
Book Review

Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman (eds.), *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), xxii + 332 pp., \$37.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-7735-4934-0.

How do you grieve for someone, when that someone is not an identifiable person or animal, but an ecosystem, a birdsong, a forest, a way of life? The answers are tremendously important as we hurtle along our current trajectory toward an increasingly hot and unstable planet. As once familiar animals no longer traipse through our yards and birdsongs of our childhood have gone quiet, as morning headlines of '7-degree temperature rise by 2100' trigger feelings of panic and foreboding that cast a shadow on otherwise joyful playtime with our children, we need ways to name and address our feelings of loss. Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman's new edited volume, *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, takes readers into (and also out of) this landscape of ecological loss.

Mourning Nature offers the first scholarly collection to name 'ecological mourning' as a unique form of grief, making this a groundbreaking and timely volume. The eleven chapters each provide very different windows into ecological loss and ecological mourning. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of this book is the range and diversity of topics covered and the disciplinary breadth of the authors (ranging from environmental studies, to philosophy and religion, to art and architecture and music). Unlike some edited volumes, which can feel disjointed, the chapters in this collection—while each telling its own story—form a cohesive narrative. Every single chapter in the book is excellent and thought-provoking and, in one way or another, unexpected. We have, for example, Nancy Menning's exploration of how mourning rituals drawn from Jewish, Tibetan Buddhist, and Shiite traditions might be used by communities or individuals to express and heal ecological grieving; Jessica Marion Barr on the art of elegy; Andrew Mark and Amanda Di Battista on the use of podcasts to express and explore ecological loss; and Glenn Albrecht on creating new language about distress over the loss of ecological home.

The book invites us to consider a whole range of ecological losses that trigger feelings of grief: the loss or degradation of natural landscapes, the extinction of wildlife, loss of one's home community (e.g., the Inuit in Nunatsiavut, Labrador, who have already seen climate change irreversibly alter their landscape and traditional ways of life); loss of a particular, loved creature or experience, such as the loss of house sparrows in London (in the chapter by Helen Whale and Franklin Ginn) or the loss of the sweet-smelling *Boronia* flower as a herald of spring in South-West Australia (in the chapter by John Charles Ryan). Bernie Krause writes about wild soundscapes, and the 'loss of or radical shifts in the density and diversity expressed'

by organisms for whom sound is crucial (p. 28). And Cunsolo confronts the work of remaining emotionally present and engaged in the face of the panic-inducing realities of climate change.

Taken together, this collection acknowledges the complexity of ecological mourning and grief and sets an agenda for future research. Ecological mourning is complicated because although we care about what we have lost or stand to lose in the future, we are also complicit in the loss. Ecological mourning and grieving are often accompanied by guilt, shame, and a sense of failure. Ecological losses are, in many instances, incomprehensible, the numbers so large as to be unthinkable (e.g., the number of species going extinct). In some cases, the loss has not yet happened, so we are engaged in anticipatory grieving (and at the same time, participating in the very practices that are driving the losses). And for many people, the scale of our grief is so vast that we fear drowning in it, if we dare open the floodgates, and thus we find it easier simply to keep our grief dammed behind a wall of denial.

And this brings me to what I liked most about *Mourning Nature*: although it was emotionally rough reading, I finished the book feeling both comforted and energized. Feeling loss, as Cunsolo and Landman note in their introduction, is a matter of recognizing that we are part of a community. Instead of being isolating, our feelings connect us to nature and to other mourners; the very fact of experiencing loss affirms our connectedness to the land and to other beings. As Sebastian Braun suggests in his chapter on what the loss of buffalo has meant to the Lakota people, for whom buffalo were not a resource but a relation, mourning brings us into a heightened awareness of our kinship with other forms of life. And as Lisa Kretz argues in her chapter, emotions associated with environmental loss can be empowering and motivating and can form the catalyst for environmental action. We can, through collective mourning, create a political community and let the mourning move us to action. What would healthy eco-grieving look like? Not letting the grief and despair become crippling and channeling the grief into action.

My guess is that ecological grieving is a hidden plague and that many people around the world are suffering feelings of loss that they have not articulated to others, perhaps not even to themselves. Many of us may feel paralyzed by panic over climate change and overwhelmed by the pace and scale of ecological losses. *Mourning Nature* does a great service by giving a name to this grief, setting us all within a community of others who mourn alongside us, and guiding us to respond not with despair but with hope and courage.

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