



Climate Trauma, or the Affects of the Catastrophe to Come

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Abstract The climate catastrophe to come is traumatically affecting, whether in its micro and macro manifestations, in the threat it poses to existing ways of life, in its upending of entrenched understandings of the workings of the world, or in the injury it is doing to particular lives and wider ecologies. It works on ecologies and bodies alike as a kind of wounding, one not simply or solely to the everyday stuff of biological life but to the very constitution of experience and expression. Critiquing and extending writing on climate, trauma, and aesthetic experience by E. Ann Kaplan (2016), Timothy Morton (2013), and others, this article argues that these affects of climate catastrophe are traumatically affecting without necessarily being traumatizing: they are jarring, rupturing, disjunctive experiences of future crisis in the now. This article traces these affects of apocalypse as they circulate traumatically in three texts: George Miller's film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), Marina Zurkow's animation *Slurb* (2009), and Briony Doyle's novel *The Island Will Sink* (2016). Climate catastrophe, that most threatening yet elusive of hyperobjects, marks and emerges irresistibly from within these works, not simply as theme, setting, or symbol but as the form of their affectivity. This intensity presses into the present from the future, shaping how the catastrophe to come is felt today and exposing crucial tensions between aesthetic expression and lived experience.

Keywords affect, climate trauma, hyperobject, catastrophe, futurity, Deleuze

Already arriving from the future yet only just beginning to unfold, climate catastrophe bears down on and shapes the present. It cannot but be felt in the now: in its micro and macro manifestations, in the threat it poses to existing ways of life, in its upending of entrenched understandings of the workings of the world, and in the injury it does to particular lives and wider ecologies. Climate catastrophe works on ecologies and bodies alike as a kind of wounding, one not simply or solely to the everyday stuff of biological life but to the very constitution of experience and expression. This wounding is not so much traumatic as it is traumatically affecting. It is a wounding that manifests in jarring, rupturing, disjunctive encounters with future crisis in the contemporary moment. While this traumatic affectivity manifests in multiple forms, it has particular consequences for aesthetic expression and its relation to experience itself.

What happens, then, when trauma is conceived at this impossible scale of climate? How are traumatic relations between the macro and the micro, between the planetary and the personal, the geologic and the momentary, to be grasped? How does a future catastrophe that has only begun to arrive shape experience in the now? And, drawing together all of these questions, how might cinema, art, literature, and other cultural texts make climate trauma manifest not simply as theme, setting, or symbol but within and through particular affective forms? How might future catastrophe emerge in aesthetic expression?

This last question is the focus of E. Ann Kaplan's 2016 book *Climate Trauma*, the most comprehensive account of trauma as it pertains to global warming in film and literature. Analyzing a collection of dystopian films and novels, Kaplan argues for recognition of what she calls *pretrauma*, or the traumatic imagining of future catastrophe. In contrast to classical accounts of trauma as concerned with the belated experience of violently rupturing past events, Kaplan describes "Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome" as shocking, debilitating imaginings of what may soon take place; imaginings that manifest in nightmares, hallucinations, paranoia, and depression.¹ "These fantasies function as warnings," she writes, "a kind of 'memory of the future'" (3). For Kaplan, such texts are both explorations of the psychological effects of future trauma and potential inducers of pretraumatic stress. Watching the films she identifies and analyses, "viewers witness probable futurist dystopian worlds as they are imagined . . . before they happen in reality" (24). These dystopian films are not allegories of past or present events but vehicles for witnessing potential traumatic futures and, through that witnessing, exposure to a kind of vicarious pretrauma (33). There is an ethical dimension to her analysis, an insistence on the potential for witnessing to instill "responsibility for injustices in the past and preventing future human-based catastrophe" (24). Kaplan's project pursues two lines of inquiry: the inference of spectator reaction and the depiction of memories of future selves by characters in the films. Reworking the classic psychoanalytic understanding of trauma as the belated experience of a wounding event that cannot be made sense of or placed in narrative context, Kaplan's theorizing of climate trauma does the valuable work of articulating trauma from the future. Yet her theory of pretrauma accounts for neither the affective forms of future catastrophes nor the complex relationship between aesthetic experience and lived, material existence in the undertow of a catastrophic future.

Addressing these complexities requires attending first to the crucial question of how climate change itself might be understood as traumatically affecting. Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobject" offers a useful way into thinking about "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans."² For Morton, global warming is the paradigmatic hyperobject: it is supersized in relation to a multitude of

1. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, 1–2 (hereafter cited in the text).

2. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

other objects contained within it and impossible to point to except via abstraction or symptom. Thus global warming manifests in second-order representation, such as the famous “hockey stick” graph, or in localized effects, such as the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef. The thing itself—the complex, interlocked phenomenon of global warming—eludes identification. Global warming constitutes a radical trauma, “*the ecological trauma of our age*,” one marked by what Morton calls a “loss of coordinates, ‘the end of the world.’”³ This end of the world is not only the end of human lifeworlds but also the end of the meaningfulness of the concept of world itself: the world as a knowable, containable, definable entity can no longer cohere.⁴ The “rupture at the heart of being” produced by recognition of global warming as hyperobject throws into blinding relief the disparity between the human capacity to respond and the scale of the problem.⁵

Part of the challenge for conceptualizing, experiencing, and responding to global warming is that its worst effects are yet to come: it is a catastrophe from the future, one that both has and has not yet arrived. What has not yet happened looms threateningly over any and all present manifestations. Devastating as the contemporary collapse of ecosystems can be, what those collapses mean is always bound up with, or on the other side of, what they portend. Each symptom of global warming is thus both a marker of past destruction and a message from the future of arriving catastrophe. To encounter global warming—a heat wave sweeps western Europe; a hurricane incapacitates New York City; vanished lakes leave communities parched on the subcontinent—is to feel, bodily, the future in the present. Such an encounter shakes the ontological ground of experience. Yet while Morton describes various properties of hyperobjects, it is not clear in his writing what is actually going on in the felt force of global warming, its strange movements, circulations, and manifestations, and the varying intensities with which it touches bodies. What, in other words, are the affects of the end of the world? How are they made manifest in the cultural production through which we make sense of what the future might become? In what ways does this rupturing arrival of an apocalyptic futurity require rethinking not only experience and expression but also their relation to one another?

That the threat of global warming is already here—that the catastrophe has both conceptually and physically already ended the world—complicates matters further. If threats in general are from the future, as Brian Massumi argues in *Ontopower*, then the threat of climate catastrophe is both not yet here and already doing damage. In Massumi’s conception, threat is felt as an affective fact—encountered in the present as an experiential reality of what might come to pass. Threats remain in the domain of the potential, and that is what grants them power: their failure to arrive does not signal the end of the threat but rather its continued presence. Consider, for instance, the threat

3. Ibid., 9, 22.

4. Ibid., 103.

5. Ibid., 78.

of terrorism and the expansion of the security state it continually authorizes, from citizen surveillance to drone killings to immigration controls. In the contemporary world, threats such as this are affectively ever present. As Massumi writes, "This is the figure of today's threat: the suddenly erupting, locally self-organizing, systemically self-amplifying threat of large-scale disruption."⁶ This background hum of potential crisis is the generalized condition of the affective present in the national security sphere and, increasingly, in relation to climate as well. Hurricane Katrina, for example, "may well have been abnormal. But it expressed nothing so much as the normality of a generalized crisis environment so encompassing in its endemic threat-form as to connect, across the spectrum, the polar extremes of war and weather."⁷ There is, in a very real sense, an affective injury in the now from that which has and has not arrived. This traumatic relation to ecological crisis is about not simply the apparent futility of action in this era of late capitalism but also the exponential complexity of the problem, what Massumi calls the "multiplier effects" that continually emerge within accounts of global warming.⁸ Catastrophe is not only imagined for the future but refigures the meaning of the present and of traces of the past. Histories must be reinscribed, industrialization or capitalism or colonialism (or some combination of these and other factors) understood as the instigator of the Anthropocene, to take one example, but so too must our perception of summer days that stretch into autumn and the countless other small perturbations of the symbolic and affective registers of everyday life. This is the work of apocalyptic affects; the affects of climate catastrophe, of futures arrived, arriving and yet to come.

In the three readings that follow—of George Miller's film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), Marina Zurkow's single-channel animation *Slurb* (2009), and Briohny Doyle's debut novel *The Island Will Sink* (2016)—the affects of climate catastrophe will be traced as they take differing aesthetic forms in the imaginary of the global north: the desert, the flood, the mediated disaster.⁹ These forms show the varied ways in which the future marks the present, not simply as imagined fantasy but as an aesthetic expression through which audiences encounter catastrophes that are yet to come. These affective formations are also more than symbols, allegories, or metaphors: they are the potential experiences of existence, captured in aesthetic expression. Each constitutes a projection into the future of dynamics of power and materiality in the present. Each shows how creative works addressed to catastrophic futures seek affective forms for addressing the disjunctive rupture of experience and expression characteristic of climate trauma. Before turning to these texts and the affective forms each enacts, however, the relationship between experience, expression, and the future merits closer examination.

6. Massumi, *Ontopower*, 22.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 31.

9. Doyle, *Island Will Sink*; Zurkow, *Slurb*.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze recognizes that futurity resides at the heart of the event and its relation to expression. The event is “always and at the same time something which has just happened and something which is about to happen; never something which is happening.”¹⁰ This simultaneous doubling and splitting of that which has just happened, or the actual, and that which may be about to, or the virtual, constitutes a kind of rupturing: a wound. While this wound is not corporeal in the same way as a cut or broken bone, it is nonetheless bound up with sensation, with the bodily experience of the event—and, crucially, with its separating into a distinct symbolic element in the realm of pure expression. Or, to put this in more distinct terms, the wound is the rupturing of virtual into actual, whether in experience, thought, or expression. Deleuze’s choice of the wound as a metaphor is telling: it draws particular attention to the violence inherent in the limiting of potential that occurs in anything’s becoming actual. To call this a wounding suggests that all intersections of the virtual and the actual, all forms of creation—whether life-living or art-making—are inextricable from injury, from a cleaving of one thing from another.

This relation between life and expression circulates in Deleuze’s enigmatic final essay, “Immanence: A Life . . . ,” in which he dwells on the two terms of the title and their relation to one another.¹¹ He shows how immanence neither refers to an object nor belongs to a subject but is immanent only to itself. The second term—a life—captures something at once instinctively understood and yet very difficult to pin down precisely. It is life as an indefinite thing—not this life or that, not my life or hers, but rather a life, indefinite and potential, indeterminate yet somehow also composed of singularities. Only in wounding does a life become the life of a subject or object. “A life contains only virtual,” writes Deleuze. “It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities.”¹² Here the complex nature of the wound becomes clear. The wound is not simply to be suffered or endured; it is not an injury with moral overtones. It is incarnated in life as a state of things, as corporeal, temporal, and experiential, yet it leads into that indefinite, elusive plane of a life precisely because the wound is a “pure virtuality on the plane of immanence” even as it is actualized in particular bodies.¹³ Put differently, the wound constitutes a kind of passage, the means by which the plane of potential takes place, something felt as loss but also as always newly opened. Deleuze writes: “My wound existed before me: not a transcendence of the wound as higher actuality, but its immanence as a virtuality always within a milieu.”¹⁴ He might have chosen another word, yet this choice of wound (*une blessure* in the French) matters. It calls attention to an ethic of care; it evokes both fragility and resilience. It suggests that how wounding happens,

10. Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 73.

11. Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*.

12. *Ibid.*, 31.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

what form and movement it takes, matters both for *a life* and for *life lived*. This has consequences for conceptualizing and responding to pending climate catastrophe: it suggests that planetary wounding is also a wounding of the relation between experience and expression, between life and aesthetics.

Wounding, unsurprisingly, also occupies a central figural position in the study of trauma in the humanities. As literary theorist Cathy Caruth famously insists, trauma “is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.”¹⁵ This wound, like that of Deleuze, occupies a doubled position: marking both body and mind yet unknown to either. Only in the belated arrival of a voice from within the wound—a return of the wounding in the form of trauma—does knowing become possible through paradoxically testifying to its own impossibility. As in Deleuze, the wound of trauma is not a metaphor but rather the living embodiment of a relation of rupture between experience and expression. While the disciplinary foundations of trauma studies in psychoanalysis and Derridean textual deconstruction offer no easy fit with Deleuze’s processual philosophy, there is a resonance between them that proves productive once trauma is reconceived in the affective forms that circulate in the texts examined here, in their evocation of the experience and expression of catastrophic futures.

What Deleuze and trauma studies share in their conception of the wound is recognition that its rupturing ruptures the planes of experience and expression. More, that this rupturing is at once destructive and creative—it closes off or eliminates potential even as it produces the actual. Trauma, in short, can spawn creation. In this sense, it can be understood as a particular form of relation between the virtual and the actual—that is, as a specific affective dynamic, what Massumi describes as “the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other.”¹⁶ In trauma, that enmeshment of virtual and actual is radically constrained by the foreclosure of potential and meaning that is characteristic of traumatic ruptures to experience: the disjunctive wound becomes a discordant, damaging feedback loop. Divorced from problems of scale and the necessity of human subjectivity, the wound in the virtualities of *a life* escapes the problem of shifting between the personal and the collective that troubles so much work on trauma in the humanities, including Kaplan’s on climate trauma.

In the texts to which this essay will shortly turn, that rupture is about not the past as such but the pressing presence of catastrophic futures in the present. Each works in different ways to coalesce in aesthetic form the wounding affectivity of the end of human lifeworlds. While the affectivity of the encounter with each of these texts forms part of the analysis, the reading method deployed in this essay also takes seriously Eugenie Brinkema’s injunction to address affect as it manifests in aesthetic form and

15. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

16. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 35.

structure.¹⁷ The specific contours of my own textual encounters should not be elided or ignored, but nor should they be privileged or generalized. Here, then, I articulate those personal encounters as arising in relation to the affective formations within the texts themselves: through aesthetics that marshal, manifest, and modulate affect in various forms. Through the varied affective modalities of the desert, the flood, and the mediated disaster, each engages the rupturing relation between the virtual and the actual that is at the heart of the wound described by Deleuze. *Fury Road* sets the tenacious fragility of human life against what Elizabeth A. Povinelli calls the geontological, or the nonbiological “life” of the planet.¹⁸ In its fusion of ceaseless action with a geologic scale, the film’s aesthetic and narrative themes insist on rupture and renewal as intimately interwoven. *Slurb* offers a sharply contrasting vision of the future, one not of blasted rock but of watery flood. Here the question is not the end of biological life but its superabundance beyond the human; a wounding that leads to excess rather than scarcity. The flood reduces the human to narrow repetition and small gestures of survival, while watery life offers an emergent actuality to which the human becomes increasingly fleeting, parasitic, and virtual. *The Island Will Sink* is less concerned with relations between human life and its environment than with the mediated forms that experience can take in the face of catastrophe’s insistent gravitational pull. In the novel, the potential collapse of humanity is bound up with an urgent desire to be fully immersed in affective, haptic mediations of disaster itself—as if mediation might make that wounding on the plane of immanence accessible in its purest sense to aesthetic expression. While recognizing that these three works originate in Australia and the United States and thus map to specific contexts and imaginaries, taken together they offer a way into feeling catastrophic futures in the present—and attending to the possibility that such virtual potentials do not become actual existing things.

Fury Road, or Survival in the Desert

Australian director Miller’s *Mad Max* is a Hollywood blockbuster of rending, cleaving, shattering action-images and high-torque sound that pits the last, scattered humans against an impossible climate. This urgent movement, the fragility of flesh in the face of the geologic, suspends the viewing body in a heightened state, one that seems to ebb only to accentuate the affective force of the frenzy’s return. Apocalyptic tribes dedicated to cars, bullets, and fuel rule a blasted earth, what remains after a nuclear winter has decimated much of the planet’s life, leaving behind little but bare rock and endless desert. While the film offers scant detail on the events that produced catastrophic ruin, the forces that continue to animate these remnants—hypermachismo, capitalist resource exploitation, authoritarian control—are surely responsible. Action in *Fury Road* centers on the escape of the warlord Immortan Joe’s captive wives, beautiful women imprisoned

17. Brinkema, *Forms of the Affects*, xi–xvi.

18. Povinelli, *Geontologies*.

as breeding partners in his fortress, a mesa above an aquifer from which he pumps fresh water. His trusted female lieutenant, Imperator Furiosa, arranges their escape, hijacking an armored war-rig truck meant to deliver water and the mother's milk of women kept like dairy cattle. Aided by the warlord rulers of the nearby Gas Town and Bullet Town, Joe pursues with his army of War Boys—irradiated young men who worship him as a deity. Caught in the conflict that ensues is Max Rockatansky, the road warrior protagonist of Miller's earlier *Mad Max* films. Captured by the War Boys in the film's opening scene, Max is caged and attached to Nux, a depleted War Boy who needs Max's "high-octane blood" to join in the pursuit. While Max is the nominal protagonist, the film's fundamental conflict is between Furiosa and the women, on one hand, and the oppressive regimes that dominate the geography of this postapocalyptic world on the other.

In this catastrophic future, capitalism is distilled to its essential modes of resource control, monopolizing the provision of water (and life), fuel (and energy), and bullets (and violence). Yet while in our present moment energy and violence are preeminent in the organization of sovereign power, in the future of *Fury Road* it is Immortan Joe's control over water that holds sway. To control water is to control the vestiges of the human, the scarred bodies—each emaciated, missing limbs, or bulging with tumors—that depend on it to live. This control of water is also control over the bodies of women and of reproduction itself, over the very capacity of the human to continue: it is water that enables Joe to keep and breed his wives and to cycle them into milking stations as they age. While such power might be understood as biopolitical, or power over life in the fashion described by Michel Foucault, it is better conceived as geontopower.¹⁹ Geontological power is what Povinelli describes as power over "the distinction between Life and Nonlife."²⁰ In this context, Life, broadly construed, encompasses cellular existence, while Nonlife refers primarily to the geologic, and thus geontopower is power over what is and is not defined as living. For Povinelli, this geontopower is historically specific: a "mode of late liberal governance" that is "trembling" at a point of crisis.²¹ *Fury Road* makes material the becoming-catastrophic of that crisis, imagining what happens when the essential conflict of the geontological becomes the ground for sheer survival. The bodies of Joe's War Boys capture this tension succinctly: their "half-lives" are both brief and infused with the radioactive fallout of nonlife. But the film interrogates the geontological aesthetically as well as thematically. It depicts humanity at what Thom van Dooren calls the "edge of extinction," the "slow unraveling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward."²² Each in their own way, the film's figures refuse to submit

19. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.

20. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 4.

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 12.

to that dull, slow species death—even in the face of an earth that offers fewer and fewer sites in which human life might be lived. Rather, they insist on the capacity of the wound to engender new forms of life from the immanence of sheer existence.

Fury Road's cinematic aesthetic is all scale and movement, the tension between humanity and human technologies and the vast and ongoing catastrophe of climatic upheaval. To encounter this aesthetic is to be thrown into the smallness of one's body, to attend to its corporeality in the midst of forces that so far exceed the human as to render it almost meaningless. Heat, dust storms, the endless salt deserts—these can only be survived, not overcome in any enduring form. Climate here is traumatized and traumatizing: the hyperobject becomes violent on an impossible scale and yet at the same time brutally immediate. One of the most powerful sequences to pull the affected body of the viewer—or rather, this white, male viewing body—onto the brink of crisis is that in which hordes of cars roar across the sand, mutated War Boys at the wheel, to be hurled into the teeth of a storm that is planetary in force and scope. This storm is dust and wind but also magnetic, a violent fusion of extreme atmospheres and denuded geography. It is Povinelli's geontological figure of the desert in radical form. For Povinelli, the desert is both a symptom of and diagnostic of the modes of power of late liberalism rather than an analytic or symbol of deserts in general. It stands in for "all things perceived and conceived as denuded of life" and dramatizes the "possibility that Life is always at threat from the creeping, desiccating sands of Nonlife."²³ Its affectivity "drives the fear that all places will soon be nothing more than the setting within a *Mad Max* movie."²⁴ While the film allegorizes our contemporary moment—the fossil-fueled rush into a future of oblivion—its aesthetics produce a force more affecting than allegory alone or than, indeed, the simple if potent theme of the perils of hypermasculine capitalism. In the arrival of the storm, aesthetic intensity exceeds narrative content. And while each viewing body is positioned and affected differently, shaped by specific histories, contexts, and experiences, this masculine viewing body—my body—cannot but tremble. As the camera pulls away and the storm overruns vehicles that become mere specks of dust, the remorselessness of catastrophic futures threatens the persistence of the human in time. It is as if the rupturing wound threatens to overwhelm the capacity of aesthetic expression to bear witness to experience, as if an event beyond the human were bringing life lived to its very limits such that *a life* would survive only as nonlife. Catastrophic affect takes aesthetic form as the melding of climate and geology, towers of magnetized dust and wind that are both the product of human technology in the form of nuclear war and at the same time the force of nonlife before which the human quakes. Within the storm and in its aftermath, human bodies are fragile, parched, and even buried. Furiosa, Max, and the wives continue on, but awareness of the narrow band within which life—theirs and others'—holds the potential for continuance is inescapable.

23. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 16.

24. *Ibid.*, 17.

As the grasp of this violent encounter loosens its hold, some affective residue clings, an awareness of the thinness of one's own skin, its permeability but also its capacity to heal: the film's evocation of climate trauma entails generative possibility alongside destruction. For Povinelli, the figure of the desert reveals the possibility "all things that could, with the correct deployment of technological expertise or proper stewardship, be (re)made hospitable to life."²⁵ Or, as Morton might put it, there is an ecology here with its own distinct status, one without the lyrical aesthetic form that "Nature" takes in much of the Western cultural imaginary.²⁶ After the storm, the fugitives in their stolen war-rig roll past dead trees standing in brackish water as birdlike men on stilts scavenge for what might be drinkable. Disquieting and even haunting, these brief images reveal a becoming-animal that is also an adaptation to the changed land: species survival, against extinction. Soon after, Furiosa learns that this was the site of the Green Place of her childhood: there is no utopia to which she and the others might escape. Reunited with the tribe of mothers from whom she was stolen, Furiosa learns that they have been driven to the edge of erasure, as if the female body can only breed or be banished from these domains of hypermasculine power, with Furiosa herself the rare exception. Initially, she attempts to lead a journey across the endless salt plains in search of some existence beyond the desert. Wracked by traumatic visions of his own failure to protect his family, Max convinces her otherwise and urges a return to the Citadel and the overthrow of geontological capitalism. Dramatizing a kind of reparative return to the originary site of trauma, the last third of the film is composed of an extended action sequence in which Furiosa is badly wounded and Joe killed, along with many of his War Boys. The film ends with Furiosa replacing the existing power structure with one founded on a reimagined socioeconomic order, one in which the seeds of trees and plants guarded by the mothers might take root. Its final images are of water freed from capital's control—against the odds, what has been made actual in the film's many violent cleavings is the stirring of something regenerative, of a female future in which reproduction is not subordinated to masculine power. However briefly, these images suggest, human extinction has been slowed. The desert as affect, as Povinelli argues, motivates exactly such a search for instances of life, for possibilities of continuing on. In the affective experience of the viewer, intensities have not only been generated but modulated, endured, and finally transformed: the release of the water releases us, too, from the clasp of traumatic affect aesthetically encountered. Surviving within such an affective formation means attending to moments of rupture, to the potential for creative regeneration inseparable from the Deleuzian wound. To watch countless parched bodies slake their thirst is to feel the urgency of survival against a future that is almost certain to be disaster: the sheer persistence of bodies and of the female body in particular, its capacity to endure, adapt, and hope. Further still, it is to encounter the intensity

25. Ibid., 16.

26. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*.

of the rupturing relation between expression and experience when the wound of the event arrives in aesthetic form: foreclosed futures made material in the image of power transformed, the renewal of countless lives as the actual flows from *a life*.

Slurb, or The Refrain of the Flood

Where *Fury Road* depicts a parched world on an epic scale, digital artist Zurkow's animation *Slurb* summons a very different apocalypse: watery, slimy, viscous. Thus while Miller's film echoes the tendency to conceive of the Anthropocene in geologic or lithic terms, *Slurb* calls attention to its neglected, watery implications and their demands on the imaginary.²⁷ In its original staging, *Slurb* was projected on the side of a building and displayed on screens along the river walk in the low-lying Florida city of Tampa, which commissioned the work for its *Lights on Tampa* festival. This setting would seem pregnant with possibility, primed for a shift in its affective atmosphere. Yet despite living in one of the US cities most vulnerable to rising sea levels, some residents of Tampa seemed not to find the work intimately affecting or strongly resonant, even with the work's cityscape modeled on Tampa's own skyline.²⁸ For me, viewing in a darkened room, headphones tight to my skull and the volume pushed to the limits of comfort, attention coalesces and the force of the work is inescapable: here is watery catastrophe, already arriving with unbidden intensity. Water is not the scarce resource of *Fury Road* but excessively abundant, the dominant element in the seventeen-minute forty-two-second animation. Avoiding the didactic tendency of certain climate art that, according to Adrian Parr, can sometimes lead to a failure to connect, Zurkow produces an affective form of visceral alienation. In her animation, humanity becomes increasingly other than it is today, while the life of water and watery creatures exist alongside humans yet occupied with their own wounded becoming.²⁹

Overheated oceans have risen to become a new primordial soup. Humans and animals float uncertainly above murky liquid on rafts, canoes, or islands of refuse. A handful of birds dip in and out of the water. In this drowned world, the markers of human achievement are signs only of civilizational fall, of climatic wounding. Shattered towers and broken buildings possess the same visual status as rocky atolls and piles of refuse. Cars and trucks, those repeated signifiers of industrial capital, are here sunk and static. If they have a use, it is only to provide another means of staying above the water. It is this liquid that is most richly textured, with gradients and shades within the swirling, pulsing pale blue. Even human skin is bathed in its reflective glow or perhaps has simply absorbed its hue, become its color. As if the wateriness of these bodies is becoming something more than human, losing the sharp edges and discrete boundaries that are foundational myths of humanism and evoking the passage of liquid from one watery

27. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 170.

28. Webster, "Marina Zurkow."

29. Parr, "Art, Politics, and Climate Change."

body to the next.³⁰ Vivid though the pinks, yellows, and reds of the clothes and objects of the anthropomorphic figures may be, it is these shaded, varied, and undulating blues of the water that pulse with life. The solid blocks of color that signal the human, prominent within the visual field of the panning camera, are nonetheless markers of stasis, stagnation, and loss, of human life dwindling in vitality. Watching the animation unfold to its discordant sound track, the viewer is held in this state of affective unease, a liminal intensity that neither restrains nor unleashes any singularity of experience. For both viewer and media it is as if renewal were held at bay, as if a wounding without potential binds this life to past histories.

Here is an ecology where the human has become parasitic, demoted from builder of cities to bare life. Indeed, the human as we know it may be ending, melding into the nonhuman animal: a handful of fox-headed humans signal the beginnings of new bodily forms and actions yet are still no closer to the amphibious necessity of the moment. Human activity lacks primacy or even clear meaning. Figures move in isolated scenes, either alone or, occasionally, with a handful of others. Figures in these scenes repeat awkward actions, cycles of stuttering, looping behaviors that figure a kind of traumatic futility, both the potential loss of purpose *and* our contemporary refusal to confront the relationship between our economies and cultures and climate catastrophe. These movements produce an accumulating yet low-level anxiety, repeated banalities that affectively layer one atop the other, becoming more and more uncomfortable to watch. Actions of survival—reaching into the water to fish strange pink and white balls or poling a crude vessel across the screen—hold the same status as those without apparent relation to their surrounds—an obese woman standing to curtsy, a parent and child walking hand-in-hand. If there is difference in this repetition it is only in relation to the environment, the screen panning, and makeshift boats gliding at varying speeds. Nothing escapes its loop, every movement is equally isolated, lonely despite the presence of so many others: only the viewer moves on; the figures remain trapped. Narrative is reduced to the panning camera, the shifts in soundscape among electronica, elegiac vocals, and industrial noise. There is no protagonist, no conflict, and no desire for redemption in this field of solipsistic activity. Yet the waters shift and change: currents flow, waves crash and recede, rains fall, jellyfish congeal and disperse. These watery movements do repeat, but their repetitions fold into one another—they form the world itself, the emergent ecology in which the human recedes. As the animation itself “ends” exactly as and where it “begins,” only to begin again, ad infinitum, this layering of repetition on repetition accumulates. Unlike the cataclysmic wounding of *Fury Road*, which unfolds in a narrative arc and gestures toward a renewed future for the human, the traumatic wounding here is most potently present within the repetition itself. This human failure of human action to make the new, of encounter with a life of pure immanence to produce, in the event of rupture, renewed life in familiar form, can lead only to a nonhuman future—of water and viscous life.

30. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 3.

Intensive repetition produces a refrain, an aesthetic movement that entrains the viewer: *Slurb* does not present signs of collapse but rather affectively conflates the repetitive, circular actions of the present with an apocalyptic future. Writing of the political force of the refrain in contemporary life, Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie point out that affective refrains are constitutive of new existential territories, new modes of existence. In the coming together of the circular repetitions of the human and the swirling fluidity of the water, “a new field of expression arises, a refrain that potentializes other refrains.”³¹ No singular image does the work here. It is the accumulation of affect, its liquidity becoming vital over time—yet doing so in a future where human time has become meaningless, repetition marked as different only in relation to the traveling frame of the viewer’s vision. This is difference without distinction or consequence, a refrain that makes material the potential of expression—despite the looping stasis of the figures’ repetitive actions—to find purchase in a postcataclysmic world. As Jill Bennett argues, art “unfettered by narrative framing” can bring the traumatic to an audience via affective devices that are “not subordinated to prescribed or didactic ends, but work to stimulate thinking in a different way.”³² *Slurb*’s insistence on the stuttering of human activity in its manifestation of a catastrophic future works in just this way: it destabilizes bodily certainties, generates disquiet, and holds the viewer in anxious tension. Global warming as ungraspable hyperobject is here produced affectively in the liquid refrains of a drowned, overheated, and traumatized world. A future not simply of societal collapse but of the collapse of meaning itself—or, rather, meaning as it coheres in and around human experience and expression. Events will unfold and life continue; yet the human, it seems, will find no place within this future in a flooded world.

The Island Will Sink, or Mediated Disaster

Addressed not to the direct experience of environments—desert, flood, or otherwise—but to the mediations through which disaster can be sensed, *The Island Will Sink* by Australian novelist Briony Doyle explores the desire for technology to produce aesthetic expressions that enable the experience of pure crisis. Set in an unnamed yet technologically advanced location, the novel imagines a future in which an energy crisis has already taken place and humanity resides permanently on the brink of catastrophe. While the world remains habitable, the threat of violent storms, tsunamis, and earthquakes requires protected habitats and workplaces. Laws and norms have been restructured around energy conservation, reinforced by ceaseless propaganda. Crisis, in short, has become the foreground condition of everyday life rather than its background hum. Living life on the brink of collapse means living in and with catastrophe: struggling against it yet also drawn inexorably to its dynamics. At the novel’s center is Max Galleon,

31. Bertelsen and Murphie, “Ethics of Everyday Infinities,” 139.

32. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 35.

director of blockbuster “immersions,” full-body, haptic experiences of disaster: “Disaster is something that we feel a primal attraction to,” he explains. “In uncertain times, experiencing disaster is cathartic.”³³ For Galleon, crisis is artistic and personal as well as ecological. His immersions are mediations of the present—but also of the past and future. They take up what everyone knows of crisis and bring that experience into relation with disasters yet to come. These immersions are affecting and worlding at an order of magnitude that far exceeds that of contemporary virtual reality. Galleon’s immersions restructure the human sensorium into purified intensities of flood, tsunami, catastrophe. These mediations are more real than the real, an excess of experience unmatched by reality. Such immersions reflect a desire for an affectivity qualified only by the catastrophic event, which in turn exists only to give scenic form to an intensity that will rapidly overwhelm its semantic content. As this immersive technology swiftly advances as the narrative progresses, each new iteration renders the cohesion of the experiencing subject less necessary, to the point where selfhood is dispersed into a kind of collectivized experience of catastrophe that is haptic, affective, and cognitively overwhelming. For the reader, this manifests in the fracturing of narrative but also in the insistence on tracing the limits of form, of pushing one into uncertainty yet compelled to feel the arriving crisis. What Galleon hungers for is to collapse bodily sensation in the present into the wounding described by Deleuze as it brings a catastrophic future into both experience and expression. This mediation is conceived not as representing, reinventing, or reimaging the field of lived existence but as exceeding it to somehow touch on the pure immanence out of which life unfurls.

Yet everyday life in the novel is also mediated at almost every moment, producing an almost parodic tonality in resonance with our own daily experience of an arriving ubiquity of mediation. Neural archives register and record memory, emotion, and nutritional state, connected into a global network. Information and communication flicker permanently within the field of each person’s vision. An early adopter of the technology, Galleon has no reliable memory without his archive, as if his devotion to catastrophe has wiped clean his own past. With the past inaccessible, trauma as an affective state arrives in the present from the future—affects of catastrophe that Galleon knowingly, even eagerly, invokes. Yet he is also fixated on the past that he has lost, embodied in his comatose brother, whose mind he attempts to access through an experimental neural link. The failure of that link, along with the failure to arrive at an expected final global catastrophe, leaves Galleon stranded in the present, but it is a present always angled—in media, immersion, and daily life—toward the end of existence or, rather, the human as a mode of experiencing the enduring formations of a future that might well continue to arrive regardless.

This obsession with the potential end to being is enacted in the world’s fixation on the slow sinking of Pitcairn Island into the Pacific. Galleon wants to create an

33. Doyle, *Island Will Sink*, 53 (hereafter cited in the text).

immersion that “uses this event, this sinking island, to perfectly simulate the end of the world, in terms of its history, its terrible, pathetic politics” (212). His aim is to leave people “feeling as though their old lives are destroyed, as though they are stepping into a whole new world” (*ibid.*). There is an eschatological hunger in this, a desire for the arriving disaster to paradoxically be some kind of revelation, delivered not by environmental apocalypse but in its mediated imagining. For Doyle, the mediation of catastrophe is not simply a question of theme or plot but of style and the capacity of the text itself to mediate the future. It is also a question of the relation between experience and expression and the necessity of a wounding to bring both into the temporal plane in which it is lived. Imbrications of body and technology and dissolutions of connection between past and future are thus woven into the writing. Its sections are named after cinematic shots, screenplay occasionally replaces novelistic narrative, and point of view shifts as the story progresses, as if to throw the reader into a kind of embodied openness to slippage and uncertainty. In one passage, narration slips into second person to capture the intensity of immersion: “You close your eyes and data scrolls. You feel as though the ground is opening up and swallowing you. . . . There is drowning in your bones and code behind your eyelids. . . . Who are you? How did you get here? Was there a fire? A storm? Some great catastrophe?” (160). At other points, the narrative cuts and jumps, reality and unreality become difficult to demarcate: reading, there is no choice but to let go or risk dampening the force of an accelerating intensity; put the book down, or allow for the exhilarating abandonment in textual enacted moments of pure crisis. Late in the story, for instance, Galleon learns that the woman with whom he had engaged in a love affair was already dead, their encounters injected into and then erased from his neural feed. The text becomes unreliable, another mediation of memory that might at any moment be proved false. Immersion in catastrophe is thus not only the province of the immersive films Galleon makes but also the sheer ecological fact of daily life.

In the final act, Galleon attends the opening release of his latest immersion, captured by new techniques of haptic recording as Pitcairn Island sinks into the sea. Its force is so corporeal it overwhelms the immersed bodies. “We need the disaster!” a man screams. “We need the catastrophe!” (298). The island’s sinking has not marked the end of the world, at least not yet—the novel ends before we can know. Yet the words of Galleon’s partner, Jean, sent from Pitcairn not long before its final collapse, are telling: “What is really interesting here is not that the island is sinking. . . . What is intriguing is how the knowledge that it is sinking affects the emotional atmosphere of the place” (278). This atmosphere of pure crisis, of island-ending as world-ending, is what the immersion seeks to convey. In this sense, it constitutes more than what Richard Grusin calls “premediation,” or “the remediation of future events and affective states.”³⁴ Rather, it asks what premediation itself might mean for the body: premediation

34. Grusin, *Premediation*, 6.

as vital process that might also be a traumatic one. *The Island Will Sink* attends to the “liveness of new media—that is, the possibility of the emergence of forms always new, or its potentiality to generate unprecedented connections and unexpected events.”³⁵ But while Sarah Kember and Joanna Zalynska are concerned with how mediation describes the “being-in and emerging-with the world,” the novel asks how mediation of catastrophe, taken to its pure immersive extreme, might enable the experience of an ending-with the world.³⁶ In the immersion of the sinking island, narrative gives way to saturation in affect—an overwhelming of the body in the traumatic affects of a catastrophe to come. Even projected further along the timeline of catastrophe’s arrival, with the hyperobject of planetary collapse increasingly tangible, the novel suggests that pure catastrophe will only become more magnetic, more inevitable. While *Fury Road* gestures to the potential for human survival in the desert of nonlife and *Slurb* to the refrain of life without the human, *The Island Will Sink* addresses the limits of mediation as a means of accessing the future. It considers the capacity for that very future to be felt in the present, not pretrauma-as-memory but premediation as the virtual encounter with the wounding event of a catastrophic future already becoming actual.

Aesthetics and the Affects of Future Catastrophe

Future catastrophe is already present in the texts encountered here, emergent in multiple affective forms that bring the body into intensified relation with the crisis of experience and expression constitutive of climate trauma. Whether in the evocation of the desire for survival in the desert against what geontopower has wrought, or in the insistence of life beyond the human in the refrain of the flood, or in collapsing into immersive mediation of pure catastrophe, climate trauma emerges not as premonition or fantasy or as the fuzzy awareness of a hyperobject but as the particular affective forms through which end times are felt in the now. These forms emerge materially within the texts but provoke an echoing, sympathetic response in the affective life of the viewing or reading body. Present across these differing forms is an ontological challenge to how we understand and aesthetically express existence in the traumatic pull of an arriving and expanding catastrophe, an event from the future shaping expression in the present.

Global warming brings us into contact with our own end in a fashion that exceeds even nuclear destruction, since states can always choose not to launch missiles, whereas halting or even slowing catastrophic climate change may yet prove outside human control. Cultural practices that respond to trauma, particularly on the collective level, tend to look backward to the past. In memorial culture, for example, “collective trauma pushes and prods the social field to the point where the disordered flows of intensity and affect emerge as the raw material of memory labor.”³⁷ This labor can in

35. Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, xvii.

36. Ibid., 23.

37. Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 5.

turn produce various modes and means of memorializing, but in the encounter with catastrophic futures, the very absence of memory is part of what is so traumatically affecting. Our encounter with global warming is thus an encounter with the wound that reminds us of the violence inherent in the actuals arising from any field of virtuals. Morton describes the aesthetic feeling of global warming as asymmetrical, a disparity between the “infinite powers of cognition and the infinite being of things.”³⁸ But this is to cut off affectivity before it has time to arrive: it is an oddly limited materialism. Better to embrace the traumatic affectivity of the global-warming hyperobject. Reading the wound as symbol misses the point: the wound of Deleuze, the rupture between life-lived and *a life*, describes a dynamic encapsulated in an amplified, condensed, and intensified form. Yet trauma’s affective rupturing of experience risks the very capacity to open onto *a life*. It targets the dynamic by which this life might manage some sustained encounter with that pure contemplative realm of absolute immanence. Because the wound in Deleuze is always about the future in relation to the present, it offers a way into thinking trauma that maps onto the futurity of climate catastrophe, its ever-presence as threat from the future even as it arrives and reshapes the now. At the same time, the wound addresses at the level of empirical process the problem of the relation between experiences of global warming and its aesthetic expression, as described by Morton. As the readings produced here show, the wound offers a flexible and dynamic means of thinking the phenomenological gap between word and thing, object and knowing, text and the visceral, bodily experience of encounter without succumbing to an overly linguistic privileging of aporia or absence or insisting on the primacy of things, as in Morton’s object-oriented ontology.

Rather than conceive of this disjunctive tension as a problem in the relation between experience and expression, this conception of the wound figures traumatic rupture as a generative affective relation. Creation occurs not despite such a relation but because of the very intensity with which it brings the tension between expression and experience to the fore. *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Slurb*, and *The Island Will Sink* are but three works at this intersection between climate crisis and traumatic affect, between expression itself and the traumatic encounter with global warming. What they evoke, enact, and embody within both text and encountering body cannot be readily generalized except insofar as each seeks an aesthetics founded on the affective forms that climate catastrophe takes. As works of cinema, media art, and literature, their modes of expression vary, and each conceives of catastrophe itself as bound up with different tensions, dilemmas, and modes of power: the geontological, the refrain, the immersive mediation. In this sense, then, these texts and readings are synecdochic of climate change itself: a complex entanglement of forms of life and nonlife, of affects, processes, and representations, and of fluid, irreducible systems subject to constant pressure and change in the passage of time. And dismissing such texts as merely aesthetic in the face of

38. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 22.

planetary crisis would fail to recognize the fundamental entanglement of experience and expression. To encounter the global-warming hyperobject in its aesthetic form is not only to encounter trauma in the present or even to imagine an apocalyptic future. It is to be affected by a catastrophic future in the now, to encounter a traumatic affectivity in aesthetic form that brings into experiential being the disjunctive and rupturing force of what might come to pass. To be affected by climate trauma is to find one's own body attuned to an arriving crisis that is from the future yet simultaneously purely present, affectively on the brink between actual and virtual. Beyond premonition or fantasy, beyond fear or uncertainty, such an aesthetic encounter makes affectively real the rupturing of existence and experience that is constitutive of human life—and that is nonetheless fragile and at risk of erasure in the catastrophe to come.

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Acknowledgments

Earlier versions this article were presented at the Deleuze Studies Conference 2016 at Roma Tre University and at Crossroads 2016 at the University of Sydney. My sincere thanks to the editors of *Environmental Humanities* for their stewardship of this article and to the two anonymous reviewers for their generous and thoughtful suggestions. My deepest thanks to Marina Zurkow for providing me with access to a full-length version of *Slurb*. An excerpt from it is available for viewing at Zurkow's website: o-matic.com/play/slurb/index.html.

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