Going Deep: A Review of *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* by Renee Lertzman

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Depth psychology—concerned with the unconscious and imaginal realms—has a long history in ecopsychology. Psychoanalyst Harold F. Searles' book *The Nonhuman Environment* (1960) was an early attempt at understanding unconscious processes related to the ecological crisis; his work furthermore influenced the writings of Paul Shepard, most notably *Nature and Madness* (1982). In *The Voice of the Earth* (1992/2001), the first book to popularize ecopsychology, Theodore Roszak drew from Freud and Jung (as well as Searles and Shepard). And since the mid-1990s, a large number of (post-)Jungian authors have appeared on the scene, many influenced by the archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1982). A more recent arrival is Renee Lertzman's book *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (2015).

A professional environmental communicator and psychosocial researcher, Lertzman offers an important message: The environmental movement requires a deeper, more complex understanding of the human psyche if its efforts are to be both sensitive and effective. For this reason alone, her book deserves a wide readership. Criticizing the dominant but unrealistically simple models of environmental change that focus on behavior, attitudes, and values, she foregrounds instead the contradictory, affect-laden, defensive, and largely unconscious nature of psychic life. She admirably brings the messy world of human psychic depths into view in order to provide an alternative interpretation for the phenomenon of apathy, seeing this not as a sign of unconcern about ecological decline but of a widespread condition she terms "environmental melancholia." This leads her to call for modes of environmental engagement quite unlike what we mostly see today. Although Lertzman positions her work as an alternative to ecopsychology, which she characterizes as "romantic," I believe there are in fact a number of noteworthy links between her project and specific currents within ecopsychology. Indeed, I suggest that a dialogue with ecopsychology takes the conversation deeper still.

The Project

At the center of Lertzman's project is her championing of psychoanalytic and psychosocial approaches for environmental communication and advocacy. Psychoanalytic work, she says,

> is one of our greatest untapped resources when it comes to meeting our ecological crisis more effectively. This is because we must understand on the deepest levels possible the workings of human behaviour, including unconscious processes such as denial, projection, splitting, disavowal and apathy. (p. xi)

This means breaking the "steadfast loyalty to the economic 'rational actor model'—long debunked—that presumes people change their behaviour based on facts, information, and data" (p. 6). This also means being willing as a researcher to take methodological risks in moving away from "surveys, polls and direct Q&A interviews" that assume that our "top of mind" perceptions and self-reporting are reliable, when in reality we are rarely "completely transparent to ourselves" (p. 41) and often react "irrationally to anxiety, loss and perceived threats" (p. 33). Lertzman's own risk-taking involved designing a qualitative social scientific method that required her to provide a kind of psychoanalytic free-associative holding environment during multiple dialogues with

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her 10 research participants. The site for her research was the heavily industrialized and "notoriously polluted" region of Green Bay, Michigan, where she deliberately selected participants "who might be perceived by active environmentalists or public opinion researchers as apathetic or not caring" (p. 49). A strength of the book is the fine-grained descriptions of the interior lives of these participants and the psychoanalytic interpretations Lertzman draws from her dialogues, often to great sympathetic effect.

Lertzman expected her participants to express anxiety about living in such perilous times but instead found "narratives of loss" dominating her interviews. This then informed her construct of environmental melancholia—"an arrested, inchoate form of mourning" that "is at the heart of much of the inaction in response to ecological degradation" (xiii). She follows Freud in holding that melancholia arises from the experience of loss that is not fully conscious and so cannot be mourned. As she notes, this matches the experience of "environmental loss," which can be highly "amorphous, particularly in a culture that does not recognize it as valid" (p. 6). Such loss also exceeds the available language needed to express it. How does one recognize or express, for example, the loss of such "traditionally held certainties" as a viable biosphere, a loss that ruptures the very ground of our being. In what socially sanctioned space can this be talked about? Environmental melancholia, Lertzman found, also includes a dimension of ambivalence. Although people may feel an impulse to "call out industry" for the environmental losses it produces, such an impulse toward "protest and anger" runs up against the "fear of possible repercussions, such as job loss, social ostracizing or appearing 'ungrateful' for the fruits of industry" (p. 105). These losses and conflicts then call forth unconscious defenses such as denial, distancing, and apathy.

Lertzman is keen to contrast this psychoanalytic approach with the conventional behavior change discourse that assumes there is a "gap" between the proenvironmental attitudes or values that people profess and their actual nonenvironmental behavior (flying airplanes, etc.)—the "so-called disconnect between what people say and what they do" (p. 6). This gap discourse is based on what Lertzman calls the "myth of apathy," the presumption underlying "most environmental campaigns and outreach efforts" (p. 19) that people don't act because they don't care. Taking direct aim at this myth, Lertzman argues that the issue is not that care is *absent;* rather, care is "*present* or even in surplus" (p. 6) in people, but it is bound up with complex unconscious defenses. The gap, then, is "not a gap at all" but rather a space "fraught with psychosocial complications and constraints" (p. 126). The standard behavior change discourse, in other words, operates from a conceptualization of human subjectivity, agency, and behavior that from a psychoanalytic perspective is seriously flawed. And as a result of this, environmental campaigners tend to view apathy as a "barrier" that they need to "overcome and battle," which shames and patronizes the public instead of attempting to understand the complex interior processes driving the behavior that campaigners wish to change.

For Lertzman, then, a psychoanalytic approach "fundamentally changes" (p. 8) the nature of environmental engagement. Instead of social marketing and related strategies, she promotes the idea of creating nonjudgmental, collaborative, and participatory conditions that encourage people to explore their interior dilemmas and free up their care, creativity, and aspirational capacities. This sort of collective depth inquiry, she holds, is "politically necessary rather than a luxury reserved for the consulting room or ecopsychology workshop" (p. 6). Her aim is to cultivate a "politics of environmental advocacy attuned to issues of despair, paralysis, anxiety and related emotions" rather than a "politics of guilt or 'feel good' steps to save the planet" (p. 13). Environmental efforts that are "quick to direct people into action" do nothing to address the "powerful and inchoate affective investments, memories, desires, and losses" (p. 101) that are informing our environmental responses. She therefore wishes to replace superficial and simple behavior-change strategies with a depth-oriented and complex approach that works with the affective and unconscious dimensions "*underlying* particular attitudes, beliefs or opinions" (p. 148).

Key to Lertzman's argument here is the claim that "vast reserves of creative potential for engaging and addressing ecological challenge are available but 'tied up' in complex psychological negotiations" (p xiii). She furthermore suggests that under current circumstances people's inherent reparative energies are mostly confined to their intimate lives and to minor actions such as recycling, as these energies are "lacking a 'home' for broader expression" in the sphere of environmental reparations. In her research, she found that most participants "perceive environmental organizations as primarily wanting only money or signatures on a petition and very little else" (p. 139). Given that creatively contributing to the world is a central human need (as identified by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott), the inability to find a good "home" for making a contribution to environmental reparations is interpreted by Lertzman as yet another dimension of environmental melancholia. She accordingly suggests that one engagement strategy could be to make emotionally safe and collaborative community spaces that allow people to soften their defenses, share their interior worlds, and make contact with their creative, reparative powers.

In the end, however, what Lertzman would like to see is an opportunity to pilot novel environmental communication campaigns

and strategies informed by the kind of knowledge she and other psychoanalytic researchers have developed. She envisions interdisciplinary psychosocial teams researching large projects and producing data that could then inform "policy decisions and governmental leadership for designing more effective public information and outreach campaigns" (p. 152). Although her research has developed a wealth of insight and suggestion, the form of engagement she has in mind has thus yet to be fully implemented and researched.

A Dialogue with Ecopsychology

A question at this point is the significance of Lertzman's arguments for ecopsychology. She herself positions her work as an alternative to, on the one hand, an environmental psychology that is "rigidly positivist" in its focus on the "trifecta" of behavior, attitudes, and values and, on the other hand, a "humanistic/therapeutic" ecopsychology that posits a "romantic alienation from nature as the cause of all our ills." Neither of these two approaches, she says, allows for the "invisible, inchoate, or messy aspects of psychic and social phenomena" (p. 33). Despite her apparent distancing from ecopsychology, framed as romantic, for the remainder of this review I wish to identify some noteworthy connections that Lertzman curiously does not make and to offer some perhaps fruitful directions for further deepening processes that follow from openings she provides.

As I read Lertzman's book, I often felt she was walking in the steps of Theodore Roszak. In laying out his vision for ecopsychology, Roszak (1995) wrote:

> The environmental movement went about its work of organizing, educating, and agitating with little regard for the fragile psychological complexities of the public whose hearts and minds it sought to win. As intensely aware as environmentalists may be of the complexity of the natural habitat, when it came to human behavior their guiding image was simplistic in the extreme. (p. 2)

Just as Lertzman wants the environmental community to "meet people with far greater levels of attunement, compassion and authenticity" (p. 146) and seeks to "re-establish some measure of dignity for those who may be labelled as 'apathetic'" (p. 147), Roszak wanted ecopsychology to be a force for a more psychologically literate environmentalism, replacing strategies based on guilt and fear with ones that draw on people's inherent love and compassion for the earth. In this respect, Lertzman's efforts are entirely continuous with an early ecopsychological spirit.

Similarly, Roszak's main image for the development of ecopsychology was that of a dialogue between psychologists/therapists and environmentalists. Lertzman too places a conversation between psychotherapists/analysts and environmental advocates at the center of her vision. In Roszak's (1992/2001) case, he later admitted he was naïve to assume that "both psychologists and environmentalists would find such a dialogue worthwhile" (p. 328) and lamented that the field had not unfolded as he had hoped. In Lertzman's case, she observes the same reluctance among psychoanalysts and environmentalists to engage with one another, although she notes that a dialogue has in fact recently begun (e.g., Weintrobe, 2013), picking up where Harold Searles left off in 1972. Roszak would be pleased.

Another person Lertzman makes no mention of is Joanna Macy (Macy & Brown, 2014). This is rather surprising given the considerable history that Macy has as an activist in theorizing and skillfully turning toward precisely the emotional territory that Lertzman identifies, including despair, apathy, the softening of defenses, grief and mourning, and the unleashing of creativity and agency/power. Macy has furthermore spent decades designing exercises and workshop structures that create holding environments for expressing "pain for the world." Macy's approach may not be exactly what Lertzman has in mind, as she is aiming at a broader engagement than is possible via workshop culture alone. Nonetheless, Macy has clearly cultivated in her own fashion a politics of the sort that Lertzman calls for. (On a related note, the worldwide Transition movement [Hopkins, 2011] also seems highly relevant to Lertzman's project, as its mode of engagement involves using creative participation and collaboration to support people in making reparative contributions—again, exactly what Lertzman calls for.)

One further connection to ecopsychology I wish to note is my own claim that for ecopsychology to reveal the deeper meanings that are of concern to it, the field will have to go beyond the methods and ontologies of conventional psychology and engage in a complexification of science (Fisher, 2012, 2013a, 2002/2013b). The natural world has historically been dominated using classical scientific models that do not account for the actual complexity of life, with disastrous unintended consequences. (Molecular biology, for example, began in the 1930s with a desire to develop a science of life that in its simplicity and elegance would give biology the same precise control over the living world that the physical sciences wield over matter. This desire is now being played out in the arena of genetic engineering. [Druker, 2015].) Lertzman is effectively saying that simple models of *human* nature being used to change environmental behavior fall into this same pattern. Developing a truly ecological psychology thus involves building understandings, methods, and modes of engagement that appreciate the complexity, mysteriousness, and depth of (human) life. Lertzman's depth psychological research is a good step in this respect and, as I discuss next, furthermore begs the question: In what

additional ways must ecopsychology stand for a deepened approach to the human-nature relationship?

Deeper Still

During her research, Lertzman "became aware of how reductive and superficial most analyses of environmental concern tend to be" (p. 151). Indeed, her book is aimed at providing a deeper analysis. There are a number of places in her discussion, moreover, where I think ecopsychology would take us deeper still.

Psyche in the place-world

Lertzman's analysis includes the psychoanalytic idea that the self is formed by internalizing or introjecting specific "objects," including "environmental objects." For example, she discusses how for one of her research participants the Fox River held certain "self-states," such that "in protecting and enjoying the river, defending it against critique [because it is polluted], he is protecting and enjoying core aspects of himself" (p. 91). Conceptualizations of this sort are one way to overcome the psyche-nature dualism that makes "the environment" external to the psyche. Countering this dualism is, of course, ecopsychology's original task. Indeed, ecopsychologists have essentially been saying that a shallow understanding of human nature corresponds to a shallow understanding of more-than-human nature, such that the perception of deep intertwining between the two has been lost. But this means that to close the gap between psyche and nature we need not only a depth psychology but also a kind of "depth ecology" (Abram, 2005) that recognizes the depth or interiority of the place-world itself.

Lertzman certainly makes statements in this direction. She refers, for instance, to Harold Searles' "kinship hypothesis," which posits a profound relatedness between humans and other-than-human beings, making the latter subjects in their own right. But my impression is that for the purposes of her project—which focuses on steering the environmental community beyond existing behavior change models—Lertzman only goes so far here. A recognition of the psychic depths of the more-than-human world itself does, however, follow logically from the line of argument she introduces. Searles' kinship hypothesis, for example, implies a corresponding "kincentric ecology," in which plants, animals, the land, and humans are all relatives sharing a common soul (Salmón, 2000). My point is that to deepen our understanding of human nature is, for an ecopsychologist, to see it increasingly united with the larger natural world and to see that world come alive with its own interiority and manifold personality. Indeed, ecopsychology began as a movement to re-ensoul the world, whether expressed through Roszak's concept of the ecological unconscious, David Abram's animistic phenomenology, or James Hillman's revival of the notion of the anima mundi. If Lertzman is arguing for new, more effective forms of engagement based on a depth psychological reading of environmental subjectivity, we may well ask what forms of engagement are called for from an even deeper ecopsychological reading of the soul of the world itself. How deep can we go?

Psyche and society

Despite that Lertzman was engaged in a kind of psychoanalysis with her research participants, she cautions that her approach is a psychosocial one, meaning that the processes she is studying are not limited to the interiority of individuals but are rather "both psychic and social" (p. 101). She writes: "It is in psychosocial studies that dimensions of the social and political contexts can be joined up, in some capacity, with the largely unconscious processes that play such powerful roles in how we respond to serious environmental threats" (p. 25). In Lertzman's case, she wanted to underscore how "social identities emerge from industrial practices" (p. 5) and how the myth of apathy blames the individual, "which arguably blinds us to complex social and cultural systems" (p. 9). Here, too, however, Lertzman only goes so far in tracing the internal relations between psyche and society. As the analyst Joel Kovel (1978) has argued, "to comprehend the unconscious we must take the *relation* between the self and the world into account; and to do this the actual structure of the world must be given conceptual weight." By "the world," moreover, Kovel was stressing the "world of social institutions and culture" (p. 48). Lertzman herself notes that her emphasis on "biographical influences" rather than social theory was meant as an aid to understanding this dimension of our responses to "chronic ecological loss" and "how we live with industry" (p. 121). As I was reading her book, though, it was this giving of "conceptual weight" to society that I found most missing. Here I would note that there are in ecopsychological circles a number of critical voices who explicitly adopt a psychosocial perspective committed to such conceptualization (e.g., Adams, 2012; Fisher, 2013a; Kanner, 2014; Pavel & Anthony, 2015; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Consider the following two examples.

In David Kidner's (2007) article "Depression and the Natural World," he introduces his own version of environmental melancholia, suggesting as does Lertzman that as a culture we are experiencing unmourned losses in relation to the natural world because these losses go largely unrecognized. Significantly, however, Kidner attributes this misrecognition to specific "social and ideological mechanisms" possessed by the industrial capitalist system "designed to deflect and reinterpret emotional reactions to the destruction of nature" (p. 133). In other words, Kidner introduces critical concepts for how the experience of loss is desymbolized or cognitively erased by our social

system, bringing the ideological structure of this system more directly into the analysis. I mention this because it suggests a mode of engagement modeled not only on a therapeutic holding environment but also on popular or critical education (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

As a second example, I would mention my own work that draws on left green thought in order to identify internal relations between psyche, society, and nature. In this instance, I would note how economist Richard Wolff (2014) ties the phenomenon of political apathy to the internal organization of capitalist corporations:

> In capitalist enterprises, workers are excluded from virtually all basic enterprise decisions. … That alienation from participation and responsibility inside enterprise also infests political, civic, and community life. Most appeals to working people to participate in politics go unanswered. The absence of democratic participation where we work sustains that apathy; a transition to workers' self-directed enterprises could cure it. (p. 50)

I do not wish to suggest that Lertzman's interpretation of apathy simply be replaced by Wolff's. I do believe, however, that in tracing apathy to the actual undemocratic structure of capitalist organization he provides additional complexification to Lertzman's findings, demonstrating once again the importance of conceptualizing the psyche-society dialectic. The idea that apathy may be "cured" by transitioning to worker-directed enterprises obviously also gives an additional slant to the topic of engagement.

A more reflexive ecopsychology

Another admirable aspect of Lertzman's research is the careful attention she gives to the phenomenon of reflexivity. This refers here to the fact that psychologists and psychological researchers approach their subject matter via their own subjectivity or psychology, which is itself embedded in specific social contexts and interests. In other words, it is impossible to separate psychology from the production of Psychology (Richards, 2010). Lertzman treats this reality in a number of ways, including in the design of her method. What most got my attention, however, was her highlighting of the centrality of anxiety in human existence. Psychoanalysts have identified a large number of defense mechanisms commonly used to protect against this anxiety, but of course such anxiety is present in analysts themselves, affecting the specific topics they choose to approach or not. As Lertzman notes, Harold Searles believed that psychoanalysts had been slow to recognize the psychological significance of the "nonhuman environment" because the subject matter stirred up too much primal anxiety in analysts themselves. In a related way, I have come to wonder how much of a role this core human anxiety has played in the shaping of the field of ecopsychology to date.

Much of my interest in ecopsychology is in tracing how it has developed over the years and in assessing what I see as its authentic possibilities. Whereas environmental psychology is a subdiscipline of psychology, and conservation psychology a superfield that cuts across all of psychology, I have argued that ecopsychology is best viewed as an inherently radical field that stands for an ecological transformation of the entire psychological enterprise (Fisher, 2013a). This creates a conflict or dilemma, however, for it means that ecopsychology makes the most sense as a field exactly in the place where it is most discomforting or anxiety-producing. A truly ecological psychology, I have argued, views psyche in terms of interrelationships—not only our relationships within the more-than-human natural world but also all our social and economic relationships. As such, ecopsychology not only reanimates the world, which is discomforting enough for many, it also finds itself in the thick of such social-historical matters as gender (Gomes & Kanner, 1995), class (Fisher, 2013a; Kovel, 2007), race (Anthony, 1995; Pavel & Anthony, 2015), and colonization (Armstrong, 1995; Tuck and Yang, 2012). In an era of climate change, it is increasingly being recognized that only a politics that incorporates all these matters as the unfinished business of human history will be a politics adequate to our times (Klein, 2014). For ecopsychology to itself be adequate to our times, I believe it must do the same. But Lertzman helps us understand how much anxiety and unconscious defensiveness such an imperative is likely to generate and the high degree of reflexive awareness that will accordingly be required if we are to see it through.

Lertzman's message at bottom is about bringing deep understanding to the painful dilemmas we all experience at this historical moment so that we may act with as much insight, care, and creativity as possible—a worthy message indeed. As I have been exploring here, moreover, these painful dilemmas include those arising as we develop the field of ecopsychology itself. The program of going deep—of making uncomfortable connections to see our historical situation with greater insight or truth, of following our own subject matter to the radical places it would ultimately have us go—poses emotional, intellectual, moral, and practical challenges to us of the highest order. Lertzman's book will be a good companion in our attempts to meet them.

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