

(Mis)reading revelations

Apocalyptic Visions and Environmental Crisis

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The Falling Birds of Beebe, Arkansas

In punishing contrast to the soaring and singing bird as a symbol of freedom, the quiet or injured bird might be a perfect symbol for environmental crisis. Dead and dying birds have long been associated with warnings of danger, having been used since the early twentieth century to predict air contamination in coal mines. Often understood to be a good indicator of ecological decline, birds have also been central to depictions of environmental apocalypse, most notably in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Images of oil-soaked, dying birds punctuated the visual media after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, despite the best efforts of BP and local and federal officials to prevent photographers from documenting the carnage (see "Critters of the Gulf Oil Spill" and Peters). Later that year, Lars Von Trier showed images of dead birds slowly falling across the sky in the opening fantasia of his apocalypse film, *Melancholia*. Then, sometime around the stroke of midnight on New Year's morning,

2011, scores of red-winged blackbirds began mysteriously falling out of the sky over Beebe, Arkansas, a small town in the American Bible Belt.

Throughout the early hours of that morning, as residents returned home from New Year's Eve festivities, ominous thumping could be heard on roofs, windshields, roads, and patios. As the sun revealed the macabre scene—a town littered with several thousand crooked avian corpses—news of the dead birds permeated the international press. The story was ripe for apocalyptic interpretation. Two days later, 85,000 drum fish were discovered by local anglers, floating belly-up, blanketing a 200-mile stretch of the nearby Arkansas River. The media could hardly

contain itself. Fox News called it "an apocalyptic-type mystery" while *The Guardian UK* described it as "a sequence of events that could get residents leafing through 'The Book of Revelation'" (Walker). In the coming days mass

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die-offs were reported from Maine to Norway. Wildlife experts assured the press that these events were not

particularly uncommon, just normally not considered newsworthy.

Over the next few months, the story fizzled out of the press. Then, on New Year's Day, 2012, history repeated itself. In the wee hours of January 1, a familiar thumping was heard through the roofs of Beebe. *The Daily Mail* headline reported, "first sign of an apocalyptic year to come? Thousands of blackbirds fall to their death in Arkansas town for second New Year's Eve in a row" (Keneally). The article framed the event in relation to anxiety around the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012, suggesting that the die-off could be symptomatic of coming doom. What was particularly eerie about the Beebe story was that it had occurred in rural Arkansas, a landscape steeped in the God-fearing apocalypticism of Bible Belt fundamentalists. The reports from

Beebe may have sent chills down a few agnostic spines before *The Daily Mail* revoked the excitement. On January 2

the newspaper announced, “Call off the apocalyptic predictions!” It turned out that fireworks shot into the birds’ roost had caused the mass die-offs both years. Apocalypse averted. What a relief. *Right?*

For over two thousand years human civilizations in the West have suspected that the end of the world is nigh, with some mix of foreboding and excitement. In 2012, apocalypticism abounded in reaction to a misunderstood Mayan calendar. While the Mayan fiasco ended with the first light after winter solstice, apocalypticism is far from being laid to rest, and with good reason. Even if the Holocene (or “Anthropocene” as it is coming to be known) sidesteps the plummeting meteors of past epochs, anthropogenic environmental degradation, climate change, resource scarcity, environmental toxicity, and all the related social injustices on which Anthropocentric relations rest (and which they exacerbate), are central apocalyptic themes that will pervade the coming centuries. How might we position these crises as central

manifestations of loss and failure, but also important unveilings and rebirths. Drawing on environmentalist, feminist, Marxist, and queer perspectives, I investigate the ambivalent nature of environmental apocalypticism as both a visionary practice with the potential to create social reform and a worryingly narrow perspective on the complex and cyclical nature of crisis.

Apocalypse(s) in the Mirror

The same year the birds began falling over Beebe, an estimated 220,000 people were killed in Haiti and approximately one million were left homeless after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck the impoverished country. As Dominican native Junot Diaz attests, “[the earthquake] was for all intents and purposes an apocalypse” (51). Diaz explains that the apocalypse in Haiti began long before the earthquake actually struck. He argues that the disaster there is a social one, facilitated by a seismic attack but made apocalyptic thanks to a long

changes, ecosystems collapse and the social injustices of late capitalism prevail. He urges us to

look closely into the apocalypse of Haiti and ... see that Haiti’s problem is not that it is poor and vulnerable—Haiti’s problem is that it is poor and vulnerable at a time in our capitalist experiment when the gap between those who got grub and those who don’t is not only vast but also rapidly increasing.... Haiti is not only the most visible victim of our civilization—Haiti is also a sign of what is to come. (53-54)

The word *apocalypse* stems from the Greek word *apo-calyptein*, which literally means to unveil or reveal (Thompson 13). While the term has been used to refer to the end of the world in a physical sense, it also points to an epochal ending, wherein the façade of contemporary life is peeled back to reveal hidden systems at work. James Berger reminds us that the definition of apocalypse is threefold: it “is The End, or resembles the end, or explains the end” (5). Diaz argues that all three aspects of apocalypse hold true in Hispaniola, where the earthquake that decimated the island nation has, in a sense, “revealed Haiti.” He explains that, “for most people, Haiti has never been more than a blip on a map, a faint disturbance ... so far removed that what happened there might as well have been happening on another planet” (51). For those of us in North America to whom the Haitian earthquake seems a distant, perhaps even random disaster, its implications for our society may be hard to grasp. That is not to suggest that crisis does not unfold around us in North America—it does, ripe with revelation—but we often misread it.

The falling birds of Beebe, blown out of their roost by fireworks on two consecutive New Year’s Eves, reflected a microcosmic example of environmental crisis that, were we more attuned to reading the signs of the time, we might have interpreted as rightly apocalyptic. The most sinister part of the Beebe story was not the fact that one or a few individuals had willingly destroyed a

What makes contemporary apocalypticism unique ... is the reality of ecological crises that offer scientific credibility to the possibility of anthropogenic self-destruction.

problems, problems that we must strive to solve, without the promise that we will be able to solve them? How might we redefine ourselves *within* environmental apocalypse as opposed to just in front of it?

In this paper I will explore the idea that apocalypticism’s environmental political valence lies in its capacity for revelation rather than ruin, a capacity that we often overlook in efforts to entertain its more sensationalistic aspects. Rather than understand environmental apocalypse as a single imminent tipping point and subsequent catastrophe, I suggest that we consider it as more of an ongoing process of change that encompasses varied physical

process of colonialism that has left the country with an enormous population, insufficient infrastructure, resource scarcity, collapsing ecosystems, and pervasive poverty. “Hunger, overpopulation, overcultivation, and dependence on wood for fuel have strained Haiti’s natural resources to the breaking point. Deforestation has rendered vast stretches of the Haitian landscape almost as lunar in their desolation. Haiti [has been] eating itself.... [Deforestation] is both caused by and causes poverty” (Diaz, 51).

According to Diaz, Haiti is at the forefront of a broader trend: a canary in the global coal-mine, a harbinger of what is to come elsewhere as the climate

flock of migratory birds in 2012 against a staggering backdrop of biological loss, but rather that this revelation of mortal culpability was interpreted by the media as the good news: a notice that we can maintain business as usual because the apocalypse is not here yet, or, at least, not yet for the residents of Arkansas.

On a much greater scale than Beebe, the attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 offered a profoundly apocalyptic event on American soil. Before Americans could dwell in the shadow of the fallen towers, however, they were mobilized as “civilian soldiers” as Jackie Orr has discussed at length (452). “Every American is a soldier,” declared President Bush one month after the attacks, at the inaugural meeting of the Homeland Security Council (Bumiller B5). Suddenly, American citizens were positioned as foot soldiers in a battle on which they had little time to reflect. The horrors of the World Trade Centre attacks were never allowed to fully reveal themselves but rather were co-opted as a catalyst for knee-jerk politics.

Judith Butler argues that the quick turn to violence after the World Trade Centre attacks mitigated the American public’s chance to mourn what had been lost. She asks, “if we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless? ... Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” (30)? The question of whether or not to dwell in grief is an interesting one, and one that may be applied to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The most gut-wrenching images of dying wildlife were quickly commodified into tidy photo essays (see “Critters of the Gulf Oil Spill”). Are these memorializations of the oil spill representative of or substitutive for grief? Do they serve as outlets for mourning or are they merely cleanses of the public consciousness, whereby the most haunting revelations of the spill are printed, bound, shelved and dismissed?

North of the border, Canadian tar sands development is desecrating Aboriginal lands, displacing Aboriginal

Augury : Elegy

JESSICA MARION BARR

Just before midnight on New Year’s Eve 2011, in Beebe, Arkansas, 4,000 or so blackbirds fell out of the sky, dead. Around the same time, several hundred grackles, redwing blackbirds, robins, and starlings dropped dead in Murray, Kentucky. A few days later, 500 dead blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, grackles, and starlings were found on a highway in Pointe Coupee, Louisiana, while 200 dead American coots appeared on a bridge in Big Cypress Creek, Texas. On January 4, in Falköping, Sweden, 100 jackdaws were found dead in the street. And then on January 5, some 8,000 dead turtle doves rained down on the town of Faenza in Italy. Later that year, on October 23, 6,000 dead birds washed up on the southeastern shore of Ontario’s Georgian Bay, and then, remarkably, Beebe was again showered with the bodies of 5,000 blackbirds on New Year’s Eve 2012.

It seems a little apocalyptic.

One might well ask whether this series of mass deaths is a microcosm of humanity’s increasingly toxic impact on the non-human world. But we are not just poisoning an isolated wilderness “out there.” We are poisoning our ecosystems—our sources of food, water, and air; our only home. The warnings are everywhere, if we choose to see and heed them. Because those were a lot of canaries, and we’re all in this coalmine together.

Augury refers to signs and omens, and relates to the ancient Roman tradition of interpreting the behaviour of birds as a sign of divine approval or disapproval. It is my feeling that the current ecological crisis will augur an elegy (a poem of lamentation or a death song) unless we act quickly, compassionately, and courageously.

The potentially uncomfortable, even abhorrent, encounter with the bones and severed wings in my work forces a visceral confrontation with this metaphor for potentially catastrophic climate change, and reminds viewers of the fact that we are all implicated in it. These artworks, much like the work of many modernists whose art attempted to communicate the profound losses of the world wars, evokes what Tammy Clewell calls an “anticonsolatory practice of mourning,” whose “commemorative forms [are] intended to provoke and hurt, rather than console and heal.... [This] practice of endless mourning compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century” (199). Those catastrophes include the undeniable reality that the biosphere is suffering as a result of human intervention and the ongoing profit-driven destruction of the world’s land, water, and air. In my own work, I am trying to think through how to effectively communicate mourning or despair for the future of earth’s ecology while refusing to be resigned to its death and, rather, finding energy to continue an ethical struggle for ecological awareness and sustainable practices. Because we must not simply remember, we must act. While my work is intended to have a strongly melancholic, elegiac tone, I ultimately want to create art that impels viewers to consider the positive ethical imperatives of ecological mourning, and to see that, at the heart of the matter, there is hope for a better world.

Notes

1. As such, I aim to use sustainable materials in my art practice. The hanging piece is made from branches from my backyard, crochet thread inherited from a great-great-aunt, and chicken bones that were being discarded by a local grocery store. In order to clean the bones, I boiled them and ended up making about 45 bowls of chicken soup, which I gave to friends and neighbours.

Works Cited

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peoples, fragmenting already endangered wildlife, and eroding one of the most important ecosystems of the northern hemisphere, the boreal forests, undoubtedly a multi-fronted environmental/social apocalypse of its own. How do Canadians grieve environmental loss? Or do we? By not “remaining exposed to [grief’s] unbearability” do we define our present moment as an uncritical one and instead peer toward a future where crisis might be worse or where we might locate the resources to resolve it (Butler 30)? Does such an act of deflection normalize events like the disaster in Haiti, the BP oil spill, or the tar sands development, as appropriate features of a landscape near, but not beyond the edge of crisis? Consider the traditional Hollywood apocalyptic format. Usually some kind of precursor event warns that doom is imminent. In *Armageddon* (1998), a meteorite shower blasts New York City, foreshadowing an oncoming comet the size of Texas. In *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), unprecedented storms warn that the climate is changing at an unthinkable quick rate and that a new and sudden ice age will soon set in. This structure for apocalypse, which is so ingrained in our popular understanding and based on the paradigmatic narrative of “The Book of Revelation,” teaches us that the real problem is always the one around the corner. What happens, however, if our current path never leads to a dramatic brink, the clear and total impasse that we might dread? Without the transcendent experience of an imminent apocalypse, of standing at the precipice and collectively peering into the abyss, do we fail to take heed of the fires already smoldering around us?

Slavoj Žižek, in his talk “First as Tragedy, Then As Farce” (2009), offers an interesting insight into the psychology of cultural capitalism. His observations might provide answers for how we, particularly in the West, continue to have an obscured relationship with environmental crisis. He argues that the ethos of charity, embedded in cultural capitalism, is one in which acts of perceived goodness overshadow processes of social and environmental injustice. “Let’s not

discard the evil but let the evil work for the good,” says Žižek, explaining the premise of the idea. He goes on to explain, “in the very consumerist act, you buy your redemption from being only a consumer ... You do something for the environment [like buy organic], you do something to help starving children in Guatemala [like buy fair-trade], you do something to restore the sense of community here [like support local coffee shops].” Meanwhile, the fundamental relationship between social and environmental injustice and capitalism is left relatively unquestioned. Using the example of a “kind” slave owner, whom Žižek calls the “worst kind of slave owner,” he argues that superficial acts of social charity have historically “prevented the core of [a] system from being realized by those who suffer from it and understood by those who contemplate it”; a sort of “repairing with the left hand” what we “have destroyed with the right.” By believing that clean capitalism, for example, can solve environmental problems, we have shielded ourselves from the possibility of alternatives to capitalist paradigms (consumerism, unfettered economic growth, etc). Similarly, we have tolerated environmental destruction as a necessary part of the capitalist system. To counter this enmeshment, Žižek calls for “soft apocalyptic thinking,” a kind of misanthropic realism that seeks to break through the veneer of charitable acts to fundamentally question a society where poverty and social-environmental injustice are acceptable to begin with.

Pedagogy of the Green Apocalypse

Whether it be prophecies of climate change, tanking economies, religious armageddons, nuclear annihilations, or a never-ending slew of films on impending meteor strikes, Western society is presently saturated in end-times anxiety. But this fear is nothing new. What makes contemporary apocalypticism unique, however, is the reality of ecological crises that offer scientific credibility to the possibility of anthropogenic self-destruction. Are environmental crises just another

link in a two thousand year old chain or is contemporary apocalypticism an enactment of realistic thinking? Perhaps the answer to this question can be initially pursued by examining how we think about environmental apocalypse itself.

Lawrence Buell, a pioneer of ecocriticism, is particularly interested in the metaphors we use to describe the environment and our relationship with it. He argues that environmental apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). Apocalypse is “central to ecocriticism’s projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transform itself according to the doctrine of the web” (285). Buell explains that by conceiving of all nature as a web of interdependence within which humans are as vulnerable as any other part, we come to recognize that any threat posed to nature is a threat posed to humans, a challenge to the hubris of an anthropocentric worldview.

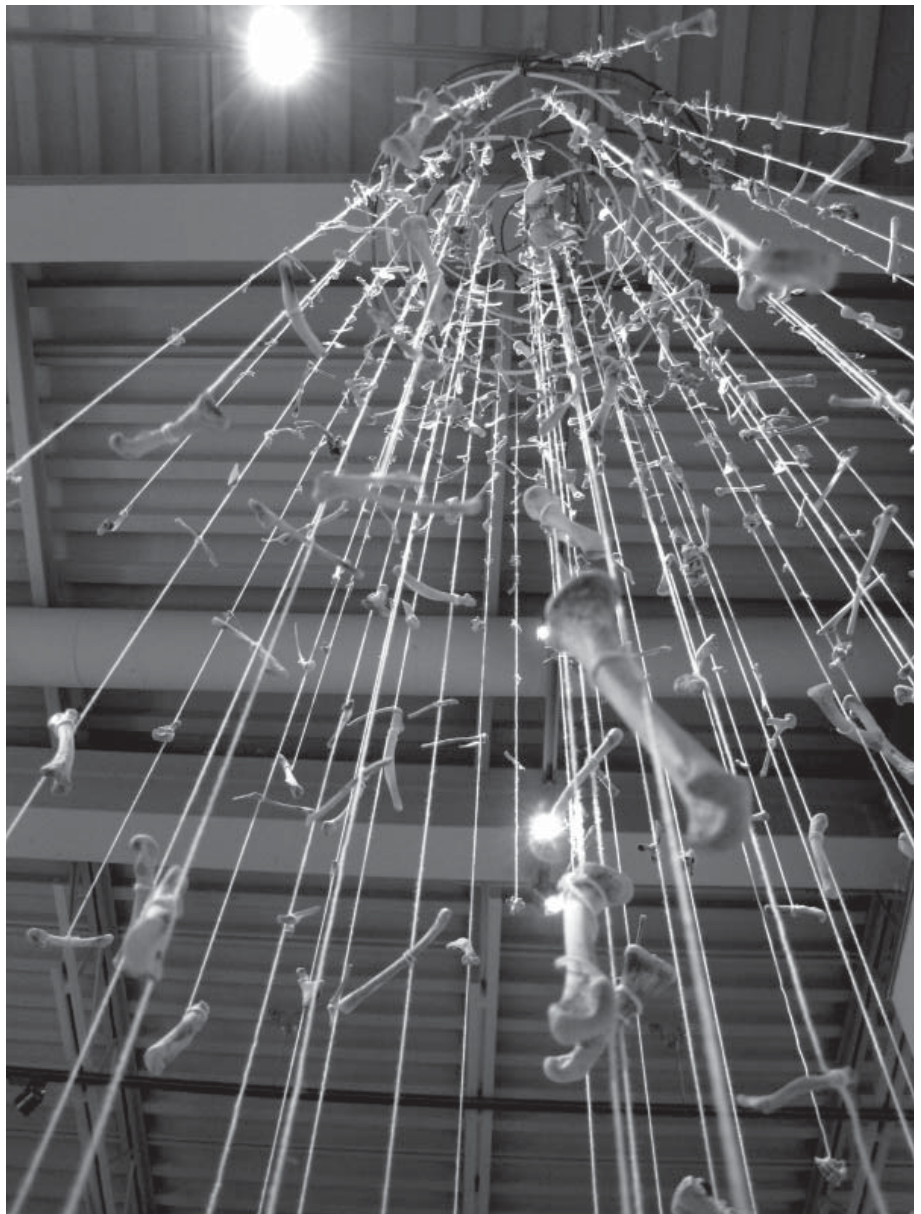
Buell writes, “we create images of doom to avert doom: that is the strategy of the jeremiad” (294). The jeremiad, an eponym that refers to the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah who prophesied the fall of Jerusalem, Babylon, and Assyria, is usually an invective attack on contemporary society, supported by a prophecy of the society’s imminent downfall. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul and Anne Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), *Limits to Growth* (1972) by Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers and William Behrens III, Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989), and Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), are popular environmentalist examples of the jeremiad structure. Each book engages with three key bases that define contemporary depictions of environmental apocalypse, outlined by Buell: a notion of a world where greater demand is put on ecosystems than can be sustained by them, causing an “overshoot” scenario; a vision of nature being “tampered with” by humans and then “recoiling against humankind in a kind of return of the repressed”; and the possibility that environmental damage

could reach an irreparable point where we are left with “no escape routes” (308).

Frederick Buell (Lawrence’s brother) argues that in the 1980s, after the success of early environmentalism, a brand of anti-environmentalism was fostered by the American Right that characterized environmentalists as apocalyptic extremists. Ronald Bailey wrote, for example, that “modern ecological millennarians, impatient with waiting for the flash of thermonuclear doom, now claim there is a ‘global environmental crisis’ threatening not just humanity, but all life on earth” (3). Bailey takes issue with apocalyptic environmentalism’s critique of the unimpeded freedom to extract and commodify resources that he holds as a core American value. As Buell describes, “like feminism and multiculturalism, [to Bailey,] environmentalism was inherently totalitarian, an enemy to America’s tradition of freedom” (19).

By the 1990s a new kind of environmentalism was being born in response to the apocalyptic environmentalism of the 1980s. This new brand of environmentalism, the origin of the present day so-called bright green camp, characterized environmental risk as an opportunity for a new start, which Frederick Buell argues fostered “a culture of hyperexuberance” (208). He describes the culture, noting that “risk and instability suddenly became exciting and creative, the signs of a renaissance.... Going out of control did not mean the degradation of the biosphere but a way to evolve faster. Chaos appeared not as a feature of apocalypse but as something that was good for us” (214). The shift toward hyperexuberance mirrors a familiar historical pattern. In Christian societies, apocalyptic fears have tended to go hand-in-hand with millenarian desires. Millenarianism, or the belief that drastic change occurs in thousand year cycles, suggests that in the wake of a major cataclysm or breakdown, a new start may be possible. In fact, it may even be desirable.

While the desire for radical change may be virtuous, the impulse to start



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anew is dangerous. Catherine Keller argues,

expectations seek, after all, to realize themselves. So the religious habit of imagining the world out of existence would not seem to be irrelevant to the material habits of world-waste running our civilization [...] ... the expectancy that Our Father will make us a shiny new world when this one breaks explicitly correlates with a willingness to dump this one. (2)

Ecological millenarianism may foster the delusion that an ecological

collapse is actually good for us by bringing us closer to creating smaller-scale, eco-topic societies. These societies, however, by virtue of being smaller, must also be exclusive.

Fantasies of a less inhabited world invite racist perspectives through which groups of the global population might be imagined out of existence. Take for example Paul and Anne Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968). In the 1960s they envisioned an imminent resource crisis and subsequent population crash that would have started in the 1970s. They argued that this crash should be mitigated by draconian population

control, notably in India and Pakistan, failing to make the more appropriate call for a redistribution of global resources. Countries of the Global South have often been encouraged to forfeit the kind of resource use that built the Global North. As Cindi Katz argues, “made poor or kept poor in part through the economic power of the developed countries, the majority of third world residents are now being asked to forego technological innovation, resource use, and other means of economic development for sake of ‘the environment’” (278).

As images of post-apocalyptic dystopia from the environmentalism of the 1970s were replaced in the 1990s by hyperexuberance for a technologically savvy future, environmentalism was incorporated into the very capitalist machine against which it had previously warned. As Frederick Buell writes,

The dialectic went as follows[.] Humanity’s heroic era of mastery of nature (thesis) was opposed by the belated, but powerful appearance of environmental apocalypse (antithesis); the new, boundless possibilities of society, just now being revealed as incorporating both the ideology of mastery and the logic of environmental crisis were the triumphant synthesis. (23)

The promise of social and technological innovation, presented in the 1990s, suggested that the West would not have to scale back. Rather, we came to believe that we might invent our way around problems like pollution and resource scarcity. There would be no challenge that capitalism could not take on; the free market was an open road of invention and innovation. In Frederick Buell’s words, “Glinda lifted her wand, and suddenly all those pesky old environmental problems were actually good for you. Let them get worse; we’ll only get better” (219).

According to Buell, since the turn of the millennium, environmental crisis discourse has largely shifted from being a contemplation of the future to a recognition of a present or imminent dwelling place. “Today, attempts to imagine the future realistically

forces one to take environmental and environmental-social crisis seriously ... from the inside ... as a context in which one actually dwells, not just anticipates” (246). This shift in crisis thinking is linked to a discursive shift exemplified by *Beyond the Limits* (1992), a follow-up to the iconic *Limits to Growth* (1972). This cornerstone book illustrated how the capitalist paradigm of unfettered growth and consumption could never be sustainable in a world with finite resources. Instead, Meadows et al. argued that there must be limits imposed to keep the natural resources of the planet from being ravaged. Twenty

the end of a stable climate marks the end of the so-called natural world. In the midst of considerable critique of this work, ecocritic Greg Garrard sums it up well when he says that, “McKibben’s ‘nature’ is not merely threatened by the possibility of apocalypse, but in some sense already beyond it, for if nature is inflected as wilderness, the very thought of human interference is enough decisively to contaminate its purity” (106). Garrard’s critique makes the point that, by McKibben’s standards, the very advent of human civilization—the moment our tampering with nature began—would have marked the initia-

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years later, *Beyond the Limits* explains that the limits posed by their first book had been exceeded. Buell explains that when *Beyond the Limits* was published in 1992, we had already “failed the test” posed by *Limits to Growth*. What *Beyond the Limits* offered, however, was hope for “a damaged but restorable world” (188). Since 1992 we have again missed the deadline for action and this realization within environmental discourse has been embodied in a more fatalistic impression of environmental crisis. Buell writes, “now [*Beyond the Limits*] time limit for remedial action has expired, its analysis would doom the earth to erosion and terrible contraction in the future” (188).

While apocalyptic environmentalism has, to some extent, awakened public consciousness to the importance of thinking-forward, it has also limited itself by thinking along stark, dualistic lines. One of the outcomes of this kind of thinking is exemplified in McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989) whereby

tion of the apocalypse itself. Such a depressing conception of the human-environment relationship probably does more to re-inscribe a status quo notion of human mastery over nature than it does to fundamentally question the human position *within* nature.

Though apocalypticism has historically had radical tenets of social critique, today, as John Wallis has found, it is most often characterized by a “valorization of the everyday wherein, in an almost Durkheimian way, the contemporary social order (understood as typically male and North American) is reaffirmed and celebrated” (73). A quick inspection of Hollywood apocalypse dramas reveals that hidden beneath the threat of rogue comets or stolen nuclear warheads is a deeper anxiety regarding the failure of white, middle class, heteropatriarchal American values. In *Armageddon* (1998), Bruce Willis’s character, Harry Stamper, is an American oil driller who goes into space to drill a nuclear warhead into an



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encroaching comet. A single father, he leaves his twentysomething daughter Grace alone in her bedroom, taking her boyfriend AJ instead, a fellow oil rig worker, played by Ben Affleck. At the climax of the film, the decision is made that someone must manually detonate the bomb from the surface of the comet to prevent it from striking earth and initiating doom. AJ is selected to detonate the bomb but Stamper insists

that he will do it instead. He admits that AJ is the son he never had and gushes that he would be proud to have AJ marry Grace. In Stamper's act of selflessness and heroism, he sacrifices himself not only to save planet Earth but more importantly, to allow his daughter to realize the heteronormative life that he had failed to achieve in his day and to perpetuate his lineage of

patriotic American oil workers via AJ's gene pool.

The hypermasculine heroism of apocalypse is not confined to Hollywood depictions but is similarly infused into popular environmentalism. Canadian journalist and environmentalist Chris Turner has written about climate change and the projected death of the Great Barrier Reef, saying, "the tragedy is obvious, the scope is impossibly huge, the loss beyond measure. But we have enough laments.... Adventure stories, on the other hand—heroic narratives of victory against impossible odds in the heretofore uncharted realms—these are the tools of transformative myth. This is what we need: a new myth of the frontier" (28-29). While I appreciate Turner's impulse to locate a new kind of hope within environmental crisis, I would argue that recasting degraded environments as the new frontier to be conquered, even if only psychologically, re-inscribes a problematic attitude of conquest and mastery and dismisses the experience of confronting the inconceivable failure of environmental loss. Is approaching environmental apocalypse with a reinvigorated sense of heroism—a sense that humans can find exciting discovery within failed environments—really the paradigmatic change that we want to foster? Was it attitudes of conquest that spurred colonialism and environmental mastery in the first place? "Feel exhilaration in the place of anxiety and lament," encourages Turner, "we will all learn to breathe underwater" (29). The Great Barrier Reef is not dead yet nor have the ice caps flooded our continents. And yet, Turner encourages us to find exhilaration in the promise of "living underwater," his metaphor for a kind of conquering apocalypse. Turner's argument echoes a line of thinking that Katz critiques, which envisions humans as simultaneously masters of nature and victims of themselves, unable to stop their inexorable movement toward destroying nature. She writes:

On the one hand the "human species" is blamed for taking us to the brink of environmental disaster, brought on, often as not, by the inevitability

of human “greed” vis-a-vis nature. Infinitely capable of wrong, “human beings” are paradoxically incapable of transformative action; greed after all is human nature. Until the apocalyptic moment human action drives history, but history-become-apocalypse renders human agency moot. (2)

A Crisis of Hope

Sarah Amsler argues that current environmental crisis discourse is underpinned by two prominent narratives of concern: fear of environmental breakdown and paralyzing doubt that humans have “the will or capacity” to prevent such breakdown (131). Amsler believes that, “systemic changes in economy, politics and culture are closing down avenues for radical freedom,” a constriction that is experienced in the everyday, “as a sense of individual powerlessness” (132). Faith in social activism, as

organic aisle of their local grocery store, where, for a few extra dollars, they can protect the environment via the purchasing of “green” products. Within this envisioning of environmentalism, only the wealthy can afford to be environmental stewards, leaving most of us with the psychological burden of environmental decline. The inability to take meaningful action against environmental and social problems creates what Amsler refers to as, “social despair” and ultimately, a crisis of hope (132).

What are the politics of hope in a time when crisis has already arrived? Can hope exist within failure? Does hope within failure require the possibility that failure might be overcome? Lisa Duggan, in conversation with José Esteban Muñoz recounts that, “the therapist of a friend of mine told her, ‘hope is the worst thing’[,] ... which I took to mean that hope in the present is a projection forward of a wish for repair of the past. Since the past cannot be

When we talk about [the] dialectical tension between hope and hopelessness we must account for the force of the negative. But we don’t mean the negative in some grandiose subjectivity-shattering way. We mean living with the negative and that, first and foremost, means living with failure. This is to say that hope and hopelessness converge at a certain point.... In this way we are calling for a politics oriented towards means not ends. (281)

Muñoz’s view that there may be a point of convergence between hope and hopelessness suggests that there is a need for accepting present and past failure in order to locate an empowerment that is not premised on the absence of failure. D. W. Winnicott observed that trauma in children often stems from fear of a breakdown that has already occurred. When children acknowledge the past breakdown, they are not necessarily freed of constraints, but rather can build it into their identity and move forward with realistic expectations of the world (103-107). In a similar way, acknowledging environmental breakdown as something that has already begun to happen will not alleviate the symptoms of the breakdown but may allow us to move forward more realistically. Amsler refers to this perspective as “an ethics of ambiguity” (148), noting that “this being-outsideness ... cannot be communicated linguistically from one person to another through rational argumentation. Rather, it must be disclosed through encounters with radically disruptive realities and imaginations that expose our own as partial and situated” (142-143).

By reducing climate change into a problem that might be solved, do we undermine its complexity? Richard M. Douglas argues that we do, and that in the process “we foster a certain atmosphere of complacency and wishful thinking, a sense that we are almost bound in time to solve it” (198). Perhaps then, narratives of climate change are valuable for the same reason that they are problematic. They pose an unnavigable problem to human society

There was something ominous about the image of a lone plane burning carbon at thirty nine thousand feet above the melting polar ice caps.

a reliable mechanism for creating social reform, may be dwindling in the face of ever-more complicated environmental-social problems and within the tightening grip of western law enforcement policy (such as that demonstrated by the Toronto Police during the G20 summit).

Consider the way that social activism in the 1960s, spurred-on by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), managed to eradicate DDT from agricultural employment within a decade (DDT was officially banned in the United States in 1972). By contrast, current environmental issues are swallowed by abstract narratives of climate change and blurry discussions of greening the economy. Contemporary Western citizens are directed by “green” advertising campaigns to the

repaired, hope is a wish for that which never was and cannot be” (275). She goes on to note that,

As a queer feminist anti-imperialist and utterly contrary and cranky leftist, I have my doubts about the political valences of hope.... I associate it with normative prescriptions about the future I *ought* to want, with coercive groupthink, with compulsory cheerfulness, with subtly coercive blandness.... Such happiness and optimism calls out for ruin—an insurgency! a stock market crash! a flaming pervert next door! (277)

Muñoz responds, saying that,

and, in so doing, challenge society to recognize its own mortality. Douglas describes this as “the kind of existential threat to society that might give rise to widespread and fundamental questioning of dominant social structures and ideologies” (198). Amsler hopes that the experience “of being disrupted or decentred ... can provoke a state of heightened reflexivity in which we realize that our bodies, truths and ways of being do not fit the contours of a dominant reality” (142).

As environmentalists, what do we take from this argument? Do we allow climate change to unfold and with it, some profound realization about human existence? Perhaps, dwelling in the tension between striving to solve mammoth environmental problems like climate change and failing to solve them, is the place of uncertainty that Amsler and Douglas argue could lead to a profound shift in cultural thinking and feeling. By envisioning the current present as apocalyptic, perhaps we open ourselves up to the vulnerability that impending failure produces. While this argument may seem bleak, I would suggest that by confronting the inevitability of human extinction (whether it be now or a thousand years from now), we might actually expand our capacity for crisis thinking, and ultimately our ability to survive in an increasingly volatile environment. Douglas points out that, “to say civilization is mortal is also to say it is killable.... Simply to make this argument is not to bring the end any closer. In fact, widespread acceptance of this idea might be the key to prolonging civilization’s lifespan in practice” (213).

Visions in the Sky

Two years ago I traveled to Indonesia to volunteer for a biodiversity research organization in the tropical forests of southeast Sulawesi. As the Boeing 747-400 carried me northwest away from Chicago, I wondered what I looked like from below. Two and a half hours into the journey and thirty-nine thousand feet above ground, I spooned bibimbap into my mouth and looked out through the oval of reinforced glass.

Below me was an expanse of mottled brown arctic tundra and ahead of me was a distinct line where the tundra turned to ice. I checked my watch. *That was quick*, I thought. I looked around the cabin of the aircraft. The flight was primarily composed of Korean businesspeople, most of whom were asleep, on laptops or watching reruns of *Friends* on the seat-back televisions. *Should I say something? Do they know that we’re flying over the Arctic?* It seemed incredible that only a brief few hours after leaving the temperate climate of Chicago O’Hare International Airport we were soaring above a mythic frozen landscape. I turned back to the window. Alien squiggles of water marked the brown canvas below and sharp, frosted, geometric shapes imprinted the blue ice just ahead of us. The shadow of the jumbo jet stenciled its way across the ground. There was something ominous about the image of a lone plane burning carbon at thirty nine thousand feet above the melting polar ice caps. And there I was, en route to do environmental work on the frontier of some of the last unexplored rain forests on the planet. The paradox was painful.

In February of 2013, NASA engineer turned multimillionaire investment tycoon Dennis Tito announced that he plans to send an American married couple on a tour of Mars in 2018. The expedition will be initially funded by Tito with supplemental funds coming from donations and media partnerships, potentially totaling somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$1 billion. Tito’s project, entitled “Inspiration Mars,” is strictly an act of space tourism. The couple will not necessarily be NASA scientists nor will the voyage actually have them setting foot on Mars but rather orbiting it for the view.

According to Tito’s right hand man, space veteran Taber McCullum, Inspiration Mars “is very symbolic and we really need it to represent humanity” (news.yahoo.com). To whom do we need to represent humanity? Is sending an American married couple to Mars really the most interesting way that we might represent humanity? Or are we inching toward fulfilling the impulse to find an exit strategy from

Earth? Is Tito’s message of inspiration perhaps a promise to the young Western minds of today that despite environmental, social, economic, and political calamity, with enough money and resources, someday some of us (the chosen few) may be able to jump ship, via spaceship, to a new earth, another planet whose landscape remains unspoiled? Ironically, Mars is, to our best knowledge, a dead planet and so Tito’s tour is, if anything, an ironic act of post-apocalyptic voyeurism. There is a lot to be done on planet Earth in the way of addressing global environmental and social problems and burning \$1 billion worth of carbon into space seems like a perfect symbol of *humanity’s* convoluted priorities.

In 2013 we managed to sidestep a repeat of the Beebe fiasco, with no major reporting of blackbirds falling out of the sky on New Year’s Eve. What does the absence of falling birds this year mean? Better behaved teenagers? A shortage in fireworks? The recession? Or, maybe, we are underestimating the birds themselves, who are simply biding their time. Maybe instead of quiet or dead birds as the apocalyptic symbol that moves us to think seriously about environmental crisis, we should try listening to what the soaring and singing birds have to say, although, I have a feeling it may be hard to hear. And so with that thought in mind, I playfully leave you with this, a piece of the end of Daphne Du Maurier’s short story, “The Birds” (1952), a tale of a Cornish coastal town on the heels of World War II where the local birds have suddenly turned on the villagers:

He went round the cottage methodically, testing every window, every door. He climbed onto the roof also, and fixed boards across every chimney except the kitchen. The cold was so intense he could hardly bear it, but the job had to be done. Now and again he would look up, searching the sky for aircraft. None came. As he worked he cursed the inefficiency of the authorities. “It’s always the same,” he muttered. “They always let us down. Muddle, muddle, from the start. No plan,



AUGURY : ELEGY. Jessica Marion Barr.

no real organization. And we don't matter down here. That's what it is. The people upcountry have priority. They're using gas up there, no doubt, and all the aircraft. We've got to wait and take what comes." He paused, his work on the bedroom chimney finished, and looked out to sea.

Something was moving out there. Something gray and white amongst the breakers. "Good old Navy," he said, "they never let us down. They're coming down-channel; they're turning in the bay." He waited, straining his eyes, watering in the wind, toward the sea. He was wrong,

though. It was not ships. The Navy was not there. The gulls were rising from the sea. The massed flocks in the fields, with ruffled feathers, rose in formation from the ground and, wing to wing, soared upward to the sky. The tide had turned again. (11)

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