

AMBIENT CATASTROPHE: CLIMATE ANXIETY AND EVERYDAY NEGOTIATION IN *WEATHER* BY JENNY OFFILL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how climate anxiety and the accompanying dread permeates daily life, subtly invading everyday rhythms, routines and social interactions. The protagonist Lizzie Benson, a librarian, begins managing the email inbox of a climate change Podcast after reconnecting with her old college professor. This intensifies her preoccupation with climate apocalypse and survival and she strains to balance her personal life- her husband, son and struggling brother- with the ever-growing anxiety of surviving on a planet that keeps growing warmer. By drawing on the concept of 'solastagia' developed by Glenn Albrecht, eco-anxiety and through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'everyday life' the paper argues that the ambient presence of the anticipated climate crisis infiltrates ordinary, mundane life. The anxiety of witnessing the negative environmental changes in one's familiar surroundings causes extreme distress and guilt. The study aims to understand how this state of helplessness in the face of an anticipated catastrophe makes daily existence dreary and quietly changes the interactions of the people with themselves and the increasingly warming world. Lizzie's ineffectual efforts to sustain normal routines and keep a clear head aggravate the anxiety that pervades her daily existence. This unsettled consciousness in the wake of anticipated ecological loss is also mirrored in the novel's fragmented, almost tweet-like chains of thought. Thus, the paper attempts to explore how climate anxiety and existential dread, a condition that accompanies living in the anthropocene, reshapes everyday life and examines the human attempt to regulate ordinary life while anticipating collapse.

Key Words: *Climate Anxiety, Solastagia, Anthropocene, Ecological Responsibility*

As things currently stand with the UN officially declaring that the world has entered an era of "global water bankruptcy", conversations about the accelerating climate change and environmental justice to prevent the oncoming ecological collapse becomes crucial and unavoidable, one that is now being copiously depicted through the emerging genre of climate fiction (cli-fi). But these novels often feature an apocalyptic setting where people try to sustain themselves on a planet they have actively destroyed, with little focus on the psychological impacts the loss of one's familiar environment can have on an individual. *Weather* then becomes a sort of record of individual psychic and emotional response to living on the eve of a catastrophe – the feeling of being lost and unmoored. In a world of planetary disasters, extreme weather, rising sea levels and ice sheet collapse, anxiety and dread about the coming apocalypse is justified. This social, economic, environmental and humanitarian emergency has come to pervade every aspect of human existence causing our consciousness to be constantly overwhelmed by the looming threat of extinction. With media and IT globalization bringing the global events of climate crises and suffering to the living room, people are forced out of the "sepulcher of oblivion".

The attritional violence against the environment, "a violence of delayed destruction", which was out of public sight and consciousness for a long time has now become increasingly hard to ignore as the calamitous repercussions of our greed is becoming more and more conspicuous. The casualties are no longer postponed, regions are turning uninhabitable and climate change has become irretrievable. The progressively tangible "death by indirection" makes it ever more

difficult to comprehend the world we live in. As one's identity and understanding of self is inextricably linked to one's sense of place, these incremental changes in one's familiar environment can severely disrupt a coherent sense of self and identity. This brings about a state of disenfranchised grief and anxiety as one, confronted with their inability to do anything substantial to reverse the damage and prevent the accelerating degradation is paralysed into inaction. This fact of one's helplessness in the face of a climate catastrophe causes extreme mental anguish. In this age of hypercapitalism, there is a consensual sense of the clock ticking, that the present has been truncated and compressed. This interminable experience of a fast-forward life, combined with the cognizance of an onrushing apocalypse, plummeting ecosystem productivity and irreparable destruction of the biosphere induces a gripping climate anxiety that derails normal functioning and interaction. Global environmental shifts and regional ecological decay are increasingly interwoven with everyday experience, triggering visceral psychological and emotional reactions (Cunson and Ellis). This demonstrates that humans possess an innate ability to develop 'affective ties' across a multitude of settings (urban, natural, personal, communal) which further highlights how land and ecosystems function as vital assets in fostering mental well-being, community thriving and cultural identity. Hence in this world, on the brink of a global catastrophe, how we live, work, love, endure and care for each other can be severely altered.

How do we live on a planet we are constantly ravaging? How do you maintain optimism amidst a sinkhole of crises? How do you cope with your own mortality and that of your loved ones? What happens when the alarm of climate change becomes too loud to ignore or escape? How do you maintain purpose and hope without falling into despair and nihilism, when only the wealthy can afford total disengagement? What is the optimal way to face the impending apocalypse? Would you choose to be a 'climate defeatist' retreating from society while making plans for your 'doomstead' or would you confront it communally, engaging in collective and collaborative actions to mitigate the disaster? The paper examines through Lefebvre's everyday life and Albrecht's 'solastagia' and the concept of eco-anxiety how daily life becomes a juggling act as one is perturbed by these unanswerable questions. As a core component of social reality, 'everyday life' is defined by familiar routines, habitual actions and predictable patterns that offer meaning, direction and sense of safety by providing a comforting order and stability. Everyday life is thus ingrained in an individual's culture, social interactions, relationships and experiences with all their differences and conflicts, awareness of which only arises by tediousness or disruption. Henri Lefebvre in his *Critique of Everyday Life* argues that daily life is influenced by larger societal forces and that true freedom is impossible as these forces control our everyday existence- our routines, habits and consumption patterns. The human being stops being human and instead "becomes a thing to be used by another thing". In *Weather*, the worsening climate becomes the totalizing force, the fulcrum, that determines the character's everyday life as they attempt to balance domestic concerns amid anxious predictions of a global climatic collapse. The weather becomes the 'urban' that disrupts the perceived, conceived and lived social space of the residents as the same era that brought incredible advancements in daily technology has also seen a profound decline in the quality of daily life for the average person. Thus the entire fabric becomes compressed to this ambient weather; every aspect of everyone's life feels threatened, every decision an intense duel, continually oscillating between individual survival and collective action. When the 'lived experience of the space' is disrupted especially with the media bringing increased exposure to the cause of the distress (climate crisis), for the coping individual "the trivial becomes extraordinary, and the habitual becomes 'mythical' "(Critique of Everyday Life 14).

Lizzie Benson, a middle aged – underqualified librarian, experiences a complete subsumption

of her daily life by the looming specter of the ecological collapse. Faced with the disorienting reality of her own corporeal limitations, she obsesses over the mundane in face of tectonic shifts—a desperate attempt to escape the pervasive anxiety that define the anthropocene. As the boundaries between her domestic life and the outside world of imminent chaos becomes increasingly porous, she grapples with the question of how to “keep tending your own garden once you’ve seen the flames beyond its walls?”. Burdened by the psychological weight of the climate crisis, anticipatory dread and exhaustion, and overwhelmed by her whirlwinding interior landscape, her “everyday life is defined by contradictions: illusion and truth, power and helplessness, the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control” (Critique of Everyday Life 21).

This feeling of pervasive anxiety and uneasiness of living in the anthropocene is what Albrecht called ‘solastagia’, the lost comfort (Latin solacium) and the mounting distress from seeing one’s familiar environment changing due to climate crisis. Different from nostalgia, ‘solastagia’ is a form of anxiety that develops when a person’s accustomed setting turns hostile and progressively uninhabitable. “It is the ‘lived experience’ of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present” (Albrecht 5). The individual panics as “the place, which was considered essential for the emotional and physical survival of the individual and their community, is endangered” (Ferrarello). As the physical gap between the individual and the anxiety trigger is closing, they often experience a sense of paralysis unable to translate such a fear into action. This eco-anxiety and melancholia is clearly exhibited by each of the novel’s main characters – Lizzie, Sylvia and Henry.

Lizzie’s average life – working an unfulfilling, routine job and resigned to the fact of her dull, disappointing existence – takes the turn for the paranoid and conspiratorial as she is obligated to navigate a world that feels increasingly disquieting and precarious. After reconnecting with her old mentor, Sylvia Liller, who recruits her to answer the emails she receives from the listeners of her podcast ‘Hell and High Water’, Lizzie gets more and more involved with doomsday prepping, climate survivalism and evangelical doomsayers and spirals into a state of chronic climate anxiety. She tries not to “spill the full cup”, struggling to balance her domestic life (the mundane) with the rising anxiety and dread. The numerous seminars, emails concerning disorienting questions of safety, bioengineered bodies, survival tips and regular engagement with the hopeless and detached, she also becomes caught in the doomer-prepper state – “There are fewer and fewer birds these days. This is the hole I tumbled down an hour ago” (Offill 49) – which becomes too much for her sensitive mind to handle. But unlike the defeatists, Lizzie can’t run away or retreat. She has a son to provide for, an elderly mother to worry about, a recovering drug addict brother to care for and a straining marriage to fix. Carrying the baggage of all these identities makes her hooked to responsibility as she becomes a personal therapist for those around her which causes her husband to remark, “I wish you were a real shrink... then we’d be rich” (Offill 8). After all the talk about the “invisible horsemen galloping towards us”, she must return home to bills, fliers and chores that define her daily life. While attending a Zen meditation class to assuage her anxiety she is asked to let go of everything she loves, which only raises her fear of not being able to protect her family from the coming doom. “The pieces of glass from a wedding were meant to be saved. If the husband died first, the wife prepared his body for burial by weighting his eyelids with the shards. If the wife died first, it was the husband’s job to do this. I wish I had known this. I wish I had kept those shards” (Offill 66).

In the absence of a beginner’s course on how to cope and distressed by doubts about her parenting, marital and familial relationships, Lizzie attempts to carry on through wry humour, research of survival tips, mapping a doomstead and doubling as an ‘unofficial shrink’ for people

around her. Growing increasingly paranoid– “Now when I see my neighbors the voice in my head gets all Jesusy. One of you will betray me. But which? Is it you Mrs. Kovinski?”(Offill 60) – and confronted with the truth of her frailty – “Then one day I have to run to catch a bus. I am so out of breath when I get there that I know in a flash all my preparations for the apocalypse are doomed”(Offill 90) – she even came close to having an affair with Will, a wilderness survival instructor and photographer. But no matter how meticulously she prepares for the crisis, she is forced to confront her powerlessness “Do you really think you can protect [your family]? In 2047?” Sylvia asks. I look at her. Because until this moment, I did, I did somehow think this... “Then become rich, very, very rich,” she says in a tight voice”(Offill 63). The true scale of things scare her and her bid to not think of the ‘bigness and smallness’ of things always fail– “My #1 fear is the acceleration of days. No such thing supposedly, but I swear I can feel it”(Offill 14). Meanwhile, her brother Henry with whom she’s in a co-dependent relationship, lapses into drug use crippled by the mounting anxiety of being a good father in a world that is turning increasingly dangerous. His self-destructive attitude prompted by bizarre and unsettling dreams and visions destroys his marriage and makes him incapable of normal human interactions.

Sylvia, on the other hand, though having started the podcast with a vision of “rewilding half the earth” grows more hopeless as she failed to protect her soul from the ubiquitous dread– “No more campaigning, no more fund-raising, no more obligatory notes of hope... all she wants now is to go somewhere quiet and dark”(Offill 90). Burnt out she realizes the futility of trying to delay the apocalypse by reasoning with the complacent evangelists, doomsayers and de-extinction maniacs. She becomes a doomer herself as she succumbs to despair and isolates herself– “There’s no hope anymore, only witnesses”(Offill 67).

This omnipresent anxiety manifests in other characters’ as well– anxious Ben, the ‘doomed adjunct’ and the blonde who frequents the library, the perfection-obsessed Catherine, the local bodega owner- whose lives are equally lost and destabilized. Individuals usually navigate hurdles through familiar routines and adapting their experiences to the changes within daily life. The frantic oscillation between the stifling daily pressures and the looming shadow of a global catastrophe will have people dazed and reeling in the fatiguing modern age of information overload. The response of an average individual to the rising tide of the climate crisis is ‘eco-paralysis’– “... it’s a myth that people panic in emergencies. Eighty percent just freeze. The brain refuses to take in what is happening. This is called the incredulity response”(Offill 31). This growing senselessness of the world is also mirrored in the novel’s incohesive narration, the fragmented tweet-like form, and the non-sequential jumping from one event to the next. The text, peppered with doomer-prepper tips, proverbs, quotes, jokes and mails is jarring, reflecting the disorientation of the individual experience.

As the domestic space becomes saturated with the knowledge of the coming collapse, ‘solastagia’ manifests as anticipatory grief– grief associated with anticipated future losses– which “. . . generate an emotional blockage between individuals, their environment and their place”(Ferrarello). Daily life becomes a site of conflict– a ham sandwich raises moral concerns, packing your kid’s schoolbag reminds you of how you will fail to protect him during the life-altering temperatures of 2047, cleaning reignites anxiety of generating indisposable waste. This eco-anxiety can also be visible in insomniac behaviour– “He’s not doing well with this sleep deprivation. There’s a reason it’s used as a tool of torture. But still, everyone I know is trying to sleep less”(Offill 62). Stressed about their future, this hopelessness and grief pervades their private and public life which comes to be defined by the prepper acronym ‘FUD’– Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt. But “In everyday life the actor becomes committed, compromised; it is a serious business. The parts must be acted out until the end”(Lefebvre 136).

So how does one respond to such paralysing anxiety and terror of the oncoming destruction? Should one like Lizzie gather survival tips—tuna can candle, t-shirt fishing— hatch plans of a doomstead carefully assessing people to bring along and get ‘enmeshed’ in other’s life forgetting oneself; like the evangelists treat the collapse as god’s will; like the fatalists succumb to despair and gloom and retreat believing it too late to stop the crisis; or like the techno-optimistic populace devise plans of inhabiting Mars or genetically modifying bodies to adapt?—“ . . . eventually all those who are unnerved by what is falling away will be gone, and after that, there won’t be any more talk of what has been lost, only of what has been gained”(Offill 23). The reason most will be inclined towards passivity in the face of an ecological crisis is because they are complicit, enjoying the comfort of modern life. Since it requires real physical sacrifice to stop participating in the slaughter of the planet, it becomes easier to wait for the rapture than actively engage in preventive actions. This conflict is precisely captured in Lizzie’s dilemma between convenience or rightness. “ I take the car service home because I’m ridiculous”(Offill 35). Hence this daily life where the scales shift every few minutes, there arises the burning question of ‘does intense psychic pain make one more empathetic to other’s suffering or blind to the pain of others outside individual experience?’

Lefebvre suggests that the only remedy for such “terror-enforced passivity”, the only escape from the perpetual pendulation of one’s acts having little or colossal impact, is channeling it into action— spontaneous and utopian. “Action and action alone can bring this healthiness and this elementary equilibrium, this ability to grasp life in its varied aspects, without being deliberately gloomy or abstractly optimistic . . . either looking at life on the black side or through rose-tinted glasses”(Lefebvre 186). To break with this monotonous taxing everyday, a massive redrafting of life is essential, brought about by change in society and space, as rumination can only immobilize. No one has a clue on how to deal with the coming doom, as even the most optimistic of scientists support limiting climate change and adapting to the pillage but not reversal. Feeling threatened but choosing to remain passive won’t stave off the calamity. Sylvia’s dystopian attitude, recognising the problem without a reliable solution only causes more worry. The trans-humanist outlook of fixing one’s biological form to adapt to the warming planet or terraforming Mars after making a perfectly good planet uninhabitable is not a feasible answer. Nor is prioritizing oneself over collective survival as it is foolish to assume one’s wealth and wit can make them immune to the catastrophe, ignoring the interconnected existence of living beings. The epiphanic realization that “the core delusion is that I am here and you are there”(Offill 96) and recognising that it is a collective crisis where we’re all responsible for each other, can be a helpful first step. A major positive response to climate anxiety is engaging in collective conservation, restoration and revitalization of one’s own environment. As Thunberg said “ no one is too small to make a difference” and extensive changes always start with something small— minimalistic lifestyle, fighting unchecked pollution, donating to organisations, caring for marginalised and severely affected communities and maintaining a climate-forward approach. But one must carefully guard one’s soul and mind as when surrounded by dread, hopelessness and pessimism since “the world continues to end” can make one weary and to eventually stop caring. “What it means to be a good person, a moral person, is calculated differently in times of crisis than in ordinary circumstances”(Offill 15).

To avoid this one can apply the ‘loss-proofing’ method mentioned in the novel—‘to think of the group first in order to survive as it gives one purpose, providing the necessary strength one needs to withstand an emergency’. It can be taxing to take the first step, feeling anxious and lost as one is in the Anthropocene. But what if you are “walking past my own search party by not allowing myself to join any collective enterprises?”(Offill). Like Lizzie, we are all in the “twilight knowing” wherein an individual is aware of uncomfortable and destabilizing truths but chooses

to remain in denial. Yet “with practice...one may learn to accept the feeling of groundlessness without existential fear”(Offill 61). Even if we cannot all organise protests or conduct scientific enquiry, if we all work together we can make great progress in preserving this doomed planet. As the novel concludes, Lizzie with her brief rendezvous with Will ending, realizes the fallacious notion of trying to save only oneself, discerning that she must rejoin the community for collective action and slowly learn to manage the multiple dimensions of her lived experience. This is further highlighted by the quote Ben pins on his desk, “You are not some disinterested bystander/Exert yourself”(Offill 94). Since the enemy is ourselves and our wasteful practices, Offill provides a website “Obligatory Note of Hope” that enables access to practical resources to join climate movements, uplifting insights and profiles of inspiring “People of Conscience” to remind one of doing one’s part however small.

Hence the paper examines how the novel *Weather* delineates individual existence in a toxic world, in the heart of the uncertainty of a global collapse (unknown in its form or time) and explores the individual effort “to commit to the next day, the next hour, the next minute even”(Offill 83) as the concurrency of daily life and climate disaster produces a paralysing fear of “dying early and ignobly.” The paper thus highlights through ‘solastagia’ and everyday theory the importance of collective action for positive change by seeing the many unconnected individuals as one big family, each responsible for the other.

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