Complaints about the Weather

Eco-Neurosis in Jonathan Safran Foer and Jenny Offill

Abstract: This essay identifies eco-neurosis as a contemporary affective response to the environmental crisis. From the awareness that their social reproduction contributes to this crisis, the eco-neurotic polices their everyday consumption and lifestyle patterns, yet they simultaneously remain attached to the promise of the good life under capitalism: a double bind that causes compulsive and often punitive actions, thoughts, and feelings. If such eco-neurosis causes an affective displacement, this essay continues by proposing the complaint as a genre that expresses such neurosis and offers the promise of a renewed belonging. A reading of eco-neurosis in Jonathan Safran Foer's *We Are the Weather* (2019) and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) shows how the complaint however preserves the double-bind.

In *The New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino reports on young millennials and Generation Z members who wish for their idol to run them over with a truck or a tractor. Or to step on their throat, break their neck, or simply kill them. At the end of the piece, Tolentino writes about a similar convergence of pleasure and pain she experienced herself at a music festival. Surrounded with friends on the beach, she feels her "unfettered pleasure" restrained by "the murmur of guilt" that the same pleasure evokes:

> I do deserve to be run over with a dump truck, I think, at home, opening my delivery packages, thinking about how much plastic I have put on this planet, how much labor I have exploited for the sake of my own convenience. Longing and guilt intertwine every time I think about having children, who, if they exist, will exist in a world defined by man-made crisis and natural disaster. On the beach, flooded with joy, I felt the tug of that familiar undertow. "Fucking kill me," I thought, suddenly desiring a sensation strong enough to silence itself – which is, I suppose, one way of defining love.[1]

What turns delight into masochistic self-flagellation is the awareness of being complicit in climate destruction: contributing to a warming planet that slowly chokes the throat of current and future life. Fear of an impending climate doom is nothing new, but its appearance at the end of a piece about millennials' death wishes is rather unfamiliar. The topic however frames Tolentino's way of undoing her anxiety which is through undoing herself: a sacrificial act of love for a world she no longer wishes to harm. Like the millennials she speaks with, Tolentino only enacts such an end: its performance primarily expresses the burden she feels for being complicit in climate disaster.

In this essay I propose the term eco-neurosis to describe this affective pattern in which pleasure gets thwarted by guilt, anxiety or other negative eco-feelings that arise from the awareness that one's own life – or in another discourse: one's social reproduction – contributes

to the climate crisis.[2] Any possible satisfaction is intersected by a feeling of discomfort or discontent that no action can adequately remedy. The neurosis exists in the compulsion of this pattern and the often self-flagellating feelings, thoughts, or actions that result from it, such as Tolentino's murder fantasy.[3] Through a discussion of eco-neurosis as an affective pattern and its aesthetic expression in non-fiction and fiction, this essay wants to contribute to the current endeavor in the environmental humanities to develop an emotional literacy around the environmental crisis: an understanding of the emotional distress the crisis causes and which feelings, thoughts and actions such distress generates.

If discussions of negative eco-feelings are often focused on means of repairing them into positive actions, I will however argue that eco-neurosis constitutes a particular form of "cruel optimism" in which the attachment to the good life is beset by aversion, while the attachment to the climate cause is beset by discontent. This neurosis creates an affective displacement in one's relation to the ordinary, which calls for a different genre of affective mediation and expectation. Following some dispersed comments by Gilles Deleuze, I suggest the complaint as a climate genre of which the expectation resides in the eco-neurotic complainant becoming part again of the social community from which they felt removed through the too-muchness of climate change.

This essay exists out of four parts. Building upon the work in the environmental-humanities subfield of eco-affect and rearticulating in ecological terms some key concepts from queer-feminist cultural studies of affect and emotion, I further develop the term eco-neurosis in the first section of this essay. After introducing this particular affective pattern, the essay's second section continues with discussing the complaint as a climate genre. In the final sections of this essay, I will further substantiate and develop these claims about eco-neurosis and complaint through a reading of the essay *We Are the Weather* (2019) by Jonathan Safran Foer and the novel *Weather* (2020) by Jenny Offill: two complaints about the weather that through

their depiction of eco-neurosis hope to re-establish sociality. Interestingly, this partially happens through inviting the reader to become eco-neurotic themselves.

1. Eco-neurosis: affect, object, subject

Discussions in the humanities of the environmental crisis and the Anthropocene, the geological era in which human activity transforms the ecological makeup of the planet, first had a predominantly cognitive focus, questioning amongst others the relation between human and natural history or the representation of such entanglement on temporal and spatial scales that far exceed those of the individual human life.[4] More recent years saw a growing interest in the affective and psychological effects of the environmental crisis. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have coined and analyzed different emotional responses to the crisis, with eco-anxiety and ecological grief being the most widely circulating terms next to more specific affects like "solastalgia" (Albrecht), "ecosickness" (Houser) and "Anthropocene disorders" (Clark).[5] Other research in this subfield rethinks the spatial and environmental effects of ordinary emotions and considers the ways in which the climate and the environment affect people's everyday emotions.[6]

A reoccurring issue in discussions of these unpleasant and negative affects is if they might nevertheless hold a positive valence: can these bad emotions instigate action, or do they rather block one's sense of agency? Scholars tend to leave both options open. In his overview of several disciplinary discussions of eco-anxiety, Panu Pihkala acknowledges paralyzing forms of anxiety yet also discerns a "practical eco-anxiety" that leads to a reassessment of behavior in the face of a perceived threat.[7] Ecological grief too can spur feelings of denial, Stef Craps writes, especially because different from human deaths the loss or extinction of parts of our natural environment implicates our own behavior and may make us feel guilty or ashamed about our own responsibility.[8] He asserts that acknowledging and publicly processing such

emotions can however "reinvigorate practices of environmental advocacy."[9] Dana Luciano however questions this reoccurring reparative mode in discussions of grief and rather focuses on "the plodding tenacity of climate depression," yet ends her piece by indicating how hope and depression can "exist contrapuntally."[10] In discussing "petromelancholia", the mourning of "conventional oil resources and the pleasures they sustained," Stephanie LeMenager cautions that such melancholy can make one too invested in intellectualizing the lost attachment but reserves her interest for that affect "as an incitement to activism."[11] This list could go on.

Such accounts in which the options of action being both suspended or provoked are accounted for seem to suggest that eco-affects are overall close to what Sianne Ngai terms "ugly feelings": politically ambiguous affects that are "noncathartic" and offer no "therapeutic or purifying release," leaving the subject undecided.[12] Similar to such feelings, these eco-affects have a weak intentionality and a low narrative impulse, meaning respectively that they are not clearly oriented towards or by a certain object and that no direct development or goal follows from them. If for Ngai, ugly feelings "tend to be diagnostic rather than strategic, and to be diagnostically concerned with states of *inaction* in particular," then eco-feelings can however give rise to actions that potentially perpetuate the sense of inaction and powerlessness.[13] Sarah Jacquette Ray gives several examples of this in *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety,* possibly the most sustained engagement with climate emotions and their relation to activism. Ray describes how her students engage in self-loathing forms of green action, like one student who is so consumed by eco-guilt that being "a good environmentalist" meant for her "to disappear, to become smaller" and who therefore almost did not consume anything (2020, 18).[14] Ray's aim then is to guide her (student-)readers away from such "politics of individual *sacrifice* and consumer *denial*" (7) to a politics of empowerment, hope and resilience. These latter emotions, she argues, could sustain long-term action more than negative feelings.

This essay however stays with the type of feelings and actions that possibly reinforce negative feelings and a sense of powerlessness to get a better sense of one the one hand how climate-conscious behavior spurred by negative feelings can reinforce a sense of inertia and of feeling defeated and on the other hand how a political and cultural environment in the West induces such inertia.[15] I thus suggest that eco-neurosis should be situated within an ecology of negative climate emotions as one of its possible consequences. Feeling "Anthropocene anxious" about inaction in the face of the existential threat of climate collapse or feeling guiltily conflicted about their daily behavior contributing to environmental disruption, the eco-neurotic responds with policing their actions, decisions, consumption patterns and desires and reprehend themselves whenever they fail their self-imposed discipline or moral obligations.[16] Unsure about the effectiveness of their actions, the eco-neurotic finds however no relief in performing them and may be left with other bad feelings of disappointment, self-loathing, or inward-directed aggression.

As a multiply entangled ecological affective pattern, I understand eco-neurosis then as a manifestation of what Lauren Berlant names "cruel optimism": a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[17] For Berlant, each attachment is optimistic in that we keep on returning to a particular object because we believe it will deliver upon the promises we believe it holds. Such optimistic attachment becomes however cruel "when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially."[18] Two similar sort of double binds also characterize eco-neurosis's affective structure. On the one hand, it is the pleasure or satisfaction of performing ordinary acts that *simultaneously* evokes the guilt, shame or other ugly eco-feelings that compromise that experience of pleasure. On the other hand, any change the eco-neurotic makes to their behavior, which implies a diminishment of their pleasures, similarly feels both satisfying and painful because they feel uncertain if such changes are in any way effective to resist the course of

climate change. Different from the contrapuntal affective relation of depression and hope, it is the same experience – of enacting or changing daily behavior – that is felt as both desirable and repulsive. Similar to Berlant's discussion of cruel optimism, the affective structure of eco-neurosis does not imply any specific emotion: one can feel differently about their pleasure also damaging the planet; one can feel differently about their commitment to the climate cause also being detrimental to their pleasures. If cruel optimism for Berlant can also remain unregistered, I suggest that the eco-neurotic is aware of the conflictual experience of pleasure and revulsion, and it is this awareness which repeatedly prompts them to act or self-castigate.

To further understand eco-neurosis as an affective pattern that generates stuckness requires a closer look at its objects, its subject and their interrelation. The subject of eco-neurosis is most likely to be what Bruce Robbins calls "the beneficiary" and more specifically that subcategory of the well-meaning beneficiary: the person who benefits from the global economy because they happen to live at its center, while being aware of and possibly feeling guilty about the way their advantage rests on the exploitation of less privileged people in the margins of the global system – and, I would add, on the exploitation of the environment.[19] Not yet forced to adapt to the worst consequences of the ecological crisis, they have the *choice* to live differently or with less and for the eco-neurotic such choice feels as a moral imperative. Although they may work toward a difference in that global system of exploitation in more activist or political ways, the subject as eco-neurotic gets conflicted about how their daily behavior – and that of their peers: family, friends, co-workers, the general makeup of their environments – contributes to climate disruption.

Their neurosis fixates itself on a whole range of objects. The eco-neurotic can get stuck on all the meat at a barbecue; the many plastics in a shopping cart, wrapped around various products that have often traveled across global supply chains; the daily driving to make children happy and prepared (fit, musical, educated) for the future (but which one?); the cardboard of

many at home delivered packages; the occasional but still too frequent flying for vacations, family visits, job obligations; the thought at the amount of carbon involved in getting your favorite artists (perform) at the festival you were still enjoying a second ago; the heap of disposable coffee cups one has consumed because one constantly forgets to bring the reusable cup; too frequent and too long (soul-searching) showers; clothes one did not really needed but bought anyway; all the energy spent on a single day (to sustain a life) of work and leisure. Most of these are banal and to some extent unavoidable objects that for the eco-neurotic make up the rhythm and imagination of a western lifestyle.

These are the kind of objects of which Timothy Clark writes that they fall victim to deranging scale effects in a context of climate change: "the greater the number of people engaged in modern forms of consumption then the less the relative influence or responsibility of each but the worse the cumulative impact of their insignificance."[20] Because ordinary, small acts now seem to hold potentially large consequences, "[h]uman agency becomes, as it were, displaced from within by its own act."[21] I would add that this similarly involves an affective displacement: when acts that make up the ordinary rhythm and pattern of daily life lose their triviality, this may affect the subject's affective economy at the level of belonging, desire and attachment: the "cluster of promises" that an object holds changes and so its attachment towards it.[22] If ordinary objects gets bound up with the catastrophic, eco-neurosis may follow as that particular double bind in which the pleasure of engaging with such objects concurrently evokes ugly eco-feelings. This involves a change in the affective attachment to those objects. For the eco-neurotic, I suggest that, like in petromelancholia, their relation to these objects take the form of "a competition between emotional investments": one in the good life; another in the climate cause.[23]

This competition plays itself out in the different meanings the objects of eco-neurosis hold. On the one hand the objects of eco-neurosis constitute what Sara Ahmed calls "happy

objects", objects that in their social and cultural circulation "accumulate positive affective value as social goods."[24] These objects act as "happiness means" or "happiness pointers": they are associated with such positive feeling because they stand in the vicinity of that fantasy of the good life as consumer abundance, marriage, homeownership, job security.[25] Performing the actions or gaining the objects mentioned above may variably be experienced as exciting activities or boring chores to go through but whatever their form they may generate a certain satisfaction because they collectively amount to what is considered a recognizable life. In Berlant's terms, this is "one of optimism's ordinary pleasures […] 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 formulation."[26] This optimism becomes however cruel through the nagging awareness that these actions are in fact no longer permissible comforts because they harm the environment and make that same life unthinkable in the ever-closer future.

On the other hand, policy and advertisement have presented those same objects as means through which the subject can reduce their carbon footprint, alleviate their impact on the environment or by which green living gets rewarded: pay less if you bring your reusable cup; buy bio meat or adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet; plastic bags come with an extra cost; drive electric; recycle; pay an extra fee and we plant a tree to offset the carbon emissions from your flight; get subsidies or tax benefits when installing solar panels or a heat pump. The eco-neurotic pursues such measures because to do otherwise would be to complicitly indulge in their own comfort and happy habits. In forsaking these ordinary pleasures, the eco-neurotic may nevertheless still hold on to happiness in that they defer its promise to the(ir) children or the future: their forsaking is "imagined simultaneously as a sacrifice and gift."[27] This optimism can however become cruel because firstly these behavioral changes may nevertheless feel like self-castigation: it is less driving, flying, eating meat, showering, consuming, etc., which in their

totality can feel like less life. Secondly, such actions may feel insufficient for the task at hand and are also found wanting in addressing the intensity of the negative eco-feelings. It is unclear then to which extent the sacrifice is truly a gift.

The eco-neurotic may however disavow such feelings and knowledge. Erik Swyngedouw has argued that environmental policies install the promise of easy fixes through a focus on a fetish object, the amount of carbon dioxide, while displacing the harder questions of its socio-economic drivers.[28] The policy and adds mentioned above promise the reduction of one's carbon footprint, yet it simultaneously represses the knowledge that a bigger socioeconomic change is required. The eco-neurotic's objects then function as fetishistic displacements: the fear caused by the environmental crisis sets itself upon products and actions that are merely its symptoms. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Robert Fletcher refers to this process as disavowal: the scale of the crisis is both acknowledged and denied. Such disavowal can help to protect one's attachments to ordinary life under capitalism, the loss of which would be too hard to bear.[29] The eco-neurotic then may purport to address the problem by different consumption and lifestyle patterns while un-knowing it at the same time to hold on to a recognizable life. This fetishistic displacement further implies that even if the eco-neurotic were less invested in the ordinary objects of everyday life as holding the promise of happiness, for instance because one's disposition in life always already put them at a distance from the good life fantasy,[30] their relation to such objects may still be one of cruel optimism because one is not sure – either consciously or not – if the optimistic return to their forsaking will bring the desired climate mitigation and better future closer.

That is the double bind of the eco-neurotic: in this competition of attachments to the climate cause and the good life, the eco-neurotic always loses. Dissatisfaction or other ugly feelings are inevitable: ordinary attachment to capitalist life is perturbed by knowledge of its destructive impact on the environmental crisis; attachment to the climate cause is disturbed by

the biting realization that their actions can never be adequate to the task. This ambivalence forces the repetition of the neurotic pattern: a constant return to the crime scene that is the eco-neurotic's everyday life. How to relate to such life is the focus of the next section.

2. Complaint: Genre and Attachment

I have suggested earlier that eco-neurosis points to an affective displacement in which the subject loses their affective grounding in belonging and attachment: there is an alienation from ordinary acts, goods and scenes now that they are revealed as potentially detrimental for the environment; there is the loss of a life's narrative now that the future and one's social and natural environment have become precarious. This forces the eco-neurotic to be, with a phrase of Berlant, "thinking about feeling historical," meaning that one needs to "reorganiz[e] the relation of affect and feeling to knowledge about living."[31] For Berlant this affective recalibration is part of a historical present in which crisis saturates the ordinary and takes shape as a "stretched out 'now' that is at once intimate and strange."[32] The environmental crisis is then not experienced as a singular catastrophic event but in ordinary life as it is lived: old ways of inhabiting the world both continue and get under pressure by the threats that the crisis presents. Whereas the singular event is sensed in a (melo)dramatic register in which feeling and acting make the event legible and knowable, the event as "crisis ordinariness" or as "climate crisis ordinary" involves an affectively and cognitively ambiguous process of constant "adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation."[33]

In this section I want to relate the loss of affective grounding to one such improvised form: genre. I adapt Berlant's capacious definition of genre as offering "an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art."[34] Genre here is not solely an aesthetic form of creation but also a form that mediates and shapes life. Berlant's interest in *Cruel Optimism* is tracking new genres that can mediate ordinary life to

affective scenarios of anticipation now that older genre conventions' depiction of (the good) life's development become less relevant in times of ongoing crisis. LeMenager connects this work of developing new genres with the environmental crisis. She speaks of a "struggle for genre" to "find new patterns of expectation and new means of living within an unprecedented set of limiting conditions."[35] She goes on to relate this issue of genre with questions of attachment and the differentiation between objects worth attaching to or not.[36]

The relevance of this discussion of crisis and genre for eco-neurosis may be clear. The eco-neurotic's attachment to the good life fantasy as mediated through happy objects is tainted with its potential harm to climate change, whereas their attachment to the climate cause as mediated by fetishized objects has not yet found a convincing genre in which their sacrifice in the present can be meaningfully related to an imagined future. Rather than a temporal narrative development in which the present follows from the past and points toward the future, the eco-neurotic subject finds themselves instead in an ongoing crisis without resolution or potential dénouement. In the rest of this essay, I suggest that the complaint is one genre that expresses eco-neurosis and that captures the need for a renewed attachment and sense of belonging amidst the conditions of environmental decline.

According to Gilles Deleuze in his *Abécédaire* (1988), the affective structure of the complaint resides in something being too large for the subject: "what is happening to me is too big for me (either in misfortune or in happiness)."[37] And what could be larger than climate change? Maggie Nelson in her essay *On Freedom* (2021):

> Talk to anyone about global warming for just a couple of minutes and you're likely to get some variation on 'I just can't deal.' It's too depressing, too overwhelming, too paralyzing, too sad, too frightening, too unimaginable.[38]

The mismatching of the individual and planetary scale in individuals' sense of the climate crisis finds a paradigmatic expression in a genre that similarly indicates an incompatibility of scales.

Deleuze links the complaint to social exclusion. The complaint is made by those who no longer feel to have a place in society and who no longer feel protected.[39] And who could feel protected in a society that allows the primary causes of climate crisis to generally continue undisturbed? Yet, while Zadie Smith sings an elegiac "What have we done!" about the climate crisis,[40] the complaint rather laments: "What is being done to me!" This feeling overwhelms the eco-neurotic when they look at their shopping cart ("still so much plastic!"), arrive at the barbecue ("so much meat even if I don't eat it!"), or reflect on their own life ("too much pollution even when I have forsaken so much ordinary pleasures!"). In short: "Why is this being done to me, while I am merely participating in daily life?!" But also: "Why is this kept on being done to me, even if I change my actions!" If Berlant defined the female complaint as "women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking," then the eco-neurotic's complaint may well be that they live for climate mitigation and that climate mitigation is the gift that keeps on taking: never can they be assured that they have done enough, that their actions will have an impact.[41]

The complaint expresses a sense of displacement and disempowerment, but it is also performative in that it simultaneously demands a solution. Herein lies the political dimension of the complaint: it can hold someone to account for what is experienced as a wrong being done.[42] Different from the elegy, the complaint does not so much want to contextualize, mourn and process a particular loss but remains stuck on that loss.[43] Or as Catherine Phillips and others put it about the related genre of the lament: "Whether weeping, cherishing or raging, lament insists."[44] The complaint requires a need to be met, and although its tone is often perceived as heavy, tiresome, overly negative, my examples (will) show that its affective tonality is variable: humorous, dramatic, flat.

Although the complaint may challenge institutions and power relations, it can also function as an attempt to find social reintegration: to become recognizable again as a subject that belongs to and feels protected by the social order. Ahmed discusses how sharing an affective orientation to an object can align one with an affective community, and in that context speaks of the "complaint as a form of social bonding."[45] To complain about the weather – as well as the emotional or political weather – is a mutual request for the other to understand you and include you in an affective community.[46] An appeal for someone to say, like Nelson does after the above-cited fragment: "I get it. I don't actually think we can or should be able to contemplate in any casual way living through – not to mention causing – a sixth mass extinction."[47] For someone who indicates that they understand that the problem is too large for you and for all of us; for someone to release you from the responsibility that is enforced upon you. If Berlant names the conversation a "key genre of the present" because it allows for the exchange of information in times of crisis, then the eco-neurotic's complaint asks to be absolved from the information about the crisis – and their own complicity in that crisis – that weighs on them as a moral imperative.[48] Their complaint needs to create some distance between their agency and (the implications of) their actions: what they have done and what they could be doing. Such complaint then does not spur criticism and resistance, nor is it so much focused on remediating a lost object and demanding change. Rather the affective expectation of their complaint is about regaining a sense of belonging. In complaining, the eco-neurotic hopes to find an acknowledgment of their burden and refuge from displacement.

In the next sections I will turn to Foer's *We Are the Weather* and Offill's *Weather*. Both texts communicate that the knowledge of climate change is too much for them and that they do not know how to act or that they feel incapable of acting. Their complaint does however not hold to account any institution or social relation but the individual. Both texts take place in an imperial center, New York, but there is little awareness of the combined and uneven

development of the climate crisis, of environmental damage already taking place elsewhere, of their narrators being beneficiaries of a globally unequal and violent use of natural resources predicated on imperial and racialized logics. Such knowledge is cast aside (Foer) or put at the margins (Offill). The books' politics then are individualized and do not address the social relations and infrastructure that mediate potential action. As such, they remain attached to a dominant fantasy of the good life. Of particular interest is that both complaints possess a persuasive intention: the complainants do not so much want the reader to absolve them but want the reader to recognize and share the burden with them.

3. Foer: Moral Masochism

In *We Are the Weather,* Foer has issues with feeling: "Our emotions – and lack of emotions – are destroying the planet."[49] His feelings are off: they do not correspond to his knowledge about the environmental crisis, nor do they make him act upon this knowledge. If Foer is "thinking about feeling historical," then he partially blocks the reorganization of thought and affect to life because he is haunted by a melodramatic imagination in which "events (…) generate feelings that facilitate actions" (46). Foer is instead constantly troubled by the "distance between awareness and feeling" (13): the affective displacement caused by his knowledge about the environmental crisis does not lead to vehement emotions that would both induce and sustain the necessary actions. I argue that Foer ultimately develops a method of eco-neurosis as moral masochism to bring such melodramatic imaginary about.

Foer is aware of the peculiar status of the environmental crisis as event: "It doesn't feel like an event at all" (69). Its "scale (…) forces it into abstraction" (177), while its long duration has made "extreme" weather not a prefiguration of an endangering future but ordinary: "just weather" (14). Despite this awareness, Foer understands his lack of emotional engagement and insufficient care as a personal weakness. The crisis is too much for him: "My mind, my heart,

they are made in such a way that I cannot accept it" (177). Foer seems to be beset by a fantasy of a resourceful, responsible, and impassioned subjectivity who both knows and feels his actions to be just. It is the struggle to impersonate such subjectivity that generates Foer's eco-neurosis. If the narrative of that struggle reads as a complaint, it is because it needs to remediate the social displacement it causes.

Foer argues for the "collective act" to no longer eat animal products before dinner (64). This act and these products become Foer's fetishistic object. He sees animal agriculture as one of the main drivers, if not *the* driver of greenhouse gas emissions – Foer cites reports that vary its contribution between 14.5 and 51 percent. Little time is spent on this diagnosis: he assembles all evidence in the second chapter and presents them in bullet points. The main issue is motivation: how to abide by the rule to stop eating animal products before dinner. Foer invests this rule with the power to judge if he can be an engaged and responsible subject. To not abide has life-threatening repercussions: "We must either let some eating habits go or let the planet go. It is that straightforward, that fraught" (71). Other ordinary activities that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions are not a cause of concern. He casually mentions "having a car that I drive for convenience rather than necessity" and "a pantry stocked with foods imported from all over the planet" (126), while he deems having "two fewer flights a year" sufficient (it is unclear upon how many) (201). To not eat animal products before dinner is however identified as the necessary "sacrifice" (passim) we all need to make.

Foer chooses to represent his struggle to act because he is skeptical that knowledge can sufficiently motivate people. None of the books or articles he read in preparing his own book ultimately "moved" him to change his everyday habits (30, 163), and he thinks the same to be true for the reader. What he and his presumed readers lack is belief:

> Such a belief would surely awaken us to the urgent ethical imperative attached to it, shake our collective conscience, and render us willing to make small sacrifices in the present to avoid cataclysmic ones in the future. (21)

Belief here is an intense conviction about the truth of the environmental crisis that would fuel a melodramatic model of feeling, thinking, and acting. Belief however sets a high bar: either one believes, or one does not. Foer is puristic on that front. He perceives of "climate agnostics" (163), which include himself, as worse than climate denialists. To feel outrage at Trump's tweets refuting the existence of global warming is "misplaced," he writes: "Those of us who know what is happening but do far too little about it are more deserving of the anger. We should be terrified of ourselves" (122). To believe then also seems to imply forsaking further scrutiny: belief trumps an analysis of power differences and structural violence.

Purity, Alexis Shotwell writes, produces "normative formulations."[50] They set up norms of being or doing that one needs to aspire to and in their "parsing, cleansing, and delineating" create a differentiation between the pure and non-pure – in Foer's case: between the climate believers and the climate agnostics and denialists.[51] As part of his tactic of persuasion, Foer makes himself the subject of this purity parsing, confessing any deviation from his own rules and turning them into objects of shame. When on tour promoting *Eating Animals* (2009), his book about industrialized meat production, he sometimes ate meat from exactly such companies to "comfort" himself as he went "through some painful personal passages" (65). When writing the current book, he has not yet even tried to cut out eggs and dairy (172). Again and again, Foer establishes his incapacity to believe. This is most extensively on display in the chapter "Dispute with the Soul," in which Foer debates with his soul over food and climate, the purpose of his book, and the lack of hope he feels for him and others to change their eating habits.

Modelled on the oldest suicide letter known, it gives Foer's agonizing the quality of a matter of life and death.

If I have quoted very often from the book, it is partially to give readers a sense of the ubiquitous presence of the self-flagellating aspect of Foer's reflections. His sense of guilt and shame comes across as excessive, not in the least when he concedes that his own rule "might not amount to precisely the reductions that are asked for" (171). Foer seems to suffer from what Sigmund Freud terms "moral masochism" (1924). In this pathology, Freud writes, the "suffering itself is what matters; (…) the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow."[52] Throughout, Foer turns his cheek for yet an another self-inflected blow whenever there is information that could weaken the existential stakes of his norm or that could make his individual contribution less pertinent. Even the few hints at the existence of the logistic power of capital beget such treatment. When Foer points out the responsibility of fossil fuel companies, compared to which the power and responsibility of individuals is relatively small, his soul quickly deflects the argument, and Foer easily goes along with it: "companies produce what we buy (…). They commit crimes on our behalf" (150).

In his little book on the writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze links masochism to the modern conception of the law which has no other foundation than itself and is therefore pure form: without specifications and without an object, it is unknowable. Consequently, one may always be already guilty and in need of flagellation: "Even guilt and punishment do not tell us what the law is, but leave it in a state of indeterminacy equaled only by the extreme specificity of the punishment."[53] What is the Law when it comes to climate change? Which Law will determine if our actions are wrong, right, sufficient? In face of such indeterminacy, the masochistic self-flagellation offers some definiteness for the sense of guilt one may have in living an ordinary life that is experienced as detrimental to the environment. Given the excess of Foer's masochism, it seems that the self-flagellation gives the environmental crisis the sense

of (melo)drama that it otherwise lacks in the ongoingness of ordinary life: the moral masochism pushes his sense of detachment and apathy – of "avoidance, withdrawal" (119) – into strong emotions of shame and guilt from which actions could follow.

In that sense, and varying on Deleuze, the chastisement needs to bring about a law for himself: something Foer must obey and which makes him responsible. Each punishment is a reminder that he has not yet sufficiently acted. In the representation of his struggle as a persuasive method, Foer then seems to advocate such masochistic self-reflection for his readers too. That is the ultimate wager of the book: that in the depiction of his struggle, readers will be spurred to engage in their own. The final line of the book reads: "Each of us arguing with ourselves, we shall make a home together" (224). And earlier: "We must engage in perpetual disputes with ourselves to do what needs to be done" (143). [54] If to stop eating animal products before dinner is the action, then eco-neurosis as individuated moral masochism is the method that Foer imparts to his readers. It is a method to makes the crisis "an emotional issue [that mobilizes people]" (33). If readers take up that task, then the complaint has achieved its goal in that the burden that is too much for Foer will now be socially shared and recognized: others too now share a similar affective orientation to our meals.

To conclude this section, it is worth standing still with Foer's focus on food and its implications for the complaint. I have up till now presented it as a fetishistic object that allows Foer to act upon climate change while simultaneously repressing the awareness of the need for bigger socio-economic change. Food is however also a paradigmatic object of eco-neurosis: it is a "necessity" for the reproduction of daily life as well as a daily activity that offers people a "reliable pleasure".[55] To change those pleasures can only elicit a strong resistance and a sense of loss, as Foer's lament demonstrates. By however solely focusing on the individual's behavior, and casting aside any responsibility of the food industry, negative feelings remain entrenched in Foer's method. If others participate in Foer's lament they share the loss of their

pleasure in food habits; if they participate in Foer's method of moral masochism they share the sense of guilt (when they do not act enough) and/or shame (when their being fails) to be provoked in doing the right thing.[56] Within Foer's complaint the positive feeling of doing the right thing by saving the planet through a changed diet sits side to side with negative feelings of loss, guilt and shame. Foer's complaint then does not so much untie eco-neurosis' double bind of desire and aversion but keeps it in place.

4. Offill: Milling in the Climate Crisis Ordinary

The ease with which Foer speaks of the availability of all sorts of consumer abundance seems to suggest he finds himself quite firmly in at least that part of the good life fantasy. This is different for Lizzie, *Weather's* main character and narrator, who is part of the precarious white middle class and feels at a remove from the fantasy that once was seemingly available to her. This precarity gets worsened by anxiety about climate change. Dana Luciano speaks of Lizzie's "climate depression" as telling a story "of the present as a scene of blockage", meaning that "she can't catch up to [the present]."[57] In my discussion of the novel, I argue that this inability to catch up relates to an eco-neurotic fixation on not knowing how to act in the face of climate disaster and being without a genre to mediate the present's lived experience. The too-muchness of the ever more precarious world knocks Lizzie off balance, something the novel describes as "milling". She aims to regain her footing within the world's sociality through care, humor and prepping but none of those will do. Nevertheless, the novel aligns with the affective expectation of the complaint by inviting us into its eco-neurotic pattern.

The opening pages of *Weather* introduce the theme of mismatching scales as a source of anxiety within a context of care. Lizzie says: "I'm not allowed to think about how big this school is or how small he [her son Eli] is. I've made that mistake after other drop-offs."[58] The novel is concerned with coming to grips with the interplay between the different scales of

everyday domestic and working life, politics and climate now that the latter two pose a threat to the sense of stability of the former. The election of (the never explicitly mentioned) Donald Trump as president and the looming climate apocalypse do however not constitute singular events but rather strengthen the overall sense of precarity in the early twenty-first-century New York life the novel portrays:

> I look up some articles on Disaster Psychology in hopes of better assisting all the people wandering around here lately.
>
> *Much of the population was in a mild stupor, depressed, congregating in small unstable groups, and prone to rumors of doom.*
>
> But I don't know. That's pretty much every day here. (124)

Using a fragmentary form, alternatively taking the shape of jokes, scenes, aphorisms and epigraphs, the novel depicts "the psychological landscape of daily life" (117), showing the incongruence of living these different scales and how one moment one can be caught up in despair over the future and the next in a household chore; awareness of the climate crisis fluctuating in and out of the character's consciousness, even though the reader may discern its presence when the characters do not. Similar to Foer, there is an affective disturbance that jars the correspondence between knowledge and action: "I keep wondering how we might channel all of this dread into action" (137).

More than around any particular action, Lizzie's eco-neurosis seems to revolve around the lack of an action, an unknowingness about how to go about the ecological, political, economic and emotional weather of her time. Her navigating of the different scales in an

uprooted everyday is neither tactical nor intentional but takes the shape of what the novel calls "milling". Her former PhD supervisor Sylvia explains:

> There's a period after every disaster in which people wander around trying to figure out if it is truly a disaster. Disaster psychologists use the term "milling" to describe most people's default actions when they find themselves in a frightening new situation.
>
> That's the name for what we're doing. (118)

In their uncertainty and unknowingness, people continue their everyday habits even if these no longer add up to what they once understood a life to be. For Lizzie, not knowing what to do about climate change as well as continuing ordinary habits become objects of neurotic concern: both can make her feel anxious and inadequate. Milling then describes a (eco-)neurotic state in which the pleasures and aversions in the experience of default actions become more difficult to disentangle.

The fragmentary form of *Weather* reflects that affective state of milling: the fragments do not cohere into a clear narrative, do not develop with a distinct purpose. Katherine Kruger further describes milling as a form of "waiting": an "enduring" in which the "moment for action", as demanded by crisis, "is continually called for and yet further delayed."[59] It is a chronic crisis in which everyday life continues not as Lizzie's realism but as something both more tragical and comical. If a common feature of those two genres is misrecognition, then Lizzie's concern about wrongly navigating ordinary life is cause for moments of despair and gaiety. The novel's diverse fragments register these different emotional intensities. A fragment of three sentences starts with a domestic scene of her son testing which of his markers still works with the father assisting, while the third sentence envisions a catastrophic destiny:

"According to the current trajectory, New York City will begin to experience dramatic, life-altering temperatures by 2047" (106). Other fragments are humorous, like the climate scientist remarking that his "work is going well, but it looks like it might be the end of the world" (76). In both cases then, there is a presiding atmosphere in which Lizzie's attempts at "the scaling of affect" to a "state of bourgeois emotional equilibrium," typical of the realist novel, do no longer work out.[60]

This lack of scaling points to the imbalance of something being too much for Lizzie. If Foer's essay had the excessive tone we more commonly associate with the complaint, then Lizzie's complaint begets a rather flat tone. Her moving through and observing the precarious present creates a certain restlessness that is captured in a tone that gives the impression "as though affects and emotion themselves are exhausted from adjusting to all the intensities."[61] There is humor and there is despair, but they are mostly toned down, not overwhelming the narrator nor the reader: it is an "undertelling" of the story.[62] In her *Bookforum* review, Christine Smallwood writes that the "truncated form of the narrative fragments" can function as a "shield" because they "sometimes tie up feelings rather than allowing them to accumulate or overwhelm."[63] At the same time, these fragments insist that something is unresolved and cannot be integrated within the narrative texture of life. Something is "nagging", as in unsettling, Lizzie which makes the fragments "nagging," as in urging and complaining for something to change. It is a complaint by someone being exasperated by the too muchness of the emotional, political, and environmental precarity that is "barely bearable" (155). At the same time, within this state Lizzie tries to resecure sociability through turning to care, humor and prepping, but the sinister joke may be that none of those can effectively assuage her neurotic anxiety about knowing the right action.

Lizzie's default action in her state of milling consists of caring for others. There is the care for her husband Ben and son Eli, her financially dependent mother, her recovering drug

addict brother Henri and his newborn daughter Iris. Yet she is also prone to "assist (…) the people wandering around" (124) to redeem the precarity surrounding her: random people on the street or at the university library's helpdesk where she ended up working after not finishing her PhD dissertation. She starts helping Sylvia by responding to the many emails her popular climate change podcast receives, which is what initiates Lizzie's climate worries. These acts of care are however not experienced as straightforwardly positive. This becomes apparent from the contrast between the novel's two models of care as interconnection. One is ideal and put forth by the teacher of a Buddhist yoga class: "we have all been each other's mothers and fathers and children and siblings. Therefore, we should treat each person we encounter as if they are our beloved" (157). This seems to make an impossible demand: how to take care of everyone when the world is going down? Already, Lizzie seems to feel the burden of all the people she cares for: "All these people. I have so many people, you wouldn't believe it" (181). This hints at the second model of "enmeshment" (58). If the first model expands care without any limit, then the latter is an affective implosion in which Lizzie cannot retain the borders between herself and others. This leads to a certain carelessness in which Lizzie – not unlike Tolentino's fantasy or the student's self-loathing refusal of consumption – minimizes herself. Lizzie stopped her PhD project when helping her brother out with his drug addiction; assisting him now through his struggles with obsessive thoughts after the birth of his daughter makes Ben and Eli felt unlooked after. Nor does Lizzie take care of herself when she puts off going to the doctor for a sore knee and to the dentist for an aching tooth. Care gets bound up with self-chastising for the carelessness embedded in care. When opting for Mr. Jimmy's car service instead of public transport because she wants to help his ailing business, she calls herself "ridiculous" (62) as she is aware that her care is extravagant and because this affects both the planet and her wallet negatively. As a default action to achieve a sense of everydayness, care then remains an object of neurotic concern that is also an insufficient response to climate

change. When Lizzie suggests to Sylvia to move "somewhere colder" with Eli and Iris, she responds: "Do you really think you can protect them? (…) Then become rich, very, very rich" (127).

As it indicates social belonging, Lizzie uses humor as a second method to undo her social displacement caused by the awareness of climate change. Comedy, as Berlant and Ngai argue, involves "intersubjectivity [and] tests what it means to say 'us' (…) what lines we desire or can bear."[64] Humor then is Lizzie's means to put a limit to the impossible demand of the Buddhist practice of care: "Then just as I'm remembering that we are all one people, that we all have hopes and dreams, I see [her annoying, right-wing neighbor] Mrs. Kovinski coming down the street toward me" (180). The ironic comment serves to pardon her lack of care and aims to find recognition from those who share a similar affective orientation to the woman. Or more precisely: to find recognition is to be pardoned for the claim made upon her that she feels to be too much.

Through Lizzie's use of humor, we can track her shifting alliances and environmental commitments. At first, Lizzie makes fun of those who express environmental concerns through consumer or lifestyle choices. She considers it "funny" when someone lectures "on and on about my ham sandwich" (16), ridicules her sister-in-law Catherine when she advises not to "use antibacterial soap (…) because lalalalalalalalala" (71) and finds the "hippie letters" she receives from podcast listeners "a hundred times more boring than the end-timer ones" with their "dreary" comments about "composting toilets and water conservation and electric cars" (51). When Lizzie herself puts the "air condition on full blast," she jokes away Ben's concern that it is "wasteful": "Once sadness was considered one of the deadly sins, but this was later changed to sloth. (Two strikes then)" (92). Humor serves to lift the weight of any self-chastising when yielding to comforts relying on carbon-fueled energy. In all these cases, Lizzie wants to

mark herself as belonging to a group who has not yet abandoned everyday behavior due to climate change: she is not a "crazy doomer" (89).

As the novel progresses however, Lizzie gets increasingly captured by the same apocalyptic fears as her correspondents. At this point, care returns in the form of prepping – the third method Lizzie applies against her sense of displacement. Different from care as default mode, this prepping serves to counter "milling": as the same disaster psychologist explains on the podcast, it is necessary to draw up a plan if you want to avoid the brain "get[ting] stuck on a loop" (171). Lizzie starts gathering information on all sorts of survival practices and techniques. She learns about making light out of a tuna can (148), the importance of having chewing gum, which flowers or insects you can eat and how to produce your own toothpaste (161). Haunted by a question heard at one of Sylvia's events, "What will be the safest place?" (52-53, 178), she also thinks about making a doomstead and the type of people to best occupy it (157).

This prepping seemingly reintegrates the scales of the intimate everyday and climate disaster in two ways. Firstly, the doomstead preparations become a shared project with her husband. After he "did the math" (195), Ben also occupies himself with the project. Together they assemble a "list of requirements (…): arable land, a water source, access to a train line, high on a hill" (194). The couple's relation, established throughout the novel by the humor they share (f.i. 50, 104), gets reconfirmed more sincerely at the end of the novel: "The core delusion is that I am here and you are there" (201). Interconnection moves from universal care and enmeshment to a shared private concern for climate rescue. Secondly, the prepping advice may establish sociality with the reader. In her review, Stephanie Bernhard suggests that the survival lessons are an act of care on part of Offill: what Lizzie does for her family, Offill does for her readers.[65] In this interpretation, the reader is invited to become like the narrator, and, similar to Foer's essay, gets constructed as a neurotic subject: climate angst and social displacement gets

redeemed through learning, memorizing and sharing such preparations as an interconnected act of mutual care.[66] Again, if the reader engages with this task, the complaint succeeds in collectively shouldering that which is too much.

And yet, one may wonder if the prepping is not a symptom of milling rather than its solution. Lizzie suggests that much in this scene:

> Then one day I have to run to catch a bus. I am so out of breath when I get there that I know in a flash all my preparations for the apocalypse are doomed. I will die early and ignobly. (187)

Lizzie presents herself as the butt of the joke, alluding that she may still be wandering around aimlessly in a situation she fails to get a grip on. The comedy winks to the reader, asking for their recognition that we are all doomed to failure in our individualized climate endeavors: that they actually reinforce instead of calm neuroses. If however Lizzie is convinced that her doomstead preparations do amount to a solution, she may, for the reader, no longer be in on the joke and thus become the joke.

Humor and despair are in proximity in this joke and such proximity is characteristic of the novel. Lizzie's complaint follows from being near the good life fantasy while political and environmental precarity have deprived her of its pleasures. This fills her complaint with all sorts of unsettling proximities: the ordinary and the apocalyptic sit side to side, as well as care and carelessness; her enmeshment with others. If this becomes too much for Lizzie, then both the complaint and her humor want to bring freedom (or at least relief) from what is (self-)chastising. No such absolution is however achieved: the jokes only work through the nearness of the negative and the positive, while the complaint cannot create a distance between Lizzie's agency and actions. In the narrative there is nobody, except for Ben, who shares her burden or releases

her from the burden to act. Similar to the reader who joins Lizzie in her prepping, Ben is plunged into an ordinary life enmeshed with the apocalyptic. If Lizzie's eco-neurosis resides in an anxious milling of the everyday, then *Weather*'s complaint rather induces than alleviates the anxiety when it comes to the satisfactions and pleasures of everyday life.

To Conclude: Climate Engagement of the Disaffected

In this essay I have described eco-neurosis as an eco-affective pattern of stuckness. It is a double bind in which the participation in daily life generates both the satisfaction of convenience and the self-reproach about contributing to climate disruption. Acting upon those negative feelings through consumer decisions, lifestyle changes, and even prepping can never sufficiently give the neurotic the sense of doing what is needed, because those actions function through a fetishistic displacement that leaves untouched the larger societal structures driving the environmental deterioration.

If ugly feelings, as suggested before, diagnose situations of inaction, then eco-neurosis, as a multiply entangled ugly feeling, registers the subject's entrapment in capitalist structures. Eco-neurosis is a symptom of the structural necessity of participating in power relations embedded in capitalist economic conditions for one's social reproduction.[67] Those very same relations that are necessary for daily survival simultaneously pose an existential threat because they generate the environmental crisis. Hence, the self-castigation of the eco-neurotic who feels discontent in performing everyday actions that contribute to the climate crisis and feels inadequate in any attempt to remedy this. The will to live and the will to reduce their complicity cannot but wrap them up in a straitjacket.

It is this political dimension that is absent in Foer's and Offill's complaints about the weather. Their complaints do not challenge political or economic structures but rather add to the mood of blockage and inertia. They aim to secure reintegration in the social community that

no longer feels protective and therefore aim to make a shared affective orientation towards an object to arrive at a sense of affective belonging. Sharing a similar eco-neurotic orientation towards daily life, however, implies that one becomes eco-neurotic oneself. Both the texts by Foer and Offill make such an appeal at the reader. Foer believes we will commit to do the right thing if we all start engaging in an ongoing dialogue with ourselves; Offill possibly sees an act of care and hope in instructing prepper's advice even if it comes with an ironic wink. In sharing that orientation we would, however, also share the burden of that which is too much: the constant logic of sacrifice in Foer; the ongoing anxious anticipation in Offill. To complain together may offer some affective release, but it will not do away with the nagging sense that something remains wrong and that something else needs to be done.

There is no redemptive quality then in these texts nor in eco-neurosis: no movement from a politics of sacrifice to one of resilience and hope (Ray), no improvisation and adaptation within a climate crisis ordinariness that leads to a better (ecological) attunement (Berlant). Both texts aim to make a shift in their optimism. For Foer this leads to a change towards an exemplary object of eco-neurosis, food, whereas Lizzie is throughout her narrative unclear to which object she would need to attach to find a new acclimatization to ordinary life. One could put a positive spin on their eco-neurotic behavior in pointing out that they, despite the constant uncomfortableness of their feelings, attempt to desert ordinary patterns of life under capitalism, and that such desertion offers a contribution, albeit a very marginal one, to climate mitigation. Their flight however does not get that far because in their complaint they remain stuck on a loss: the loss of comforting food (Foer); the loss of being aligned with the fantasy the world had in store for you (Offill). It is cruel optimism if you would rather be destroyed by your object than lose it; hence the death wish in Tolentino, the conversation with the soul as a suicide letter in Foer, the apocalypse and carelessness in Offill.[68] Theirs is rather a climate engagement of the disaffected yet included – of those who have lost faith in the institutions of the ordinary but

are still too proximate to imagine otherwise or to leave it entirely.[69] In such disaffected climate action, I suggest, the competition of affective investments is constant.[70]

Notes

[1] Jia Tolentino, "Love, Death and Begging for Celebrities to Kill You," *The New Yorker,* 21 June 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/love-death-and-begging-for-celebrities-to-kill-you/, accessed 20 June 2024.

[2] I am not the first to make use of this term. In his PhD dissertation, Rudy Leal McCormak uses the term "as an umbrella concept for all forms of emotional discomforts and maladies due to climate change (e.g., grief, mourning, anxiety, depression, etc.)" Similarly, Johannes Lehtonen and Jukka Välimäki use the term "environmental neurosis" to refer to all "psychological factors involved in our adaptation to the consequences of climate change." My use of eco-neurosis is rather one particular type of discomfort that develops in the realization of the need to relate and adjust one's life to climate change. Rudy Leal McCormak, "Towards a Dialectical Account of Eco-Neurosis: Developing a Framework of the Unconscious in an Age of Ecological Degradation." (PhD diss., Colorado State University, 2023), 1, https://hdl.handle.net/10217/236945; Johannes Lethonen and Jukka Välimäki, "The environmental neurosis of modern man: the illusion of autonomy and the real dependence denied," in *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* ed. Sally Weintrobe (Routledge, 2013), 48.

[3] To be sure: this essay does not have any clinical intent. I use 'neurosis' here in its most ordinary sense to refer to a condition of nervousness and stress that originates in or causes feelings of anxiety, insecurity and compulsion and that lead the subject to repetitively act and reflect upon those feelings and actions in a punishing manner.

[4] Key texts in those discussions are Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (2009), 197-222; Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[5] Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia and the New Mourning," in *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief,* ed. Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); 292-315; Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

[6] Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, "Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene," in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, ed. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino (University of Nebreska Press, 2018), 1-22; Blanche Verlie, "'Climatic-Affective Atmospheres': A Conceptual Tool for Affective Scholarship in a Changing Climate," *Emotion, Space* and *Society* 33 (2019), 100623, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100623.

[7] Panu Pihkala, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety," *Sustainability* 12, no. 19 (2020).

[8] Stef Craps, "Ecological Mourning: Living with Loss in the Anthropocene," in *Critical Memory Studies: New Approaches,* ed. Brett Ashley Kaplan (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 73-74.

[9] Craps, "Ecological Mourning," 69.

[10] Dana Luciano, "'Of course, the world continues to end': *Weather* and the Climate Crisis Ordinary," *Post45*, 19 September 2023, https://post45.org/2023/09/of-course-the-world-continues-to-end-weather-and-the-climate-crisis-ordinary/, accessed 30 May 2025.

[11] Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 18, 102.

[12] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

[13] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 22.

[14] In the preface to *The Activist Humanist,* Caroline Levine similarly evokes a group of students that aim to "maintain the most austere standards of green living" even if they know their individual choices will not suffice (2020, ix). These are forms of eco-masochism that could be seen as the outer limit of what this essay describes as eco-neurosis. Caroline Levine, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton University Press, 2023), ix.

[15] Alice Carlill makes this point convincingly in her essay "'We Were Paralysed': Ecological Grief, the Everyday Anthropocene, and Climate Crisis Ordinariness in *The High House,*" *English Studies* 106, no. 3 (2025), 374fn8.

[16] Nicole Merola uses the term "Anthropocene anxiety" to describe "an affect specifically concerned with inaction in the face of and worry about global socioecological change." Nicole Merola, "'what do we do but keep breathing

as best we can this / minute atmosphere': Juliana Spahr and Anthropocene Anxiety," in *Affective Ecocriticism,* ed. Bladow and Ladino, 27.
[17] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
[18] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 1.
[19] Bruce Robbins, *The Beneficiary* (Duke University Press, 2017), 5.
[20] Timothy Clark, "Scale: Derangements of Scale," in *Theory in the Era of Climate Change, volume 1: Telemorphosis*, ed. Tom Cohen (Open Humanities Press, 2012), 150.
[21] Clark, "Scale," 150.
[22] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 23.
[23] LeMenager, *Living Oil,* 104.
[24] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 21.
[25] Ahmed, *Happiness*, 27.
[26] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.
[27] Ahmed, *Happiness*, 33.
[28] Erik Swyngedouw, "Climate Change Consensus: A Depoliticized Deadlock," in *Handbook of Critical Environmental Politics,* ed. Luigi Pellizzoni et al. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).
[29] Robert Fletcher, "Beyond the End of the World: Breaking Attachment to a Dying Planet," in *Psychoanalysis and the Gl0bal,* ed. Ilan Kapoor (University of Nebraska Press, 2018).
[30] Besides disadvantaged social groups, one could think here of the students mentioned by Ray and Levine who, once they became climate-conscious, thought of these objects as harbingers of ecological misery rather than happiness.
[31] Lauren Berlant, "Thinking about Feeling Historical," *Emotion, Space and Society* 1, no. 1 (2008), 5.
[32] Berlant, "Thinking," 5
[33] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10, 54. Climate crisis ordinary is used by Luciano and Carlill. Carlill, "We Were Paralysed"; Luciano, "Of course, the world continues to end".
[34] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6.
[35] LeMenager, "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times,* ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Penn State University Press, 2017), 222.
[36] MeMenager, "Struggle for Genre," 234-36.
[37] My translation. Original: "ce qui m'arrive est trop grand pour moi (au malheur ou au bonheur)." Gilles Deleuze & Claire Parnet, "L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze: J comme Joie," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyXMmx2Ofgs, accessed 7 July 2024.
[38] Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Jonathan Cape, 2021), 200.
[39] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2* (Minuit, 1980), 561.
[40] Zadie Smith, "Elegy for a Country's Seasons," in *Feel Free: Essays* (Hamish Hamilton, 2018), 19.
[41] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008), 1.
[42] See for instance Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021); Deleuze & Guattari, *Mille plateaux,* 561; Catherine Phillips, Jennifer Atchison and Elizabeth Straughan, "The Power of Lament: Reckoning with Loss in an Urban Forest," *Nature and Space* 6, no. 4 (2023): 2358-2378.
[43] David Mikics, *A New Handbook of Literary Terms* (Yale University Press, 2007), 67.
[44] Philips et al., "Lament," 2372.
[45] Ahmed, *Happiness,* 43.
[46] Complaining about the lack of climate action may also be a cause for social exclusion, as is the case for the environmentalist killjoy. Ahmed calls the complaint a 'killjoy genre', cf. Ahmed, *Complaint!,* 1.
[47] Nelson, *On Freedom,* 200.
[48] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 57.
[49] Foer, Jonathan Safran, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (Penguin, 2019), 152. Further references to *We Are the Weather* will be cited parenthetically.
[50] Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 13.
[51] Ibid., 14.
[52] Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in Sigmund Freud, and James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud / Translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey ; in Collaboration with Anna Freud Vol. 19, (1923-1925)* (The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1996), 165.
[53] Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in Gilles Deleuze and Leopold Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism,* trans. Jean McNeil (Zone Books, 1989), 84.
[54] For a review that deems this strategy to be successful, see Kyle Bladow, "What's the Weather?," *American Book Review* 41, no. 4 (May/June 2020), 4.

[55] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 115.
[56] I take the associations of guilt with action and shame with being from Stef Craps, "Guilty Grieving in an Age of Ecocide," *Parallax* 29, no. 3 (2023), p. 326; doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2024.2302666
[57] Luciano, "Of course, the world continues to end".
[58] Jenny Offil, *Weather* (Granta, 2020), 8. Further references to *Weather* will be cited parenthetically.
[59] Katherine Kruger, "Aging through Precarious Time: Maintenance and Milling in *The Cost of Living* and *Weather,*" *Poetics Today* 44, no. 1-2 (June 2023), 94, 101.
[60] Mark McGurl, "Gigantic Realism: The Rise of the Novel and the Comedy of Scale," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017), 410.
[61] Berlant, "Thinking," 7.
[62] Luciano, "Of course, the world continues to end".
[63] Christine Smallwood, "Meditations in an Emergency," *Bookforum,* Feb/March 2020, https://www.bookforum.com/print/2605/jenny-offill-s-novel-of-the-barely-bearable-present-23833, accessed 3 August 2024.
[64] Lauren Berlant & Sianne Ngia, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017), 235.
[65] Stephanie Bernhard, "Survival Tips: On Jenny Offill's *Weather*," *LA Review of Books,* 13 February 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/survival-tips-on-jenny-offills-weather/, accessed 4 August 2024.
[66] Such reading is further supported by the website that is mentioned at the last page of the book, www.obligatorynoteofhope.com, on which one can find "tips for trying times" as well as means to get involved in climate activism. At the same time, the title of the website is also a joke, referring to the positive note that needs to conclude discourses on the terrifying climate challenges societies face. Cf. Offill, *Weather,* 67.
[67] For an extensive discussion of such power relations, see Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Analysis of the Economic Power of Capital* (Verso, 2023).
[68] "And so losing the bad object might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it. That's a relation of cruel optimism," Berlant writes in "Lauren Berlant On Her Book *Cruel Optimism*," *Rorotko.com*, 5 June 2012, https://www.rorotoko.com/11/20120605-berlant-lauren-on-cruel-optimism, accessed 5 September 2025.
[69] Idris Robinson speaks of "the included yet disaffected" in his discussion of destituent power. Idris Robinson, "The Destituent Urge Is Also a Destructive Urge: Agamben, Aristotle, and Benjamin on the Potentiality for Destitution," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 1 (Jan 2023), 154.
[70] I first presented a primordial version of eco-neurosis at the online Roundtable World Weary: Cultures of Exhaustion on 20 May 2021, only to pick it up a couple of years later. An earlier, much shorter and quite different version of this essay appeared in Dutch in the Belgium-Flemish literary magazine *nY: tijdschrift voor literatuur, kritiek en amusement*, #54 (2024), 81-92. I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer and the editors of *Theory & Event* for their very helpful comments and suggestions, Koen Sels for exchanging ideas on Deleuze's complaint via WhatsApp, Silvia Vittonatto for her questions and comments on an earlier draft and regular encouragements with 💪 emoji's, Marlou de Bont for helping me to decide which conclusion I should take, and Robbie Duschinsky for some excellent suggestions on the double bind character of the affective pattern that I have tried to describe in this essay.