

**WEATHERING GRIEF:
ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITIES, UNDONE SENSES AND MELANCHOLY
ECOLOGIES IN TIMES OF PLANETARY ECOCIDE**

BY
M. BERKE

Submitted to
Utrecht University
Graduate Department of Gender Studies

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's
and Gender Studies (GEMMA)*

Main Supervisor: Eva Hayward (Utrecht University)
Second Supervisor: Beatriz Revelles-Benavente (University of Granada)

**Utrecht, The Netherlands
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ABSTRACT

Originating from my experience and fascination with the phenomenon of ecological grief, this project travels with the term, investigating it in an effort to think differently about the potentiality of ecological grief, rather than seeking methods for its resolution. I begin by delineating the temporality of grief as it is presently constructed, to make clear how even as ecological grief expands the boundaries of grievability, chrononormative demands constrict ecological grief to remain in accordance with capitalist cycles of consumption and substitution. This constriction forecloses the possibility of ecological grief to be generative, and sees it instead as illness requiring cure. Building from psychoanalysis, queer death studies and queer ecology, I then shift my focus to the concept of ecological melancholia. I present ecological melancholia as a politicized, queer and generative reformulation of ecological grief that resists, rather than naturalizes ecological loss. I explore ecological melancholia specifically for its sensory and temporally disruptive qualities. This presents the phenomenon as an affective mode of relation to the more-than-human that disturbs notions of normative futurity implicit in much environmental discourse. Displacing humanist notions of grief and staying true to my commitment to thinking alongside ecologies, rather than *for* them, I then illustrate the generative possibilities of ecological melancholia via submergence in what I deem a melancholy ecology. Thus this thesis ends with a journey to boglands. I learn from the ways that bogs “become-with” (Haraway 2008) death so as to begin to imagine alternative futurities outside capitalist chrononormativity, undetermined by the binary of promise and ruin. Instead, alongside the bog, I offer a line of flight for environmental imaginations in Anthropocene scenes of mass death, which foreground staying with what has been deemed ruined, rather than abandoning loss in the quest for continual progress. Alongside theory and analysis, this project incorporates ecopoetics to foreground the embodied, affective, and indeterminate elements of queerly understood ecological grief.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my Utrecht family, who taught me about feminist friendship, who stayed alongside me in rage, grief, silence, and enormous amounts of joy. Who let me run away and always kept calling me back.

Thank you to Granada, and to the creatures you led me to; for dust and dirt and heat and the space to think with and learn to love ruins.

Thank you to Eva for pushing me farther, fiercely defending my right to speculate, and for always, always asking more questions.

Thank you to my writing and thinking partner, Ceci, for being a constant presence by my side, near or far. This project wouldn't exist without you. Thank you for dreaming up more tales with me, before this one was even finished.

Thank you to Lizzie, for teaching me everything I know about grief.

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“the future is already over, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have anywhere else to go.”

- *Billy-Ray Belcourt*

INTRODUCTION

Even disaster can feel old at this point. We are well within the Anthropocene, a time where humans have become a geologic force, (Certini and Scalenghe 2015; Lewis and Maslin 2015) a force that seems to determine the continued “liveability” (Tsing et al. 2017, G1) of the earth, or not. The Anthropocene is a time of rolling crises. Environmental devastation and natural disasters are no longer anomalies, but can be understood as the characterizing force of our time; a time of enormous human and more-than-human loss. The planetary reality of environmental destruction provides incessant reasons for grief. Yet, the contours of this grief are often left unexplored. It is my belief that we must come to know this feeling as we continue to live within ecological calamity that is inequitably distributed but global in scope. This is a thesis about living and grieving in times of mass ecological devastation.

(A NOTE ON) THE COLONIALITY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Firstly, the ‘our’ of “our time” and the ‘humans’ of the Anthropocene destruction tale do not paint a clear picture, and they deserve to be contested terms. It could be argued that the Anthropocene acquired its label only when Western powers began to feel the impacts of our own extractive destruction of ecosystems worldwide; what Jason Moore has coined “the end of cheap nature” (Moore 2014). Although the “long-now” (Huber 2022, 3) of late-stage capitalist ecological disaster comes with interconnected crises that cannot be neatly separated into political, social or environmental categories, these crises stretch outwards and onwards as the ongoing legacy and effect of colonialism and its imposed racialization, and they must be recognized as such (Bacon 2019).¹ The ongoingness and effects of colonialism are evident not

¹ In any discussion of hegemonic Western modes of extractive relations between humans and those designated as non-human others, the legacy of coloniality cannot go ignored. Colonialism is the laboratory as well as the (ongoing) scene of the crime. I bring this up in the introduction, because this is not a thesis explicitly about

only in ecological crises in the present² but, also in current ‘global’ responses to climate change.³ (Sultana 2022, DeBoom 2022). The United Nations Climate Change Conferences have been rightly criticized as a “theater of climate colonialism” (Sultana 2022, 2), where performances are carried out “that erase[s] historical and spatial geopolitics and power relations” (Sultana 2022, 2). As Sultana continues, “Climate change lays bare the colonialism of not only the past but an ongoing coloniality that governs and structures our lives, which are co-constitutive of processes of capitalism, imperialism, and international development” (Sultana 2022, 3). Colonial history is ongoing and lives in the present. It remains the structuring force of dominant Western⁴ modes of relation to environments and more-than-human others.

As gestured towards above, even the term Anthropocene demonstrates the presence of colonial logics within climate change discourses. The totalizing nature of the term makes clear

coloniality. But because it is a thesis about Western relations to environments, and what is commonly felt to be the *end of the world*, then it is in conversation with, and a critique of colonial logics. I remain in conversation with colonial legacies, in so far as I examine the binary logics and technologies of visualization that create a form of environmental relations predicated on extraction, enclosure, appropriation and mass violence.

² For one example we can look at the connection between contemporary wildfires in the United States and the suppression of indigenous tactics of controlled burn forest management through the settler colonial strategies administered by the United States Forest Service. (For examples see Vinyeta 2022; Minor 2018; Marks-Block and Tripp 2021).

³ Colonial logics are evident in many narratives and proposed solutions for climate change. Some examples include “overpopulation narratives” (Sultana 2022, 6) as well as “green revolutions for agriculture” (Sultana 2022, 4) which encourage monocropping and agriculture for global export. Colonial logics as they operate in global policies of “pollution permits” and “emissions trading” have also been analyzed (for example see: Bachram 2004; Page 2013)

⁴ Colonial, racial and heteropatriarchal logics are the logics that comprise this “Western” mode of viewing and relating that is predicated on the fictionally bounded nature-culture dualism. Throughout this thesis, I refer to methods of seeing, relating and abusing environments as “Western” but this choice is not done in order to falsely homogenize what are heterogenous modes of being in relation to environments that exist, resist and proliferate even within the “Western” world. I do not use “Western” in order to collapse difference, but to acknowledge that the dominance of Western modalities for seeing and relating to environments functions because it subsumes and discursively erases other ways of knowing and seeing that it could not materially erase (in the failed, yet ongoing colonial project). Heterogenous world views are discursively erased in order to offer a myth of singular objectivity, which can be lifted as false evidence for the victory of the Western project of modernity itself. Even within the label of “Western” ways of seeing, or “Western” environmental and temporal logics, “Western” signifies a specific white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, industrial, able-bodied and bourgeois mode of vision. “Western” is necessarily whitening. And I do not employ it in order to affirm the victory of capitalist racist heteropatriarchy, but to acknowledge that the other voices, ontologies and epistemologies generated by people of color, indigenous people, queer people and other others, have been subsumed, extracted and cast as dead, in ways not dissimilar to methods of environmental resource extraction. To use “Western” is not to totalize, or to ignore that there are a multiplicity of voices within what we call “the West” but to acknowledge that the project of the label of “Western” already proves its point as a discursive method for training vision away from what may already exist as otherwise.

the “power matrices of control” deployed in the ways we speak of climate change, which put forth a singular “grand narrative” of “universal truth” that cannot contend with “the nuisances of the specific” (Armiero and De Angelis 2017, 346). Said simply, the *human* of the Anthropocene has never been *all* humans, and the term Anthropocene fails to make this clear. Crises are not new and devastation is a precondition of emergence for those who have faced or live within the ongoingness of colonization, racialization and dehumanization. So if we are to mark this epoch as the moment that *humans* became a geologic force, we must understand this ‘human’ as always exclusionary, where the human itself is predicated on racialized ontological denial. As Zakkiah Iman Jackson (Jackson 2020, 12) puts forth,

Liberal humanism’s basic unit of analysis, “Man,” produces an untenable dichotomy —“the human” versus “the animal,” whereby the black(ened) female is posited as the abyss dividing organic life into “human” or “animal” based on wholly unsound metaphysical premises”

Jackson shows us that not only has the category of *human* never included all humans, but the concept of the human is built on an unsound dichotomy that requires the “ontological plasticity” (Jackson 2020, 35) of black(ened) individuals to serve as the foundation from which the shifting concept of human can always define itself against. The human that has become the “geologic force” (Certini and Scalenghe 2015; Lewis and Maslin 2015) defining the Anthropocene, applies to the human that emerges through powers of coloniality, white supremacy, gendered and racial violences. This is to say, world ending is not new but it only gets a title when certain humans begin to face it.⁵

⁵ For some debates and suggestions of alternative titles for the Anthropocene see: Davis et. al 2019; Davis and Todd 2017; Di Chiro 2017; Haraway 2015; Moore 2017.

GRIEVING TIMES

Regardless of its title, within this time of ongoing and escalating environmental crises, much warrants grief. Beyond specific instances of loss, grief surrounds as an atmosphere, extending to places, to knowledge systems, to the more-than-human, to the future. Yet, as I will come to elaborate throughout this project, this grief goes largely ignored, or otherwise incorporated into institutions committed to solving it as a mental health problem, rather than extending curiosity towards what the phenomenon may illuminate. The current choices are lacking. Either environmental losses on a planetary scale are somehow not grief worthy, or this grief is framed through medicalized and neoliberal frameworks presently used to pathologize other instances of grief (Comtesse et al. 2021; Pihkala 2022). I worry that extending this framework forecloses alternative understandings of the phenomenon while prioritizing overcoming ecological grief, so that grief becomes the way we process, rather than resist environmental losses.

Personally, with no certainty of a liveable future, not only do I find myself often suspended within a sustained state of unassigned grief, but I find myself feeling curiously intimate with it. Before writing this project I thought frequently about how grief can feel like a mode of relation; spectral intimacy with devastated lands. But through this process, I have also come to think about how grief itself can be twisted so as to function in accordance with the very temporal logic that creates situations warranting ecological grief. That is, not even grief can escape capitalist temporalities. As I will demonstrate, grief itself has become overly determined by the medicalization apparatuses of neoliberal regimes of health and wellness that, in accordance with capitalist time, shape grief to be a process (Mozessohn and Hoskin 2022). This process takes place along time's mythic linear path, whereby what is lost is abandoned and

eventually grievers can return to their lives unencumbered. Yet, I remain attached to the seeds of potential within the surplus of loss, attached to an idea that grief could work differently. How could I rethink ecological grieving to reveal its potential, rather than succumb to its pathologization?

This project is but one fruit of my ecological grief. It is an exploration of its possibilities, its temporalities, its sensuousness. I am committed to staying alongside grief, so as to explore it in a way that disturbs the linear temporality that currently over-determines the phenomenon. That is, I am interested in exploring ecological grief in a *queer* way, because I believe that at its core what has come to be labeled ecological grief is in fact a queer way of remaining in relation to the ecological and more-than-human world as we witness and are complicit in its ongoing destruction. As I will elaborate, this way of relating may be more aptly understood as ecological melancholia. Thus this thesis is not only my attempt to explore ecological grief, but it is my melancholic commitment to remain in a grieving state; my stubborn assertion that there is an alternative way of grieving, a queer way of grieving where grief is no longer the process by which loss is digested and overcome, but is a sensorial method for relating to and remaining with environments, ecologies and more-than-humans that disturbs “progress narratives” (Tsing 2015, 6) and normative futurity’s extractive unfolding.

Each spring, Jane and I meet at the base of the magnolia tree in Fort Greene Park. We meet to watch the petals fall, to make land-art with them as they scatter. We see it as an ode to the tree that is a collaboration with the tree, an exercise in displacing our impulse for human designed control. This ode flies away in the wind, sometimes before we finish our foolish tinkering.

Last spring, in a joyous burst of life brought on by a warm winter, the buds poked their heads out a few weeks early; round, pink and fuzzy, stretching sensuously into the world. Every single one died when the early March overnight freeze returned. The blossoms we had built seasonal rituals around instead offered shriveled brown buds teetering between alive and dead, lingering longer on the tree without the effusive weight of their petals to pull them to the ground. We could not make art with them that year, because once they fell, their dried bodies quickly crumbled and became indistinguishable from the dirt. But what I could do was stay close underneath the tree. What I did do was wonder through grief, asking myself, what can be learned from uneasy death shrouded in one of life's favorite forms; that of the early spring bloom?

A MAP

The remainder of this introduction will serve to define some concepts instrumental to my arguments throughout this project. I then outline the methodology and structure of the three forthcoming chapters, which take on differences in form and method.

KEY TERMS

ECOLOGICAL/THE ENVIRONMENT: Most immediately, when speaking about the *ecological* of ecological grief we meet tricky territory. The fraughtness of terms like “nature” has been well documented and debated within feminist scholarship⁶ and “environment” too is a

⁶ Much feminist scholarship has been done in relation to the nature-culture dualism. This includes but stretches far beyond the repudiation of dualism itself or the reclamation of the concept of nature. Although it is not the purpose of this thesis to provide this history, or to chart the many contributions of eco-feminism, for some limited but personally informative examples, see King 1989; Plumwood 2002; Merchant 1980.

broad word. But, because ecological grief is not necessarily grieving for one specific thing, (though ecological grief may arise from particular losses) broader terms have utility here, as they have the breadth to signal towards many possibilities. In this sense, the choice to use broad terms such as ecological, ecology and the environment, means that I can signal towards the clenching of the gut that comes from driving by a clear cut forest or hearing about yet another hurricane you can do nothing about. Ecological can refer to a neighborhood pond, or the muddy banks of canals on the outskirts of Utrecht. It encompasses the ominous joy of warmer winter days as well as the amorphous grief that is thinking about future ecological calamity. Therefore, though I understand the vagueness of words like “ecological” and “environment(al),” within this thesis, the indeterminacy is intended. This indeterminacy is a first gesture towards the queer open-endedness of ecological grief, where what exactly we grieve for may also be unknown.

As I type this in early June, my mother texts me from her suburb in New York:

“Air quality so poor today we are not allowed to go outside.”

QUEER: Throughout this project I deploy the term queer to describe my methods as well as my understanding of ecological grief. I use it not only as a term to describe sexuality, but as a verb which resists the imposition of hegemonic norms, including norms surrounding time. The choice to frame my “norm-critical” (Radomska et al. 2020, 82) exploration of ecological grief as a queering of ecological grief is an extension of the methods and frameworks of queer death studies, (Radomska et al. 2020, 89, emphasis mine) where ‘queer’

operates in a dual way; it refers to both: (1) a noun/adjective employed when researching and narrating death, dying and mourning in the context of queer bonds and communities... and (2) *a verb/adverb that describes the processes of going beyond and unsettling (subverting, exceeding) the*

existing binaries and given norms and normativities. In consequence, ‘queer’ becomes both *a process and a methodology* that is applicable to and exceeds the focus on gender and sexuality as its exclusive concerns.

My choice to use *queer* to describe my foray into understanding ecological grief differently serves to fundamentally acknowledge that individual’s relationships to environments in times of on-going ecological catastrophe may very well be *queer* relationships resisting prevailing norms regarding acceptable boundaries of affective and intimate relationships. But, the second reason highlighted by the above quote is more important for the methods that I employ. My efforts to understand ecological grief for its disruptive temporal and sensorial capacities is my effort to present a *queer method* for understanding and thus experiencing this phenomenon differently, so as to not depend on pre-existing “norms and normativities” (Radomska et al. 2020, 89) that currently constrict it.

MORE-THAN-HUMAN: Although I employ the word ecological for its breadth of possibility, it too can bring overly mechanistic and empirical connotations of ecosystems. This is why throughout this thesis I employ the phrase *more-than-human* to refer to the forces and inhabitants that populate and constitute ecological worlds. My use of the term more-than-human is inspired by Marisol De La Cadena’s 2010 work “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics’” where she deploys the term “other-than-human” (De La Cadena 2010, 341) to describe the actors that “Indigenous movements are currently “making public” (cf. Latour 2005) in politics” (De La Cadena 2010, 342). Other-than-humans “include animals, plants, and the landscape” (De La Cadena 2010, 341) and importantly, are not just the elements that make up the ecological world, “they are also sentient entities whose material existence—and that of the worlds to which they belong—is currently threatened by the neoliberal wedding

of capital and the state” (De La Cadena 2010, 342). I was greatly informed by De La Cadena’s “other-than-human” to describe the agential actors of the ecological world brought into politics by indigenous environmental movements. But, I branch out from this to use the term more-than-human, as I feel it to be more fit for my particular context. I use “more” rather than “other” because De La Cadena traces the political economy of indigenous movements that are historically, affectively, spiritually and materially enmeshed with other-than-humans, but in my context, the *other* is what is consumed and subjugated by dominant Western modes of environmental relations. Other-than-human may not imply hierarchy within an indigenous cosmopolitics which already recognizes the agency of ecological actors, but for the context in which I write, labeling something as “other” than human carries hierarchical implications which still foreground human supremacy and carry on colonial legacies. Therefore, I choose to use the phrase more-than-human. This term is widely used in geography to “accent a relational worldview in which parts cannot be dissociated readily” (Rogers et al. 2013).

Not only do dominant Western modes for environmental relations deny the agential presence of more-than-humans, but they fundamentally rely on a human/non-human binary construction. Therefore, I also use more-than-human, rather than non-human as a “counterpoint to culture-nature dualisms” (Souza Júnior 2021, 1) where the concept not only refers to the “the worlds of the different beings co-dwelling on Earth” (Souza Júnior 2021, 1) but gestures to how these worlds not only exist alongside, but exceed human understanding, and should not be seen as lesser than *human* societies (this human, of course, already excluding many individuals who do not conform to dominant notions of subjectivity, or are excluded through racial, gendered, ethnic, economic or other differences (Jackson 2020)).

CHRONONORMATIVITY: This thesis is predicated on an analysis and critique of the methods of environmental relation that are constructed through adherence to capitalist temporal logics. I analyze how these logics shape normative approaches to grief and dominant modes of environmental interaction. I frequently refer to capitalism’s temporal logics using the term ‘chrononormativity,’ coined by Elizabeth Freeman in her 2010 book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Most simply, Freeman describes chrononormativity as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 2010, 3). But, chrononormativity functions on multiple registers. She explains that chrononormativity is individualized, so that adhering to it is taken as a measure of good health and morality (Freeman 2010, 3). Although felt to be individual, innate or even natural, chrononormativity is enforced by institutions and the state. She explains (Freeman 2010, 3-4, emphasis mine)

Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which *institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts*...Manipulations of time convert *historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos* and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time...this process extends beyond individual anatomies to encompass the management of entire populations...*the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change*...*This timeline tends to serve a nation’s economic interests, too*

With this definition, Freeman provides contextualization of the dominant organizational arrangement of time. She reveals this construction of time to be neither natural nor neutral, but implemented with the goal of producing norm-adhering productive subjects for whom this organization of time *feels* natural. Ensuring that this imposed time feels natural works to confirm the fiction that what is natural for individuals is to “serve a nation’s economic interests” so that experiencing something along an alternative temporal schema is not only negatively associated as not contributing to “movement” or “change” but is easily pathologized (Freeman 2010, 4).

Freeman's analysis extends further to remind us that not only do we naturalize dominant notions of time, but that (Freeman 2010, 5, emphasis mine)

In the eyes of the state, this *sequence of socioeconomically "productive" moments is what it means to have a life at all...* The logic of time-as-productive thereby becomes one of serial cause-and-effect: *the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future*

Through Freeman's explanation, we come to see that specific formulations of time are imposed and naturalized so as to always contribute to a future of economic progression and growth. The past; what is lost, degraded, damaged or eliminated is only important if it provides *resource* for the future or if it *predicts* the future. The use of the past as a resource may make immediate sense; clear the forest so as to build the road. But the past's predictive function is also crucial. The past as predictive serves to ensure that the future stretches forward as a continuation of time, which eliminates the possibility for the future to be ruptured by the past. For the purpose of this project, the predictive function of the past ensures that grieving can only exist along a linear path, where one may reminisce on the past only while remaining oriented towards a preconstructed future. Other interpretations of grief are pathologized, such as suggesting that what is brought forward through grief may constitute the present or disrupt the future.

In opposition to chrononormativity Freeman identifies queer temporalities as those which are "interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless" (Freeman 2010, xiii). Throughout this thesis, I will travel with and expand upon this queer temporal formulation, exploring what it means to be "bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless" and how this temporality may allow us to imagine and embody oppositions to chrononormativity's construction of appropriate grief.

NARRATIVES OF PROGRESS: For the purpose of this project, chrononormativity should be understood as the logic that produces what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing refers to as “narratives of progress” in her 2015 book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, another phrase that contributes to my analysis of the unfit temporality of ecological grief in its current configurations. Progress narratives can be understood as how chrononormative logic becomes instrumentalized through its discursification. Tsing argues that progress narratives create a method of seeing the ecological world that is one of *looking ahead*, because progress narratives are a chrononormative tool to keep individuals oriented towards a stable vision of the future as a site of continued conquest and mastery.

She argues that we need an anecdote to progress narratives, so as to begin to recognize and learn from the lives that emerge throughout “ruined” (Tsing 2015, 30) landscapes, that is, sites that have been extracted or degraded for resources and subsequently abandoned. As an anecdote to progress narratives, Tsing suggests that we learn to *look around* as opposed to *looking ahead* (Tsing 2015, 19). Throughout this thesis, I travel with this proposition, mobilizing and interrogating the differences and implications of looking around as opposed to looking ahead, and applying them so as to further understand the temporality and sensorial orientation of (ecological) grief as opposed to (ecological) melancholia. Through this extension, I propose that Tsing’s advice, to *look around* so as to find emergent forms of collaborative life that exist in defiance of narratives of progress, is taking up Freeman’s queer temporality, and gestures towards a *queer melancholic method* of environmental relation. This melancholic method may serve to provide a new way of thinking about environments and our enmeshed relationality that integrates more-than-human agency and presence even as damaged, lost, or *ruined* landscapes.

METHODS

In this thesis, I deploy a variety of methods to craft my exploration. To establish a shared understanding of the chrononormative structuring of grief that I argue against, in the first chapter I use discourse analysis and engage in a close reading of a report from the American Psychological Association in order to demonstrate how affective responses to climate change come to be pathologized and psychologized. In the second chapter, I take a methodological turn, and substantiate my theoretical arguments by interjecting personal reflections and memories within formal analysis, a method already deployed in this introduction. These ecological reflections and personal experiences of grief appear as italicized text. This is a method of “ecopoetics” (Wattchow 2012), and I choose to deploy this more creative methodology in order to bring materiality and emotionality back to the text, as this project is fundamentally about embodied emotions in the face of ecological calamity.

Importantly, these ecopoetic interruptions should not be read as stylistic breaks from theoretical arguments, but as emerging sympoetically alongside theoretical arguments. For Haraway, “sympoesis” is a straightforward concept meaning “making-with” (Haraway 2016, 58). She says, “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (Haraway 2016, 58), and sympoesis is a way of recognizing the co-constitutive nature of, in this case, poetics and theoretical arguments. The personal reflections and poetics cannot be separated from the theory, but are enmeshed and co-constitutive in the development of the theory. In a different vein, this stylistic choice also exists as a way to foreground the sensorial dimensions of looking around, where what has been cast aside by hegemonic powers as “dead” remains materially and affectively present, and is not to be ignored. It is done to reject the notion that once something is cast as dead, it is neatly bound and cannot constitute the present nor influence the future. I

explore the sensorial implications of ecological melancholia extensively in chapter two, and the poetic interruptions are an element of this exploration. I ask readers to travel through these few sections of italicized text and to reflect on what environmental losses remain living within them.

In the third chapter I introduce a visual analysis of images in order to sensorially and creatively ground myself in an ecological setting that can teach us to see grief and melancholia in new ways. This visual analysis also allows me to write creatively, and to offer an artistic illustration of the theoretical arguments I make throughout.

Overall, the combination of methods I use throughout this thesis led me to end with a methodological invitation. I see the ecological melancholia I work towards as an affective, methodological proposition for grappling with ongoing ecological loss. So, in the conclusion, I offer eco-poetic rituals that I developed as personal methods for being with my grief throughout the writing of this project. This is intended to again evoke the indeterminate materiality and more-than-human agency of environments into a textual space while providing an embodied and affective way of experiencing ecological grief. These rituals are small invitations to engage with ecological grief beyond medicalized frameworks.

CHAPTERS AND STRUCTURE

The first chapter of this project works to formally define what ecological grief is. I then outline how grief is currently medicalized according to the norms of chrononormativity, and how this model raises problems for adequately theorizing ecological grief outside of pathologization or psychologization. I explore current theorizations of ecological grief to consider how even when ecological grief is considered as expanding the boundaries of grievability, the temporal implications of grief makes it so that the phenomenon is weaponized as a way to process through

ecological devastation and return to productive subjectivity, rather than resist environmental destruction.

My second chapter turns away from chrononormativity towards a theorization of melancholia as a range of affects with queer temporal and sensorial implications. I substantiate this reading with work from queer ecology, psychoanalysis and queer death studies so as to investigate how melancholy, as opposed to grief, brings us towards Tsing's injunction to *look around*, and the synesthetic implications there within. I aim to theorize a possibility for experiencing ecological grief which resists processing and linear temporality, in favor of staying with "whatever has been declared useless" (Freeman 2010, xiii).

What I propose may feel paradoxical, but it is that when living in times of ongoing, ever-intensifying ecological destruction, we need a relationship to this death and the dead, rather than a pathway for emotionally overcoming the experience of being complicit in or witnessing such destruction. By functioning through the logics of consumption and substitution, that is by *looking ahead*, grief, as I will elaborate, may create the conditions for reproducing exactly the destruction it mourns. Theorizing ecological melancholia as opposed to ecological grief puts forward a queer methodology for existing within times of mass ecological destruction which does not foreground processing and abandonment of what is lost, but rather disturbs the continuance of capitalist time by refusing process.

Whereas the second chapter is my theoretical exploration of what is revealed through a queering of ecological grief, my third chapter is a case study that illustrates this argument through intimacy with an often misrecognized landscape. In my final chapter, I expand upon the ecological melancholia theorized in chapter two, by locating and learning from what I deem a site of *melancholic ecology*. Because this thesis is my attempt to put forward an ecologically

melancholic alternative for remaining in relation to damaged ecosystems instead of processing their destruction as collateral damage in service of a continued capitalist future, I am driven to build this argument through fostering intimacy with an ecology which already exists melancholically. This is why the third chapter of this thesis leads us to boglands. Through careful submersion and attentiveness, I explain in this chapter what I mean by melancholy ecology, and how this melancholy ecology provides fruitful ground for imagining a method of ecologically melancholic relations that resist normative futurity.

Revealing a way of life that emerges only through ongoing relation with death, the melancholy ecology of the bog provides a foundation for thinking through ecological melancholia. Likewise, bogs have much to teach about alternative temporalities and the violence embedded in fictions of discreetly bounded binary categories. Although this is my reason for choosing boglands as a final case study, it does not fully explain my choice to write through the bog in a sensorial, submersive way. I feel it necessary to return to the sensorium in my writing because once the problems with a vision that attunes us always towards a fictionally stable future are established, we are left with the imperative to return to the senses in a different way. We must learn to see landscapes that are cast as devoid, or wasted, with open-ended curiosity. I return to the sensorium as informed by melancholy so as to theorize that affects are inseparable from the sensorial experience. I extend Tsing's argument and propose that looking around is not only an ocular or sensorial task, but is an affective endeavor. Where affect and the sensorium meet is that they are both "irreducibly phenomenological" (Sedgwick 2003, 21), that is, they contribute together to one's orientation within space, whether *ahead* or *around*. In looking *around*; attuning ourselves to the lives that already emerge where binary distinctions fail, we are not looking for third options, which can ultimately, though unintentionally, reify binary logics, but instead for

that which emerges through relation. This relation may be of ecological elements irreducible to distinct parts, or it could be the inseparable relation between affect and the senses, similar to what is theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling*, her 2003 project that aimed to “explore promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought” (Sedgwick 2003, 1) through thinking through affect and sensation as inseparable. Sedgwick offered a theory that the sense of touch is also always a *feeling*, an emotion, *an affective experience*. For Sedgwick, “the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity... (Sedgwick 2003, 14). This is precisely the defeat of dualisms I seek through proposing a melancholic vision, illustrated through submersion within boglands. It is an acknowledgment that affect distorts vision, but moreso, it is an argument that there may be something useful for the project of facing unstable futures with a sensorium distorted by melancholic acknowledgment of such instability and overwhelming loss.

To mobilize my understanding of the sensorium as shaped by melancholy, in the final chapter, I try to smell with my eyes, to look with my hands. I take up Tina Campt’s challenge to “think of synesthesia as something that actually happens” (Campt 2023, 1), but beyond actually happening, I try to *think* synesthetically. Looking *around* carries more than the imperative to slow down the gaze. Instead, or rather, in addition, it invites us to resist the bounded categorizations of sight, just as melancholia resists the bounded categorization of alive as separate from dead, or past as separate from future. The risk here is that although I travel with Tsing’s injunction to *look around* and although I may see this as a melancholic method, *looking* itself, whether around or ahead, can too easily become a way of prioritization of the visual as a way of knowing. But, melancholia although it lends itself to a method of *looking around*, invites us further. As I will explore, it invites us to think of looking more broadly, to include other

embodied ways of ‘becoming-with’ (Haraway 2008, 4) that which has been cast aside. Choosing to ‘become-with’ what has been cast aside is a queering of ecological grief which rejects the continuation of capitalist futures, instead being interested in generative disturbance, and multi-species liveability despite what can feel like relentless ecological death knells.

Throughout the forthcoming pages, this project moves alongside grief, melancholia, environmental destruction and methods of environmental relation that harness unruly affects as a means of resisting capitalist regimes of chrononormativity. We do not have to allow the rolling stream of ecological obituaries to push us towards a reconciliation with environmental loss, to processing and coming to abandon what has been cast as dead. Rather, through thinking grief queerly, we may perhaps learn how to remain in relation to destroyed landscapes, using melancholic vision so as to recognize life that emerges when destruction is not allowed its easy fiction of stable death and injunction for immediate overcoming. That is, seeing through melancholy, rather than processing through grief may allow us to see environments for all that cannot be contained in the obituaries that encourage their abandonment so as to resume the quest for continued progress.

Chapter 1: THE POTENTIALITY AND LIMITATIONS OF ECOLOGICAL GRIEF: CHRONONORMATIVITY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE GRIEVABLE

1.1 WHAT IS ECOLOGICAL GRIEF?

Ecological grief is typically understood as a “common and pervasive” reaction to ongoing environmental destruction (Bryant 2019). Identified as a response to “climate change-related loss” its definition includes emotional reactions to “physical ecological losses...disruptions to environmental knowledge systems and resulting feelings of loss of identity” as well as “anticipated future losses of place, land, species and culture” (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 276-277). The “anticipatory” dimensions (Pihkala 2020, 2022) of ecological grief distinguishes it not only as a reaction to a specific loss, but invites us to understand it as a mode of relating to the unsettling temporality of ecological catastrophe still to come. We grieve for an uncertain future. With its temporal dimensions attuned to environmental destruction in the past, present, and anticipated future, it becomes crucially important to understand the temporality of ecological grief in a different way from the currently imposed linear temporality of normative grieving experiences.

When located as a site of potential rather than pathologization, ecological grief has largely garnered scholarly attention for how it challenges the normative domains of grievability. It accomplishes this through demonstrating that the environment and its more-than-human constituents are worthy of grief (for example see: Craps 2020, Cunsolo 2012). Through grieving what has been deemed ungrievable, ecological grief intervenes in “the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must grieved, and which kind of subject must not” (Butler 2004, xvi). Therefore, grieving for the more-than-human disturbs the

“exclusionary conceptions of...what counts as a livable life and a grievable death” (Butler 2004, xvi). In this understanding, ecological grief has political potentiality precisely because it disturbs the categories of grievable and non-grievable life, it “extends the concept of a mournable body beyond the human” (Cunsolo 2012, 141). Here, ecological grief is a recognition of the “value [of] what is being altered, degraded, and harmed...” (Cunsolo 2012, 141).

While I agree that ecological grief contains potentiality for expanding recognition of grievable lives – which may result in a resistance to the death of more-than-human others – in this thesis I am interested in exploring and expanding the possibilities of ecological grief in another direction. There remains a need for analysis of how the temporal constrictions of contemporary grieving processes may counteract this expansion. Beyond recognizing how ecological grief extends the boundaries of grievability, I would like to present a queer(ing of) ecological grief that is particularly attuned to the resistant temporalities that are brought to the fore through a norm-resistant reading of grief. I will ask how a queer reading of ecological grief may interrupt future oriented temporalities that produce self perpetuating logics of consumption and substitution, which inform both extractivist environmental relations as well as neoliberal, medicalized grieving processes. Before presenting a queering of ecological grief I will use the remainder of this chapter to further demonstrate the problem at hand. First, we must understand how chrononormativity has come to define and construct what are *appropriate*, norm-adhering forms of grief.

1.1.1 LIMITS OF GRIEVING IN CHRONONORMATIVE TIME

Neoliberal norms of health and wellness that are enforced through processes of medicalization and psychologization have overly determined what is appropriate grief, in order

to remain aligned with standards of capitalist chrononormativity. Nina Lykke suggests that the “time limits of mourning stipulated by biopolitical agendas of current neoliberal health normativity regimes” (Lykke 2019, 17) constrict griever into experiencing a grief that is shaped by “discourses that fetishize linear movement along the line of time’s arrow...” (Lykke 2019, 16). Meaning that grief itself is defined through normative models that do not leave room for experiencing grief differently, and instead offer only one version of *healthy* grief. This ‘healthy’ grief looks like a linear movement through time – connecting to what is lost only through reminiscing on a past disconnected from the present. Overcoming this loss and returning to productivity is the goal, rather than remaining with grief. This notion is “rooted in Western, colonial and patriarchal notions of health that rely on productivity and suppression of emotions” (Mozessohn and Hoskin 2022, 474) which serve not only to reinforce productivity as health but also to create “unrealistic mourning expectations that prevent individuals from experiencing a full range of mourning or reconnecting with their loved one” (Mozessohn and Hoskin 2022, 474).

Contemporary neoliberal agendas cannot accommodate any wish from the bereaved other than a return to norm-adhering productivity, because norm-adhering productivity signals health and wellness. That is, “prevailing neoliberal logic...pathologizes thoughts and behaviors that deviate from what the market defines as functional, productive, or desirable” (Esposito et al. 2014, 414). If behaviors disturb the ability for productivity and economic continuance, they are at risk of being pathologized, precisely because it is this functional productivity that is taken to be a sign of health and well-being. Therefore, we can see clearly in the case of grief, how “not accepting or failing to become fully integrated into this market reality is...associated with personal deviance and/or pathology” (Esposito et al. 2014, 416).

Because grief is medicalized⁷ there is no room to experience extended periods of mourning, or to stay within “sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived” (Cvetkovich 2012, 14) without this staying being pathologized as illness or identity (and coming to be treated as such). Instead grief must take shape as a process with a final ending wherein the loss is digested and can be abandoned, so that the griever is free of this attachment. Here we can see that any personal, emotional desire to stay within states of grief is dangerous, not out of an innocent concern for the health of the griever, but because of how health itself is measured according to capitalist expectations of productive subjectivity. I do not simply argue in favor of extending the allotted time for grieving, but I wish to make clear that any imposition of a temporality on to grief is a prescriptive endeavor. I desire to unrest the organization of grieving protocols, not to provide other, more extended protocols. It is the organization of appropriate grief and pathologized grief along the lines of temporality at all that places a moral judgment on grieving experiences, which separates grieving into good (norm adhering) and bad (pathologized) forms.

This pathologization of grieving according to adherence to temporal linearity is evidenced most clearly by the inclusion of “prolonged grief disorder” in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), revised in March 2022 (APA⁸ 2022). “Prolonged Grief Disorder” here is defined as “An intense yearning or longing for the deceased (often with intense sorrow and emotional pain), and preoccupation with thoughts or memories of the deceased...” (“Prolonged Grief Disorder”). What is important here is that there is a lack of clarity regarding exactly when grief becomes “prolonged,” creating the circumstances

⁷ Grief was added to the International Classification of Diseases in 2018 (MacCormack et al. 2021, 580).

⁸ The American Psychological Association is the publisher of the report on mental health and climate change I analyze in the second half of this chapter. The American Psychiatric Association is the publisher of the DSM. To avoid confusion, note that both associations refer to themselves with the acronym APA.

for grieving experiences, such as “intense sorrow” and “longing for the deceased” to be readily pathologized if they are not quickly processed through in a normative, yet ambiguous time frame. Via its inclusion in the most recent edition of the DSM, we witness the exact process Lykke critiques as the expression of “biopolitical agendas of current neoliberal health normativity regimes” (Lykke 2019, 17) wherein any non-normative grief experience or effusive expression of sadness is understood as illness requiring cure.

Through its reliance on chrononormative norms, the hegemonic understanding of grief functions through a clear demarcation of the past from the present, and the present from the future (Sandilands 2010, 340), putting forth a vision that it is only possible to relate to the dead by reminiscing on the past, *not* by staying with the dead as they contribute to the constitution of the present (Lykke 2019, 3). This also puts forth a singular and defined vision of the future as bounded and separate from the past. This temporal construction forecloses the possibility of remaining in relation with the dead, or to imagine that we may learn from, or live alongside what has been cast as dead in the present, without seeking resolution. Here, the future is a site where productivity is re-established, because the griever’s priority must always be a return to normal, that is, non-disrupted life.

All grieving experiences are enormously varied, whether ecological or not. Medicalization, through the imposition of temporal limitations not only prescribes protocols for grief, but collapses grief so that the differences of the experience, depending on individuals' situatedness, cannot be readily explored. We must remain critical as to how current frameworks and overly-medicalized understandings of grief will only serve to foreclose ecological grief, even with a recognition that the phenomenon may expand the boundaries of grievability. The expansion alone does not counteract the imposition of linear temporalities, which will encourage

the processing and abandonment of the lost object, even when what is grieved for is a non-normative object. With the current temporal limitations placed on grief, it is clear that it is precisely ecological grief's treatment *as* grief that will limit the potential of the phenomenon to disrupt the ongoingness of environmental destruction in service of global capitalism. This is not to say that ecological grief is not widely felt as an affect, or is somehow disingenuous, but that if it is understood as grieving in the normative sense of the word, even if it expands what counts as a mournable body, these losses too will be understood as something to be processed and overcome. If the current temporal limitations defining grief are not explicitly questioned by theories of ecological grieving, this grieving may approach a “nostalgic, sentimental or utilitarian *process* – a *process* that does not challenge or change the intersecting necropowers that cause planetary-scale death and destruction” (Radomska et al. 2020, 95, emphasis mine). I will focus more closely on the problem of prioritizing chrononormative futurity in the case of ecological grief in a coming subsection. But first, I will take a closer look at the current theorizations of ecological grief's potentiality, in an effort to uplift these theorizations while remaining attentive to their limitations.

1.1.2 (DISTURBING THE) PRESENT POTENTIALITY OF ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

As Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman set forth in their introduction to a volume on ecological grief, entitled *Mourning Nature* (2017, 3-4, emphasis mine) ecological grief can be informative and should be recognized as more than just a response to climate change related loss.

It can also be:

...about understanding absence... and the spectral haunting that comes from more-than-human loss. It is...about *different ways of knowing* and being in the world that stretch beyond solely human bodies into the sensuous experiences of the more-than-human world(s)...It is about

decentering subjectivities... and living connectivity and interdependency. It is about mourning that resists the artificial separation between bodies that can and cannot be mourned...

As Landman and Cunsolo posit, ecological grief is about more than the affective experience of witnessing ecological loss. By attuning oneself, through grief, to the experiences of the more-than-human world, ecological grieving can be seen as a pathway to displacing human exceptionalism. Recognizing that “different ways of knowing and being in the world” (Cunsolo and Landman 2017, 3) may be generated through ecological grieving is to see it as an epistemologically generative phenomenon that may gesture towards ways of being that respond to shared precarity rather than denying human and more-than-human interdependence. They argue that ecological grief points towards the need for living through complex relationality, rather than denying it, a project I recognize as being desperately needed in times of ongoing ecological crises.

Despite this epistemologically generative reading of ecological grief, it is clear that ecological grief too easily still falls into neoliberal health and wellness frameworks. Elsewhere, Cunsolo and Ellis argue that more attention must be paid to ecological grief, in an effort “*to identify opportunities to cope with or heal ecological grief* and human suffering due to these ecological losses” (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 275, emphasis mine). I agree that there is much human suffering within our time of planetary scale ecological destruction. Yet I believe that the desire to *heal* ecological grief puts forward a medicalized and chrononormative understanding of the phenomenon. This does not leave room for living with and amongst losses rather than *coping* with them, which may ultimately naturalize environmental loss rather than work against it. Furthermore, this framing forecloses potential curiosity regarding what we may be able to learn from the continuation of forms of life amidst ecological ruin, that could be revealed if the focus

was not on coping with grief, or healing from losses, but on seeing this grief as a complex form of relationality that allows griever to remain with what has been degraded and abandoned.

Although seeing this grief as epistemologically generative is needed, we still must consider the ways that ecological grief is currently overdetermined by capitalist chrononormativity, which imposes a temporality on to healing; where a *healing* is a process with a prescribed time frame, encouraging the return to norm adhering subjectivity.

In present theorizations, ecological grief is uplifted because it is an affective “resistance to the pressures, forces, and processes that are underpinning current practices of environmental destruction and commodification...” (Cunsolo and Landman 2017, 15). That is, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, ecological grief resists environmental destruction and commodification through grieving for that which is deemed ungrievable, demonstrating that environmental loss does not go unnoticed. While I agree that experiencing ecological grief can function to demonstrate that environmental destruction does not go unfelt, I remain curious as to what is left unsaid. I am curious as to how ecological grief in this conception, still upholds the logics that create and continue to reproduce the environment itself as “always already lost” (Butler 2004, 33) – that is, always already for use because of its construction as unalive. What I mean is, by casting the environment as grief worthy, yes, we are demonstrating that the environment is beloved and that some have deep and intense affective responses to environmental destruction. But, we are also cementing its status as unalive. Further, by not questioning the temporal logics at work in the current Western and medicalized definitions of grief itself, we leave unexamined what is implied by grief; that this loss is something that *can* be processed through and overcome.

We can grieve for the environment, or for a future shaped by ecological destruction, in part because it is understood as already dead. But understanding the environment as dead, (which allows it to be seen as passive, inert, or resource for development) is the same understanding that excuses historic and ongoing environmental destruction; if it is already dead, can't it be put to *higher* use? This vision sees the environment as grief worthy, but doesn't critically examine how the temporality of grief in its present construction encourages a cycle of consumption and substitution, mirroring and reproducing capitalist logics that permit such environmental exploitation (Sandilands 2010, 337). Grief then may risk confirming environments as dead, rather than interrupting the logics that cast them as such. Here, grief functions to "reiterate the oppressive violence that caused the deaths to be posthumously mourned in the first place" (Radomska et al. 2020, 95). That is, a nostalgic mourning for a vision of undisturbed nature, functions as a "far too easy – and utterly escapist – response to the current environmental crisis" (Radomska et al. 2020, 95) because it serves to distance ecological grievers from staying with what has been degraded or damaged, and instead, confirms "nature as something "lost" at the hands of modernity" (Sandilands 2010, 337) and through this confirmation via grieving, the "victory of the modernity *responsible* for that loss is confirmed" (Sandilands 2010, 337).

Instead, ecological grief needs to be re-examined, not as a process for overcoming loss, but as a method of relating to what is sacrificed in the project of capitalist futures. Ecological grief should be positioned against normative futurity, and alternatively seen as a way that grievers 'become-with' (Haraway 2008, 4) what has been degraded and left behind, as it builds the present alongside us. If we understand that ecological grieving not only expands the bounds of the grievable, but must necessarily make-queer the temporality of grief, then a future oriented vision may be interrupted.

1.1.3 THE FAILURE OF THE FUTURE

It is important to disrupt the future oriented vision offered by capitalist chrononormativity, as chrononormative futurity offers a vision of the future as a site of continual progress, where human capability will always provide stable victories over any type of precarity (Tsing 2015, 2). These “narratives of progress” (Tsing 2015, 6, 282) offer a vision of the future as a “singular direction ahead” (Tsing 2015, viii) which provides stability (for some, and precarity as a condition of life for many others), as it reinforces faith in global capitalism and development, and encourages a belief that “we knew, collectively, where we were going” (Tsing 2015, 2). But this version of the future does not hold, when we remember, for instance (and there are many possible instances) that the great pacific garbage patch stretches 1.6 million square kilometers (Lebreton et al. 2018, 1) and the first human-induced world-wide mass extinction is well underway (Cowie et al. 2022, 640). Thus, we must imagine otherwise – we can no longer look to the future as it is constructed through narratives of progress, because “even as the promises of development still beckon, we seem to have lost the means” (Tsing 2015, 3).

In my vision ecological grieving must then be tasked with the project of resisting the temporal linearity applied to other grieving experiences, if it is to be an effective intervention against environmental destruction at the service of global, unsustainable, capitalist growth. But it cannot resist this temporality if it remains defined (and thereby confined) *as* grief. To extend Tsing’s argument for an anecdote to progress narratives, I believe we can see (chrononormatively resistant) ecological grief as an affect that leads us to look *around* rather than to look only *ahead* (Tsing 2015, 22). Remaining in grief interrupts the orientation of ahead, by lingering in a present constituted by what has been cast into the past, through its extraction and depletion. This occupation of grief, rather than processing through loss, is an act of becoming intimate with

“what has been ignored because it never fit the timeline of progress” (Tsing 2015, 21). Extraction and depletion of ecosystems doesn’t necessitate their disappearance, and grief *only once it is reconstructed out of the bounds of chrononormativity*, calls us into intimacy with the un-disappeared, but nonetheless exploited sites we are instructed to abandon in the ongoing quest of progress; that is, in the orientation of ahead. If ecological grief can interrupt hegemonic temporality rather than reinforce it, the phenomenon may inform and help us imagine “life without stability” (Tsing 2015, 2), rather than serving to provide a framework for processing through ecological losses. I will focus intently on the methods and implications of looking around as opposed to ahead in chapter two.

A queering of ecological grief instead promotes an environmentalism against (chrononormative) futurity. As Haraway writes, “Renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct” (Haraway 2015, 160-161). These “myths of immortality” can be read as analogous to Tsing’s “narratives of progress” – that is, chrononormative future visions in which the strength of human mastery always prevails. The myth has never served more than the powerful few, and now, we must look for other ways to envision the future. Conversely, becoming-with the dead and the extinct provides a pathway towards an alternative futurity, where we no longer arrive in the future through abandonment of the past, but acknowledge that the dead, the extinct, the degraded and damaged co-constitute our present, and the future. In times of great global human and more-than-human loss, re-imagining grief as a way towards becoming-with the dead, rather than a way through which death is processed ensures that we move away from the harmful, extractive and exploitative environmental relationships which permit mass ecological harm, and instead, craft the future with the input and influence of the devastation that has already been wreaked.

We cannot flourish as humans and more-than-humans together if we believe only in myths of immortality, (that is progress and mastery) nor if we ignore the dead and extinct as they continue to shape the future and present along with us. “Renewed generative flourishing” (Haraway 2015, 160) is the project of multi-species, rather than anthropocentric livability, and it cannot be accomplished by looking towards the future while ignoring what has been cast as collateral damage so that this future can take shape. And yet, one cannot become-with the dead and extinct when adhering to the present contours of grief, or while operating within the bounds of chrononormativity. The project of learning how to become-with the dead and extinct is necessary because it is an honest reflection of our earthly conditions. We do not have endless sites for resource extraction on to which we can execute capitalist visions of the future, nor should the environment and its more-than-human constituents be discursively cast as already dead sites of resource extraction.

In the case of ecological grief, death is not always the Deleuzian “becoming imperceptible” (Lykke 2017, Lykke 2022) of human or animal death. Instead, we must reformulate grief to account for the experience that arises through the troubling existence of living amongst the dead, recognizing that this death is one that disturbs modernist conceptions of time, because ecologically speaking as disasters abound it is clear that “the dead refuse to stay silent” (Shildrick 2020, 182). How are we to live with this dead when they refuse to stay silent within present configurations of grief? Norm-resistant ecological grieving may gesture towards an environmentalism invested in the project of learning to live in collaboration with the un-silent dead, as opposed to one that remains invested in myths of future conquests. Thinking critically about the temporal structure of contemporary grief allows one to recognize that although ecological grief may have political potentiality insofar as it expands the boundaries of the

grievable, if it remains structured as a normative grief, it does nothing to disrupt capitalist temporal logics, and in fact, upholds these logics.

While Cunsolo and Landman remind us that ignoring the affective side of climate change is one choice that works to uphold dominant logic that constructs the earth as passive and inert, I argue that engaging in ecological grief, as it is presently constructed *also* upholds dominant logics that construct the earth as already dead, and this death as a final ending. Even good faith engagements in ecological grief – if temporality is not problematized or otherwise disturbed – extend capitalist permission structures for environmental degradation, where we are invited to mourn for a mythic, idyllic nature, through consuming it as a nostalgic commodity (Sandilands 2010, 333). More than seeing the potentiality within ecological grief, we must reconfigure what this grief is, in order to create a potentiality that can intervene in the relentless continuation of capitalist temporalities, a temporality that already structures grieving itself.

To illustrate this point, for the remainder of this chapter I will engage in a close reading of a report from the American Psychological Association that attempts to grapple with the affective elements of climate change. This section will illustrate that when grief's definition remains confined to neoliberal, medicalized frameworks, its potentiality is foreclosed. Beyond foreclosure, this understanding and attempted treatment of climate change related affects serves ultimately to provide a pathway for individuals to *overcome* environmental losses, and return to *normal* life.

1.2 MEDICALIZING CLIMATE CHANGE: OVERCOME ADVERSITY, RETURN TO PRODUCTIVITY

In 2017 the APA in partnership with EcoAmerica⁹ and Climate for Health¹⁰ published a report titled “*Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications and Guidance*” with information on and strategies for grappling with the “mental health responses” (Clayton et al. 2017) brought on by climate change. “Grief” is mentioned without exploring the affect, and explicitly appears only four times in this report (Clayton et al. 2017, 15, 23, 36, 46), which is a precise example of the problem Cunsolo¹¹ herself identifies, when she writes “quite simply, grief and mourning for the loss of the environment or non-human entities currently do not enjoy or garner serious or widespread discursive work” (Cunsolo 2012, 147). With close reading, we can see that ecological grief, though not given discursive space as a phenomenon worthy of exploration, is at the center of this report.¹² The solutions posed by the report uphold norms regarding appropriate emotional expressions, prioritizing individuality and progress. This report also demonstrates the constructed temporality of grief, and how this is used to naturalize, and “cope” (Clayton et al. 2017, 40) with environmental destruction on an individual level. When

⁹ An organization with the aim to extend “climate leadership beyond traditional environmental circles” specifically concerned with building “climate leadership” amongst the sectors of “faith, health, communities, higher education, and business” (EcoAmerica, 2023).

¹⁰ The sub-organization of EcoAmerica concerned exclusively with physical, mental and community health within the context of climate change (Climate for Health, 2022).

¹¹ This report was edited by Cunsolo, whose work on climate grief figures prominently in this chapter.

¹² Throughout this section, I highlight the limitations of an approach that frames emotional responses to climate change through the lens of a binary division between mental health and mental illness. I by no means aim to discount or discredit the experience of those who live with mental illness. Rather, I am interested in dissecting what is at work when narratives of mental health and mental illness characterize this debate, and how this limits climate grievers to containment within regulative institutions. My effort is to expand the possible epistemological ground for these discussions, away from pathologizing approaches, and towards attempts to see the affective side of climate change responses differently. Experiencing grief (for humans or more-than-humans) is by no means easy, and a queer re-thinking of grieving experiences will not make them easier to experience or necessarily less painful, and alleviating the pain is not the goal of my analysis. My alternative reading is only an effort to propose a way to approach ecological grief that does not uphold binary distinctions between good/bad, normal/abnormal, grievable/ungrievable, etc.

normative goals are prioritized, the potentiality of ecological grief is denied, and social regulation is upheld.

1.2.1 RESILIENCE

This report begins with a summary of recommendations for mental health professionals to help individuals face the mental and emotional challenges of climate change. The first two tips are: “1. Build belief in one’s own resilience” and “2. Foster Optimism” (Clayton et al. 2017, 7). What are we to make of these recommendations? Resiliency is the ability to withstand. It is the affective embodiment of individualism and autonomy (what is non-relational). Promoting resiliency encourages responses to ecological destruction that are solipsistic, rather than potentially connective. Resilience itself should be understood for the ways it has been taken up by neoliberal regimes which “appropriated this concept [resilience] in order to create subjects with multi-disciplinary knowledge and capacities able to find practical solutions and adjust to the new times without complaining” (Revelles-Benavente 2021, 191). That is, resiliency must be contextualized within the framework of neoliberal capitalist mental health regimes that deploy such terms as “regulatory ideals” (Gill and Orgad 2018, 477) to ensure not only the continuation of exploitation, but the subsumption of exploitation into the norms of living. ‘Resilience’ as a concept is “demanded and promoted by public policy” in times of “worsening inequality” (Gill and Orgad 2018, 477) so that what it means to be in good health is equated to meeting the demand to be “adaptable and positive, bouncing back from adversity and embracing a mind-set in which negative experiences can—and must—be reframed in upbeat terms” (Gill and Orgad 2018, 477). In this case, building one’s resiliency translates to the ability to endure hardships individually rather than resist them collectively. It implies that hardship is something to be

processed through on one's own, making the ability to withstand environmental destruction an indicator of good mental health.

In a later section that expands on the need to build resiliency, the authors state that “on an individual level, resilience is built internally and externally through strategies, such as *coping* and self regulation...” (Clayton et al. 2017, 40, emphasis mine), with self regulation defined as “the ability to control one's immediate impulses in favor of a more considered, *long-term strategy*” (Clayton et al. 2017, 42, emphasis mine). This framing of self-regulation as a long term strategy orients individuals squarely towards a singular and stable future. I contend that at this moment in time, as ecological destruction takes on planetary dimensions, we can no longer promote the fiction of a stable or knowable future, and instead must resist capitalist chrononormativity which promotes the myth of a future of ever continual progress. Furthermore, advocating for “coping” once again places the responsibility on the individual for overcoming the experience of environmental loss.

In the same section the report reads, “most people come through adversity with positive adjustment and without psychopathology” (Clayton et.al 2017, 40). To frame climate change as on par with “adversity” completely fails to approach the severity and planetary scale of ecological catastrophe. To imply that individuals should be able to overcome this *adversity* with “positive adjustment” demonstrates the problematic nature of a temporality fixated on future progress, as well as neoliberal wellness norms which equate productivity and positivity with good health. On the other hand, to suggest that not being able to process away the “adversity” of ecological loss is a form of “psychopathology” pushes those who may be experiencing ongoing instances of ecological grief to see this grief as an illness requiring a cure. Within mental health

institutions, the potentiality of ecological grieving that Cunsolo and Landman foreground is overshadowed by the temporal demand to process through loss.

1.2.2 OPTIMISM

What does the second recommendation, “2. Foster Optimism” mean? Optimism here implies a shared belief in current systems’ ability to save a mythical ‘us’ from climate change, pointing towards another implied belief that a collective ‘we’ is doing the right thing. As Berlant reminds us in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), “one of optimism’s ordinary pleasures is to *induce conventionality*, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate” (Berlant 2011, 2, emphasis mine). Optimism’s pleasure lies in the fact that it continually orients its investors towards “predictable comforts” (Berlant 2011, 2) or non-disruptive solutions. Optimism makes us feel good because it reinforces the idea that commitment to normative systems will in fact bring about positive results, rather than revealing the fictions and failures of such normative systems, which would leave us not only not-optimistic but unmoored, without stable entities to form attachments to. Optimism “induce[s] conventionality” by encouraging a sense of faith in the object of the attachment. For this report, the object of attachment is the optimistic feeling itself. And as Berlant continues, “the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (Berlant 2011, 2, emphasis original). In the case of this report, the affective structure of a cruel optimistic attachment to a sense of optimism itself encourages the belief that simply *being* optimistic will result in a change regarding the future of the world under the crises of climate change. Berlant

continues, “But, again, *optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving*” (Berlant 2011, 2 emphasis mine). This point is crucial. Optimism becomes cruel when the strength of the attachment makes it impossible to achieve what the object itself represents. This is precisely the optimism that this report is offering, as it suggests that feeling optimistic is a way to deal with devastation. Optimism is unequipped to change the devastation of climate change, but it does shift responsibility for emotional reactions to loss back on to the individual. Optimism then functions as both the method to achieve the cure, as well as the cure itself. Optimism as a solution does not encourage disruption, nor does it encourage thoughtful analysis regarding how normative institutions encourage these cruelly optimistic attachments so as to avoid said disruption. To put it simply, “An optimistic attachment is invested in...the world’s continuity” (Berlant 2011, 13).

In this report we must recognize that optimism functions in a positive feedback loop: being optimistic will result in the end goal of feeling better, or overcoming environmental losses, while arriving at a state of optimism is accomplished through being optimistic, thereby not requiring changes or disruptions to the status quo, but only changes to how we approach our own feelings. Optimism breeds resiliency, that is the ability to withstand, which is taken as health and wellness but deserves to be contextualized instead as a submission to the “demand to return to social ideals” (Ahmed 2010, 2).

Fostering optimism encourages an attachment to a specific vision of “the good life” (Ahmed 2010, 6), that is norm-adhering, where adherence to these norms are supposed to produce good mental health and thus, more optimism and resilience. Fostering optimism as a solution for grappling with climate change related losses demonstrates that having an optimistic

standpoint, or being happy, is not only the *goal* of mental health treatment, but that occupying an optimistic standpoint is how one demonstrates alignment with the social norms of wellness (Ahmed 2010, 11). It demonstrates precisely how neoliberal expectations of productivity are taken as measures of good health, so that health care works with the goal of recuperating productivity. As a solution to the emotional effects of environmental destruction, the report puts forward obtaining an optimistic vision: always look *ahead* to better times, believe in fictions of progress and stable futures. Here, grieving has no utility or potentiality. Bad feelings are to be avoided.

A later section that expands on the recommendation for optimism reads, “People who are able to reframe and *find something positive* in their circumstances tend to do better than people who are less able to regulate their thinking, emotions, and actions” (Clayton et al. 2017, 40, emphasis mine). Neoliberal health and wellness norms are again at work in this framing that promote the avoidance of bad feelings, and extend the fiction that there is always something positive to be found because of the strength of our resilience and relentless optimism (Revelles-Benavente 2021, Ahmed 2010). It also focuses back on the individual to make positivity not only an indicator of health but a personal responsibility (Ahmed 2010, 10). In this case, the recommendation to foster optimism breeds a faithful yet ambiguous attachment to the fiction that authority figures can and will solve climate change, and that the mental stress, or the ecological grief will also be eliminated through these solutions; solutions that are always just around the bend and somehow non-disruptive. The solutions can continue to always be non-disruptive precisely because it is each individual’s responsibility to find something positive and regulate their emotions, rather than be informed precisely by the disruptive nature of the affective response. Both tips work towards the same goal: increase faith in institutions to provide

nondisruptive responses which refocuses individuals back to approaching loss as something that needs to be overcome solipsistically and normatively rather than occupied. Contrary to the vision put forth by Cunsolo and Landman, in this framing, the emotional intensity, or ecological grief is not generative, rather as a consequence of its treatment as grief, it is pathologized and requires solution.

In a subsequent section on the compound stresses of climate change, the authors say “Stress can also be accompanied by worry about future disasters and feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, mourning, grief, and despair” (Clayton et al. 2017, 23). Yet, the first concern that accompanies the “compound stresses” (Clayton et al. 2017, 23) are the “economic costs incurred by lost work days...” (Clayton et al. 2017, 23). The implicit message comes into stark relief: experiencing ecological grief, or any “mental health response to climate change” (Clayton et al. 2017) is a danger because it interferes with the presumed productivity of the worker and their ability to economically contribute to the uninterrupted continuation of the economy, even though it could be argued that it is this prioritization of economic continuance which continuously reproduces the conditions necessary for environmental catastrophe. Interruption into the productivity of the worker disrupts a vision of the future which requires continual “assumptions of growth” (Tsing 2015, 4) a vision of continued mastery which disallows for the acknowledgement of “current precarity as an earthwide condition” (Tsing 2015, 4). For the first listed problem associated with vulnerability, helplessness, *grief* and despair to be the *economic impact of lost work days* re-establishes what is prioritized in approaches to solve ecological grief. Far from seeing this grief as potentially generative or connective, this grief does not even elicit worry or care for the individuals experiencing it, but only concern about missing work.

Rather than generating “different ways of knowing” (Cunsolo and Landman 2017, 3), when attended to by normative mental health institutions the main priority is overcoming grief as quickly as possible, so that the ability to produce is uninterrupted. Here we can see how medicalized understandings of grieving are overly reliant on a temporal time scheme which sees health as individual resilience, optimism, and productivity, combining to contribute to economic continuance. To close, I want to leave us with one paradoxical inclusion on the list of recommendations for mental health professionals, where we began with resiliency and optimism. On this list we find, “8. Uphold connection to place” (Clayton et al. 2017, 44). I am left with a question: How can we uphold connections to the places that are meaningful, as they change, disappear, or are degraded, when grief is constructed according to chrononormative norms that see it as a process with an ending that looks like a return to undisturbed productivity? How can one uphold connections to landscapes that are shifting in ways that feel deathly without the time, space and permission to experience on-going grief?

1.2.3 UNGRIEVABLE LOSSES

There are other engagements with loss throughout this report that are not described using the language of grief by the authors. The overt denial of the language of grief remains worthy of analysis. Within the executive summary (Clayton et al. 2017, 7) reads the following sentences:

...feelings of loss may be due to profound changes in a personally important place...and/or a sense that one has lost control over events in one’s life due to disturbances from climate change...a sense of loss regarding one’s personal or occupational identity can arise...

Although this section repeatedly focuses on the experience of loss and the emotional effects of such distributed loss, these “feelings of loss” do not add up to something worth the label grief.

Why not? This is repeated within the section titled, “Loss of personally important places” which reads, “As climate change irrevocably changes people’s lived landscapes, large numbers are likely to *experience a feeling that they are losing a place* that is important to them” (Clayton et al. 2017, 25, emphasis mine). By not calling this grief and attending to it as such, this report can ignore the ways that grief “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order... by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (Butler 2004, 22). Labeling something with the ambiguous title of a “sense of loss”, rather than “grief” contributes to a sense that these losses do not have significant meaning, or social consequences. It allows the report to reframe losses as individual phenomena, thereby side stepping the complex “relational ties” (Butler 2004, 22) that grieving would otherwise make evident.

To follow Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004), grieving has the potential to reveal relational ties that are overlooked or dismissed when loss is not afforded grievability. If grief is named as such rather than avoided, we are left with the reality of our interdependence, a reality that is ignored when “losses” are not grief-worthy. But beyond this, if grief is understood, as it is in this medical framework, mainly as a process of mourning and subsequent abandonment, or “overcoming” without “psychopathology,” ecological grief, even if named as such, is still limited. Butler offers a reading of grief that is sustained and generative, as it illuminates the ethical responsibilities we have to one another, ones that can be theorized towards more-than-human others. Using the language of grief would not only provide the foundation for realizing our complex political community amongst other humans, but would reveal the “fundamental dependency” and “ethical responsibility” (Butler 2004, 22) we have with our more-than-human co-habitants. Using the language of “loss” that is somehow not worthy of grief

should be read as the report's attempt to sidestep the aspect of engaging in grief which requires "transformation (perhaps one should say *sub-mitting* to transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (Butler 2004, 21).

In Butler's understanding of grief, there is always an element of the unknown; one cannot know who they will be, or how they will be transformed by the experience. This reading of grief is needed when approaching ecological grief, particularly for its anticipatory nature. That is, ecological grief is a grieving process for a future that is neither certain nor guaranteed, which is particularly why we cannot invest in a stable sense of the future as a solution for this problem. As the report clearly aims to avoid uncertainty, and clamors to offer restoration of self control and long term planning as an anecdote to intense uncertainty, to admit that these "senses of loss" (Clayton et al. 2017, 25) come with feelings of grief would be to give up the control and stability that the report advances as the very cure for such uncomfortable feelings. Instead, by offering a fiction of control as a response to ecological loss and the unknowable territory of mourning, the report can reframe what could be ecological grief, instead as an individual mental health problem.

It could be argued that much of what is discussed in this report should be understood as the myriad of possible expressions of ecological grief, regardless of its label. But by not extending the language of grievability to more-than-human losses, the report supports Butlers claim that the types of acceptable forms of mourning not only make clear "the norms by which the 'human' is constituted" (Butler 2004, 46) but also reveal that we are "as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow..." (Butler 2004, 46). Although Butler is writing about grief as it pertains to individuals foreclosed from normative humanity, I believe this argument holds and can be extended to the ways that grieving is foreclosed in the case of the

ongoing destruction of more-than-human others. This passage makes clear that not naming “feelings of loss” as grief contributes to the ongoing project of separating the grievable human from ungrievable nature so as to ensure that ecological destruction can be subsumed into the background. If we are constituted as much by what we grieve as by what we don’t, the environment must remain squarely within the domain of the ungrievable, or else the ways by which we understand self/other are not only put into question, but the ability to extract, consume and degrade the environment cannot remain unquestioned.

I do not advocate for the usage of grief as an umbrella term in an effort to squash differences and make broad conclusions and easy analysis. Moreso, I believe that if we could name these affects, experiences and anxieties as grief, ecological grief would be revealed as not only pushing the bounds of the grievable beyond the human (as it is already theorized by Cunsolo and Landman), but it would also push the temporality of grieving beyond its conception as a process with a final ending, in part because of its orientation towards an uncertain future. The not-naming of grief and mourning in this report actually, perhaps counter to the intentions of the authors and editors, serves to uphold logics that cast the environment as “mere resource and instrument for human actions” (MacCormack et al 2021, 576) where grief, if it is acknowledged at all is encouraged to be a process where grievers are successful if they are “able to substitute one loss object for another...” (Cunsolo 2012, 143).

Overall, this report elucidates several critical points that are necessary for moving beyond medicalized approaches to address ecological grief. One, it illuminates the ways that neoliberal norms of wellness prioritize regulatory ideals as indicators of health, foreclosing the possibility to engage with environmental loss outside of either processing this loss or becoming pathologized by the experience. Two, largely avoiding the word grief in favor of passive framing

such as “senses of loss” (Clayton et al. 2017, 7) at once forecloses an engagement with grief, while also reflecting precisely how grief is dealt with: with the wish to bypass and overcome the feelings, instead of occupying them. This non-naming does what Cunsolo warns against, namely it “serves to further derealize our animal, vegetable, and mineral kin in the same way that other human lives have also been derealized” (Cunsolo 2012, 147). Not naming ecological grief as such but dancing around the subject reaffirms the environment as an ungrievable entity while placing a pathologizing focus on the individual.

Through an analysis of this report, one can see clearly what norms are at work when discourses of ecological grief are located in normative mental health institutions. Although it is clear that this report largely denies grievability to the ecological more-than-human, I hope to have proved that the present alternative is also not enough. Expressing grief for the environment, if this grief is still defined through traditional understandings of grief as processual, reconfirms the natural world as a site of ruin, which encourages attachments to new objects, instead of remaining with what has been cast aside. With this foundation, the second chapter will explore an alternative; a queer reading of ecological grief that disturbs chrononormativity and the notion of bounded and autonomous senses. In this reading, I offer a conception of ecological melancholia as a norm-resistant reinterpretation of ecological grief that allows grievers to bathe “in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (Freeman 2010, xiii), gesturing to an environmentalism which does not look towards normative futurity, but remains committed to the project of “becoming-with the dead” (Haraway 2015, 161).

Chapter 2: QUEER ECOLOGICAL MELANCHOLIA: ENVIRONMENTALISM AGAINST FUTURITY

In the previous chapter I demonstrated that although ecological grief is theorized to have political potential for how it expands boundaries of grievability, its potential is foreclosed because of temporal constraints placed on grief by regulatory institutions. Mobilized by the risk of pathologization, in this vision grief is something to be overcome in a designated time frame, ending when the attachment to the lost object is severed, returning the griever to a more *healthy* (read: productive) life. With this framing, ecological grief is to be processed through and the experience is seen as neither informative, epistemologically generative, nor containing political potential for resistance to environmental destruction. In a framework where environmental loss can be overcome through a grief process, environmental destruction itself becomes an ordinary, naturalized loss, instead of a consequence of extractive capitalist logic. As an alternative, in this chapter I will present a queer reading of ecological grief, framing it as a relational standpoint to the ongoing destruction of more-than-human ecologies which cannot and should not be processed through or overcome. This grief refuses to accept environmental losses as necessary, ordinary or un-impactful. This refusal moves us away from ecological grief and towards ecological melancholia, and in this chapter, I work to suggest that ecological grief's potentiality, as well as its paradoxical complexities are revealed when re-framed as ecological melancholia.

2.1 FROM MELANCHOLIC ORIGINS TOWARDS MELANCHOLIC POSSIBILITIES

In the psychoanalytic tradition, melancholia is understood as a failed grief that comes to be considered pathological because it is not “overcome after a certain lapse of time” (Freud 1917, 244). In this framing, grief is engaged with via the process of mourning, mourning is the

healthy processing of grief. This does not deny the pain of grief, grief is destructive and heartbreaking (Freud 1917, 244). But by engaging with the *process*, grieverers are supposed to ultimately right themselves again, so that mourning ends with a return to norm adhering subjectivity. Conversely, melancholia lingers; loss unmetabolized results in destabilization of the self. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud sees this destabilization as the impoverishment of the ego on an all encompassing scale (Freud 1917, 246). This impoverishment or destabilization can become a psychical crisis for the subject, wherein the unresolved nature of loss produces an *ambivalence* that is introjected into subjectivity, producing a range of affects which may include detachment from reality and disorientation (Freud 1917, 246). When notions of the sovereign self blur so as to accommodate losses (whether physical or ideal) into subjectivity at the level of the unconscious, loss becomes present not just as a lingering or incomplete grief, but as a spectrality with agency unclear to the subject. What exactly is lost is not always clear. But loss itself takes over the agency of the subject, so that the unexplained yet unwavering presence of loss *becomes* all that is present to the subject, *becomes* the subject themselves. For Freud, this is an “*identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” (Freud 1917, 249, emphasis in original) where “object loss” is transformed into “ego loss” (Freud 1917, 249). Conversely in a typical grief process, when object loss is attended to through mourning, new attachments can be subsequently formed.

Ambivalence here is a crucial word. Freud figures ambivalence as at the core of melancholia; its presence is what gives healthy mourning its “pathological cast” (Freud 1917, 251). In the ordinary reading, the ambivalence of melancholia is a conflict over the relationship with the lost object “in which love and hate contend with each other” (Freud 1917, 256), where

internally the subject both wants to be rid of the attachment and remain attached, because this attachment has become how the subject understands themselves.

Though Freud's definition of ambivalence is foundational, I travel with the queer reading of ambivalence offered by Ghassan Moussawi, where the notion of ambivalence is not at the core of pathologization (Moussawi 2022, 85). But rather Moussawi (2022, 84, emphasis mine) contends that

Ambivalence is a queer affect; it opens up the potential to occupy more than one position at the same time. It is also a *relational affect* that moves us, even as we dwell in it. While some might regard ambivalence as a liminal state that one needs to overcome, I argue for an understanding of ambivalence not as a temporary state, but as a *queer affect that allows one to simultaneously experience multiple conflicting feelings...that allows one to disidentify (Muñoz 1999) with dominant narratives of mourning and grief and of linear time and temporality*. To be ambivalent while mourning is to go against what are considered normative registers of prescriptive mourning...

For Moussawi, ambivalence is the ability to occupy more than one position simultaneously, even positions that conflict with one another. And this queer occupation of ambivalence, rather than a temporary or "liminal state that one needs to overcome" (Moussawi 2022, 84) serves to refashion grievers experience of temporality by "simultaneously grieving the present and the past and imagining an (im)possible future" (Moussawi 2022, 86). This skewed temporality of grief experienced when ambivalence is occupied and dwelled in without seeking resolution is disruptive to the ongoingness of capitalist time and the temporality prescribed to normative grieving experiences, for how it resists notions of progress. The queer relationality of ambivalence in experiences of loss is particularly interesting because it is both a queer relation to the past, by bringing what is past into the present, but it also "*queers* our sense of time..." (Moussawi 2022, 87), bringing to the fore alternative temporalities outside of chrononormative

futurity. Although I figure ambivalence along the lines of Moussawi's theorizations, melancholia itself is not cleanly experienced as a mode of resistance and I do not aim to argue that ecological melancholia can provide a simple path forward for those interested in disrupting capitalist temporalities as they structure dominant Western modes of environmental relations.

On the contrary, although I do believe that ecological grief has more potential when figured as melancholia, I also believe that melancholia allows us to think through the psychic effects of living within the Anthropocene disaster with more nuance. The ambivalence generated through melancholia provides a foundation for coming to understand what feels like a paradox of living in times of ecological calamity in the Western world. Namely, how so much ambivalence, apathy and disconnection can be intertwined with so much loss and destruction. Melancholia can express itself in ways unknown to the subject, and in ways that are not easily traced as being related to instances of loss. Therefore, in the case of ecological destruction, thinking through melancholia as opposed to grief serves multiple purposes. Firstly, as will be the two main points of exploration within this chapter, melancholia disrupts normative time and provides a generative starting point for thinking through other queer temporalities. It also, as I will come to speculate, influences the sensorium, expanding on and distorting the ways we see and come to relate to environments, leading to an affect-inflected expansion of Tsing's injunction to look *around*.

Additionally, although not the main focus of this chapter, thinking through melancholia may help us to understand how living within the "long-now" (Huber 2022, 3) of environmental calamity doesn't necessarily create activist subjectivities, but individuals who respond to unescapable loss in conflicting or seemingly nonsensical ways. Because melancholia can generate ambivalence it can also help to better understand how reactions to living within on-going loss can be wide ranging; perhaps emerging as a commitment to disruptive activism,

perhaps numbness, perhaps violence, perhaps scrolling on Instagram for hours. Perhaps a combination of any, all or none of these.

In a queer reading of melancholia and its ambivalence, instead of pathologization, this unresolved grief may create what we could recognize as a subjective bogginess (as I will return to in chapter three). Herein there are interesting possibilities for reimagining environmental interactions in times of crises that are foreclosed by a normative reading of ecological grief. Through integrating scholarship that asks how to understand grief queerly, we are able to investigate how a queer turn away from pathologized (ecological) grief towards (ecological) melancholia is not a failure of mourning, but a way to think through ambivalence while simultaneously revealing the possibility for generative temporalities and sensory orientations that only emerge through non-normative melancholic relations. Relationality rather than boundedness defines the self, the quick abandonment encouraged by chrononormative time is refused, and other ways of living through ongoing relation with death are revealed.

With the reading that follows, I aim to put forward ecological melancholia as a “politicized way of preserving that [lost] object in the midst of a culture that fails to recognize its significance...” (Sandilands 2010, 333). Before arriving at the queer alternative I propose, it is necessary to return to the concept of a progress narrative so as to understand the methodology through which it functions. Understanding the methodology of how progress narratives are implemented will allow us to more clearly see how melancholy disrupts the contours of normative futurity and the concept of autonomous senses.

2.1.1 PERILS OF PROGRESS: PROMISE AND RUIN

Let's focus back on the concept of a progress narrative as a way of organizing dominant temporal structures through their narrativization. As I introduced earlier, progress narratives are implantation tools of chrononormativity that will always orient their adherents towards a specific and non-ruptured vision of the future. To summarize, narratives of progress attach their believers to a promise of future stability, where human mastery always reigns supreme, propelling "us" (read: Western Man) forward, uninterrupted and ever equipped to tackle every challenge, crafting the future as something knowable, that which can be anticipated. Dominant fictions of progress can also be seen through Berlant's lens of cruel optimism, as they serve to maintain individuals' attachments to capitalism as *the only way*, rather than imagining the possibility of alternative systems of temporal (economic, or relational) organization. Although I introduced the concept in the first chapter in order to make clear how progress narratives orient individuals towards the future, we also must understand *how* progress narratives function in the case of environmental relations; by deploying another binary to categorize the more-than-human ecological world, that of "promise and ruin" (Tsing 2015, 18).

Progress narratives function within and through the deployment of the binary of "promise and ruin" (Tsing 2015, 18), where ruination acts as the necessary dark side of promise, so that when "ruined," landscapes are quickly and easily cast as dead and subsequently abandoned, so as to free the quest for progress to be executed on to another site. As Tsing reminds us, when the story of a landscape ends in its decay, our attention can once again turn "*to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin*" (Tsing 2015, 18, emphasis in original). This standpoint relies on both the presumption of the existence of new and ever available sites for progress to be enacted on, and on the presumption that decay is the end of the story. Narratives of progress depend on

ruin. The discursive construction of nature as *undeveloped*, as if nature itself exists *for* human development is what allows progress to function. Once the targeted resource has been fully exploited, because of a mechanistic world view which frames the environment as passive, or always for human use (that is already unalive), environments are easily abandoned as ruined spaces. Even environmental apocalypse scenarios, as popular as they are, do not accomplish a transformative, generative, or even thought provoking task.¹³ In fact they uphold the dichotomy of promise and ruin. So, where are we to turn for sites from which to imagine other ways of seeing, other ways of living? Tsing argues for what I recognize as a method of melancholic relationality. She says, “In a global state of precarity, we don’t have choices other than looking for life in this ruin” (Tsing 2015, 6).

2.1.2 BEYOND PROMISE: TOWARDS PLAYING IN RUINS

The exploitative way of seeing constructed through the binary of promise and ruin and deployed via the progress narrative is unable to recognize the differently emerging or persistent forms of life in ecological ruin, because this way of seeing does not *look around* or stay with environments, it only looks ahead (Tsing 2015, 18). Rather than an orientation towards the future as a site of continual development being the foundation of hegemonic Western environmental relations, an orientation of *around* may in fact be able to build from melancholy – where what is *lost* in fact *remains* – whereas conversely, this ambivalent and unruly spectral temporality must be overcome if we are to resume the orientation of ahead. Therefore, looking around is a choice that foregrounds relationality and harnesses ambivalence, as it is not a prescription to look around so as to secure resources or land for development, but to look around so as to learn about

¹³ For some examples of scholarship that engages with the binary of victory and apocalypse prevalent in mainstream sustainability and climate change discourse see Lakind and Adsit-Morris 2018; Kverndokk 2020; Evans 2017.

the way life emerges in ruin, for the ways that life continues in spite of the narrow definitions put forward by progress narratives. Looking around, so as to attune oneself to life in the ruins counteracts the dogma of progress and ruin. What I propose is that a queer understanding of ecological melancholia provides a methodological foundation to think through what it means to look around rather than looking ahead, making it harder for the binary of promise/ruin to be upheld. As we find ourselves in a time when it can feel as though we are careening towards planetary ruin, rather than outrun it, it is time to stay curiously with the ruin, to take up the queer temporality Freeman sees as “bathing in the light of whatever has been declared useless” (Freeman 2010, xiii), which I see as another way of describing the melancholic method of *looking around*, of playing in ruins. The binary of promise/ruin reproduces as much as it is formed from the capitalist logic of consumption and substitution (Sandilands 2010, 338), a logic which melancholia interrupts through its stubborn determination to stay with what has been ruined, rejecting its substitution.

The invitation to learn how to play in ruins, that is to be curious as to what emerges there is a queer one indeed. But it is a political, practical and necessary step if we are to begin to envision outside of the binary of promise and ruin. What I mean is, we do not defeat promise and ruin by finding a third option. The anecdote to the cyclic operation of promise and ruin is not to prescribe a stable third option, just like the solution to defeating the normative temporality imposed on grieving experiences is not to call for a universal temporal extension of appropriate grief experiences. But, to harken back to the introduction, we may defeat, or begin to think outside of the binary of promise and ruin through “developing tools and techniques for nondualistic thought” (Sedgwick 2003, 1). Looking around, intimately occupying what has been deemed as ruined, with ambivalence, may be one such tool. Perhaps the way to begin to imagine

outside of the binary of promise and ruin is not finding an alternative solution, but by refusing the abandonment of ruin, an abandonment that is accomplished through grieving for the ruin and moving on to a new site of promise. By refusing the abandonment of what has been deemed ruined, by playing with and remaining in relation with an object(s) that was never supposed to be mourned, or loved in the first place the cycle of promise and ruin itself is not so easily carried out.

I call for a method of *playing* in the ruins because play is a creative, yet agnostic endeavor. It is not attached to outcomes, and therefore is not an activity which is meant to lead to predetermined ends. As Haraway notes, play is the “most powerful and diverse activity for rearranging old things and proposing new things, new patterns of feeling and action, and for crafting safe enough ways to tangle with each other in conflict and collaboration” (Haraway 2016, 150). Making room for ambivalence, and agnostic regarding future outcomes, play is a method that may teach us to relate to our earthly condition in non-exploitative ways, ones that through foregrounding curiosity deserve to be seen as an act of “becoming-with” (Haraway 2008, 4) that has been cast as ruined. And rather than abandon, we may, through playing in the ruins, learn about necessary collaboration and “new patterns of feeling and action” (Haraway 2016, 150).

To put it simply, to stay around, to play in the ruins, is a political act of holding on, of orienting ourselves towards that which is presented to us as easily abandoned. This playing is political, even if it may be hard to recognize as such, because it is an experience of an attachment with an object(s) that is instrumentalized as resource, that is cast as inert, intended for use to further normative capitalist development. Understanding narratives of progress through its deployment and reliance on the binary of promise/ruin makes it clear that in ecological

melancholia, the progression of normative time on the individual scale is interrupted, but so are ways of relating to environments that depend on the cycle of promise and ruin. A different way of relating, a melancholic relation that resists both cure and pathologization is offered, and there may be much to learn from this position, as it pushes us to play with, or recognize ruins differently.

2.1.3 LOOKING THROUGH MELANCHOLY

With an understanding of how narratives of progress are deployed on to environments, we can see how melancholia, as opposed to grief, invites an alternative orientation towards “ruins.” This orientation encourages careful and curious attention for what has been cast aside, and necessitates a reformulation of vision unencumbered by progress or promise. Now that I have established how an ecologically melancholic disposition disrupts the promise/ruin binary, and invites us to *look around* or to *play in ruins*, we can more closely examine and speculate how the ecologically melancholic disposition may shape both what it means to *look*, as well as what is perceived as *around*.

I contend that by taking up the standpoint of playing in ruins, rather than abandoning them, ecological melancholics take up the task of learning how to live with dead, dying, or degraded ecologies, which first necessitates seeing them with curiosity instead of accepting them as “collateral damage in the service of ‘higher’ purposes such as profit, progress... neoliberal mass consumption, etc” (Radomska et al. 2020, 93). Unencumbered by progress or promise, melancholic vision is interested in what emerges, remains and makes life according to different rules, rather than seeing what has been deemed ruined as a “*backdrop*’ of undifferentiated earthly and dehumanized others” (Radomska et al. 2020, 91, emphasis mine). In melancholia,

environmental destruction does not easily fade into an undifferentiated background, but instead lingers, troubling the continuation of an uninterrupted future. The staying power of melancholia so thoroughly exceeds the subject's capacity "to be" as a norm-adhering subject at all, that *being* the subject is now the act of *staying* with the loss (Freud 1917, 249). Melancholia leads us to the orientation of around, for in melancholia, there is no clear *ahead* towards which to go.

Before we can interrogate the orientation of *around*, it is crucial first to interrogate what it means to *look* in the act of *looking* around. Looking around as opposed to looking ahead is a way of being in relation to the damaged world that is distinctly resistant to regimes of chrononormativity as well as norms of relationality. But, looking is never a passive exercise. As Haraway suggests, without insisting on the partial nature of all looking practices, the visual remains a sensory system "that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 581). Looking around cannot be prescriptively nor unproblematically held up as a solution to capitalist methods of viewing unless this looking practice is marked by the particularities of both the visualizer and what is visualized.

Advocating for *looking around* without interrogating the asymmetries within the unequal distribution of who can look as a means to produce knowledge brings us too close to the perverse capacity the eyes have been used to signify, that is the ability to "distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power" (Haraway 1988, 581). Helpfully, melancholia both probes and disturbs vision and orientation.

In the case of the melancholic sensorium, because the presence of the lost is within oneself, and the subsequent ambivalence is an occupation of multiple simultaneous positions, ecologically melancholic vision is always a looking with eyes that are not solely our own. Ambivalently melancholic vision is always in multiplicity; it can be muddy, opaque or boggy. In

my usage, melancholy does not just resist the direction of *ahead* but also resists what is normatively bound up in definitions of *looking* itself. Once we see melancholia as an active disorientation of the self through introjection of loss into the subject, we must approach autonomy and the boundedness of the senses differently. We can better understand this orientation through two aspects of the melancholic condition; introjection and disorientation.

Introjection is the process by which “objects from the external world...are taken into the ego, internalized” (Truscott 2012, 1). Introjection as a process “usually denotes a *merging* with the object, a movement from difference and distinctness to sameness” (Truscott 2012, 1, emphasis mine). If the lost object is introjected into subjectivity in melancholic experiences, then we are no longer seeing with our eyes alone, but with the unknown, or unidentifiable influences of unmetabolized loss. *Around* then becomes not just slow curiosity from a single standpoint; it is not one human looking around themselves for what has gone ignored. Instead, *around* is a look that emerges from multiple standpoints, multiple perspectives. Another way to say this is: there are many sets of eyes within the landscape. The eyes of the lost look from within the melancholic. Melancholic vision is thus necessarily multiple and more-than-human.

Introjection contributes to a fundamental blurring of the boundaries between a subject’s interiority and the external world (Truscott 2012). This blurring, a movement towards merging with the lost object that confuses the borders between internal and external has thought provoking implications for the sensorium distorted through melancholy and the orientation of *around*. My argument is simply that melancholy intrudes upon the sensorium. In melancholia, the unconscious resistance to the loss of an object is experienced as “being the lost object rather than having it” (Truscott 2012, 1). And if we are to take this *being the lost object* seriously, then it follows that it is not just the psychic landscape of the melancholic that is changed, but also

bodily sensory apparatuses may be distorted through the same process of introjection. If the role of the sensorium is to edit the plethora of sensory inputs into something coherent and understandable, *but* as a subject we are composed of the lost object, then the bodily and organic integrity of the sensory editing abilities must also be influenced by such affective overwhelm. Although senses are experienced as bodily, melancholy pushes us to recognize that sensory abilities are in excess of the body – they are affective, full of resistance, ambivalence, and in the case of ecological melancholia, informed by the unconscious effects of environmental loss. When loss is introjected, we see not only with the eyes of what is lost, but the affective weight of melancholia may distort the processing capabilities typically associated with the sensorium.

If melancholia results in a disorientation of the subject through the process of this introjection, I ask us to imagine that it is not just as simple as vision becoming multiple and relational, but staying discreet as a sense. Rather, melancholia invites us to imagine that beyond multiple standpoints, looking itself may be synesthetically transformed through the disorientation that accompanies introjection. In disorientation, vision loses its myth of boundedness, it becomes blurry and perhaps distributed throughout the body. What I mean is, we can first establish that in melancholic vision one sees from a subjectivity that is not fully human due to the incorporation of more-than-human loss into the self. But further, *seeing* is not just multiplied while retaining its structure, but instead, traveling with the concept of disorientation, seeing may take on disorientingly synesthetic qualities, losing the ability to remain a discreet sense. I propose that in addition to seeing from multiple, but perhaps unknown standpoints, the melancholic sees with with “fingeryeyes” (Hayward 2010) rather than through a solely optic biologic technology. The disorientation that ensues because the subject is rendered non-sovereign (having become the lost object) may be extended to the level of disorientation of sovereign sensory abilities. That is,

melancholia may allow a synesthetic form of seeing that is smelling, a touch that is seeing. Might we arrive at an understanding that through introjection and subsequent disorientation, melancholia so distorts the sensorium so that sight cannot be neatly separated from other sensual ways of knowing, and instead becomes a relational sensory emergence? This is a theory of the senses that contends that sight emerges not just through relation, but is developed as an effect of the affects of encounter. I follow Hayward's proposition in her 2010 piece "Fingeryeyes: Impressions of Cup Corals" that senses themselves are created through the influence of affect, and it is the affective ripple of interaction that builds the sensorium, it is not a purely biological materialization (Hayward 2010, 582). Therefore, seeing with "fingeryeyes" in the case of ecological melancholia is a reformulation of vision that incorporates the affective overwhelm of living within loss into an theory of how senses themselves are formed.

I wish to extend this argument further, so as to wonder if melancholia, as an affect, is an agent that influences bodily and sensory potential. As Hayward puts forward, senses are produced and developed through experiencing sensation, where sensation is the composite of the corporeal sensing experience (in my case, what is seen), and the affect that is produced through such sensation. In the case of melancholia, I think that the intrusion of disorientation into the sensorium refracts perceptive ability, so that what is perceived as around may not just be the ecological losses that are materially evident, and instead this *around* may also take on a wider affective scope. Looking *around* through the distorted and disoriented vision of melancholy may contribute to a vision that is unable to shy away from the planetary condition of continual environmental loss.

Tsing's advice to look around as opposed to looking ahead is a necessary one. But seeing this method through melancholia expands its potential into necessarily multiple and distorted

directions that problematize both what it means to look and the orientation of around. Bringing the characteristics of melancholia to meet methods of visualizing makes different what it means to visualize, *looking* itself is relational, and *around* is an affective, rather than solely spatial orientation. Because of the influence of affect on the senses and the melancholic presence of the other within the self, looking around becomes a way of “becoming-with” (Haraway 2008, 4). Looking around, with the influence of the melancholic disposition is a complex formation wherein it is not just that the senses are synesthetically collapsed but that looking around is also the emotional act of carrying forth overwhelming loss that cannot be processed. In this melancholic disposition, memories of losses may overwhelm what is materially present in the spatiality of around. Melancholia, in its disorientation, does not just produce synesthesia, but perhaps also is a vision so informed by loss, that what is seen is an affective reality, rather than a material one. First, looking melancholically is a practice of relational becoming-with the more-than-human, rather than just learning how to recognize more-than-human life as it persists in sites deemed ruined. But second, looking melancholically is seeing an affective reality. Seeing is not just a sensory perception device informed and influenced by melancholia, but melancholia itself is a sensory perception device, one that influences and forms how we are able to see, and what truth emerges through this method of visualization.

What melancholia, rather than (individualized, medicalized) grief invites us to do is to break the cycle of promise and ruin, substitution and consumption, vision as enclosure, through being with the dead and dying, by looking around rather than looking ahead, allowing melancholy to blur both what is around, as well as methods for seeing it. Rejecting the call to look ahead resists the structures of capitalist chrononormativity by acknowledging that we are living within a “present that is not only haunted but *constituted* by the past: literally built of ruins

and rejections...” (Sandilands 2010, 340). This vision of the present requires a blurry sensorial approach, one that is detached from clarity, boundedness or myths of objectivity, in favor of seeing in ways that are equipped to recognize that unmetabolized losses constitute the present, in their complicated and unclear influences. And because they are unmetabolized, this melancholic living-with requires “an *ethical* relationship to the past that acknowledges its perpetual incompleteness and contingency” (Sandilands 2010, 340). That is, if the past – in this scenario what was destroyed as resource in the quest for progress – is not actually over but present as “the past which is not past” (Sharpe 2016, 9) the affect of melancholia can account for the feeling of “perpetual incompleteness” (Sandilands 2010, 340), or for how this past continuously “reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe 2016, 9). Further, it leaves us with an ethical responsibility to act in collaboration with the dead or destroyed, out of a recognition of their presence as constitutive and rupturing forces in the present, rather than a grieving responsibility to put the past behind us, or to only remember it. Living and seeing melancholically not only interrupts capitalist temporalities – but melancholia emerges as a method for skewing the senses in ways that disrupt the fiction of bounded knowledge production and visualization technologies as enclosure methods, and instead offers a relational approach that is expansive enough to recognize that what we are in relation with, what we become-with, may not be only what is materially present around us. Melancholia is not just a more accurate way of understanding the tonality of environmental calamity, but is also epistemologically and methodologically generative. It encourages us not just to *look around* rather than *look ahead* but in its disorienting effects, makes looking a relational and affective practice of environmental relation, rather than a means of enclosure and appropriation.

2.2 THE RESISTANT TEMPORALITIES OF QUEER MELANCHOLIA

On a foundational level, ecological melancholia is queer precisely because of how it grieves what is deemed normatively ungrievable. But, as I introduced in the introduction, to continue building from the field of queer death studies, we can not only claim that ecological melancholia *is* queer, but we can understand this queer as active rather than solely descriptive. We can examine queer as a lived methodology. Said another way, we can ask, what exactly does *queer* do to grief that results in a “norm critical resignification” (Lykke 2022, 41) akin to melancholia? And how does this queer reading of grief that resists pathologization make the phenomenon more generative for anti-capitalist environmental movements?

Whereas capitalist logics would offer an understanding of grief as a process to be engaged with in a normative timeframe, grief from the perspective of queer death studies includes an “ontological openness and existential uncertainty” (MacCormack et al. 2021, 583) that chrononormative futurity cannot allow. Melancholia, as I demonstrated above, further pushes the possibilities of this “ontological openness” to apply to sensorial methods of relationality.

In her 2022 book, *Vibrant Death*, Nina Lykke puts forward a theory of “excessive mourning” (Lykke 2022, 39) as a resistant form of queer relationality, which looks far more like activist melancholia against the constricting regime of capitalist time than medicalized grief. Although dealing primarily with the grief surrounding the death of her life partner, this chapter is still instructive regarding how a queer reading of (ecological) grief leads to an (ecological) melancholia with resistant political potential. Lykke argues that her grief experience, her desire to “*immerse myself in an eternally extended instant of mourning*” (Lykke 2022, 41, emphasis in original) occupying mourning “beyond acceptable time limits” exists as a queering of acceptable

grief time, resulting in a temporality which “refuses futurity” (Lykke 2022, 43). Remaining immersed in the mourning process as a mechanism for resisting “a chrononormative time scheme, and its requirements regarding a quick and happy ‘return’ to productive life” (Lykke 2022, 43) demonstrates a refusal of capitalist time’s prioritization of progress and productivity.

Instead, by choosing to “interact excessively with a ghostly past” (Lykke 2022, 44) Lykke affirms that suspending herself in grief is epistemologically generative, as it generates queer forms of recognition and relation that, “chrononormative norms” would take as signs of “insanity and/or anachronistic superstition” (Lykke 2022, 44). What is crucial here for my argument is that Lykke’s occupation of grief as a method of relation rejects the assumption that the dead subject “vanishes with the final exhalation” (Lykke 2022, 45), summarily dismissing the idea that looking to a bounded past is the only possible site of connection with loss (Lykke 2022, 45). Through seeing excessive grief as a persistent continuation of her partner's presence in her life, Lykke connects to the “beloved outside of chrononormative time” (Lykke 2022, 45). The queering of grief time that Lykke offers is pertinent in the case of ecological grief, because the phenomenon needs a re-formulation to account for the fact that this *staying* is not limited to the griever. What I mean is, the materiality of environments doesn’t necessarily nor easily disappear when they are degraded; we often remain living within environments that we mourn, in their deathly, disabled or different expressions. And therefore, the affective phenomenon labeled ecological grief is productively reformulated by queer readings that welcome these interactions rather than pathologize them, and offer theorizations of grief that explicitly engage in alternative temporalities and modes of relation. This way, the phenomenon does not function just as a mechanism for processing through loss, as if with this loss comes disappearance. Instead, we can understand the staying of melancholic disposition, or the queering of grief time, as a pathway

towards relating to environments, as they too, stubbornly stay looking (not only looking) at us. That is, ecological melancholia offers a method to answer one of the questions I posed in chapter one, namely how to stay with the dead when “the dead refuse to stay silent” (Shildrick 2020, 182). This refused silence of course, is not just auditory, but troublingly indiscreet.

As a child, my family drove past the burnt pine barrens on the way to the beach. Each year as we passed I was filled with a sadness I could not name nor understand. I watched small new trees poke their fingers through the surface of the sandy soil, coming up to stand next to the ashy, black tipped corpses of the burnt previous generation. Eventually the spry green shoots overpowered the black ashy bodies; I remembered.

There was an oak tree on the corner of the block I grew up on, across from my brother and sister’s bus stop. My grandpa was in charge of me most days, but he was blind so we could not easily go so far. He brought me to the tree every day. He stood on one side, I stood on the other and we reached our arms around the trunk, hugging its base while searching for each other’s finger tips. He would tell me that one day I would be big enough that we would find each other easily, joining hands in a full hug around its thick trunk. Grandpa died and the tree was cut down. You see, it grew so big it began to disrupt the easy flat surface of the sidewalk that attempted to cement in its roots. It is still there, as a ground down stump and a cracked sidewalk; I remember.

The superfund site on Union Boulevard in Bay Shore, New York is a wasteland, poisoned ground, fenced in, shut down. Dead. But that does not mean I did not walk past its tall fences, peering through the holes. The toxic soil on one side of the fence can not be bounded from the dirt I stood on right outside its borders, as I was looking in. Its designation of dead does not eliminate its presence, nor did it protect me from the toxicity haunting my small child's body. How could I pretend that whatever poison that leached enough to warrant the designation did not also pervade the boundaries of my skin, as I walked past, probably chewing bazooka bubble gum, or drinking a blue slurpee. I drive past now when I visit my parents. I look down at my hands and wonder how they hold this wasteland. I remember.

We need a type of grief that can attend to the fact that we live amongst the ecologically dead. The chrononormative notion that you can only reconnect with the dead through remembrance of the past is defeated by the fact that we remain surrounded by “dead” ecosystems in the present, but melancholia accounts for this. Whether chrononormative time would like it or not, we cannot pretend that ecological death results in ecological disappearance. Lykke’s persistent occupation of a grieving state outside of chrononormative timeframes can be recognized as a move towards melancholia, but perhaps without its attendant historical pathologization. By occupying mourning, instead of processing through grief in the relentless pursuit of normative ideals of health and productivity, Lykke demonstrates that queer grief resists capitalist logics and the ability for capitalist time to continue forward uninterrupted. Although I

figure the chrononormatively resistant occupation of grief that Lykke puts forth as queer grief to be similar to melancholia, there exists a crucial difference. Melancholia, as an individual experience within the psychoanalytic tradition cannot be readily instrumentalized or politicized. Queer death studies offers a breadth of possibilities for alternative temporal experiences within grief and thus builds from the foundation of melancholia, but extends the singular towards a position that can be theorized from for how it may exist as a broader political standpoint against the chrononormativity of grief. With an understanding of the interaction between the unruly temporalities of queer grief and its relationship to melancholia, we can return to the ecologically melancholic position to see how it opens new lines of flight for environmentalism in times of rolling late capitalist crises.

2.2.1 ENVIRONMENTALISM AGAINST THE FUTURE

Much mainstream environmentally conscious discourse is focused on futurity. This is understandable and is evidenced perhaps most clearly by sustainability movements that are focused on keeping the earth intact, so that future generations can live in ways not dissimilar to their parents. I locate a failure within the concept of sustainability precisely in this relationship to futurity, as it is generated from and reproduces heteronormative reproductive futurism (Kverndokk 2020, 147). Sustainability narratives rely on adherence to a normative temporality crafted through the generational cycle of an assumed nuclear and reproductive family unit. Temporally speaking, this means that sustainability movements do nothing to challenge the construction of the future as a site of mastery, and in fact, participating in environmentalism so as to ensure that your children can continue to live as you do is a futurism that “reproduces social norms by projecting them onto the future” (Kverndokk 2020, 147). The discursive construction

of the future that is developed around “our children’s fate” (Kverndokk 2020, 150) is one where these children’s fate, if sustainable ways of life are not adopted, is “depicted as a totally devastated and chaotic world” (Kverndokk 2020, 152). But this apocalypse plot is a common reproduction of the promise/ruin binary as this plot also always includes an alternative “formulated as either sustainability or as a progress narrative about technological development that will solve the climate crisis and facilitate further economic growth” (Kverndokk 2020, 152). Rather than facing the precarity of an unknown future, sustainability movements do not disrupt the normative “narrative model for how life is expected to be” (Kverndokk 2020, 149), and instead, extend these on to the future, advocating for a future that remains predictable, rather than ruptured, disturbed or influenced by the past.

Sustainability is an environmentalism that is invested in normative futurity and the “reestablishment of narrative balance, enabling life to continue as planned” (Kverndokk 2020, 152). These movements tend to offer a replication of the promise and ruin binary, in the form of apocalypse or victory. That is, sustainability movements offer a narrative that the environment is worth fighting for, so as to preserve the way of life (certain members) of future generations. This does not disrupt humans' dialectic relationship to the earth, nor our presumed supremacy over more-than-human others. In fact, it calls for urgency so that normative ways of life can continue, without fundamental change.

Environmentalism structured around futurity, whether this is a positive futurity of technological *victory* over ecological disaster, or *apocalypse* visions of mass death within ecological disaster, still uphold capitalist temporal logics by remaining contained within the false binary of promise/ruin. An environmental movement interested in ecological melancholia rejects the future as it is currently constructed, and is therefore better equipped to imagine “life without

the promise of stability” (Tsing 2015, 2). Life without the promise of stability necessitates thinking imaginatively about strategies for collaborative survival, strategies which can only be imagined when we become detached from a future of human progression (yes, even progression over the challenges of climate change). The point of forming an environmentalism detached from the future is not to ignore the urgency of the problem at hand, but to become aware as to how the future is itself a preconceived construction, and thus narratives of normative futurity recreate exploitative relations between humans and more-than-human ecological others, rather than challenging this relationship.

Ecological melancholia on the other hand, breaks the promise/ruination binary and rather than upholding this capitalist cycle asks for a committed staying-with, advocating for the environmentalist not to fall into easy fictions of human mastery or unavoidable environmental damnation but instead commit to learning how to “become-with the dead and the extinct” (Haraway, 2015, 161). It is time to imagine an environmental movement that instead of constantly building better futures or mourning an unsalvageable world recognizes that we have much to learn from the “unruly temporalities” of “haunted landscapes” (Tsing et al 2017, G8). While I argue against the future as it is currently constructed, this is not a nihilistic argument that all attempts to create a liveable world in the face of climate catastrophe are futile. Arguing against the future is not giving in to apocalypse narratives, it is saying that the future itself is already constructed as an entity of continuation, a coherent and unruptured form. What the unruly temporalities of ruins may demonstrate is that collaborative survival depends on life emerging in ways that are unrecognizable to the progressive futurity that is presently afforded as the only option, and that shapes the way that we see, and interact with the present as it materially surrounds us.

As opposed to an environmentalism that unquestioningly upholds dominant futurity, we can follow Sandilands' proposition, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, that ecological melancholia offers an alternative framework for environmental activism which resists the continuation of a linear, unruptured and future oriented temporality. In her 2010 chapter, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies" Sandilands begins by engaging with Richard Anderson's 2001 claim that "At the heart of the modern age is a core of grief..." born from witnessing "ongoing deforestation... pollution... and the mass extinction of species" (Anderson 2001). She departs from the "core of grief" to contend that (Sandilands 2010, 332)

...that "core" is more accurately conceived as a condition of *melancholia*, a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically "ungrievable" within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief

For Sandilands, the difference between a core of grief and a core of melancholia is crucial and implications for ethical and activist responsibility abound. She is demonstrating that because the environment, the "deforestation" and "mass extinction" that Anderson is grieving is "ungrievable" within normative society, that experiencing grief for these things is melancholic for not only is it unrecognized, but it is suffered as a consequence of a loss of "a more ideal kind" (Sandilands 2010, 335) where what has been lost cannot be clearly delineated. Anderson's argument is that we must "face our fear and our pain, and to go through the *process* of grieving..." (Anderson 2001, emphasis mine) whereas Sandilands contends that melancholia offers no process, no way out, but instead, as quoted in the introduction to this chapter, is a "potentially politicized way of preserving that object in the midst of a culture that fails to recognize its significance" (Sandilands 2010, 333). Although the focus of Sandilands' chapter is to use the concept of melancholia to illustrate the paradox of ecological tourism, her

understanding of ecological melancholia is informative, and I am interested in staying with the affect. For Sandilands, this ecological melancholia is “a holding-on to loss in defiance of bourgeois (and capitalist) imperatives to forget, move on, transfer attention to a new relationship/commodity” (Sandilands 2010, 354). Here, a melancholic disposition is a rejection of the designation of certain more-than-human lives as ungrievable *and* as this rejection emerges through the “holding-on” (Sandilands 2010, 354) of what is lost in active refusal of capitalist imperatives to forget, it disrupts the capability for capitalist time to continue uninterrupted. It is the persistent relationality of “holding-on” rather than transferring attention to new commodities that disrupts the future oriented temporalities which structure grief, as well as mainstream approaches to understanding environmental disaster. Here we have the inseparable relationship between relationality and temporality. Queer relationality, a holding on to ungrievable objects, creates queer temporalities; a roadblock in the straightforward continuation of capitalist time. The queer temporality of ecological melancholia opens a line of flight for environmental movements to function outside of the constraints of chrononormative binaries or attachments to knowable futures.

Shifting from ecological grief to ecological melancholia provides a foundation for a re-imagining of more-than-human relations in times of escalating environmental crises which both de-centers the human standpoint and disturbs capitalist temporalities, which encourage a consumptive relationship to the ecological world, while avoiding the romanticized, and nostalgic tendencies of ecological grief. Although in traditional readings, the melancholic is pathologized, as I have hoped to show, there are ways to understand melancholia that not only reject the pathologizing approach used to attend to ecological grief, but present an alternative framework for experiencing ecological grief which resists capitalist progress narratives and gesture towards

alternative frameworks for environmental activism. In other words, ecological melancholia provides a way for imagining how to live with dead and dying ecosystems that demands ethical and political responses, instead of overcoming their loss, and accepting this loss as a condition of capitalist modernity.

2.2.2 WRITING THROUGH AND THINKING WITH ECOLOGICALLY MELANCHOLIC METHODS

As I have worked through in this chapter, Tsing advocates for a form of environmental interaction that is generated through looking around, which I extend through a melancholic lens towards a standpoint of playing within the ruins constructed through narratives of progress. Sandilands sees ecological melancholia as a queer subject position which does the similar work of interrupting the logics of consumption and substitution that are upheld in chrononormative grief. My exploration of melancholy is more than theoretical, as I have remained interested as to how the affect may be used to develop methods for living in times of ecological destruction that does not abandon what is cast as dead, and therefore provides a generative ground for reimagining environmentalism outside of the singular normative futurity offered by sustainability narratives. This leads me to wondering how a melancholic method, one that looks around rather than looks ahead, can emerge in writing, a melancholic method of inquiry and knowledge generation.

Returning to the field of queer death studies, Nina Lykke offers a hypothesis that one is more equipped to face the “existential uncertainty” (MacCormack et al. 2021, 583) of living within grief, by not searching for clear answers but patiently attuning oneself to transformations, experiences, sensations and interactions, that is, the *relational* elements of grief, rather than its

prescriptive processes. This method is useful to my discussion of ecological death and grief, specifically because it presents a methodological entry point to accompany a theoretical re-imagining of grief outside of the bounds of normatively constructed humanism. She identifies “creative writing as a method of inquiry” (Lykke 2022, 200) as that which allows for “the experimental unfolding of a poetic and narrative form of knowledge-seeking” (Lykke 2022, 200). These experimental methods are needed if one is to queerly re-ontologize death, as Lykke aims to do, because it does not rely on “pre-prepared models” (Lykke 2022, 200). That is, Lykke’s commitment to queerly re-imagining the grieving process as something which (differently) elongates and materializes connections with the dead, necessarily calls for a queer method of inquiry that does not remain attached to locating final, provable answers.

I understand Lykke’s insistence on creative writing methodologies for exploring grief in a way that prioritizes undoing humanist subject positions and blurring boundaries as especially ripe for use in an exploration of the affect and implications of ecological melancholia. Deflating humanist subject positions through poetic blurring allows Lykke to see the grief she is experiencing as part of a web of larger “entanglements which are shared between humans and many different kinds of non-human critters” (Lykke 2022, 205) which then allows her to relate, through grief, to other grief-worthy but normatively ungrievable death experiences, such as “algal death due to oxygen depletion caused by water pollution” (Lykke 2022, 207). Lykke’s non-normative methods for inquiries and explorations into grief, which relentlessly attempt not to fall back on an easy centering of the human experience, are not only queer but ecologically relevant.

In the coming chapter, I will attempt to mobilize these creative methods, turning to the site of boglands. I believe that through thick descriptions and staying with the bog, this landscape

may enable us to think through the richness that unfolds when ecological grief is reconfigured towards ecological melancholia. It may also help illuminate the alternative and imaginative lifeways that are opened through the bogginess of the relational melancholic subject. Bogs may be a potent more-than-human starting point from which to theorize and think through the “unruly temporalities” (Tsing et al. 2017, G8) of ecological melancholia, and may be helpful to theorize a “different kind of livability” (Tsing et al. 2017, G9) generated from remaining with, rather than overcoming loss. The ecological richness of bogs is easily overlooked when vision is structured by chrononormative frameworks of progress and development. Bogs demand a method of careful, slow curiosity, as they resist visual signifiers of progress and narratives of capitalism and futurity. They present a world that emerges through relationality and is rich with non-discrete sensuousness, which also provides a case study to imagine what *looking around* through melancholy may actually uncover.

To approach the bog as artistic and scholarly collaborator is part of my commitment in this project to not only advocate for a displacement of humanist logics that construct normative grief practices, but to try to displace humanism in my own approach to working through the queerness of ecological melancholia. It is part of my queer attempt to “uproot our masterful subjectivities” (Singh 2017, 170) instead choosing to dwell “within our devastated landscapes alongside other dynamic agencies that are making up the future with us” (Singh 2017, 170). If we cannot avoid the ongoingness of ecological death and destruction, we must instead turn to how we make the future already with what is dead, dying, degraded. To learn how to do this in a way that foregrounds the ethical implications of ecological melancholia demands that I look to an ecosystem that has much to teach about making futures out of what is deemed dead.

Chapter 3: ECOLOGICAL MELANCHOLIA AND MELANCHOLY ECOLOGIES, OR: A SUBMERSION INTO THE BOG

Exploring ecological melancholia while remaining true to my commitments to queer methodologies encourages me to *look around* for where melancholy exists on an ecological scale, and to become attentive to what emerges from this standpoint. Foregrounding potentiality rather than pathologization, I am drawn to case studies where ecologies already exist in defiance of binary distinctions that shape chrononormative temporalities – those between life/death, past/present or promise/ruin – as it is these ecologies that may also help us to begin to imagine alternative futurities. Here, the bog emerges as a potent more-than-human knowledge creation site, with specific utility for thinking about the relational implications of an ecologically melancholic disposition. I will explore ecological, temporal and cultural aspects of bogs in an effort to learn from the bog about chrononormative resistance arising via melancholic modes of being. In this chapter I will explore these wetlands, to learn *from* bogs, not just about bogs. This exercise, I hope, will present ecologically situated means for imagining an environmental activism that harnesses the political force of melancholia and disrupts narratives of progress.

3.1 SINKING; MEETING THE BOG



Figure 1: The surface of Clara Bog in Co. Offaly, Ireland. Screenshot at 8:09 from “Peatland Legacy (Saving Ireland’s Peatlands)” EE17 EP4, March 09 2019.

Looking at this image¹⁴ of a bog my mind sways and I lose a sense of scale. I understand that I am looking at a nonuniform surface of grasses, its organic border shapes suggesting undulation. What supports these grasses is unclear and instead murky liquid fills in the cracks

¹⁴ It is significant that I am using a photograph to introduce us to the bog rather than smearing its mud on the pages or bringing notes from the field. Photography is not a neutral medium of representation. It too, is a technology of enclosure, and working from a representation of the bog rather than a bog itself is another act that, on its surface, may contradict the relational approach that I am arguing for, by offering it as something that *can* be represented in this form. It could be argued that the very bogginess of the bog is rendered ruin by its representation. (Yet, throughout my writing process, I experienced several flairs of a chronic condition which limits my mobility. Venturing to the bogland was beyond my capability. I too, was enclosed in a time and space I could not easily escape.) Yet, I see another possible interpretation of the relationship between the bog and the photograph. For Barthes, as explored in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph is always “funereal” (Barthes 1980, 6). Although it captures what has been forever lost, the ability to return again and again to the photo makes it so that viewers are able to, to continue my argument, remain with what has been “ruined” (through environmental degradation or through the very act of representation), by engaging with the past in the present. The photograph, on an initial level, may wrongly stabilize the entity of the bog, but on another level, the photograph allows a method of analysis that materially brings the past into the present, by continuous engagement with what is lost (in the case of a photo, what is a singular and unrepeatable moment in time). Representation is both what ruins, and allows continual, melancholic engagement. This allows us to play with the bog, as it is “ruined” through its own representation as a photograph. By bringing an unrepeatable moment into the present, the photograph allows me to practice melancholic looking that is a remaining with. Herein the imperfection of the medium does not allow viewers to forget the ongoingness of death. It reminds us of the continuation of the past as that which reappears to rupture the present.

where I'd wish for the easy fiction of stable ground. When I sit with the image, I yearn to enter it and am barred. With no trees or larger plants for comparison, I cannot understand the scope of what I am seeing, I am left boggy; disoriented. Am I staring at grasses at all, or microscopic visions of mosses extending their fingers, branching out towards one another? Am I viewing from a distance farther than I originally imagined? I find myself falling into the trap made in the space where visual indeterminacy meets a desire for easy categories. I am aware I am searching for transparency where there is none to be found. The ambiguous nature of the bog encourages wonder; maybe the grasses are in fact behemoths, maybe I could slip my body right through. Maybe I could disappear into the mud under a tangled canopy of sedges, taking my place in a lineage of bodies preserved long after death; cradled by the time defying anaerobic grasp of the bog.

From afar, a bog can seem like an expanse of open or *empty* land that stretches to the boundaries of vision. Without large trees or dazzling mountains to signify the landscape as *landscape*, bogs demand an alternative approach. The alternative approach is not just a slower method of attentive viewing that results in the emergence of boundaries, but acceptance that with a slower look, the bog defies boundaries on all scales, including the boundaries imposed by the photograph that I use to gain proximity to the bog itself. But seeing the photograph through the bog reminds me it is a melancholic technology as well, suspending time and allowing each look to reanimate the past, bringing it into the present through submersive attention.

The bog is a body that emerges only through relation, and thus requires creative modes of recognition that do not impose myths of boundedness. Therefore, I aim to use a synesthetic sensorial approach revealed by melancholy in order to experience the photo as an instance of “visually fingering” the bog through a “haptic-optic” (Haraway 2008, 6) touch which begets a

multi-sensory and queer response to the entity, rather than simply accepting the photograph as a static viewing experience that reveals a stable truth. Said another way, in order to do justice to the bog, we must approach it with methods for understanding that reject the premise that understanding comes with a “requirement for transparency” (Glissant, 1990, 190). There is no transparency to be found within the bog. Imposing transparency as a requirement for understanding the bog would be an epistemic act of violence against the bog that defeats the ability to understand it as it is. This method offers only a reduction, where understanding reproduces Western hegemonic modes of relation to environments that turn understanding into “a gesture of enclosure if not appropriation” (Glissant 1990, 192). A belief that understanding something requires it to become transparent and graspable not only denies the fact that the bog emerges only through complex and ongoing relations, but also reproduces logics that shape extractive relations to lands, through understanding them as static resources. It reduces complexity, in order to stabilize and enclose (even if epistemologically) that which is irreducible, complex and ongoing, in order to present a stable vision crafted for utilization. Alternatively, I want the bog’s methods for living to inform my method of understanding, and aim instead to see the bog as “irreducible” (Glissant 1990, 190). This requires not only accepting, but reveling in, sensuously approaching, and learning from its opacity, prompting students of the bog to “move towards entanglement” (Glissant 1990, 191) as a method of understanding. Seeing the bog for its entanglement, or understanding it synesthetically invites us to submerge into the bog, rather than to reduce it into something that fits within preexisting categories. Bogs defy the easy imposition of distinctness, and I believe that it is this defiance that can provide a foundation for imagining outside of bounded and binaristic categorizations that overly characterize ecological imaginaries in times of environmental crises and ongoing ecological destruction.

When I return to the photo, allowing the sheen of daylight reflecting off the moist edges of the grasses to inform my looking, I come to recognize that wet cannot be extricated from dry. These edges are not edges at all, but sites of emergence, places for the bog to grow both outwards and upwards in a creeping crawl. At first glance the bog is expansive and indecipherable – grasses and mud in organic configurations stretch as far as you can see, collapsing pattern and color. Upon closer look the entanglement is repeated on the smallest of scales. Nothing really becomes clear. Clarity is not the bog’s purpose. Perhaps this defiance of boundaries can help us to understand the possibility for life outside the binary of promise and ruin, life that exists not through opposition to death, but in co-constitution with the unavoidable presence of the dead. Perhaps learning to recognize the bog as an emergent body, rather than a stable entity pushes us to remember that “The partners do not precede the meeting” and so rather than the meeting of discreet parts, the bog *is* “a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters” (Haraway 2008, 4). To think the bog through relation provides a methodology for recognizing an alternative to binary temporal organizations. The bog not only exposes the fictional and cyclical narrative of promise and ruin, but already lives otherwise. In its undulating non-boundaries, we see not only its own constitution via dynamic relationality, that is, its own materialization via a “becoming-with” (Haraway 2008, 4) of ecological forces, but we can recognize that as enmeshed and submerged viewers, we too engage in this becoming. We can see in the bog a method for multispecies “generative flourishing” that is the direct result of becoming-with “the dead and the extinct” (Haraway 2015, 160-161). I will return to the role of the dead in the ecological health of the bog in a coming subsection.

Surrounding the small archipelago perimetered with rust tipped grasses is an opaque brown-green water lacking clarity of surface or substance. The water is not *water* in the easy

sense of the word and it is unclear whether it is dotted with bubbles or blemishes. Something about it is thicker. This sludge-water, like the bog itself, exists in the in-between, not water, not mud. I am again reminded that this is not a site that will accept clear demarcations. In some parts this sludge breaks the liquid surface, and I wonder if I am witnessing the slow emergence of more uneasy ground rising from the depth. Maybe these patches of slop-surface will soon hold just enough soil for horsetail or bulrush to root (Lyons and Jordan, 1989). I cannot touch this bubbling sludge but I imagine it feels like algae or fish eggs slipping through fingers – the way that your eyes tell you to grab it, but upon contact, your hand senses there is nothing to hold on to, only texture to pass through. Mush, mud, sog, muck: textures that provide much sensuousness, but no stability. The grasses that make up the “land” of this image – if we are to call it such– depend on this mixture, this muddy mucky sludge, this web of dead and living organic material making life in the emerging shallows.

On its surface, this is an image of the bog that I attempt to submerge myself into. But via this submersion, I come to realize that I am not simply using a photograph to understand the bog, but that the bog generatively disturbs the photograph. Applying a boggy methodology on to the photograph, allows us to see what happens all *around* and transforms the photo into a “haptic-optic” (Haraway 2008, 6) experience, which demands a different type of engagement. So although I first read movement in this photo by looking at the grasses caught mid-bend in the wind, movement exceeds what is able to be represented in the photograph. If I took a step on this bog, its surface would give in to my foot, and it would slowly sink in; the feeling of pressing my thumb into overripe fig flesh. Yet, in most places, it would support my weight. And if we were visiting the bog in pairs, and you jumped up and down a few meters away from me, I would feel your movement echo in waves carried by the liquid-ground, reverberating delicately but clearly

underneath my feet. The ability to feel movement as it is transmitted through the surface of the bog has been labeled “quaking” (Kimmerer 2021, 111). Bogs move as they grow, organic matter rising, sphagnum moss spreading, but they also move, as if to remind you of their presence and participation. They move in a transmittance of disturbance, gesturing towards their vulnerability. Movement is made possible by living in the disturbed space, the gaps left by an imposed slash between land/water – revealing yet another distinction that bogs live in defiance of: static/dynamic.

Historically, bogs are cast off as devoid and muckish wastelands (Emory 2021), perhaps because they defy boundaries that are designed so as to help to quickly identify utility. Without an alternative method of recognition, the bog elicits fear for its lack of clarity, or disposability for its lack of visually apparent resources. With eyes trained for utility, so as to create resources for the project of capitalist futures, the bog will remain with its dominant associations. And though these associations overly determine approaches to bogs that tend to result in their misuse, the bog deserves an approach that can recognize it as an agential and relational body that reacts to stimuli. The bog is not a bounded entity. The relations between various elements and species is not a characteristic of the bog, it *is* the bog.

In allowing the bog to disturb myths of boundedness, we can open our senses to the blurriness that bogs generate and use it as a method for approaching non-stable futures, ones that will also exist outside of binary fictions. We must approach the bog with an understanding of how, much like melancholia, it renders its viewers boggy so that “sensing...is not so neat” (Hayward 2010, 582). Bogs invite us to welcome the blur. And so I can say, synesthetically speaking, this is also a photo that smells. The scent is brackish, ringing slightly of the ocean; soaked, but not salty. It is a dark smell, something like the depths of a well used closet. It smells

of wetness left to linger and extend slowly in many directions. An old dog in the rain. Sweaty bodies in cold air. Traces of sex in unwashed sheets. Old and wet but bodily and erotic, the smell and the bubbling ground beneath your feet demand a different type of flow. Look too long and you too are beckoned to become slippery, to become slimy, to be curious as to the sponging squeeze of sphagnum around your fingers, to slip, to leak. The scent that emits from this photograph disturbs easy ways of knowing and calls the viewer instead towards submersion. This is a photograph you can sink into rather than analyze, one that you must sink into in order to engage.

Mobilizing the melancholic method of looking that I outlined in chapter two is what allows me to smell this photo. It has a scent that lingers with an uncommon acidity, one that does not support the presence of aerobic bacteria needed for the process of decomposition. Without decay, I begin to think about the material presence of dead matter differently, how the bog depends on the presence of death for the structure of self (Puig de la Bellacasa 2019, 400; Rolston 2000, 596). Without decay the bog does not make clear boundaries between life and death, past nor present (Fredengren 2016, 487). The bog is a time-bending ecology. There are more-than-human temporalities at work in the bog that exist outside and in defiance of the material constraints of the photo (Fredengren 2016, 496). There is something primordial about the bog, as if its ancient landscape is resisting the imposed smoothness of modernity, even the imposed smoothness of the photograph that I use to create proximity with the bog. Through its defiance of wet/dry, land/water, static/dynamic, past/present, alive/dead, the bog invites viewers to imagine outside of clearly demarcated binary distinctions, it invites us to “radically imagine worlds that are possible *because they are already here*” (Tsing et al 2017, G9, emphasis mine).

3.2 MELANCHOLY ECOLOGY

Let's begin by gaining familiarity with bog ecology so as to understand how this commonly misunderstood wetland depends on the ongoing presence of the dead. Disturbing boundaries between alive/dead, past/present, intimacy with bog ecology allows us to see melancholic living methods as they exist in ecologies. Likewise, ecological melancholia as a disruptive and political affect can be expanded and explored through intimacy with the bog. Bogs, often called mires, moors, peatlands or muskegs are found typically in cool, northern climates (Evers 2022). The most common type of bog, the raised bog, emerges over thousands of years at sites where glaciers once tore through land, creating depressions. In landscapes with poor drainage and the right climatic conditions these depressions develop into bogs (Evers 2022). Poor drainage leads to incredibly low levels of aeration in bog water, because if water does not flow, oxygen cannot permeate. Without oxygen, aerobic bacteria does not flourish, halting the possibility of organic decay (Evers 2022). By never arriving at the stage of decay, by resisting this *progress*, the bog preserves the dead within its watery body so that the dead *composes* its watery body. Much like Haraway's conception of compost, the bog not only enacts, but *is* "sympoiesis with the dead" (Haraway 2016, 157) where, for the bog "living-with" dead matter is "the only possible way to live-well" (Haraway 2016, 162). Undecayed dead plant matter is what allows mosses and grasses to grow, creating the boggy surface only because of the structure and support provided by the presence of the dead.

What we recognize as a raised bog forms incredibly slowly over time, through the accumulation of deposited organic matter in a glacier formed lake. (Egli et. al, 2021; Robichaud and Bégin 2009). This organic material is most often in the form of fallen leaves and the remains of plants and mosses growing around the borders and across the surface of the basin (Malmer

and Wallén 1993, 194). In a typical lake, this organic material would decompose over time, filtering through the water to form a silty bottom. But in this case, matter accumulates incredibly slowly, stacking up and staying undigested in the body of the bog (Gearey and Everett 2021; Rolston 2000, 596). With conditions favoring preservation, layer after layer of plant matter rests in the lake basin until the basin itself is composed of these layers of compacted organic material, which comes to be named peat (Moore 1989, 89). As peat accumulates below the visible surface, sphagnum moss creeps over the liquid outer layer, forming a ground that is not quite ground, sphagnum itself being more water than solid matter (“Moss”). As sphagnum dies, some is eventually incorporated into peat, and in this long process, roots of new mosses sprout from the preserved shoots of the dead (Kimmerer 2021, 112-113). In the bog, dead matter doesn’t just co-mingle with the living, but provides the conditions necessary for life to be sustained (Kimmerer 2021, 113). Or, as I suggest, preserving dead matter rather than processing it in the form of decay is an example of a melancholy ecology, where the lost object quite literally “constitutes the self” acting “as an ongoing psychic reminder of the fact of death in the midst of creation” (Sandilands 2010, 333).

To follow Haraway, bogs may serve as a figure to remind us, in times of mass planetary death, how to “stay with the ragged joy of ordinary living and dying” (Haraway 2016, 167), that requires a radical recognition and enactment of sympoetic relations with the dead because without the influence and input of the dead, relations amongst the living are incomplete (Haraway 2016, 157). Rather than assuming that alternative ways of living (the project of non-normative and collaborative multi-species futures in times of mass death) requires “starting over and beginning anew” (Haraway 2016, 150) attentiveness to the indispensable role of the dead in the emergence and life of the bog helps us to imagine ways of liveability that do not fall

into cyclical logics of promise and ruin but “inherit without denial and stay with the trouble of damaged worlds” (Haraway 2016, 150). Whereas we may live in a fiction that imagines easy divisions between past present and future, a temporal organization that will always encourage the renouncing “of the past in an ongoing search for new cathexes” (Sandilands 2010, 340), the bog demonstrates a present liveliness that is literally, and melancholically, “*constituted* by the past” (Sandilands 2010, 340, emphasis in original). The bog can then be understood, not as an example of ecological melancholia, but as an ecology that functions through melancholic methods.

As a landscape that lives only through ongoing relations with the dead, the bog becomes a site that demands an imaginative rethinking of death itself. Re-thinking death itself is a necessary project when we have lost the means to continue the motivational fictional narratives of progress. The bog provides pathways for thinking about continued earthly survival beyond present paradigms. Bogs do not allow the deceptive story that we can “start from scratch” (Haraway 2016, 138) but instead, through their ecological constitution gesture towards a different type of liveability, one that is instructive as we occupy Anthropocene scenes of mass death. Rather than outrunning deathly realities, we may instead learn to “live in the ruins that were still inhabited, with ghosts and with the living too” (Haraway 2016, 138).

Existing as an ecology that disturbs the fiction of a bounded divide between life and death, the bog also demands a rethinking of the utility of grief as it is presently understood. If a bog’s method for dealing with death more closely conformed to what is considered an appropriate grief, a process where what is lost is digested – attended to through mourning or through the process of decay which results in the dissolution of the dead object – the bog would lose its very body, as well as its ability to sequester and hold more carbon dioxide than all the world’s forests (Gewin 2020, 205). The bog reminds us that processing through grief is not the

only way to experience loss. I imagine a bog might ask the question, “who exactly benefits when death is processed, and the dead is abandoned?”

In such a nutrient poor and anaerobic environment, higher classes of vegetation have little chance for survival. But a lower class of plants abound (Kimmerer 2021, 114). Most notably, this includes the sphagnum moss, which despite its designation as a low class of vegetation has an indispensable role as the architect of the bog ecosystem. Sphagnum comprises the spongy surface of the bog, stretching over stagnant water, extending undulating ground through the incorporation of this water into its structure. The water retention abilities of dead sphagnum is what provides surface area and nutrients for new mosses to grow; a cycle of life dependent on intimate co-mingling with the dead (Kimmerer 2021, 114). In the case of sphagnum, the majority of the plant is dead. Only one out of twenty cells are alive, the others do not produce energy, but retain water to provide infrastructure (Kimmerer 2021, 114). Their highest function is provided only after death, when they become the spongy structure that future sphagnum depends upon (Kimmerer 2021, 112-113). Defying, through its ecology, the imposition of past/present, dead/alive, land/water, the bog sits uncomfortably within a future oriented vision that only understands the environment through logics of consumption/substitution, or promise/ruin. For the bog, death is an ongoing presence that ensures the continuation of life.

Defying boundaries disturbs narratives of progress, and can help us learn to see in new ways. Importantly, the bog’s defiance of boundaries is not accomplished through the creation of an alternative set of defining boundaries. That is, defying boundaries can too easily create a structure that ultimately serves to reinforce the existence of pre-existing categories, rather than leading to their dissolution. But in the case of the bog, it does not defy boundaries by offering an

alternative but similarly bounded method for living. Instead, the bog can be understood only through relationality between what are typically seen as bounded categories, revealing their fiction and porous borders. This again brings us towards the recognition of bog's ecology as melancholic, because the bog, quite simply, exists as a body through the ongoing-ness of internalized loss.

The melancholy ecology of the bog does more than just retain and preserve dead organic matter. By resisting decay, bogs also do not release the carbon dioxide emitted in decomposition. So despite being only 3% of the world's land mass, peatlands are the world's best terrestrial carbon sequestration site, even though the wet and acidic conditions do not typically bring forth positive connotations (Gewin 2020, 205; "IUCN Issues Brief"). The bog's defiance of bounded temporal divisions is more than epistemologically generative; it actually makes the bog *more* useful in combatting the effects of man-made climate change. And "amid a groundswell of support around the globe for efforts to plant trees to combat global warming" (Gewin 2020, 206), it becomes evident that trees, which are employed as symbols of sustainable futures, function not because they are the most adept at carbon sequestration, but because planting trees and witnessing their growth is a tidy visual signifier of progress. It is only because of the melancholy ecology of the bog that it can store carbon dioxide for millennia yet it is this same melancholy ecology that makes it unfit as a symbol of mainstream environmentalism.

I do not claim that environmental movements should not fight for reforestation, but that we should think critically as to why the tree functions as a symbol for environmentalism – even as mass tree-planting fails more than it succeeds (Pearce 2022; Jones 2021) – as opposed to the bog. In current constricted viewing practices, the supremacy of the tree as a symbol makes it hard to recognize boggy alternatives. Peat stores more carbon than all the world's forests, but

because it works under the surface, it may not abide by common visual signifiers of progress, so it cannot be recognized for what it does. And when bogs are wrongly seen as devoid or desolate, that is, available for development, the climatic effects are disastrous. Peatland destruction is responsible for 5% of global annual human induced carbon dioxide emissions (TedX, van Dolderen 2021, 5:54), which is more than the aviation and shopping industries together (TedX, van Dolderen 2021, 6:00). Whereas undamaged peatlands can sequester carbon “at a rate of 30-70 tonnes of carbon per km² per year” (Bain et. al 2011, 25).

When we look with eyes attuned for progress, the bog can look like a site of death, and this death can look like an ending. When looking differently – *around* – a life outside of the binary distinctions of promise and ruin emerges, and melancholy ecology is recognized. This ecology reminds us that there is much to be generated from resisting the dualistic system of logical oppositions that formulate chrononormative temporalities and extractive visual practices.

3.2.1 BOG LORE

Beyond ecology, bogs take up a paradoxical place in Western cultural imaginations. They are often repositories for fear and anxiety, as well as the sublime and supernatural (Gladwin 2014, 39). They are given the puzzling designation as both “barren” (Green 2018), devoid of purpose or promise¹⁵ while also being known as otherworldly sites of more-than-human interaction (Meredith 2002). As a landscape, in Irish language and culture the bog is figured as a site that can open “a doorway to another realm (death, the fairy kingdom, the past)” where sensitive people may become “haunted by their own heightened senses and an overwhelming connection... to their environment” (Joyce and Stautnon 2020, 76). Stories abound through

¹⁵ This mis-recognition carries itself into popular language. When overwhelmed we are *bogged* down, caught in the *muck and mire*, lost in the *quagmire*. As I have been writing this chapter, my word processor suggests the change from *bog* to *blog*, as if bog is not a word I would ever willfully use.

England, Ireland and Northern Europe about “bog fairies,” “ghostly presences,” “bog witches” and “elves” (Meredith 2002, 319, 321-323). Encompassing contradiction, bogs are “profoundly ambiguous landscapes” (Meredith 2002, 319) both in their ecology and in the cultural lore attending to them. They are the sites where journeys to the underworld begin, where phosphorescent light, called “will-o’-the-wisps” spontaneously emerge to entice “travelers to their doom”¹⁶ (Meredith 2002, 328). They are sites where across cultures and countries preserved human bodies are found, with uncertainty regarding whether or not they were lost, persecuted or sacrificed to a higher power that was accessible through the mystical mouth of the bog.¹⁷

And yet they are described as “bleak” even by their conservationists, (“Blanket Bog”) and “obsolete” (Boyd 2011). Despite their supernatural connotations they are often figured not as “wild but rather wasted” (Blanchette 2021, 5) or as “wastelands” simply put (Gladwin 2014). Referring to Carl Lineaus, the “father of taxonomy” (Blanchette 2021, 22) Rolston (2000, 584, emphasis mine) says,

Even the father of modern biology hated muskegs, confirming how wetlands are the most *misunderstood* of the landscapes. Typically, we do not dislike land; we do not dislike water. But we dislike land-water, the muddy, mucky places where the land and the water mingle.

¹⁶ “Will-o’-the-wisps” are spontaneous emergences of light, which can look like hovering balls of inexplicable luminescence lingering and suddenly disappearing above the surface of the bog. Although steeped in lore across various cultures and geographies where bogs figure prominently, there is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon. Will-o’-the-wisps are scientifically called *ignis fatuus*, a “spontaneous combustion of peat gas” produced when “pockets of methane and phosphine escape” from the peat (Meredith 2002, 328-330).

¹⁷ There are many examples of human bodies well preserved in bogs, most commonly found in Northern Europe. In 1950, a preserved human corpse was found in a Danish bog that had been there for approximately 2,000 years (Rolston 2000, 587). The body was so well preserved that the facial hair was still intact. Some 2,000 so-called “bog bodies” have been found in European bogs (Rolston 2000, 587). Although much scholarship on bog bodies suggests that they were killed and deposited in bogs as ritual agricultural sacrifices (Kimmerer 2021, 113) (which is interesting considering that historically, without draining, bogs were not suitable for agricultural use) there remains debate on the precise reasons why bogs were chosen for the location of burial, or if the bodies were always sacrificially deposited. (For further reading on bog bodies that exceeds the scope of this chapter, see Van der Sanden 2012; Fredengren 2018; Giles 2006; Kama 2016)

This passage reminds us that the cultural negativity associated with the bog originates not within any inherent characteristics of the bog. Defying hegemonic Western ways of looking, the hatred for and mystery surrounding the bog comes from its defiance of neatly and cleanly bounded organization. In his writings about the Lapland region, which contains many bogs, Linnaeus said, “It would be very desirable to discover some means of eradicating the Bog- moss” (Von Linné 1811, 167, quoted in Blanchette 2021, 22). In fact, Linnaeus ended an expedition early after encountering Lycks bog (known as the Lucky Marsh) because the severity of conditions did not accommodate his method of systematic categorization and naming (Blunt 2001, 47-51). Writing of his travels and the need to turn back, he says, “A priest would not be able to describe hell to be worse than this... I have traipsed through the underworld” (Stenlund 2021). Neither land nor water, this *nor* that, the bog becomes detested or steeped in mythology, not because of its ecological rarity, but because of its lack of adherence to the dominant Western categorizable way of seeing and understanding the world. In a nod to the disruptive power of defying categorizations, Blanchette reminds us, “the man who named almost everything was overcome by a marsh” (Blanchette 2021, 23).

It is precisely this paradoxical nature, the defiance of binary categories, that makes thinking with the bog so generative. At this moment in time, when environmental activism must take on the task of imagining a future without stability, that is a future without progress, we must be attentive to sites of such paradoxes, places that refuse binary distinctions of promise/ruin. It is no coincidence the bog is both the sight of nothingness (Blanchette 2021, 29), the site of communication with gods, witches (Kavanaugh 2007, 792) and the site of passage into the underworld (Kavanaugh 2007, 794). It is no coincidence that the bog is the home of fairies,

devils, both and more (Meredith 2002, 329). Unstable futures contain multitudes, and the possibilities cannot be accounted for within narratives of progress.

There is an eerie supernatural quality about the bog, just as there is something supernatural about ecocide; the “long-now” (Huber 2022, 3) and looming future of planetary scale ecological collapse. I do not mean to imply that all instances of environmental degradation are supernatural, in fact many are quotidian to the point that they go easily ignored. But living within ongoing ecological calamity – even if it has become unremarkable – creates such disjuncture and ambivalence that to try to remain with it as we move towards a future that is unknowable can take on fantastical, if not horrific qualities.

It is not just that the bog can lend valuable insight into the potentiality of ecological melancholia. But the bog may also provide a starting point from which to understand how something can be deemed a wasteland, that is a ruin, while also being the site of such mythology, otherworldliness, complex and entangled life. That is, through its melancholic characteristics and its accompanying mythologies, the bog attends to the fantastical, terrifying dimensions of reckoning with the ecological collapse, without resorting to grief, a process which serves to ultimately naturalize environmental losses. Bogs may have something to demonstrate to environmentalists and activists alike about how to live within the surplus of loss. That is, they may gesture towards, and help us to think through the possibility for alternative methods of liveability, for imaginative temporalities that are generated through collaboration with what is lost, rather than attempts to process and overcome it.

Although unstable grounds and unclear boundaries make bogs epistemologically resistant to progress narratives, nothing is simply resistant or removed from the reaches of capital. Bogs are drained in the name of development (van Roon 2012, 144); they too become scenes of

reinforced planetary conquest. And so although this ecosystem may have much to teach about the necessary project of imagining a future without stability, in ways that capitalist temporal construction cannot attend to, it is not materially resistant to methods of capitalist extraction. Relationality is not resistance, and in fact often serves to reveal the truth of our enmeshed precarity. The bog, for all its categorical defiance and epistemological generativity, is a precarious body. But its epistemic invitation to imagine otherwise remains vitally important. If our methods for imagining stay confined in the binary of progress/ruin, futures can be narrativized only as apocalyptic or naively utopian; wildfires and floods *or* some technological victory to save *mankind* at the last moment. But if we can begin to imagine beyond this binary, by learning from an ecosystem which already lives in defiance of this binary, future visions may also be of collaborative, multispecies survival, emerging from and attending to the eerie vulnerabilities made apparent through relating with death as it already surrounds us. To quote the *Re-Peat Manifesto* (RE-PEAT 2021, bold in original, italics mine) a poetic expression of commitment to the peatlands created by youth climate activists,

...Peatlands embody the potential for worlds to collide... /They are the partnership between... / the underworld, the surface and the sky. / *To be alive and dead/ and the future...* / In thinking through ontologies... / Learn about their interwoven layers of silence and force... / We believe in a process of **re-imagining**... / In the moment of suspending belief... / *While we enter the depths of pain and grief,/ We leave space for the steps of curiosity and /co-existence.*

3.2.2 BOG TIME

The question of time cannot be avoided when approaching the bog. Most of this is because peat “grows” incredibly slowly, at a rate of only a half to two millimeters a year (Lindsay et., al 2014, 3). Some bogs across the UK have layers of peat up to ten meters deep, meaning the bog has been developing layer upon layer for approximately ten thousand years

(Gewin 2020, 205). Because the melancholy ecology of the oxygen-poor environment resists decay, what enters the mouth of the bog remains there, preserved. It is this dimension of the bog that gives “a sense of deep time” (Rolston 2000, 595). When engaging with the bog on its own time, “materialities are revealed that... ‘trouble’ the present with objects and substances that have crossed temporal boundaries” (Fredengren 2016, 488). Bogs trouble the stability of temporal boundaries by bringing materials from the past into the present, by offering evidence that the separation between past and present is but a myth.

Although in much scientific literature on the bog, peat is referred to as *growing* very slowly (Bonn et. al 2016, 40; Clymo 1978, 195), a more apt term may be *accumulating*. This distinction may be small, but important if we are to recognize the ways that bogs disturb capitalist temporalities. Recognizing peat *growth* as peat *accumulation* troubles chrononormative organization which offers a vision of the present as a distinguishable and separate moment from the past. Peat accumulation over times that exceed human scales says something larger about time itself; in the bog we have a more accurate vision of the ways that the past is materially constitutive of the present. Bogs offer a vision of time not as that which passes without a trace, but as that which accumulates (Baucom 2001, 80). Building from Baucom’s fundamental understanding of accumulative time, Stephen Dillon argues, “the past and present are not ontologically discrete categories, but are, rather, complex human constructs. The present is not a quarantined, autonomous thing” (Dillon 2013, 42). The bog beckons its interlocutors to recognize that we are living in a present that cannot be cordoned away from the past, because this present is the accumulation of every leaf that has fallen into the mouth of the bog, every dead cell of sphagnum that crept across stagnant water. Peat is a melancholic substrate. It resists decomposition in a manner analogous to a melancholic resistance to the grieving process, and in

doing so introduces its interlocutors to an alternative temporality. As Rolston (2000, 587, emphasis mine) explains,

Mires bring a deeper experience of time than we often experience...The layers of peat form a sort of time capsule, a history book. One experiences that past lingering in the present. Wetlands reflect processes that are much older, more everlasting, and mightier than our human powers, even if the *fearful power* of the human mind and hand is, today, what most threatens these mires and bogs.

Here, we can see that the bog already lives within a temporality that defies the logic and scale of human (lifespans) or capitalist time. Rolston's choice of describing human power as "fearful" is apt, in that the force of human enclosure and appropriation of wetlands can be read as a fear response to the ways that wetlands disturb stable categories that structure Western ways of knowing. The bog reminds us that relations to the dead need not just be confined to an inaccessible past, but instead that these relationships "unfold within the frame of an ongoing mutuality and embodied relationality" (Hazekemp and Lykke 2022, 34) experienced in the present.

Reading the bog through Lykke's work in *Vibrant Death*, it becomes clear that the bog itself enacts what she frames as a queering of grief, albeit on an ecological scale. It puts into stark relief how unsuited humanist and medicalized frameworks are for attending to the phenomenon of ecological grief, in part because, as the bog shows us, its vitality and ecological health is dependent precisely on retention of the dead. When capitalist visions of futurity defined by progress via mastery see the bog as a wasteland of muck and mud the "fearful powers" (Rolston 2000, 587) of "a chrononormative time scheme" demand a *solution* to wrestle the bog into a more "productive life" (Lykke 2022, 43). Draining the bog for more productive uses has disastrous ecological consequences. What is important here, is that by thinking through

bog-time, we can see that the bog already defeats the humanist progressive fiction that the dead subject “vanishes with the final exhalation” (Lykke 2022, 45) and that time continues onwards, uninterrupted. By materializing only outside of the bounds of chrononormative time, bogs provide generative examples of other forms of livability that exist despite the constrictive and homogenizing clutches of capitalist futurity. The bog may be a site where ecological activists and melancholics alike can begin to imagine alternative paths for environmental movements that “refuse[s] futurity” (Lykke 2022, 43), where this future relies on an abandonment of the past and the fiction of ever more available, non-grievable resources.

What the bog offers is an affirmative reading of the generative possibilities within the defiant temporality of melancholia. These generative possibilities only come to the fore by expanding vision beyond “forward-moving chronological time that is tied to individual human lifetimes” (Lykke 2022, 46). As Tsing reminds us, without the “driving beat” of progress drawing us into its “forward march” like a horse with blinders on, we might begin to notice how other beings, other ecologies are already living “other temporal patterns” (Tsing 2015, 21). If, instead of being ruled by progress, we recognize progress as a quest for mastery that can no longer organize human relations to the more-than-human world, “we might look for what has been ignored...” (Tsing 2015, 21). This is certainly true for the case of the bog, where entangled life and enormous carbon sequestration¹⁸ ability was historically overlooked because it emerged

¹⁸ Although I do not intend to present an argument against carbon sequestration, it is important to understand how even carbon sequestration science does not help us to reimagine ecologically towards a new formulation of human and more-than-human environmental interaction. What I mean is that carbon sequestration science, regardless of its absolute necessity, asks the question of how we can behave in the same ways longer, rather than intervening in this behavior. That is, carbon sequestration presents solutions that do not intervene into the extractive logics which characterize Western environmental relations, they simply search for alternative types of ecological utility. A utility that is not necessarily *removed* as a resource, but is still utilized as such. This logic advocates for ecosystem preservation because it can be used to contribute to the continuance of forward moving time without requiring much disturbance to behavior. That is, carbon sequestration, regardless of its absolute necessity in the current moment, is also a reification of the practices that create the conditions for the problem of climate change to occur. Asking the question of “how do we use land to save ourselves?” is still asking the question, “how do we use the land?” It is not that this question is not important, but that it will always produce a bad answer that does not, to paraphrase Patricia MacCormack, disrupt the dialectic pattern of earth for humans, rather than offering a dialectic of humans for earth

through a melancholy ecology and a temporal pattern that does not adhere to the temporality or dominant visual signifiers of progress.

With eyes attuned to progress, we risk falling back on the traditional Western casting of the bog as a land with no use. In this vision, “wetlands are wastelands” (Rolston 2000, 585). Once understood as wasteland, that is, as already dead, capitalist logics are free to find alternative ways to put this land to good *use*. As Rolston continues, “...in the name of progress, people have been prompted to do something about them [bogs]...ditch them; drain them...put these lands to some higher and drier use” (Rolston 2000, 585). It is the temporality of progress itself which will always result in a misrecognition of the bog. But, recognition of the bog is not just understanding its utility to humans as we seek to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Boglands offer more than this, when approached as epistemologically generative, not just environmentally useful. Bogs beget creative methods of recognition. They ask us to abandon temporal linearity in favor of staying with what has been deemed useless. Staying with what is unrecognizable to most Western eyes; the intermeshment of death and life and the unruly temporalities born from within the tangle.

3.2.3 BOGS AGAINST PROGRESS

Thus far, I have attempted to learn from the melancholy ecology, ambiguous cultural standing and resistant temporality of the bog. With this final case study I will demonstrate what

(MacCormack 2020, 112). Now, we need answers, including the ones that are not fully satisfactory, but we also need imagination. We need to not just think about, or save bogs for their capacity to service humans and elongate the ability for our behavior to continue – they do good work for us, but their good work is also a part of the story of their instrumentalization. The bog provides much in terms of ecosystem services, and a critique could end at an argument that we should all love bogs because they help us to solve carbon issues; it is true, but it does not change the narrative pattern of the story. Beyond carbon sequestration as a service for the future, the bog can also help us to critique how we think about the future and salvation. *About how environmentalism is tasked with saving the planet through instrumentalization, rather than reformulation of relation*. Even the bog’s utility can be examined for how it reveals the conceptual limitations of understanding, when understanding is shaped through the lens of use value.

happens when progress collides with the body of the bog. This story begins in the Flow Country of Northern Scotland. This rolling expanse of peatland is the most extensive stretch of blanket bog¹⁹ in Europe, covering about four thousand square kilometers (“Flow Facts”). To eyes trained for progress and development, this land can look empty; opportunity wasted. Flow country was known locally by the acronym MAMBA, standing for “Miles and Miles (of) Bugger-all” (Gewin 2020, 205).

By the turn of the 20th century, narratives of progress had already swept through the expanses of forest stretching across the British Isles, and because the forests had been developed for agriculture, “the iconic British Woodland was largely a thing of the past” (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”), leaving Great Britain reliant on importing wood to fuel its rapid industrialization. By the 1980’s, in an effort to lessen the dependence on timber imports “the government started using tax breaks to encourage private citizens to fund tree planting efforts around the country” (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”). In order for this homegrown scheme to work, investors needed “*undeveloped, unwanted* land” (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.” emphasis mine). The Flow Country was the perfect location. For most people the bog was unpleasant at best, “a scary place to be avoided” (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”). Seeing the bog as a wasted land that could otherwise turn a profit, locals were convinced by the forestry industry that draining the bog and planting trees instead would bring a new economy to the area, *with very*

¹⁹ Blanket bogs are rain fed bogs, as opposed to the most common type of bog, the raised bog, which was described in the melancholy ecology portion of this chapter. Similar in characteristics, blanket bogs and raised bogs differ based on method of formation. Blanket bogs also form in cool wet climates, but in sites where rainfall exceeds the water lost through evaporation, plant transpiration, or permeation and filtration through the soil (“Blanket Bog”). This leads to a state of “near-constant saturation” characteristic of all bog habitats, but forming over highly acidic bedrock, as opposed to forming over another wetland habitat, such as a lake basin (“Blanket Bog”). Blanket bogs tend to have lower peat depths but can stretch farther across the landscape, whereas raised bogs have deeper peat depths but are typically smaller, as they are contained by the basin, and typically surrounded by grasslands (“What is Blanket Bog?”)

little lost (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”). Bog land was quickly drained, and with eyes attuned to short term profits, non-native quick growing conifers were planted, and the landscape was overrun with a plantation-forest (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”). Not suited for the environment, these trees grew poorly and were riddled with disease, making them not even particularly useful as timber, the reason they were planted (Gewin 2020, 205). Although there was a minority of the community who were advocating on behalf of the bog, the power and promise of profits outweighed and tree planting continued, the dense plantation crowding out native wildlife (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”).

By the time the tax scheme was halted in the mid 1990’s, over 150,000 acres of the Flow Country had been drained and replanted with trees (FitzGerald et al., “For the Love of Peat - 99% Invisible.”). The promises of forestry development overshadowed the rich but unrecognized ecosystem of the bog, and the ecological effects were disastrous. Draining allowed decomposition to begin and put enormous amounts of carbon into the atmosphere that had previously been stored. Drained or otherwise damaged peatlands worldwide emit “at least 2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually...” (Gewin 2020, 205).

Now, Scotland leads the charge for restoration of peatlands, but with 80% of the country’s bogs drained or otherwise degraded (Gewin 2020, 205) bog restoration is neither an easy, nor innocent project. By claiming restoration as non-innocent, I mean to interrogate the motivations behind this restoration; would bogs be a priority for restoration if their utility in the project of human produced carbon sequestration was never revealed? Regardless of the motivation, restoration of this wetland is incredibly difficult. Partially, this is because the bog defies human timescales; the rehabilitation of an ecosystem which took thousands of years to

form cannot be accomplished in a short amount of time. It was in the name of progress and economic development that trees were planted in the hollowed out body of the bog. I argue that this development scheme is able to happen precisely because progress recognizes best the ability for production. Ecosystems that do not readily *produce* resources but instead provide services (or not) are overlooked by a visual logic of *looking ahead* that looks only for what is extractable. The story of the destruction of bogs and peatlands is “proof of our drive to make things fit into a neat conception of productivity and goodness” (Emory 2021). Contextualizing the quest for productivity and goodness is necessary in order to stop naturalizing environmental losses. As the Re-peat collective says, “Claiming something to be nothing in order to exploit it, is not a new technique... This is one of the foundations of the colonial narrative” (Emory 2021). What puts bogs in danger is also their most generative characteristics, if we can learn to recognize them. But when progress recognizes the bog as empty or worthless, there is the permission structure already in place for its uncontested destruction and subsequent abandonment. And as Lykke reminds us, “both narratives, the one of decline and that of progress, are problematic – both obey the rules of temporal linearity and exclude other perspectives” (Hazekemp and Lykke 2022, 33). This is an old tale and one that repeats itself in perpetuity, unless we are able to change what we look for, unless we are able to stop looking towards the future.

Of course, undamaged peat is markedly more valuable than forest-plantations filled with unhealthy trees. But because methods of seeing ecologies are structured by historical logics of enclosure and appropriation, the value of undamaged peat remains largely unrecognizable. But we must remain thinking with the bog, in order to think beyond promise and ruin, even after the bog has been drained. The project of bog development fails not only because the trees are not suited to grow within the ecosystem, but because life emerges in unpredictable ways, even within

ruin. Even the “ruined”, that is, drained bog helps us to think beyond ruin as the end of the story. The power of the bog, drained or not, is not its utility, the recognition of which does not interrupt extractive capitalist logics, but in its invitation to think differently about enmeshed and complex collaborative survival. To stay with the bog means also to resist casting even a drained bog as a ruined landscape, and instead to be attentive to what is revealed when drained. Even drained and damaged beyond *repair* (that is, rehabilitation for continued utility) the bog still demonstrates its relational nature, our intermeshed precarity, and with it the fiction of easy solutions. While complete restoration of drained bogs may not be possible, what is possible is a change in perception.

A method for seeing the bog, becoming curious about its temporalities, about its commitment to relationality that exceeds life/death binaries, will help us to reconfigure – through a bogginess rendered through melancholic skewing of the senses – methods of seeing as a whole. And through this we may begin to imagine alternative methods for multispecies survival in unstable futures (Haraway 2016, 114). True engagement with the bog demands going beyond binary divisions of devoid and abundant, developed or undeveloped, demonstrating that an otherwise already exists. Bogs show that life already emerges through the interdependently precarious relationality that also characterizes conditions of ecological crises. A commitment to stable and dichotomous categorization produces a way of seeing that will always determine exactly what is seen and for what purposes. And thus, many ecosystems, and many possible futures go unexplored, as they cannot conform to these fictional dichotomies. When we look with eyes attuned for progress, we may ask, what does the bog have that we need, and how may we take it? When we look with eyes attuned for progress we may see empty space waiting to be used, instead of a vibrant landscape that has much to teach about living well alongside the dead.

The case of the Scottish Flow Country demonstrates that what is most needed is a change in the method for looking and being with landscapes. Rather than actually making things better, it is time to recognize that narratives of progress function to have us believe that a better future is always ahead; whether or not we can reach it is up for debate.

RETURNING TO THE SCENE OF PROMISE



Figure 2: The surface of Lemanaghan Bog in Co. Offaly, Ireland, after 50 years of drainage and peat harvesting. Screenshot at 13:15 from “Peatland Legacy (Saving Ireland’s Peatlands)” EE17 EP4, March 09 2019.

This is an aerial photo of a bog that has been harvested for peat.²⁰ Where once undulating and indeterminate green brushstrokes flowed, it has been excavated, emptied and hollowed for a *greater* economic purpose. And still, the photo allows students of the bog to retain, revisit and reanimate the drained bog; to carry its image forward as we look around and see the oft-ignored alternative temporalities of this ecology. The bog cannot return in human timescales, and instead we must remain, rather than outrun the debris left from the imposition of a binary where no

²⁰ Peat is a fuel source for many rural communities as well as harvested for gardening (Kearns 1978; Alexander et.al, 2008). Following the long history of peat extraction for fuel is beyond the scope of this chapter.

categorizations should be drawn. These thick brown wounds where earth was once wet and opaque tell of the enchantment lost when things are made clear. The strength of the bog is exactly in its indeterminacy, its unwillingness to be either land or water, alive or dead, past or present. When harvested, drained and taken as a resource, that is – made transparent and *useful* – the bog begins to be recognizable, it fits more easily into images of modernity. If we didn't know better we may believe we are seeing an agricultural field in the off season. Good thing we know better.

When the bog is drained, the scale of enclosure is put into stark relief. Where there was once entanglement that encouraged curiosity, now harvested and abandoned, that which perimeters the bog becomes more notable than the once-bog itself. My eyes immediately begin to travel along the two roads that stretch beyond the frame and meet perpendicularly on the right bottom edge. These two roads meet in a gesture of enclosure that reminds the viewer of the disastrous consequences of vision only attuned to progress, of vision that clamors for clarity. The two roads and the car feel small in the face of tracts of brown interspersed with black tarp, and yet it is these two roads and a car that stand as metaphor for the destructive force of progress. So small in the scope of the expansive once-bog, and yet “fearful power” (Rolston 2000, 587) knows well the possibilities of enclosure. The car and roads not only remind the viewer of what humans can do, but remind us of what we have already done in the quest for clarity. The roads that surround the hollowed out bog draw our attention to the crafting of binaries that create the conditions for naturalized extraction. The roads that chart out a path surrounding what has been *developed* echo the violence that exists in the form of a slash fictionally demarcating a line between promise/ruin, alive/dead. May the bog teach us to see differently.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, I have sought to explore the phenomenon of ecological grief in ways that disturb its present construction, so as to reveal its limitations. I have worked to demonstrate that grief is currently overdetermined by chrononormativity, which forecloses the possibility of ecological grief to be a generative or disruptive affective experience. In my attempt to stay with ecological grief rather than solely point out its theoretical limitations, I proposed using psychoanalysis and queerness as a method to rethink ecological grief towards ecological melancholia. Ecological melancholia disturbs both the temporality of ecological grief, and presents an alternative way to think through the sensorial aspects of relations between humans and the more-than-human world in times of ongoing planetary environmental crises. I then moved on to submerge myself in the bog, in an effort to demonstrate that thinking through the lens of ecological melancholia has generative applications, and can lead us to recognize the ways that certain ecosystems “become-with” the dead in material ways as well as ways that bend time outside of human centered chrononormative regulatory regimes. I propose that we can, and must, learn from the ways that more-than-human ecological worlds already craft futures alongside and with the active participation of the dead, as we humans are tasked with imagining futures in times of escalating ecocide.

With all of this talk of death and destruction, a crucial development in my thought throughout this thesis was generated from the trouble, or perhaps impossibility, of ever defining or being able to represent what *dead* actually is. Throughout this thesis I have referred to ecologies often using the words dead, damaged or degraded. I had to make the uncomfortable choice to travel with the term ‘dead’ so as to make my arguments, but this term is incredibly difficult and opens new strands of thought within my own eco-feminist practices. In the first

chapter, I made the argument that grieving for the environment can often serve to confirm it as dead. But, using the term dead, rather than describing something as such, is another conceptual move that may cement this very deadness. That is, by attempting to represent death, I run the risk of continuing the epistemic violence I am attempting to track within this project. This has raised a question I am not sure how to answer – though I have tried to do so by advocating that we must learn to “become-with” what is dead (and that an ecologically melancholic orientation presents a way to begin this project) – which is, how can we think about environmental destruction and our the planetary condition of ecocide – referred to as the more palatable climate change – without rendering environments dead through the discussion of their death? This is an area for further research opened by the work completed in this project.

There is a lack of satisfactory ways for understanding or representing death, and perhaps, what I have learned most in this project is that, it is precisely the struggle to speak about something un-representable that can produce generative discourse, but this discourse doesn't necessarily solve the problem. What I mean is, I want to stay committed to thinking with ecological death, not despite of, but alongside its certain and particular untranslatability. It is impossible to generate a stable understanding of what death is, and in the case of anthropogenic ecocide taking place on a planetary, though highly differentiated scale, it is difficult, though even more necessary to approach the topic with openness, curiosity and without predetermined modes of understanding. Part of what I have tried to do in this project is to re-open the assumptions attached to terms like “dead” and the representations of death and the dead. Part of the certainty that comes with the common sense casting of certain ecologies or environments as dead is the violence I ultimately want to unrest, because it may allow for a recognition that death itself is lively, complicated and dynamic. Of course, this is troubling because I do not mean the

recognition of vibrancy within dead or damaged ecosystems to provide a permission structure to not be concerned with their destruction. But definitions of death render things static. I worry that defining something as dead is a defense mechanism that protects ourselves from engaging with the complexities of death that, as I have hoped to show, do not result in easy disappearance. I have tried to work around this epistemologically sticky situation by re-imagining forms of grief that allow griever to remain with what has been cast as dead, but nonetheless, the (im)possibility to define, or represent death, especially in the case of complex ecologies is something I have tarried with throughout this thesis and is an area of thought I would like to continue to engage in.

Although there are many other areas of thought and desires for future research that have been uncovered throughout my writing process, the other one I would like to highlight in this conclusion is my interest in ecological ghosts. Although this project was concerned primarily with disrupting the temporal constrictions placed on grief, and imagining alternative methods for experiencing the affect, I envisioned an alternative companion to this project that was an exploration of what exactly is brought into the present through ecological grief. As I was writing this project, I was (and remain) enormously compelled by the concept of an ecological ghost.

Ecological ghosts are most commonly figured as the “spectral hauntings of more-than-human loss” (Cunsolo and Landman 2017, 3). That is, when we speak of ecological ghosts, it is easy to think of extinction; plants and animals that are no longer here because of human destruction. But I think ecological grief brings forth ecological ghosts beyond these material borders. My interest in ecological ghosts comes from a desire to explore the ways that early-modern scientific philosophy has come to haunt climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. Said another way, are the “spectral haunting(s) of more-than-human-loss” (Cunsolo

and Landman 2017, 3) that we come into relation with through ecological grief able to represent more than damaged ecosystems and their eliminated more-than-human inhabitants? Can the “spectral haunting” also represent the ontological seeds of destruction that conceive of nature as always already dead – the epistemic foundation of Western relations to the natural world formulated through early-modern scientific philosophy and the advent of the mechanistic world view (Merchant 1980)? Can these ecological ghosts actually *help* to make clear how the violent epistemic foundations linger, destructively, even in good faith approaches to climate crises? And how should we face the ghosts of extractive, humanist, gendered and racial logics, as they continually “rupture the present” (Sharpe 2016, 9) in the form of current approaches to climate change mitigation and ongoing climate colonialism?

I am interested in the epistemic and ontological ghosts called forth through ecological grief, not solely the haunting presence of ghosts born from untimely and unjust extinction. The history of environmental philosophy haunts our approach to climate change in the present and this too is an ecological ghost. I would like to write a companion project to this one that argues that climate grief reveals the haunting specter of gendered, extractivist, racialized and colonial environmental philosophy and how its ghostly presence still influences climate change mitigation and adaptation science. This would not be an argument against scientific attempts to combat climate crises. But it would be a critical invitation to recognize how ecological grief may be a way to illuminate where and how the historic hierarchical logics that result in environmental enclosure, appropriation and extraction haunt contemporary approaches to combat climate change, repeating and extending the logics that resulted in said ecocide.

RITUALS

Beyond focusing on the areas for further research that I could not attend to in this thesis, I would like to end by returning to methodologies. Because I wanted this project to exist as more than an exercise in pointing out the shortcomings of present conceptualizations of ecological grief, returning to methods as a way to end feels fitting. As I was in the depth of the writing process, I became fixated on my own ritualistic patterns and methods for remaining within embodied yet unstable ecological grief, outside of placing pathologizing vocabularies back on to myself. Therefore I would like to offer an ecopoetic account of the rituals that I developed as alternative ways to remain in conversation with my grief, with the undulating atmospheres of affect that surrounded me and could not be rendered stable. These are practices that emerged and stayed with me in writing this project, as I was frequently overwhelmed by my own sense of grief.

1. RETURN

Return. Find a place that calls to you and a place you can return to frequently. Create a personal practice of attending to this place. Attending is a form of care. If there is trash, pick it up. But, more than this, attend to the place with active communication, and patience for slow emergence. Look closely, track changes, human or other. Become intimate with this land.

2. SUMMON

Grief is summoning work. Summon what you are scared of, or do not understand. Welcome ghosts. Feed them. You can summon futures into being by practicing living otherwise. Practice requires failure. Talk to dirt.

3. RESIST PROOF

Resist the need for evidence, signs and proof that the world is listening to you, or proof in the form of your own production. Allow your grieving to

produce nothing that is legible or material to anyone else. Trust that there is worth and reason to grieve, without proof that your grief has done something.

4. SEE YOUR BODY OTHERWISE

Grief is body work. But part of more-than-human grief is the act of displacing the human body from the center of the narrative. Instead of anthropozing the environment, try to think in reverse. Learn your body as organism. Learn your body as environment. See yourself ecologically.

5. FEED POISON TO THE SYSTEM

Most of us still have to go to work everyday. Recognize your slow death as the same slow death which makes the sunsets burn brighter. Steal time where there is time to be stolen. Do with it what you will. Do not use it to generate product.

6. FIND WAYS TO LOOK BEYOND YOURSELF

Allow the environment to defract something unexpected, rather than function as a mirror. Do not look for yourself. Experiment with imagination as method. This experiment has no hypothesis. Bury preconceived notions in the night when no one can tell you not to. Spend a day forgetting your name.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL RELATION IS MULTI-DIRECTIONAL

Ecosystems have their own poetics. No one can relate alone. Attune yourself to other modes of contact, ones that trouble preconceived notions that dictate the rules of your perception. See and feel with your entire surface area. Convince yourself that this is also the mode of operation of everything around you. Become a stone.

8. WELCOME THE UNMAKING OF YOUR SENSES

Forget the given names of the flowers on your walk home. Instead, walk under the lowest tree and let the leaves touch your face. Open your mouth. Spend time as a specter. Dissolve preconceived notions. Feed them to the wind in whispers.

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