

Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*. London & New York: Routledge. 2015.

Lesley Head, *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge. 2016.

Is it legitimate and helpful to deploy concepts such as paranoia, hysteria or melancholia outside of the consulting room to understand social, cultural or political phenomena? Renee Lertzman makes a convincing case for just such an approach by using the concept of melancholia in order to understand various forms of environmental inaction. She insists that it is just too easy to dismiss such inaction as 'apathy' but invites us to consider the complex psycho-social processes at work when we face the damage and loss humankind inflicts upon 'mother earth'.

Lertzman has been involved in environmental communications for many years and her frustrations with the rationalist approaches that dominated this field led her to undertake her own doctorate. Her study is based upon research in the heavily polluted Fox River and Green Bay area of Wisconsin where she undertook fieldwork and in depth qualitative interviews with a sample of adults many of whom had lived in the area before it became industrialised and environmentally damaged. What is fascinating is that Lertzman explicitly uses a psychoanalytic lens to understand her interviewee responses. She also used therapeutically informed methods of undertaking interview research. These methods (Hollway & Jefferson 2013; Clarke & Hoggett 2009) involved open-ended interviews, alive to the complex defences and positionings that occur in the interview space. Rather than a single interview Lertzman often returned on several occasions to continue the dialogue with her respondents over time.

Her starting point is Freud's classic exploration in *Mourning and Melancholia* where he distinguishes between the work of mourning and working through and, on the other hand, that 'crushed state of melancholia' (Freud, 1914, p. 248) which is sometimes complaining and clamorous and sometimes quiet and pining. Remember Freud himself has the social dimension of this phenomenon in mind when, right at the start of his essay he notes that whilst the loss may refer to a loved one it may equally refer to what he calls an abstraction 'such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on' (op.cit., p.243).

Freud notes that melancholia 'is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness' (op.cit., p.245) and he makes the point that for the individual who has lost a loved-one whilst he might know whom he has lost he may not know 'what he has lost in him' (ibid.). Lertzman's sensitive interviews are able to illuminate this very issue. Her respondents know what object has been lost (nature - the clean waters, pure sand dunes and clear air of the Green Bay area) but not what they have lost in this object. As Lertzman puts it,

"What is it that we have lost when our rivers, beaches and wetlands have been degraded, have been developed or are altered? What aspects of ourselves are in the places in which we reside?" (Lertzman, 2015, p.88)

The interview served as a containing space in which the blocked work of grieving could proceed as childhood memories flooded forth. Later she argues that it is the very 'naming' of these unconscious losses and their working through which is so missing in many attempts by environmentalists to engage their public (op.cit., p.101). Sifting through many hours of interviews Lertzman sees three themes emerging from these memories. The sense of innocent freedom derived from experiences of outside play, the association of nature with the sense of sanctuary and safety and finally what she calls the sense of 'possibility' or "open horizons, blue skies" (op.cit., p.86). Lertzman recognises the idealisation of the past which sometimes emerges in her interviews but also the ambivalences, the "complicated, and at times contradictory, affective dimensions" (op.cit., p.89).

It is these complications and ambivalences that offer her insight into the apathy and passivity of most of her respondents. For example she notes that it is precisely this idealisation carried over into the present which accounted for the way in which some of her interviewees such as Howard refused to adopt a critical stance towards the Fox River despite its despoliation. As she puts it, "in protecting and enjoying the river, defending it against critique, he is protecting and salvaging core aspects of himself" (op.cit., p.91).

Lertzman notes that rather than feeling anger about what has happened to their environment most of her interviewees expressed,

at most, disappointment alongside a melancholic pining for what had passed. This was partly accounted for by the ambivalence of her interviewees bound up with feelings of guilt and conflict towards the polluting industries that many in the community now depended upon for their livelihood. But she felt it also seemed to be connected to the absence of opportunities to make reparation. Using Winnicott, Lertzman notes how the act of reparation requires opportunities for 'contributing to' (op.cit.,p.139) and in their absence the process of working through becomes suspended as reparative impulses are left without a home. Many of her interviewees expressed powerlessness, an abject feeling that there was nothing they could do and sometimes this was linked to a view, partly realistic and partly based on projection, that those who had found something to 'do' about the situation were 'not people like me', indeed, even worse, that they were 'fanatics'.

Lertzman's analysis focuses on individual responses to specific instances of environmental destruction. But one is left in no doubt that her horizon is much bigger and that she sees this single frame as part of a much larger picture of a world which stands on the brink of destroying the benign environmental conditions which have enabled civilization to flourish over these past 10,000 years. This bigger canvass is the subject of *Hope and Fear in the Anthropocene*, a book published in 2016 by the Australian geographer Lesley Head.

Like Lertzman, Head draws significantly upon the psychoanalytic writings of Sally Weintrobe (Weintrobe, 2013) and Rosemary Randall (Randall, 2009). What's interesting is that although she acknowledges the importance of studies such as Lertzman's which focus on tangible losses of place or species Head argues that the primary source of grief that humankind now faces is concerned with the loss of the future, 'hitherto a time and place of unlimited positive possibility' (Head, 2016, p.5). She notes how embedded this sense of possibility is in Enlightenment thinking about progress and its foundational beliefs in the power of knowledge, our capacity to control the world around us, and so on (op.cit.,p. 31).

As Head notes, the paradox is that most conservation technicians, sustainability consultants, farm and fishery managers, climate scientists and environmental policy makers continue to apply the same foundational beliefs even as their world falls apart all around them. And of course two of the most essential of all of these beliefs is

the splitting of what is natural from what is human, and the splitting of reason from emotion in the human. As a consequence Enlightenment reason became narrowly instrumental, detached and 'hard headed', questions of feeling and value became associated with unreason, and with the 'soft headed', the feminine.

One of the consequences is that it has left climate scientists with few ways of creatively managing the emotional impact of their work, particularly the depressive anxieties that are aroused as their research uncovers more and more bad news. Head sees climate scientists as the canaries in the coalmine and having interviewed a number of them she is struck by their optimism bias and what, following Brysse and his colleagues (Brysse et. al. 2013), she calls ELSD (Erring on the Side of Least Drama). Whilst nearly all of her respondents adhered to the ideal of dispassionate scientific objectivity she noticed that in practice there were plenty of emotions expressed but only of the positive kind.

We might think of this as a kind of manic defence. In our own work with climate scientists (Hoggett & Randall, 2018) we have argued that hyper rationality, specialisation and overwork function as 'social defences against anxiety' (Menziés Lyth, 1960). We agree with Head that one of the consequences of such defences is that they lead climate scientists towards an unjustified bias towards positive scenarios, quite the opposite bias to that which they are often accused of by the denialist lobby.

Both Lertzman and Head adopt a generous attitude to the struggles we all have in knowing how to respond to evidence of humankind's destructiveness, whether this be dying coral reefs, drowning migrants or wars without end. Just as Lertzman insists that 'apathy' is not evidence that ordinary people just don't care, Head argues that more often than not climate scientists try not to think and speak about the worst because they care too much. As Lertzman notes in her concluding chapter, our lack of engagement with these pressing issues has typically been framed in terms of an absence of affect. But what if the reality is a surplus of affect, a flood of loss, grief, terror and guilt? Then the task of communicators and activists is not to arouse peoples' feelings for these issues but to tap into, contain and give direction to feelings that are already there.

If the climate's canaries are putting on a brave face and whistling away as the atmosphere around them becomes increasingly toxic might this tell us something about emerging patterns in the wider culture? Head certainly thinks so. She contrasts such anxious optimism with something she also found in several of her respondents, a hope in which grief is its constant companion. From our clinical perspective we would say that such hope *is* grief contained. Head cites one of her respondents:

You're kind of schizophrenic in one way, you know, part of your brain thinks 'Shit, this is really bad and my kids don't have a future, or at least my grandkids don't have a future', and another part of your brain just sort of says 'Well, I've just got to keep going anyway'. (Head, op.cit., p.74)

She remarks that to just 'keep going anyway' is what she thinks of as hope, not a feeling one *has* but a kind of embodied practice, something one *does*.

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