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## Book Review

Barnett, Joshua Trey. (2022). **Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence**. Michigan State University Press.

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In the prologue to her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014), Elizabeth Kolbert reflects on the ubiquity of biospheric transformations occurring due to anthropogenic behavior. While the bulk of Kolbert's book charts her travels around the world to examine case studies demonstrating human-driven species extinction, the author observes here that, perhaps, she did not need to leave home at all: "such is the scope of the changes now taking place that I could have gone pretty much anywhere and...found signs of them" (3). The International Union for Conservation of Nature's "Red List of Threatened Species," for instance, has now identified more than 42,000 species at risk of extinction, including forty percent of all amphibians and over a third of all conifer trees (IUCN 2022; Gilbert 2022). According to the organization's latest update, 2022 marked the official end-of-the-line for almost seventy species of animals, including the Yangtze sturgeon (*Acipenser Dabryanu*), Australia's *Nyakala* or "mountain mist" frog (*Ilitoria Nyakalensis*), and the Atlantic's giant atlas barbel (*Labeobarbus Reini*) (Ratner). As a result, and in an era distinguished by escalating ecological crises that inevitably result in such destruction of species, homes, and entire ecosystems, it is not an exaggeration to surmise that "earthly coexistence entails loss" (Barnett xi).

So begins Joshua Trey Barnett's compellingly lyrical *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence*, an insightful, moving examination of how to better pay attention and respond to the increasing ecological losses with which we find ourselves entangled and surrounded. As Barnett's prologue succinctly traces, generations of settler-colonial ideology and extractive capitalism have wrought losses of organisms and landscapes on levels far greater than "natural" rates might assume, culminating in our current historical moment of rampant species extinction, deforestation, soil degradation, ocean acidification, and other markedly un-natural phenomenon. At the center of Barnett's larger inquiry is the tantalizing potential of ecological grief to serve as an actant of change in the face of such overwhelming loss. Arguing that grief is both a rhetorical process and achievement through which we sustain connections with those already lost and anticipate future, yet still-undetermined losses, Barnett explores how we might facilitate this sense of emotional agency through a closer attunement to the more-than-human world. Barnett's construction builds off existing thinking on grief and mourning by scholars such as Judith Butler, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Thomas van

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Dooren, Ann Cvetkovich and even Sigmund Freud, situating these emotions not as passive responses of inaction or withdrawal, but rather as “gestures toward a sense of connection, intimacy, and even love across profound differences” (16). By considering grief particularly as it relates to ecological thinking, Barnett’s book offers a meaningful contribution to recent scholarship on environmental rhetoric and emotion. As Dolly Jørgensen (2019) has convincingly argued, “emotional frameworks matter deeply in both how people mentally understand nature and how they interact physically with it” (5). For Barnett, grief emerges as significant in this regard because of its enmeshment with other feelings that cultivate active responses. As a rhetorician, Barnett underscores his field’s possible contribution to this emotional understanding, averring that rhetoric “plays a crucial part in directing...just who and what we see as worthy of our concern and our care” (27).

Barnett surveys an array of rhetorical practices through which he sees ecological grief made possible. His second chapter considers the power and significance of naming, elucidating how this phenomenon is vital to creating the conditions for feeling grief. While recognizing that naming is an inherently complex dynamic—one often tied to settler-colonial ideologies of domination and erasure—Barnett also emphasizes its rhetorical significance on emotions: “names are essential for grief. They direct our attention to what is with us and, therefore, to what we can lose” (45). Implicit especially here, but throughout *Mourning in the Anthropocene* in general, is Barnett’s alignment with a longstanding tradition of thinkers who regard more-than-human beings as kinfolk and, therefore, deserving of greater respect and affection than Western cultures typically endow (van Horn 2021). Citing Jacques Derrida’s (2008) articulation that a name is “a foreshadowing of mourning,” Barnett establishes the notion that naming suggests or bestows value (qtd. in Barnett 41). Through examining various cultural practices—recent art installations, war memorials, dictionary archives, and ongoing attempts to name and label our current planetary era—Barnett both demonstrates the potentiality of naming as a means for facilitating ecological grief while also arguing that, because of its importance in shaping how we perceive the world around us, this act warrants careful, ongoing scrutinization.

Beyond naming, Barnett reveals how performing archival work in general can also instill an active understanding of ecological grief. The practice of phenology—closely observing and recording environmental occurrences like weather patterns, plant behavior, and animal sightings—sharpens an individual’s perception of loss across multiple timescales: past, present, and future. Barnett cites Aldo Leopold’s phenomenological recordings in central Wisconsin as exemplifying the types of ecocentric insights that might be generated from such focused, deliberate attention. Beyond documenting past and current observations of place, participating in the acts of phenology—witnessing, recording, and archiving—prods an individual to recognize that everything observed “already tinges with the possibility of loss; everything to which they [the phenologist] attend may pass—or be pushed—out of existence” (88). Demonstrating the contemporary praxis of this thinking, Barnett again spotlights recent cultural artifacts—especially digital technologies—that allow individuals to participate in public archiving projects. Such acts emerge as “a means of preparing ourselves to recognize and grieve losses to come” (101). Furthermore, as scholars such as Sean Morey and Sidney Dobrin (2009), as well as Teena Gabrielson (2019) have previously explored, visual rhetoric, likewise, holds significant potential for impacting emotional understandings of and reactions to environmental concerns. Barnett likewise orients his last chapter toward how visualizations might illustrate ecological grief in ways that render the prospect of loss as “conceivable,



tangible, imaginable” (110). Here, too, Barnett surveys a diverse range of international case studies that perform this rhetorical work. For example, an encounter with Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing’s traveling exhibition “Ice Watch, 2014,” which featured a dozen blocks of melting glacial ice from Greenland, arranged in a circular shape, enabled an individual to understand the material dimensions of climate change on both visible and tangible levels as the ice melted directly in front of them—a sensation that was accelerated even further by an individual’s physical contact with it (126). Such a visual and kinesthetic rendering of current and future loss concretizes what might otherwise appear to be an abstract or distant threat.

As the chapters combine to demonstrate, Barnett’s considerations here represent a purposeful eclecticism that transcends disciplinary boundaries: art, prose, film, monuments, and digital technologies compose only a fraction of the evidence offered up to convincingly suggest the power and potential of rhetoric in fostering ecological grief. And yet, this response is not inherent nor automatic, but rather, as Barnett emphasizes, an *achievement* that opens us up to a more intricate, mindful coexistence with all forms of life. Considering Jay Johnson and Soren Larsen’s previous exploration of how Indigenous-led community-wide grief over the proposed destruction of Kansas’s Wakarusa Wetlands underscored the decades-spanning efforts to preserve them, Barnett observes that grief opens us up to an “anticipatory stance,” whereby we are called to care and protect that which we might eventually mourn (23). In other words, while such thinking might ultimately entail sorrow and bereavement, it is our capacity to feel these sensations in the first place that also make possible proactive, response-oriented feelings of love, concern, and care.

In a famous essay from *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994), author and environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams describes a similar awakening: “I think of my own stream of desires, how cautious I have become with love. It is a vulnerable enterprise to feel deeply...if I choose not to become attached to nouns, my heart cannot be broken because I never risked giving it away” (64). Yet, as Williams continues, this mindful conservation of emotion, ultimately, would leave her in a state of “impoverishment” that would extend toward the landscape itself. Williams remarks, “Our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land” (64). *Mourning in the Anthropocene* echoes this sentiment but also extends it toward a pragmatic response, offering a stirring meditation on what we might gain from opening ourselves toward a more compassionate embrace of our more-than-human neighbors. If successfully realized, according to Barnett, grief and mourning provide the catalysts for the “energy we need to labor on behalf of our fellow travelers” (145). The resulting “labor” Barnett envisions here emerges most visibly in collective actions which seek to prevent future, unnecessary destruction and loss, such as 2016’s Standing Rock movement, Extinction Rebellion’s “die-in” demonstrations, and other public protests that explicitly advocate for care and justice for the more-than-human world (145; 143). Such open, communal actions represent a future sense of bereavement paired with a contemporary praxis of anticipatory mourning, and ultimately display the promise and potential of ecological grief that Barnett so thoughtfully describes. If our current era’s ongoing entanglement with loss requires a collective human response, perhaps it is by first acknowledging—and, indeed, feeling—what we have already lost that positions us to better protect what we still have to lose.

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