community counselling service in Gloucester, UK.

Denis Postle is an artist, human condition practitioner, filmmaker and musician.

Rebecca Weston is a practicing clinician, co-President of the Climate Psychology Alliance of North America and a Jewish, cis-gendered female raising two Filipino-American children in a bi-racial, bi-cultural marriage.

Rembrandt Zegers is a political and organisational consultant, Gestalt psychotherapist and facilitator from the Netherlands. He researches people's lived experience of relating to nature.

'We are where we are', by Kevin MacCabe

Reviewed by Maggie Turp

"Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." James Baldwin¹

This issue's cli-fi review is of a short story by Kevin MacCabe, a member of Bristol Climate Writers, which appeared in the spring 2019 edition of *Dark Mountain*.² Because it is short, and no longer available, we are taking the opportunity to re-publish it here in full.

MacCabe addresses a number of issues central to climate psychology, in a mischievous, tongue-in-cheek voice that belies the underlying darkness of the story.

'We are where we are'

When Leo opened his eyes there was something different about the sitting room. It was filled with smoke. It shouldn't have been a complete surprise as he had smelt smoke earlier in the day, but a cursory inspection had not disclosed its source, so he had decided to watch the football. Tedious defensive play from both sides had sent the game to a dreary nil-nil and him to sleep. In the meantime, the situation in his house had apparently deteriorated and ignoring it was clearly no longer an option.

He rolled off the sofa onto the floor knocking over a half-filled can of lager, which was annoying, now he would have to clean the carpet as well. Better stay low, that seemed to be the thing to do, he had seen it in a film or something, and so he crawled over to the door. Fumes were streaming up the from the basement utility room but the hall was otherwise clear so he stood up and went to the kitchen to get a bucket of water. He had a fire extinguisher under the stairs, but it was new and rather expensive. Better to wait for a real emergency.

After a brief search, he remembered his bucket was catching a drip at the back of the toilet in the bathroom, so he went up the one and a half flights of the quirky three-storey building to get it. The bath taps thundered a good twenty litres of water into the bucket and he took it to tackle the orange flame that was now licking along the skirting boards in the hall. The liquid load arrested its progress and he returned upstairs for a refill.

When he tried to descend again, the bottom step was glowing a healthy red, so he tipped the water over the banister. It hissed and fizzled but did not make much of an impression. The lower storey looked lost.

We are where we are, he thought. As long as the fire stayed where it was, he would be OK, so he went into the bedroom to think about what to do next.

The afternoon sun poured in as he opened the curtains. Across the road he could see another house also on fire. In the window of the second floor his neighbour was sitting in his study watching television, which he found reassuring. In his own house, he realised the kitchen was now out of commission, but he didn't really need a kitchen to live, he thought, he could order takeaways. His plan to adapt to life one and a half floors up began to take shape.



No fridge was a bit of an issue, but when he was a student he had made one using a bucket of water and a large cloth. It was good enough for six-packs of beer, so it would probably do for milk and cheese.

The master bedroom would serve as his new living room and from now on he could sleep in the spare room, although he would have to move some of those boxes. In fact, he could throw them down the stairs and the fire would burn them.

OK, this was better, these were solutions.

He moved the double bed over to allow room to set up an office. He would have to work from home now that he couldn't get out. See, it wasn't all bad.

All the running around had made him feel sleepy. He assumed that was what it was, although the smoke made him a bit drowsy too. So he decided to take a nap. His acceptance that he had to move

1. Baldwin, J. *New York Times*, 14 January 1962.

2. MacCabe, K. (2019). We are where we are. In *Dark Mountain* issue 15, spring 2019.

on from living at street level had taken all the stress out of the situation and he slept very well.

When he awoke it was dark. He found a can of lager under the bed – it was his lucky day – and he cracked it open. Looking across the road, he could see his neighbour still slumped in front of his television. He raised the can in his direction, sound bloke, he wasn't panicking, took a swig and went to the bathroom.

He stumbled to the toilet across the landing, now dense and black with smoke. When he flushed he realised he had no soap, so he wrote it down. There were bound to be lots of things he would need for his new elevated lifestyle.

Outside the bathroom, tongues of flame lapped at the top of the stairs and the carpet was smouldering. The fire was advancing faster than expected, which was a big disappointment. He had been thinking that the ground-floor fire was really a problem he could leave for the next owner. Well, he had a third floor – that was the advantage of these townhouses; what a shrewd purchase. So he gathered a pillow and his toothbrush and made his way upstairs again.

If the fire spread any further, he always had the attic. And, if he was honest, it could do with a clear-out.

In *The examined life*³ (pp.55-85), psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz explores the roots of “a passion for ignorance”. He relates the story of a patient, Francesca, who repeatedly describes incidents that indicate beyond any reasonable doubt that her husband is having an affair, while at the same time explaining them away. Grosz reflects that acknowledging the reality would require Francesca to make far-reaching changes, both external and internal. In a later chapter, “How a fear of loss can cause us to lose everything”, Grosz cites examples of more extreme situations – as when people in the south tower of the World Trade Center saw and heard the first plane fly into the north tower, yet continued with telephone conversations or went into meetings. In this case, the urge to carry on as though nothing untoward were happening caused people to lose their lives – just as Leo in MacCabe's story is doomed to lose his life. Grosz (p.123) concludes that:

We are vehemently faithful to our own view of the world, our story. We want to know what new story we're stepping into before we exit the old one. We don't want an exit if we don't know exactly where it is going to take us, even – or perhaps especially – in an emergency.

What might lie behind this extreme reluctance to venture into the unknown? We might understand it first and foremost in relation to defences erected against the threat of trauma; in Leo's case the defence of disavowal or “looking away”. If we have been fortunate enough not to have been subject to trauma as children, most of us will have had brushes with trauma as adults. We – and our clients – refer to “falling apart”, being “in bits”, being “beside ourselves”, or perhaps “unravelling”. Winnicott (1963, p.90)⁴ refers to “primitive agonies” and “unthinkable anxiety”, characterised by “acute confusion” and “the agony of disintegration”. The experience of trauma is of overwhelm, of helplessness, of despair, of being utterly outstripped by events. Not surprisingly, we will go to great lengths – albeit for the most part unconscious – to interpret events in ways that offer reassurance that things will be OK, that we will be safe, that we are not at risk of trauma. Familiar patterns and

paths, those that have always worked in the past, offer exactly the kind of reassurance we need. As the saying goes, “Better the devil you know...”

‘We are where we are’ also invites reflection on the operation of cognitive dissonance. Early on, Leo fails to act when the damage resulting from his misplaced assumption that no action is required would still be manageable. The longer the fire is allowed to burn, the greater the loss to be faced and the greater the reluctance to change tack. Leo resembles the gambler, who after many successive losses ‘can't afford’ to countenance the possibility that his luck will not turn. To do so would be to face the fact that 1) his losses are by this stage huge and their implications terrifying and 2) he has been foolish and wrong-headed.

Leo's successive denials of reality are made palatable to the reader by exaggeration and a sense of the ridiculous. This is a fable and we can laugh at Leo's obviously nonsensical refusal to become alarmed. As an allegory, the story helps us to think about our own inaction in relation to our overheating/burning/drowning planet. When it became widely known – certainly by 2000 – that burning fossil fuels was fuelling climate change, ‘we’ decided to carry on as usual. ‘We’ placed our bets on not having to make major changes. Like Leo, we are now faced with a situation where rapid and dramatic change is required, where the cost is sky high, and where it is already too late to avoid major harm. (The use of ‘we’ is a shorthand. It feels important to acknowledge that some of ‘us’ bear far more responsibility than others.)

Readers of this journal will be more aware than most of the dangers inherent in looking away from the reality of climate and ecological breakdown. We know how bad things are and yet the time frame of the changes – the slow, uneven creep of disaster – can make it hard to hold on to a sense of urgency. MacCabe's story underlines the words spoken by Greta Thunberg in 2019:

*I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.*⁵

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3. Grosz, S. (2013). *The examined life: how we lose and find ourselves*, pp.55-85. London: Chatto and Windus.

4. Winnicott, D. W. (1963). Fear of breakdown. In Winnicott, C., Shepherd, R., and Davis, M. (Eds.) *Psychoanalytic explorations*, p90. London: Karnac Books (1989).

5. Thunberg, G. (2019). *No one is too small to make a difference*. London: Penguin.

The light over there

By Bernadette McBride

For A.



In the summertime, the lake starts here. The fisherman tells this to the two off-season tourists, a couple, as he guides the boat. They are a few miles out on Lake Skadar, in Montenegro by now. He is smoking close to the diesel engine and the woman tourist looks uncomfortable. She shifts her body towards the other end of the boat, by around an inch to the right, with each drag the fisherman takes, until there is almost no boat left her side.

The fisherman wonders what she is scared of the most, but he doesn't ask. Fire or drowning or fire and drowning, he wonders. Instead, he asks if she can swim, like the birds and the fish. The fisherman knows all about fires because the fisherman is a fireman too. He is in communion with the water and the things that swim beneath or on top and with the fire and the things that leap and hiss.

Finally, the fisherman flicks his cigarette.

He has learned to hold all of these environments in his bare hands. The fish try to jump through his fingers. The flames try it too. Though slippery and hot he holds them gently but firmly and whispers to them, You are safe here, or, You are not safe here, go.

In the distance, a small breeding colony of Dalmatian Pelicans senses their approach. Wings silently start to move, to retract, to bend back into themselves as though they are extinct. Play pretend. They were dwindling though for sure. The birds notice the aura of the woman tourist and decide to grant her wish and stop still, instead of flying far, far away. They are very intuitive.

The fisherman turns the engine off and slowly lets the boat glide

Photo by Bernadette McBride

towards the majestic creatures still in their eye line, for now. The silence is so much. Emotions circle high overhead and then surround the three humans like an unseen tornado. All are stock-still should there be a predator amongst the flock. The fisherman, the tourists, and Dalmatian Pelicans all adopt somewhere between the freeze pose of prey and apparent death.

Sunshine has travelled from the light they first spotted across the lake on the Albanian side, at the start. Crossing the transboundary of the wetland. It makes the birds' white-silver heads dazzle brilliantly like diamonds. A liquid gold runs off the edges of the woman's hair and makes it seem as though her hair has caught fire, but it hasn't. She still feels the heat, as if in anticipation.

The fisherman doesn't realise this, but the woman tourist is scared of something else. Of things coming to an end, before she gets the chance to figure out the end for herself. How will she know? If she is really loved? If the boat goes down or the flames torch her locks.

Three days a week the fisherman works down at Bar fighting the wild ones. Because sometimes the Adriatic doesn't swell high enough to douse them. Then two days a week he's on the boat showing tourists the lake up on Skadar, as far as Montenegro goes before it reaches the Albanian border with its nose. On the other days, the fisherman just floats around the lake with his boat in total serenity.

SHORT STORY

The season was all skewed now, but in the old season, tourists could see water lilies, greens, and whites and yellows all laid out like a magical carpet, and eat chestnuts right off the water and watch the Dalmatian Pelicans and sometimes their silent grace, if they were lucky.

With the engine turned off, the man tourist tries to command the silence further and asks for complete silence so as to not disturb the silence. No talking please, he says to the fisherman and the woman tourist, with a smile. He records the silence on his mobile phone and the fisherman and the woman hold their breath as he does so. He holds his phone up and angles it out towards the lake and records all its invisible boundaries and edges and finally, he captures the Dalmatian Pelicans. Their graceful but strong necks, huge bills, gizzard pouches, orange hues, heavier than swans' bodies, and wingspans stretching out far enough to rival the Great Albatrosses. Lastly, he zooms his lens in to focus on their grey plumage; so soft, they look as though they are made of spun silver.

The Dalmatian Pelicans mate with one partner, who they share a nest with and a life with and migrate with for several breeding seasons, and in some rare cases, forever. Taking it in turns to incubate the female's eggs. When the fisherman is able to talk again, he tells the tourist couple all of this. They had both migrated from different borders and the fisherman sensed a tension or something difficult and it made the boat rock gently.

It is the job of the fisherman to keep the boat stable.

The light looks so beautiful over there, can you cross the border to reach it? The man tourist had asked at the start. The fisherman replied, Yes, but you'll end up in prison. It's illegal to cross the border of the lake, even if the border is unmarked. Only the Dalmatian Pelicans can transcend the border for free, but even they pay a price. They had all looked towards the light over there.

As they were about to depart again, a noise on the lake made all on the boat turn and look. The Dalmatian Pelicans were spreading their wings, in and out, in and out, wider with each motion, as though in dance, like ballet dancers, and the silence in the air was the music of Tchaikovsky. Their breeding rafts, created to combat the manmade floods and pollution, acted as a wide dance stage and they pirouetted in perfect synchrony.

You see, said the fisherman, we just need to restore the balance.

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Green rising, by Lauren James

Reviewed by Mila Boldon

This novel tells the story of teenagers around the world who manifest supernatural abilities allowing them to grow plants from their bodies and using these abilities for different environmental purposes. It focuses on two teenagers in particular, Theo and Hester, who have developed these green finger abilities, one of whom comes from a fishing town and the other being the daughter of the owner of Dalex oil. Hester is tasked by her father to bring together a group of teenagers who can use these new abilities to produce biofuel for Dalex to sell. However, as the story goes on, the teenagers realise Dalex has other plans regarding energy, which aren't quite so climate friendly

The theme of *Green rising* seems to be rebellion – especially against corporations and governments. For example, Hester files a lawsuit against her father. This is exactly the kind of action which needs to be taken in order to ensure a better future and prevent a climate catastrophe.

Through this book, the reader stands to gain an insight into the workings of energy companies, learning how they may be run and what their motivation towards sourcing energy might be. Readers also gain perspective on different people's circumstances and opinions on climate change. For instance, Theo's parents are so concerned about finding money to fix their boat that they don't have the capacity to worry about climate change. On the other hand, Hester's father is so caught up in getting permission to drill for oil to keep him in business, that he couldn't care less about the impact this will have on the environment. This illustrates people's attitudes towards climate change from different backgrounds.

I think that climate change is an incredibly important issue that needs immediate attention. However, I find that it is easy to be overwhelmed by people telling you facts about the disastrous consequences of climate change. This can result in me slightly switching off and pushing it to the back of my mind for someone else to sort out, so that I can get back to thinking about my everyday issues.

I think that, like me, many young people have just been overloaded with various presentations on what will happen as a result of climate change. It is hard to see how simple things such as recycling your yogurt carton will save the planet. So, therefore, many have resigned themselves to the inevitability of climate change. There are few young people in my school who feel passionately about helping the planet and who actively engage in school activities which could benefit the planet (such as school clubs). *Green rising* gives an overview of what needs to be done in order to prevent a climate catastrophe. It highlights how you can't make a difference as an individual, whilst it is possible to make very influential changes as a community.

What I particularly liked about the book was that it reflected real life issues and included versions of real people, such as a character called Edgar Warren who was very similar to Elon Musk. This made it very relatable. I also liked the way that the author, Lauren James, included things such as emails, newspaper articles and social

media posts. What I didn't like so much was that the ending was a bit unrealistic and felt a bit like a Marvel action film.

I think that what young people need in relation to climate change – from governments, schools and parents – is to provide ways in which we can get involved with activities which could lead to real change. I, among many others, took part in the Friday school strikes, but it is hard to see what this achieved. I think it would be helpful for adults to help children to make a real difference.

Green rising has helped me think about the fact that young people have the ability and resources to make a difference. I find it incredibly important for young people to talk about climate change, as we will be the ones dealing with it in 30 years' time and will have to be prepared. I think a good way for adults to talk to children about climate change is to be very direct and honest, however not to overwhelm them with negativity.

Overall, I would thoroughly recommend this book to anyone interested in climate change, as it is thought provoking and gives a positive message of hope and empowerment.



Mila Boldon is 13 years old and lives in East Sussex.

“Grief will be our companion”

Earth grief, by Stephen Harrod Buhner

Reviewed by Toby Chown

The writer Stephen Harrod Buhner died in December 2022.

His last available book *Earth grief*¹ was released six months before his death and written during a time when he knew that he was terminally ill.

The journey that Buhner takes us on through this book is therefore both personal and transpersonal – a journey that maps out his personal experiences of earth grief and, from that, goes on to draw out a sense of the meaning of earth grief, the purpose of it, how to enter it and how to come through it.

Buhner had a long life, and a broad and varied career; amongst other things as a medical researcher, medical herbalist and psychotherapist. His bibliography includes a book about brewing ancient or healing beer, a book about fasting, a book about writing, a book about herbal antivirals, a book about the relationship between the nature of plant intelligence and faculty of imagination, a book about the way pharmaceutical products effect ecosystems and the ecological function of plant medicines.

What connects this disparate set of writings is set out in the opening chapter of *Earth grief* – that Buhner writes nonfiction ‘manuals’, or ‘how to’ books, that re-imagine what a manual is meant to be. Buhner is interested in teaching through his writing, but this teaching involves something other than simply telling his reader how to do something. Buhner pays close attention to language, which he crafts with strong references to poetic imagery. He describes places where he has been, both inner and outer. He shows gradually how he learnt from the thing he was doing, how through following what he calls “golden threads”, he learns from the activity itself how to do it. “Golden threads” he borrows from the poet William Stafford, who himself draws from William Blake’s lines:

*I give you the end of a golden string;
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate,
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.*

Stafford amplified this poem into an approach to writing poetry; that you pull on any given thread in your life and follow it truly, writing down what you see and feel without knowing where it will go, and you will write a poem of value.

Buhner amplifies Stafford’s approach further in each of his manuals, taking this as a kind of master metaphor for learning; that we pull on a thread and follow the feeling without knowing where it will lead and in this creative state of mind gradually learn how to do something – even very disparate things, be they to brew beer, practice therapy, write books, heal with herbs, or perceive plant intelligence. All activities involve a communion with the world, and it’s this communion that really teaches us mastery of any kind, as much as being taught.

Buhner calls this the “touch of the world upon us” and it’s central to his message that we really learn from a deep, sometimes unconscious relationship with the world, in a nonlinear way that we absorb, rather than from techniques that we copy.

However, with this his last book to be published so far, the challenge seems far in excess of how to do any of these things. For the subject of “how to do earth grief” seems at once incredibly personal and yet overarchingly overwhelming.

The task Buhner sets out through *Earth grief* is twofold: to offer the reader the journey both into and through ecological loss. In fact, one of the great impacts of the book lies in the way that it allows the reader to make the journey into earth grief. It’s not a journey that many wish to make, and often one that feels thrust upon us.

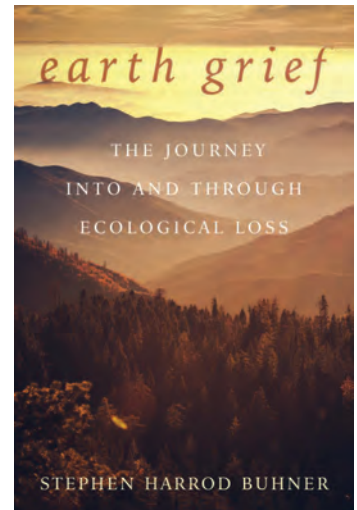
Each of us is, or will be familiar with, loss and grief personally or professionally. However, with *earth grief*, Buhner states that the situation becomes highly complex. It begins perhaps with a place that has been lost; sometimes a place known as a child, sometimes a place nearby that’s been developed. This loss is compounded by information about loss and death of nature all over the world, in ways that press in upon us, and call upon us to imagine and feel the loss not only of our own life, nor even of the people we know, nor even of our species, but the loss of everything that we know to be life.

Addressing this Buhner (p.195) writes:

Grief will be our companion on the journey because of what we have lost, and because the losing will not end in our lifetime – nor in the lifetime of our children, or of our grandchildren or their children either. We live both inside a loss and a terminal diagnosis, that tells us that other losses are coming. We cannot simply grieve over what has been lost and go on, for there is no normal world to go back to in which we can go on...

Buhner suggests that although personal grief is devastating, it takes place against the backdrop of a world that is taken to be stable. For us, there is no stable world to return to, and so no obvious prospect of grief ending. The entire backdrop of life has moved to the foreground; is alive and is threatened.

Buhner as a young man studied with Elizabeth Kubler Ross, who was a seminal writer on grief. He tells us that the experience of grief



1. Harrod, S. H. (2022). *Earth grief: the journey into and through ecological loss*. Boulder USA: Raven Press.

places a person outside of the world into a kind of shadow realm. Many well-meaning friends or relations make attempts to puncture the walls of this shadow realm to rescue the person lost in grief. Often, those close to the person grieving become impatient, or lose interest, or feel the person is being indulgent or selfish. As a therapist working with grief and loss in children and young people, I have seen the awful twist between the need to grieve and the biological demands to grow, live and flourish. Buhner states nature and the psyche are rarely wasteful, and this process of stepping outside of the world, into the shadows and ashes of grief, has for him to do with memory. He quotes Parkes approvingly, calling it “fine grained almost filagree work with memory”, and suggests that in grief we attempt to remember who and what is lost and enter into an emotional review of our relationship with the person that takes as long as it takes.

This emotional review appears to be to do with examining our own role in the loss. William Worden – a clinician who revised Kubler Ross’s “phases” with “tasks” – defined complex grief as a situation where the process of grief is interrupted because of unresolved issues with the dead person. Therapists may well be familiar with this on the individual scale; that someone holds strong anger or disappointment or dislike towards a dead parent, partner or friend.

However, Buhner suggests that earth grief will be even more complex because of the scale of the loss and the difficulty in tracing an immediate connection to it. We know that often people feel very guilty when someone has died and feel they could have done more; often when they were powerless. This kind of process may be what earth grief looks like; a kind of working through the guilt that seems laid upon us as a species and, at the same time, remembering who we are both as individuals and as humans.

To this end, Buhner, echoing David Kidner, reminds us that our own culture seeks to share blame rather than take responsibility. Here, Buhner’s close attention to language comes to the fore; the use of “we” to make all guilty for the actions of a few. The language of climate change activists and how they attempt to force guilt upon their readers is one example.

Buhner speaks of the sophisticated nature of denial. Climate psychologists are well aware of denial of climate change, and psychotherapists understand denial as a psychological defence. But Buhner means something more subtle in the context of earth grief. For Buhner, it is to do with the way we consider ourselves unique, so cannot consider ourselves to be food for other animals (crocodiles, worms or viruses). It’s in the way we carry the idea that we are ecologically different from them and outside of nature. It’s in the way we focus on small issues we might control, like plastic bags and recycling, while ignoring the massive scale industrial

pollution continually being churned out. It’s to do with fantasies about escaping, or being saved by technology, or revolution, or spiritual intervention.

It’s to do with the limits of our ability to place our own personal survival and that of our loved ones in the balance. One very difficult chapter outlines the reliance of the medical industry on single-use plastics, both in medicines and wrap-around care, and the highly poisonous effects of medications – antidepressants and cancer treatments to name just two – as they are passed out through urine into sewers and from there into water courses, with a devastating effect on fish, plants and ecosystem health.

Buhner’s great strength as a writer lies in his skill with language and his ability to speak in the many voices that he weaves throughout this book, like the fine patterns of a Persian rug. He speaks at times from a personal and raw place, at others as a medical researcher, at others as a coyote trickster teacher, and others as an animist mystic. Some readers may take issue with this tone, and on his attack on the effects of science as creating a culture of “dissociative mentation” or with the passages that fall into a dreamlike mysticism. For me, though, I enjoyed this polyphony of voices. The book reminded me that much of the task of earth grief is to allow oneself to feel it – the journey in – to feel a grief that means that even the possibility of being remembered or anyone being remembered must be let go of. It felt like a final message from a deep thinker, and the oscillation between poetic craft, occasional grouchiness and dry humour, animist mysticism, psychotherapeutic skill and academic rigour felt refreshing and real. I would recommend this book to anyone who feels a sense of kinship with the natural world. Within the title itself lies a profound message; that there is no way through ecological loss without journeying into grief.

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Photos by Toby Chown




Other contributors to this issue


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