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Psychoterratic States: Designing the New Language of Climate Change

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Abstract

In this project, I want to explore psychoterratic states and how they affect us in our daily lives.

Psychoterratic states are emotions that people feel in relation to the earth. The term was created by Professor Glenn Albrecht of Murdoch University, who observed the need for a new vocabulary to describe the emotions we feel as we witness the historical degradation of the planet on a global scale. The term literally translates to earth psyche with “psycho” meaning psyche, and “terratic” meaning earth. This will be the focus of my thesis project, looking at the emotional states we experience in the face of environmental disasters and how those emotions affect our responses.

The Psychological Effects of Climate Change

The negative physical effects of climate change are well-known and, except for fringe denial groups, widely accepted and acknowledged. On Earth Day of 2020, the Pew Research Center published a report intending to review public opinion on climate change and environmental matters in the US. The report states that in the past 10 years, the percentage of Americans who feel that the government's top priority should be protecting the environment and dealing with global climate has doubled from 30% to 64%. Additionally, 62% of Americans felt that climate change was affecting their local communities. The most common effects that were reported were long periods of hot weather (79%) and intense weather such as flooding or storms (Funk & Kennedy, 2020). These numbers indicate that the majority of Americans are concerned with climate change and the negative physical effects that it brings, which will hopefully produce a trend of Americans voting for policies that address them.

There are other dimensions of climate change aside from the severe physical harm that it causes and will continue to cause. In 2012, The National Wildlife Federation published a report that stated that in addition to the physical damage climate change will cause, there will also be enormous psychological consequences. The report stated that an estimated 200 million citizens are expected to face psychological distress due to climate change (Coyle & Van Susteren, 2011). Those expected to be disproportionately affected are vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, people with pre-existing mental health conditions, military members and their families, and people living near or under the poverty line. There is a range of reasons for these

psychological effects and why they have the potential to be so catastrophic. Among the concerns of the report were: rising temperatures that are linked to increases in aggression; distress from disaster-related displacement; PTSD from natural disasters; the psychic toll of droughts and waiting for seasonal changes that are unnaturally delayed; exposure to wildfire, ash, and smoke; and stress related to a higher risk of a disease outbreak. Not only are these consequences going to be significant enough in both their frequency and intensity to elicit a mental health crisis, but, according to this panel, the current mental health infrastructure of the United States is woefully unprepared to respond.

The report paints a grim picture of the future but aims to provide some recommendations to alleviate this looming threat. The main recommendation is that a new field of study needs to be created that specifically focuses on the mental health effects of climate change, to help guide mental health practitioners as they navigate these specific needs. This study also needs to be incorporated into other disciplines such as business, law, medicine, and education. Essentially, the acknowledgment of the psychological side of climate change needs to be brought into the discourse in a much more intentional and responsive fashion.

Language and Mental Health

Language serves a very important purpose not only in navigating a new discourse within society but also on an individual psychological level. This is evident in rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), a subset of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). In this model, the goal is to identify and challenge irrational beliefs and emotional disturbances and recognize the relation they have to cognition and behavior (Dobson & Dozois, 2019). By establishing an awareness of these emotional patterns and what is causing them, the individual can reach a better understanding of how to respond in an effective manner. Having specific and definable words for these emotional patterns is necessary for the individual to be able to address them, be convinced that they are external from themselves and solvable, and come up with ways to approach them. However, given that we are still in the relatively early stages of observing climate change-related effects, and there is not a vastly comprehensive array of studies on these types of psychological effects, the field is still emerging. In the common English vernacular, there are very few words that describe the intense existential emotions that go along with both individually and collectively experiencing the world go through radical, and sometimes cataclysmic shifts due to climate change.

This problem was especially apparent when I attended a workshop from local climate justice non-profit, 350PDX. In it, a facilitator led us through a group discussion about the different relationships we as individuals and communities have with systems power and privilege. Inevitably, as we went around the room sharing our experiences, one of the first topics

that came up was climate change and the destructive burden that is placed on our environment and ourselves. Some phrases that came up were:

“I hate that I have no choice but to be part of a system that I don’t want and I know is actively killing this planet.”

“When I think of power, it’s life and death. If people are in power who don’t care about changing the way we do things, then it’s death for us all.”

These examples are anecdotal but it only reinforced claims from the National Wildlife Federation about climate change’s increasing palpability on human psyches. It was very clear that the participants of this workshop were feeling intense emotions around climate change. Perhaps having specific terms to describe them could help normalize such intense feelings and make the participants feel less isolated in their pain. Fortunately, such a vocabulary has started to be expanded upon and given the category, *psychoterratic states*.

Psychoterratic States

“I think there’s a drama going on. This drama’s been going on since the year dot. This relationship we have between our home, on all scales, from the image you have of a tree outside your bedroom window all the way through to the planet we call our home, there’s a drama going on between the forces that are attempting to create, and the forces that are attempting to destroy.” (Albrecht, 2011)

Retired professor of Sustainability at Murdoch University and self-proclaimed “farm-osopher”, Glenn Albrecht, has created a new typology for these emotional states which he has called psychoterratic states (See Table A). Albrecht states that this new typology is a response to the stress, the tensions, that are going on within us all the all of the time...unfolding in the 21st century at a pace and scale that we've never seen before” (2011). Albrecht was prompted to create this typology first in 2005 when he published a paper documenting the impact of large-scale mining and the relentless drought on people living in the Upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales (2007). In his paper, Albrecht found that there was a very strong and unique correlation between ecological distress and human distress. There is a great deal of literature that documents the pain that people feel when they are displaced due to natural or human causes. In fact, Albrecht notes that the “place pathology” the people in the Upper Hunter Valley were feeling, could be compared to those of the indigenous peoples of North America, who have endured generations of emotional distress over the loss of their land and culture and their

inability to ever return (Albrecht, et al., 2007). The difference, however, was that the people of the Upper Hunter Valley were not being actively displaced. Nobody was being forced to relocate and leave their home or loved ones behind. Some outsiders with business interests had come and settled there, but not to the degree of pushing the residents out and replacing them. Yet Albrecht writes, “In the Hunter Valley it was the distress of those that remained in the wake of zones of high impact that was the focus of my concern. The places that I was interested in were not being completely ‘lost’, they were places being transformed.” (Albrecht, et al., 2007, p.4). In order to describe the peculiar state of melancholia that combines the sense of loss of place—while remaining in that place—along with the powerlessness felt in the face of environmental injustice, Albrecht coined the term *solastalgia*.

The birth of the term solastalgia was not met with thunderous applause from academics across the globe as most new academic terminology is not. However, since its inception in 2005, it has become more widely accepted. In 2015, *The Lancet*, one of the world’s oldest peer-reviewed medical journals, cited solastalgia as one of the adverse connections between human health and well being and climate change (Whitmee, et al., 2015). As the term gained approval, Albrecht set to the task of identifying other emotional states and concepts that were unique to living in the dawn of climate change. Albrecht categorized this new typology as psychoterratic states. Currently, he is running an online archive called *Psychoterratica*, in which he updates new terminology. His neologisms are also now being used by other researchers as a basis for studying the emotional impact of climate change in populations such as the K’omoks First Nation of British Columbia (MacKinnon, 2016) and the Inuit of Arctic Canada (Ellis &

Cunsolo, 2020). To date, Albrecht and his colleagues have documented over 30 psychoterratic states.

In 2019, Albrecht published a book, *Earth emotions: New words for a new world*, in which he explores psychoterratic states not just as emotional experiences, but as key phases of an epic odyssey humanity is living out. Albrecht argues that his terminology is meant to recontextualize the age-old paradigms of love versus hate or good versus evil. These paradigms address the relationship between the Earth and our mental health states (2019). While this binary is intense, it is the motivation for all of Albrecht's work. For him, the fact that there are no words for these intense emotions and behaviors indicates that there is something wrong with our relationship to the Earth. This isn't only a lack of prescriptive language, but ultimately a facet of earth murder, or *tierracide*, effectively erasing the need to conceptualize this destruction humans and the environment are enduring.

The Problem

Although I feel strongly that Albrecht is creating a necessary language to frame our relationship to climate change, I have a few concerns around the language he's using and its accessibility to a wider audience. Words like "solastalgia" and "eutierria" feel pedantic and long-winded. When I tried to explain his classification to my peers, they were intrigued, but the barrier of comprehension was such that they stumbled over the words and couldn't get a sense of their full meaning. In his review of *Earth emotions*, Scott McLemee of *Inside higher ed* wrote, "[Albrecht's] book does identify some new maladies of the soul, but an adequate language to express them will need to be imagined, not just deduced." (McLemee, 2019). For terms that describe intense emotional states of being, the terms themselves have a tendency to feel elusively formal and academic. The 'imagining' aspect could go a long way in expressing these concepts in an enduring process.

Of any major world issue, people in my generation, Gen Z (people born after 1995), are most concerned and will be most impacted by climate change (now in addition to the Covid-19 global pandemic that broke out after the research for this project was finished). In the 2019 Future for Humanity Survey conducted by Amnesty International, 10,000 people in the age range of 18-24 years old in 22 countries were asked about the current state of human rights and which issues they felt were most pressing at the time. The most commonly cited problem globally was climate change (41% of respondents) followed by pollution (36%). When governments discussed the survey in Spain for the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference, Secretary-General of Amnesty International, Kumi Naidoo proclaimed, "In this year when young people mobilized in huge

numbers for the climate, it can be no surprise that many of those surveyed saw it as one of the most important issues facing the world...” (Amnesty International, 2019). There is clearly a need to bridge Albrecht’s scholarship and the work of young people who are coming of age as their generation is defined by climate change.

There have been attempts in the past to proliferate these terms to young people, who are Albrecht’s intended audience as well. In 2018, *Vice* published an article about Albrecht and psychoterratic states (Olsen, 2018). In his article, Albrecht voices his desire for baby boomers to step aside and make way for the next generation to embrace “symbiotic and living growth,” starting with a paradigm shift in how young people think about climate change. *Vice* is one of the fastest growing youth media companies in the world making it a great channel for youth outreach (Vice, 2016). But there are still other ways to reach this generation. For these reasons, I have aimed for my project to live at the intersection of environmental social causes, emotions, and graphic design for an audience that is already feeling these states and now needs to see them.

The Form and Content

Albrecht’s psychoterratic states simply are not catchy enough for everyday conditions. They may even run the risk of being intimidating or, worse, boring. Given the subject matter, it would be appropriate for this project to connect with people on both an emotional and intellectual level. In order to form an emotional response, it is important that people encounter the subject in places where they might be feeling some psychoterratic states. Though not the only factor, highly urbanized areas that take over natural spaces, and separate people from natural processes,

account for a rising disconnect with nature (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2017). Posters, therefore, would be an ideal medium to engage with audiences in industrialized and frequently trafficked spaces. Though on its surface a humble format, the poster is a powerful and accessible means for communication. According to Quentin Bodin, designer and co-founder of French design studio, Super Terrain, “The poster is the best format, even if today motion is coming out, the poster stays the most direct way to diffuse an image in a public space, to give it to everyone (Filmer-Court, 2020). Unlike digital or other print formats, there is no apparatus that is needed to engage with a poster other than the human eye.

Placing the posters in a context where the audience feels disconnected from nature allows them to reflect upon these emotions that often accompany that feeling of disconnection.

. It would not be effective to lead with the terminology. Instead, I crafted moody phrases at the top of the textual hierarchy that was both striking and relatable enough to draw my audience in, such as *'THANKS BASTARDS'*, *'THE FUTURE IS CANCELLED'*, or *'EVERY PASSING YEAR, I FORGET ONCE AGAIN'*. These phrases are intended to capture the essence of each state but in terms that are more relatable to my audience. Each poster exists within a visual system consisting of rules to reinforce the message. They are deeply saturated, but duotone and feature

both illustrations and digital photo manipulations as well. These choices emphasize the real and abstract nature of the terms and connect the series to the aesthetics of grassroots political movements. They all feature a hand engaging in gestures such as, pushing away or flipping off to symbolize the engagement humans have and are responsible for in these states. They all feature a definition and phonetic breakdown of the state they represent. These commonalities allow the series to feel cohesive while also expressing a wide variety of emotions.

Tierracide

The deliberate desolation of the earth such that it can no longer support life.

Tierracide refers to the intentional destruction of the earth to the point that it can no longer support life. Albrecht also refers to it as *earth murder*. It is at once dramatic and passionate, while also painfully slow and desolate. Both the composition and color choices between the foreground and background are representative of these two conditions.

Ecoagnosy

Lack of knowledge about and hence ignorance of past ecological states.

People who experience *ecoagnosy* have been cut off from their surroundings and their past. To convey this sense of seclusion and detachment, the title is wrapped around the poster's other assets. One of those assets is a progression of corridors containing a photo collage of twisting, disorienting vines and branches. On the bottom of the poster is a vase spilling out particles that drift into the void. The viewer gets a sense of disconnection from the collective, while blindly straying further towards uncertainty.

Eutierra

A positive and good feeling of oneness with the earth

The concept of *eutierra* is almost like a return to Eden, this idea of the earliest state of innocence where there is nothing to encumber a sense of oneness with one's surroundings. In this way, the pink embodies that return to an infant state of humanity and the comfort it provides. Many elements are overlapping or interacting in some way to emphasize the sense of oneness. These signal to the viewer the mutual participation of flora, fauna, humanity, and the forces of nature itself.

Solastalgia

The lived experience of homesickness you have when you are still at home.

Solastalgia is characterized by the uncomfortable tension of feeling disconnected from a place you are still connected to. The digitally manipulated photos are part of the same picture but distorted and removed from each other nearly to the point of being beyond recognition. The imagery and color choices in this poster capture that tension in different ways from the rope that is about to sever, to the figures that are falling from the stars to the hands that are both wringing with grief but could also be seen as greedily preparing to grasp the landscape before them.

Global Dread

The anticipation of an apocalyptic future state of the world

One of the heaviest emotions that Albrecht has identified is the sense of global dread. This is certainly no better illustrated than through the classic imagery of Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders. Global dread is an endless burden that hinders any kind of action. In this rendition, Atlas is carrying a deflating, melting sadness as he traverses a craggy terrain represented by a treated photo of an oil spill. The burdens are not only on his back but surrounding him, not the least of which is the outlook for the future.

Topoaversion

The feeling that you do not wish to return to a place that you once loved when you know that it has been changed for the worst.

The mark of *topoaversion* is an irreparable change to a place that forces you to cut ties with it. At this point, the relationship you have to that place is only in a fragmented memory that has been tainted by your involuntary disengagement. This poster stands out from its counterparts in that the biggest element is central and contained. The imagery is obfuscated by the hands that are pushing away from the audience giving the sense of being unwelcome in this space.

Symbiocene

An age that will be in evidence when there is no discernable impact of human activity on the planet other than the temporary remains.

The *symbiocene* is one of the most important concepts that Albrecht hopes to leave behind for a younger audience. His vision is for the term to serve as the new meme that redefines how the next generation thinks about everything from economics to architecture, and hopefully culminates into a Generation S, a generation that values symbiotic growth between humans and nature. The themes in this poster are altruism, moving forward, cohesion with natural processes, and leaving the past behind.

Topopinea

A deep longing and coveting to enter a place you have never been to but wish to go.

Topopinea speaks to a misplaced sense of longing. It's nostalgia for a somewhat romanticized, elusive concept rather than an actual time and place that existed. There is a strong feeling of longing and reaching out to grasp something undefined. Unfortunately, both physical and mental barriers block that place off from ever being reachable. The colors and imagery of the poster are both warm and forlorn, underscoring the tragedy of this state.

Terrafurie

*The anger within those who can clearly see and are frustrated by self-destructive patterns
that occur in society*

All psychoterratic states have a certain intensity to them, but *terrafurie* is uniquely visceral. This emotion speaks to a fundamental dissatisfaction that manifests itself in Twitter threads, political platforms, and the silent seething that is felt every time Amazon reminds us of how impossibly convenient it is to order from them. The flames both cover and lurk behind the middle ground of the composition speaks to that permeation. In all aspects of the poster, there is growing violent energy that stems from the desire to tear down systems in place that are creating our destruction.

Conclusions

“Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.” Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu (Hinton, 2015)

The primary existential question of the 21st century revolves around climate change. As each year passes and the detrimental consequences of climate change become more pervasive, our relationship to the earth and each other will actively change. Rather than allowing these changes to integrate thoughtlessly into the current paradigm, the next generation will be far more prepared to face these challenges with a new framework that is specifically tailored to those challenges. There is a remarkable potential of psychoterratic terms. My hope is to create a visual language where these terms can live and evolve rather than leaving them to exist in a 4-page long glossary. By doing so, they will be far easier to internalize and integrate into the ways younger generations think about climate change as well as the value that they place upon all processes of life.

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Table A

Ecoagnosy	Lack of knowledge about, hence ignorance of, past ecological states.
Eutierria	A positive and good feeling of oneness with the Earth and its life forces where the boundaries between self and the rest of nature are obliterated and a deep sense of peace and connectedness pervades consciousness
Global Dread	The anticipation of an apocalyptic future state of the world that produces a mixture of terror and sadness in the sufferer for those who will exist in such a state
Mermerosity	An anticipatory state of being worried about the possible passing of the familiar and its replacement by that which does not sit comfortably in one's sense of place
Psychoterratic	Emotions related to positively and negatively perceived and felt states of the Earth
Solastalgia	The pain or distress caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory; the lived experience of negative environmental change; the homesickness you have when you are still at home
Soliphilia	The giving of political commitment to the protection of loved home places at all scales, from the local to the global, from the forces of desolation
Sumbiophilia	The love of living together
Symbiocene	The era in Earth history that comes after the Anthropocene; the Symbiocene will be in evidence when there is no discernable impact of human activity on the planet other than the temporary remains of their teeth and bones; everything that humans do will be integrated within the support systems of all life and will leave no trace
Terrafurie	The extreme anger unleashed within those who can clearly see the self-destructive tendencies in the current forms of industrial-technological society and they feel they must protest and act to change its direction
Terranascia	Earth creator

Terraphthora	Earth destroyer
Tierracide	Earth murder, the deliberate desolation of the Earth such that it can no longer support life and life-support processes
Tierratrauma	Acute Earth-based existential trauma in the present.
Topoaversion	The feeling that you do not wish to return to a place that you once loved and enjoyed when you know that it has been irrevocably changed for the worse
Topopinea	A deep longing to enter a place you have never been to

Table A. (Albrect, 2019)