

Ascroft's sweltering skies, and through such "imaginary or insane" ramblings and musings, we learn to think about the environment, human complicity, and the low hum in the background.

Notes

- 1 In his preface, Ruskin comments that newspapers "scouted his assertion of radical change, during recent years, in weather aspect as imaginary or insane" (7).
- 2 In *On Time and Water*, Andri Snær Magnason states that "[f]or most people, the phrase 'climate change,' is just white noise." He laments that it is easier to form opinions about smaller matters, but "when it comes to the infinitely large, the sacred, to things that are fundamental to our lives, there's no comparable reaction. It's as if the brain cannot register at such a scale" (9).

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Teaching Ecological Grief

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IF THERE is anything more demoralizing than watching our students struggle with uncertainty, fear, and grief around climate change, it's encountering students who don't. For the past several years, my youngest undergraduates have seemed benumbed to the idea of their perilous future. I began teaching climate change literature in a freshman class at the University of British Columbia in 2015, which was a stretch from my usual Victorian novel fare; while I often include texts such as M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885), and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) in my CliFi classes, I have also begun teaching more contemporary literature about climate change and environmental disaster. When I first taught this material, I was nervous about deeply depressing my students. I walked into the classroom after I'd assigned Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* expecting that we'd have to have a group therapy session. Yet my students barely responded when I asked them if they had been

traumatized by the book. “No,” one of them finally replied to my prodding, “we’ve grown up with this stuff.”

In response to this state of affairs, I made a decision to teach writing about climate mourning as part of my environmentalist literature courses. Imaginative and critical writing that struggles with grief over lost habitats, environments, species, and lifeways is, after all, a variety of Anthropocene literature. Inviting students to take part in this “meta-conversation” is akin to Gerald Graff’s notion of “teaching the conflict”—for those who have been around long enough to remember the culture wars of the 1980s through the aughts.

In the first iteration of my climate fiction class, we began our unit on eco-grief with a 2005 essay entitled “Solastalgia.” Psychology researcher Glenn Albrecht and his co-authors coined this term to refer to ecological mourning—while it’s not a term that has caught on, it’s a useful descriptive moniker (and shorter and more convenient than “ecological mourning” or “environmental grief”). My list of other introductory readings varies depending on the level of the course and the preparedness of the students, but a representative sample includes the Scranton book already mentioned, Stef Craps’s essay “Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory,” and Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis’s “Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss.” These essays all lay out the basics of the concept of eco-grief and invite students into an ongoing conversation.

When teaching this material, I strive to include writing from a wide variety of approaches and cultural traditions. To claim that our collective orientation to climate change has recently shifted is to make some fairly big assumptions about the referent of the word “our.” Indigenous people have been thinking and writing about this topic for a very long time. The Brazilian Indigenous activist Ailton Krenak, for example, has written about the “myth of sustainability, invented by corporations to justify their theft of our idea of nature” (20), while academics such as Kyle Powys Whyte and Jenny Pickerill have analyzed the impacts of the colonial encounter on Indigenous peoples and ecosystems. Scholars of colour such as Leilani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams have explored the “racial ecologies” that undergird anthropogenic climate change and environmental harm, while a recent essay by Nylah Burton makes the argument captured in its title, “People of Colour Experience Climate Grief More Deeply Than White People.” Works by these scholars are a central part of expanding students’ understanding of the histories—and stakes—of anthropogenic climate change and the human mourning that attends it.

As important as it is to recognize and ameliorate the differing impacts of climate change on different populations, it remains the case that we all will have to confront grief. As Albrecht notes, the sufferings of contemporary Americans experiencing a loss of environmental emplacement “uncannily

resemble (albeit in lesser degree) those of displaced native Americans, whom European Americans displaced in the first place. These natives have lost their land; those of us who are non-natives have lost our place” (43–44). Scranton argues that in the face of the imminent collapse of civilization, we are “going to need new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality . . . a new way of thinking about our collective existence” (19). In an attempt to take up Scranton’s challenge, I also include on my syllabi a sampling of spiritual responses to climate change, including Thich Nhat Han’s *The World We Have* and excerpts from Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato Si’*.

Responses to climate mourning in social media and on the Internet are an important pedagogical resource given how deeply conditioned current undergraduates are to finding information and making connections on line. A growing awareness of the phenomenon of ecological mourning has recently given birth to support movements for those struggling with dread about the future. Some of these groups believe that the complete extinction of human beings is imminent, while others assume that humanity will survive long enough to have to deal with widespread civilizational collapse. The Facebook group Near Term Human Extinction Support (@NTHESupportGroup) claims that it is “for people who have accepted that HUMAN EXTINCTION IS INEVITABLE IN THE NEAR TERM due to anthropogenic global warming (AGW) and the consequences, based on trends determined by scientific research. This could be a few years to a few decades from now.” The Deep Adaptation movement bases its assumptions on a 2018 paper by British academic Jem Bendell entitled “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy.” Deep Adaptation devotees do not assume that human extinction is necessarily imminent, but they do believe that humanity will soon need to deal with “the uneven ending to our current means of sustenance, shelter, security, pleasure, identity and meaning.” One of their central tenets is the importance of both “inner adaptation” (emotional, psychological, spiritual) and “outer adaptation” (practical, policy-oriented, community-based) to widespread societal collapse. These websites and groups are a rich resource for students wishing to dive deeper into recent responses to climate grief; I have built optional extra-credit assignments in which students read, engage with, and/or critique these ongoing discussions.

As my students are already aware, in this wide range of possible responses to the crisis of anthropogenic climate change it might seem that the utopians have switched places with the realists. High-profile technology mavens such as Elon Musk and Bill Gates, who stake our future on “green” energy and geo-engineering, paradoxically seem like starry-eyed idealists chasing after a quixotic dream—that everything essentially stay just as it is. Those who are resigned and circumspect in their expectations—those who are mourning—are the ones who advocate a radical change in how we orient ourselves both to our uncertain future and to our planetary home. In her

devastating essay “Facing Extinction,” Catherine Ingram writes, “Living with the grief of facing human extinction may be akin to how a person with a terminal diagnosis might experience his or her final phase, the awareness of death undeniable, and the magnificence of life ever more obvious.” While these responses are far from the only ones available, it does at times seem like they are the ones garnering the most attention in the public sphere.

Having engaged in dozens, perhaps hundreds, of conversations with students about climate change in recent years, I have come to appreciate that their range of responses—from nearly paralyzing fear to denial to apathy to benumbed resignation—are all equally legitimate and understandable, and equally require our respect and sympathy. Introducing my students to the voices of writers and activists—from Ruskin and Morris to Scranton and VanderMeer—who have already begun thinking (and feeling) through these enormous questions is the least I can do as a teacher and mentor. While some students might prefer not to engage fully when they first encounter these writings, I hope that these resources will be there waiting for them if and when they are ready.

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EVENT 2024: Embodied and Virtual Events across Nations and Time

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THE CLIMATE crisis is leading scholars to limit their travel to conferences because of the massive emissions of air travel, especially from long-haul flights. Some universities now discourage travel to academic meetings because of climate concerns. If the main purpose of our scholarly organizations is to encourage travel to conferences, they will wither and die as the climate crisis develops. We need another solution. EVENT 2024 (www.event2024.org), which we organized alongside hub leaders at seventeen locations across the globe in 2024, was an attempt to rethink the structure of the academic conference in the face of climate change, with digital tools that made it possible to convene globally while attending locally.¹

This paper discusses our solution to the challenge of linking scholars in meaningful ways without further compromising the world we share. It also theorizes the concept of “event,” which gives us a framework for hope and a way to counteract the common feeling of powerlessness in the face of the many seemingly insurmountable problems that face us. What is the best way to manage despair while making a difference at some degree of scale? We theorize this approach in the next section.