ON THE LATE STYLE OF A SPECIES: CONFRONTING ECO-ANXIETY IN THE POETRY OF TORU DUTT AND EMILY BRONTÊ

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By

Elizabeth George, B.A.

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This project is dedicated with gratitude to my advisors, teachers, classmates, and friends—and with hope and care to my students.
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INTRODUCTION

[...T]he disturbed timeline of bourgeois modernity is an uncanny, traumatic history. This history connects the emergent fossil capitalism of the mid-Victorian moment to the postwar Great Acceleration, and then to our own post-peak moment of exhaustion, tight-oil, and mass extinction, in the ruins of the liberal project, when 75% of all insects measured by weight – at least those in industrialized areas— seem to have died in the past 25 years. The total number of nondomesticated vertebrate animals alive in the world – individual animals, I mean, not species – dropped by 52 percent over the period 1970-2010 alone. This means that, in a forty year window . . . half of all wildlife on earth has been lost. Among freshwater animals, the number is closer to 75%.

–Nathan Hensley

Eco-Anxiety

Last summer, I was working as a research assistant for Professor Nathan Hensley in the English Department here at Georgetown. I had asked him if I could support his summer projects because I had taken an interest in ecocriticism during my undergraduate studies, and my advisor had recommended that as a graduate student I get to know his work. I was editing a chapter on Emily Brontë for him when I came across notes he had taken regarding a talk he had given on Brontë and climate collapse at Lehigh University. The statistics he had presented were staggering. The information proved so devastating that I found myself having to read in spurts, resting between confrontations of the constant grief that goes along with studying our planet’s

\[From his talk “The European Game Has Finally Ended: Social Justice After Climate Collapse” presented at Lehigh University on April 10, 2019.\]
current reality. I was not surprised to hear, then, that during this talk, one student had simply
gotten up and left the auditorium, emotionally overwhelmed by its contents. There was a sort of
dissonance with which I had to grapple upon realizing how deeply that reaction resonated with me; here I was, seeking out these numbers, this discourse, this intimacy with devastation, and yet at the same time, I had yet to engage with it without an intense emotional reaction. Some combination of grief and dread, of anticipation and horror.

One of the foundational assumptions we must accept in the field of ecocriticism is that we are a species, that we are a relatively new species on the scale of geologic time, and that we have worked over the past hundred years or so to make the planet uninhabitable for many species, our own included. In short, to even engage in ecocritical discourse means to bring to the fore the notion that our lifetime as a species won’t last much longer, and it’s our own doing. As a twenty-five-year-old woman, I look at the science around our future and have to calculate whether or not it would be ethical for me to have children. I’m far from alone in experiencing or observing this anxiety. The proliferation of environmental panic entered common conversation for Millennials as we transitioned into adulthood, but Generation Z doesn’t remember a time without it. The phenomenon of environmental anxiety proved so prevalent for children born between the late 1990s and early 2010s that it was profiled by *Washington Post Magazine* in early 2020:

The United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said in 2018 that policymakers have just 12 years to avert the worst consequences of global warming; news coverage is constantly filled with apocalyptic stories of storms and wildfires. Young people, absorbing the gravity of these warnings, have become the defining face of
the climate movement — marching, protesting and berating their elders for bequeathing them an uncertain, unstable future. Underlying their anger, though, is another a-word: anxiety. And it’s something they’re increasingly voicing. Teachers hear their students talk about panic attacks when wildfires break out, and psychologists face young patients weeping about their fear of never having a family. (Plautz)

I was surprised, then, to find that so little scholarly work had been done in literary studies on the emotional toll of the anticipated death of one’s own species. If it could drive students from auditoriums and induce full-fledged panic attacks, then certainly this phenomenon was worth investigating. One possible explanation for the lack of attention to eco-anxiety in the field of ecocriticism is that, frankly, it most severely affects a generation still far from the age at which an academic journal or press might publish their work. As Jason Plautz further explains in his article for Washington Post Magazine, the burden of climate collapse will fall on teens and children who already suffer the emotional effects of their inheritance:

In a Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll of American teenagers released in September, 57 percent said that climate change made them feel scared and 52 percent said it made them feel angry, both higher rates than among adults. Just 29 percent of teens said they were optimistic. Reports like the U.S. government’s National Climate Assessment have cited mental health concerns as a side effect of climate change. The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement in 2015 warning that climate change poses threats to “children’s mental and physical health,” and that “failure to take prompt, substantive action would be an act of injustice to all children.” (Plautz)
As we begin to understand the severity of the psychological impacts of climate change, reports consistently agree that our youngest generations will prove the most severely affected, and their voices remain absent from academic discourse. Many suffer from a sort of agential paralysis, but a resilient few take to activist spaces. 17-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg was named *Time*’s Person of the Year in 2019. In August 2018, Thunberg began skipping school, camping out in front of Swedish Parliament in what she called a climate strike. Since then, *Time* summarizes in her Person of the Year profile, Thunberg has “addressed heads of state at the U.N., met with the Pope, sparred with the President of the United States and inspired 4 million people to join the global climate strike on September 20, 2019, in what was the largest climate demonstration in human history” (“Greta Thunberg”). It’s telling of Generation Z’s predicament that a 17-year-old is the leading force in the fight to save their future. This generation finds itself both burdened with the consequences of decades of extractive practices and barred from the institutional conversations surrounding them because of their youth.

If not as a result of the generational gap, then perhaps the scholarship fails to reflect the current state of ecocritical discourse’s inextricability from psychoanalytical approaches because eco-anxiety has only come to find coverage in mainstream media as a legitimate mental health concern in the past two to three years. The American Psychological Association first defined eco-anxiety in March of 2017 as “a chronic fear of environmental doom.” Their report “Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance” revealed, for example, that “among a sample of people living in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, suicide and suicidal ideation more than doubled, 1 in 6 people met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD and
49 percent developed an anxiety or mood disorder such as depression.” But the psychological effects of climate collapse aren’t limited to natural disasters; according to the report, “[w]orry about actual or potential impacts of climate change can lead to stress that can build over time and eventually lead to stress-related problems, such as substance abuse, anxiety disorders and depression.” Caroline Hickman, a psychotherapist and member of the U.K.’s Climate Psychology Alliance, claims that in order to cope with the loss of control that comes with environmental anxiety, “we project into the future, sometimes into apocalyptic thinking,” which explains why children, even in the wealthiest, least affected zones of the world like the U.S. and U.K., believe that climate change will kill them.

I decided to pursue a project that would give me space and time to explore the complexity of the intersection of ecocriticism and trauma theory because I believe that understanding and finding ways to cope with eco-anxiety will prove one of the most critical projects of the next decade. Bruno Latour’s famous essay “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene” argues that working against the learned helplessness of our current state, fighting a battle that seems to have been already lost a century ago, remains a stubborn psychological and semiotic obstacle for the entire field of ecocritical work.

While scholars disagree on what historical moment initiates the era of species destruction we’ve come to call the Anthropocene, there is a general consensus that we can locate the catalyzing uptick in atmospheric damage within the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. In this thesis, I’ve decided to look to the Victorian period not necessarily as a foolproof golden spike in the definition of the Anthropocene, but as the point at which the concept of deep

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For more on the measured impacts of climate crisis on mental health, see the APA’s summary on the report here: https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/climate-mental-health.
time and the industrialization of extractive culture converged, initiating the affective models we’re still engaged in today. This extractive project drove both imperialism and climate collapse, and my thesis argues that nineteenth-century texts provide a window into the origins of the anxiety we’ve only come to call by name since 2017.

In London’s Great Exhibition of 1851, people gathered in the Crystal Palace to gawk at the ultimate symbol of England’s expanding power: a massive chunk of coal, set on display alongside other shining minerals meant to represent the success and possibility of the nation’s extractive missions. Ciara Nugent’s 2019 article on eco-anxiety for *Time* describes an almost dystopian inversion of this moment 168 years later, as the public’s fascination with coal evolved into fear of the consequences of its use:

Under the bright white lights of a central London exhibition space, a few dozen people are sorting themselves into groups. An instructor tells those that feel extremely worried about climate change to go to the far end of the room. Those that are less worried should stay closer to her. Moments later, she is mostly alone. Thirty feet away, strangers awkwardly cram together, signaling that they suffer “eco-anxiety.”

This workshop, organized by King’s College London, is one of several events organized in the British capital this fall to help people work through the feelings of anxiety, depression and grief that arise from confronting the fact that, according to the U.N., we now have less than 11 years to prevent catastrophic climate change.

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3 For more on the cultural meanings Victorians ascribed to coal, see Naomi Yuval-Naeh’s “Cultivating the Carboniferous: Coal as a Botanical Curiosity in Victorian Culture” in *Victorian Studies*.
4 Hugh Owen’s photograph and a description of the mass of coal is available through the Royal Collection Trust: [https://www.rct.uk/collection/2800005/large-blocks-of-coal](https://www.rct.uk/collection/2800005/large-blocks-of-coal).
Nathan Hensley and Phillip Steer’s “Signatures of the Carboniferous: The Literary Forms of Coal” helps us to understand how what was once a symbol of status, power, and progress, in fact, what harnessed the energy of thousands of compressed years of life, turned to a symbol of the point of no return: “Coal fueled the industry that made England a global power; underlay the most significant advances in technological and material progress in this most progressive age; and quite literally drove the expansionist policies of England’s rapid aggrandizement and increasingly acquisitive militarization after 1880” (64). We have to comprehend the semiotics of the exhibition of coal in the nineteenth century in order to properly engage with ecocidal trauma in the twenty-first. What I wondered, then, was whether this eco-anxiety, formally defined only in 2017 when an entire generation seemed plagued by it, is actually something new. If we apply a critical perspective that takes into account the psychological implications of the circulation of Charles Darwin’s and Charles Lyell’s work— that is, the confrontation with the mass scale of geologic time and the concept of the self as inextricable from the web of species— might we find traces of eco-anxiety in texts written at the emergence of fossil-fueled society?

What I will argue in this project is that we absolutely can. In fact, I argue that the Victorians put into circulation the affective model of eco-anxiety that has only come to surface as a cultural crisis in our current moment. Rather than an eventual shift from awe to anxiety surrounding the power of extractive industry, the texts I will examine demonstrate that the scale of consequences made conceivable by the mode of ecological thinking that arose in the nineteenth century produced texts that are wrought with preemptive grief, with anticipatory trauma. In tracing the origins of eco-anxiety, we have to go back long before its defining in 2017 because our current affective moment is merely the extension of one that began with the
Victorians. Accordingly, we must look to nineteenth-century texts in order to understand this long affective moment. We don’t get Greta Thunberg without Emily Brontë and Toru Dutt because their texts model the anticipation of cultural and species death that spurred the 17-year-old to action. If the Victorians were suffering from the very same sense of anticipatory trauma, then the nineteenth century up through 2020 can all be collapsed into one affective period. Simultaneously, we can think about this period as containing a series of temporal positionalities within which this affective model is repeated on varied scales: the life of a Victorian poet in relation to the Victorian period; the Victorian period relative to the longevity of extractive culture; and the life of an activist like Thunberg confronting the end of the lifespan of a species. Eco-anxiety may not have come to define the emotional struggle of entire generations of children until the twenty-first century, but my work identifies its effect on poetic images and form as early as the nineteenth century, when coal was still the aesthetic center of the Great Exhibition.

Theoretical Approaches

A psychoanalytical approach, specifically following theories of anticipation and trauma, is useful as a foundation for this project, providing the basic concepts and vocabulary necessary to articulate ways of knowing that are not predicated on proof. That women in the nineteenth century had gathered sufficient evidence to calculate that by 2020 we would stand just a decade shy of the point of no return for our own species seems, at the least, unlikely. But that they would feel, or at least that their poems would manifest an unconscious recognition of, a sense of anxiety regarding the violence of extractive practices, extrapolated through new understandings of scales and interconnection, does not defy any common understanding we hold of the way the
mind functions in relation to futurity. Throughout this project, then, I will rely on psychoanalytical language to link affect, knowledge, and futurity. My framework for trauma theory comes from Paul Saint-Amour’s *Tense Future,* in which he argues that modernist novelists at the interwar period expressed both post-traumatic and pre-traumatic anxieties, having experienced mass-scale loss and anticipated more. I diverge from Saint-Amour in that my project focuses on the poetry of two Victorian women in order to study how pre-traumatic anxiety might be expressed or suppressed on an even greater scale: that of the anticipated loss of language, for Toru Dutt, or of species, for Emily Brontë.

The second, perhaps more dominant critical framework I draw from in this thesis is a distinct mode of ecocritical analysis concerned with scales and systems. Although the field of ecocriticism has taken many shapes, ranging from animal studies to ecofeminism, I want to clarify that the type of ecocritical discourse I will engage with throughout this project primarily follows thinkers like Latour, Hensley, and Steer, who foreground scale and interconnectivity as the basis for ecocritical discourse. My project does not aim to interrogate the violence of extractive, imperialist culture itself; there are entire fields of study already successfully devoted to that work. Rather, I’m interested in how nineteenth-century poetry represents or demonstrates resilience against the psychological phenomenon we’ve only just come to recognize as eco-anxiety, or ecocidal trauma as I will most frequently refer to it throughout this project. This work necessarily engages with extractive and imperialist violence as the source of this anticipatory anxiety because they produce potential for loss on scales far beyond the individual.

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5 See, for example, Laura Junka-Aikio and Catalina Cortes-Severino’s “Cultural Studies of Extraction” in *Cultural Studies.* The special double issue centers on the violence employed by extractive and imperialist culture.
The precedent for this kind of cross-theory study was only set in 2018, the year I began thinking about what this project would look like. In “Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene,” Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino introduce the need for and potential of affective ecocriticism:

For environmentally concerned scholars and citizen scholars around the world, a major source of anxiety is the American public’s apparent apathy about climate change. While the emergence of the term “climate justice” is a healthy sign, environmental issues played no significant role in the 2016 U.S. election. And while local and state governments and nongovernmental organizations vow to redouble their efforts to curb carbon emissions in response to Trump’s decision to abandon the Paris Agreement, that decision nevertheless raises major concerns about the nation’s commitment to mitigating the effects of climate change—and about its role in global politics.

Environmental humanities scholars find ourselves faced with important tasks: we must find new, more compelling ways to foreground connections between environmental and social justice, and we must reach across ideological, species, and scalar boundaries to find common ground in this new geologic epoch. A premise of this collection is that affect theory can help with both. Since both climate and social justice activists require altruistic emotions as a foundation for action, a clearer sense of what those emotions are and how they work might reconnect environmental and social justice . . . Affective Ecocriticism imagines a more affective— and consequently, we argue, a more effective—ecocriticism, as well as a more environmentally attuned affect studies. (2-3)
As Bladow and Ladino point out, bringing affect into ecocritical discourse is necessary to combat the dissonance between recent political apathy around climate crisis and the heightened anxiety felt by rising generations, many of whom are still too young to vote in American elections. I believe that by more closely studying the connection between affect and action, scholars of the environmental humanities can find ways to mitigate the agential paralysis experienced by Generation Z, instead leveraging affect as a catalyst for climate justice.

In this thesis, I look to texts from the earliest point of this affective moment to model ways of recognizing, analysing, and activating eco-anxiety. I believe that the role of literary theory can and should be to promote frameworks of thinking that translate from textual interpretation to real political action, and in the conclusion of this thesis, I return to Bladow and Ladino’s book as a launching point for reconceptualizing the future of ecocriticism as a pedagogical project, knowing that students and scholars interacting with ecocritical texts—whether literary, scientific, or scholarly—will need a set of emotional and intellectual frameworks we have yet to provide them. I think of my thesis, centered on recognizing eco-anxiety’s origins and manifestations, as contributing to the first step in the much broader project that Bladow and Ladino outline as a necessary shift in the field of ecocritical scholarship.

Method

My argument will take the form of two case studies, each occupying one chapter of this thesis. In the first chapter, I analyze the threat of forced cultural extinction in Toru Dutt’s “The Tree of Life.” In the second, I examine the manifestation of eco-anxiety, or pre-traumatic anxiety as it relates to species death, in Emily Brontë’s poem “Why ask to know what date what clime.”
Both poems are the last (published) poems written by the authors before their deaths. There’s something haunting about that, and in fact, what’s most uncanny to me is that I chose these poems separately, not intending to select them for their chronological relationship to their poets or to each other. I was drawn to them for their intensely anticipatory moods, their confrontations with death, and their first-person narrations. For this reason, in the second case study, I consider how texts engaged with eco-anxiety may offer a way to recuperate oft-dismissed theories of late style. While Dutt’s poem anticipates a subcontinent’s linguistic death, Brontë’s poem looks to a suicidal species, and though these poets both died young, I argue that late style has less to do with the age at which they felt life slipping as it does the age in which they were writing. Perhaps there’s a quality I can’t articulate in a project of this limited scope that colors the last lines of nineteenth-century poets—that anticipatory anxiety and their subtle forms of defiance.

Further, the choice to focus on these two poets has to do with the importance of their poems as paradigmatic of the theoretical argument I attempt to weave throughout this project. Both Dutt and Brontë grapple with death at the scale of the species as a greater source of anxiety than the death of the individual. Their poems seem aware of their inextricability from larger webs of interdependence, and they exhibit a play between conscious and unconscious knowledge that allows the text to speculate about the future in scales that also stretch temporal expectations. Both Dutt and Brontë work in scales of time and population much larger than the typical lyric. Virginia Jackson’s study of Emily Dickinson’s poetry proves especially helpful here in thinking through how the ecological nature of Dutt’s and Brontë’s poetry— that is, their concern with scales and systems— wasn’t even recognized by much of the twentieth century’s scholarship on them because of the way lyric poetry was analyzed:
One of the most interesting aspects of twentieth-century critical thought about lyric subjectivity was the lack of such particular attachments; for literary theory in the United States in the twentieth century, the isolated lyric subject tended to become a social, even an historical and cultural, abstraction. (90)

Importantly, I chose these two poets because the frequency of natural images in their works is often underestimated, interpreted as the marker of nature writing as a result of that abstraction. Of Dickinson’s poetry, Jackson argues, “that meant that the densely woven fabric of social relations from which her verse was removed when it was published and edited as a series of isolated lyrics was replaced by a theoretical concept of ‘the social’ as such; the lyric subject then became the personification of that concept” (90). We see the same limiting mechanism reducing the natural images in Dutt’s and Brontë’s poetry to icons of the concept of “nature” when in fact, the use of these images demonstrates work in historical systems of mass scale—of extractive and imperial culture—with implications far beyond the limitations of what we see in much of the scholarship devoted to their poetry. My project seeks to locate where natural images, form and scale, and elision demonstrate these poets’ expressions of ecocidal trauma. My hope is to trace how language and its manipulation have grappled with the self-assured death of the speaking species and how women we considered nature poets were actually working out scales of mass extinction. For Dutt, the trees and flowers that populate her poems are highly charged with political meaning; for Brontë, plants and harvest scenes are rife with mass-scale violence. These are ecocritical poets, not nature writers.

In what little scholarly work we find on Dutt’s poetry, writers often spend paragraphs on her looks, and their analyses of her works are skewed by a layer of exoticization. As Alison
Chapman importantly notes, “[f]or her first British critic, Edmund Gosse, Dutt is a ‘fragile exotic blossom of song,’ a colonised Sapphic poetess whom he boasts to have discovered” (595). Gosse’s assessment is symptomatic of the long history of Dutt’s miscategorization; he presents her as the object of nature writing rather than the agent of ecocritical poetry. More contemporary treatments of the writer draw on postcolonial discourse. Sanjukta Dasgupta, for example, identifies Dutt’s adroit political moves in “The Lotus,” and Chapman, too, takes a careful look at the historical treatment of Dutt as a Victorian writer. No expressly ecocritical scholarship has been published on Dutt’s poetry, and those few writers who mention Dutt (usually as part of a list) as an environmentally-minded writer don’t even remark on “The Tree of Life,” let alone address the intersections of ecocritical discourse and trauma theory.

Similarly, there are gaps in the scholarship on Brontë’s work, though certainly not for a lack of volume. In the past ten years, there have been hundreds of articles and books written on the poetry of Emily Brontë; yet just a fraction of those can be categorized as ecocritical, and none of them interrogate the intersection of psychoanalytical and ecocritical approaches. As is often the case in ecocritical analysis, Brontë scholars make use of natural imagery to a wide array of ends, often invoking a mode of symbolic interpretation that differs from my approach to Brontë’s poems. Shawna Ross, for example, argues in “The Last Bluebell: Anthropocenic Mourning in the Brontës’ Flower Imagery” that the bluebell represents a cyclical sense of mourning and rebirth in Brontean novels and poetry, which seems to rely on a distinct symbolic logic. Ross’s essay exemplifies a persistent pattern in ecocritical discourse on Brontë in that it seeks symbols rather than systems in the semiology of natural images. My mode of ecocriticism differs from scholarship like Ross’s in that I analyze recurring images not as fixed to a consistent
and singular meaning but as demonstrating connection to intricate systems. This distinction between images as isolated, consistently semiologized symbols and images as representations of intricately linked systems will prove important to my method of interpretation and close reading in both chapters.

Ross’s attention to Charlotte Brontë’s edits to Emily’s writing, however, particularly in the context of Alexis Shotwell’s work on ecological purity, does help us think about the editorial history of Emily’s poems; what emerges when we overlay affective or psychoanalytic discourse with this study is that editorial processes can function as a mechanism for repression/denial of the anticipatory mourning that Ross wants to pin to the image of the bluebell. In my chapter on Brontë’s poetry, I will argue that the repressive impulse of the editorial hand relates directly to eco-anxiety, citing C.W. Hatfield’s excessive additions to Brontë’s poem “Why ask to know what date what clime” as mollifying the effect of anxiety that the poem’s absences perform.

Scope and Limitations

In framing what I’ve set out to accomplish in this project, I believe it’s imperative to acknowledge the limited scope of a thesis. For the sake of the nature of this project, I’ve decided to focus on these two case studies in order to achieve a depth of analysis rather than providing a breadth of examples. In doing so, however, I recognize the risk of appearing to identify the common characteristics of two writers, both well traveled and relatively well-off, as emblematic of an entire era of human experience. My intention is not to suggest that the individual anxieties and forms of resistance expressed in these poets’ work can be extrapolated out as the precise, common, and absolute condition of humankind throughout the Anthropocene. Rather, I aim to

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6 I’m deeply indebted to Nathan Hensley for modeling the application of this systems-and-scale-based analysis in his Nineteenth Century Ecologies graduate course at Georgetown as well as in his ecocritical work on Brontë’s poetry.
recognize in their writing the manifestation of a paradigm of eco-anxiety, one that necessarily operates on the scale of deep time and in the anticipatory mode, that we still experience today and that has been almost entirely absent from ecocritical discourse despite its prevalence.

The benefit of conducting this research for a project of limited scope such as the thesis has been its allowance for sustained close reading. The poems I have selected to center in these chapters are infrequently studied, and without the need to expand my analysis to a swath of nineteenth-century texts, I have had the opportunity to examine the ways in which my theoretical framework manifests in the details of the poems’ constructions. Spending time with these poems, returning to them, and reviving them by recirculating them in my writing, has allowed me to interrogate the relationship of image and form to expressions and suppressions of eco-anxiety, and my hope is that this work will provide a useful paradigm for future scholarship on ecocidal trauma as a legitimate and necessary component of nineteenth-century literary studies.

Stakes

I see the stakes of this project as multifaceted. First, and most obviously, I hope to generate more writing on the poetry of Toru Dutt, whose positionality within Victorian society is complicated and therefore too infrequently engaged with as the central focus of sustained research projects. The paucity of work devoted to Dutt’s life and writing reinforce cycles of her omission from course syllabi and scholarly writing, and accordingly, my aim is to bolster the limited but strong scholarship which rejects and rewrites antiquated, racist, and colonizing analyses of what her work means. Secondly, I see this thesis as providing important arguments for both Dutt’s and Brontë’s consideration as ecocritical poets rather than merely nature writers. This thesis aims to model a method of analysis that recognizes the intellectual value of these
writers’ work, seeing the frequency of nonhuman natural imagery in their poetry as much more complex than odes to natural beauty. Finally, I present this thesis not as a means of coping with eco-anxiety but as an entreatment that its readers make space in ecocritical scholarship for affective discourse. Ecocriticism as a form of literary study has undervalued the experience of those not yet old enough to enter research-producing institutions, and so I want to be intentional in validating not just the affect of eco-anxiety but its disproportionate impact on generations who simply aren’t yet positioned to perform this kind of project at a university.
CHAPTER I

Scales of Death and Resistance in Toru Dutt’s “The Tree of Life”

Some people, some companies, some decision-makers in particular, have known exactly what priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money. And I think many of you here today belong to that group of people.

–Greta Thunberg

“Broad daylight, with a sense of weariness!” opens Toru Dutt’s 1877 poem “The Tree of Life.” Verbless, the line provides only temporal and affective information to contextualize the scene. Dutt’s emphasis on the natural light of day suggests a deviation from circadian cues; exhaustion sets with peak sun rather than at night, such that the first line, without action, conveys that much has already passed, that at this point the speaker feels the sense of weariness so acutely that it has become synecdochic with the sense of time. The poem narrates, in first person, a vision Dutt had while her father sat by her bedside. In his memorandum book, in April 1877, her father writes:

Yester evening when the candles were lighted, Toru told me, in very low whispers and with some agitation, a dream or vision in which she had had the day previous about 9 or 10 am. She was not asleep at all, but quite awake. I know now why she asked me the evening before, where the text was, “And I will give thee a crown of life” . . . (Quoted in Das, 339)

7 Here Thunberg is addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos, January 2019. See Ivana Kottasova and Eliza Mackintosh’s article “Teen Activist Blames Davos Elite for Climate Crisis” for CNN.
In this vision-turned-poem, Dutt relates a shocking visit from an Angel who takes leaves from the Tree of Life to bind her head with a crown. When Dutt asks the Angel to do the same for her father, he refuses, looking full of pity, before disappearing. The poem ends as it begins, with Dutt ill in bed and her father devotedly at her side.

In this poem, death operates in valences, on scales stretching from the individual to the systemic. Toru died four and a half months after writing about this vision, at just twenty-one years old. Chronologically, “The Tree of Life” is her last poem. Death, as the interruption of normative cycles of wakefulness and weariness, then proves the unnamed catalyst of the syntactic elision of action in the poem’s first line. Dutt’s exhaustion extends from two directions: the compounded grief of losing both her siblings in 1865 and 1874, respectively, and the weariness of anticipating her own death by consumption, of clinging to her own last moments as her father witnesses them slipping away. This poem’s composition in English reflects a much larger scale death, however: the erasure of linguistic inheritance in India by British colonization. Its Christian imagery functions to illustrate the same death of religious tradition, as missionaries sought to eradicate Hinduism in favor of Christianity. At the time of Dutt’s writing, these ideological inheritances, in language and belief system, battled for survival against colonial influence, so this grief too functions both as experienced and anticipated. In this sense, Dutt as a literary figure, as well as this poem, are complicatedly involved in global networks of violence.

In this chapter, I examine “The Tree of Life” as a site in which mass-scale colonial violence, particularly through linguistic and religious erasure, plays out on the micro-scales of this poem. At the same time, however, Dutt’s poem presents a space for resistance.
This approach requires three main schools of discourse: first, the ecocritical, by which I don’t mean that because the poem’s title image is nonhuman that this constitutes some mode of nature writing worth examining as such. Rather, ecocritical frameworks help me set the stakes of Dutt’s work on a larger-than-literary scale, one global, intricately connected, and mindful of the ways in which Charles Darwin’s work was often weaponized as colonial justification. Second, trauma theory necessarily informs this approach by contextualizing the poem within the life of the author. The personal, the political, and the poetical all collide in the manifestation of colonial violence through Dutt’s authorial choices, and I would be remiss to present Dutt’s words without that context. Third, this chapter looks to postcolonial theory, specifically in the form of Homi Bhabha’s essay “On Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” to locate the poem’s resistive potential.

**Dutt’s Life and Inheritance of Language**

As the poem’s opening line suggests, much had to occur before Toru put her pen to paper in order for “The Tree of Life” to come into existence. According to Mary Ellis Gibson, Dutt was the first Indian woman to publish poetry in English, and biographers and literary critics alike often compare her to the Brontë sisters (294). Toru was born in Calcutta in 1856, and when she was six years old, the Dutts converted from Hinduism to Christianity. As Chandani Lokugé explains, her family was “one of the earliest in Calcutta to be radically influenced by British and colonialist discourse” (iix). Lokugé’s euphemistic choice of the word “influenced” is worth parsing here; it grammatically denotes passivity while conversely connoting consensual acquiescence to colonizing forces rather than forced submission. Given the Dutt family’s class standing and high-level connections, their experience of colonization was unusual in that it did
allow the illusion of the choice to opt in, in a strange Darwinian sense, to the acquisition of ideologies and language that would make them more likely to survive in a British-ruled environment. But Lokugé’s situation of the family’s acquisition of colonial influence is important for conceptualizing Dutt’s poem within Paul Saint-Amour’s theory of pre- and post-traumatic anxiety, which argues for reading trauma as experienced as well as anticipatory: Dutt has both already been submitted to this violence by the time she writes this poem and realizes that her family will not be the last to lose their linguistic and religious autonomy under the British empire.

Dutt’s Trees of Life and the Temporal Collapse of the Garden

Dutt’s father, Govin Chander Dutt, who was a linguist and poet himself, adamantly enforced an anglicized education upon his children. “The Tree of Life” offers immediate evidence of this: Dutt presents these 38 lines in Miltonic blank verse, and she pulls her titular image from *Paradise Lost*, a work which, according to Toru’s letters, her father had her read in childhood “with her brother and sister until [they] had learnt the first book and part of the second book by heart” (quoted in Lokugé, xv). The Tree of Life that reminds us of Dutt’s forced adoption of both literature and religion valued by the colonizing culture also appears (again, as the titular image) in Dutt’s poem “Our Casuarina Tree.” In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, Satan sits atop this tree, gaining a full view of the Garden, dreaming up death:

Thence up he flew, and on the Tree of Life,

The middle tree and highest there that grew,

Sat like a Cormorant; yet not true life

Thereby regained, but sat devising death

21
To them who lived;
Dutt seems to rewrite this very moment from *Paradise Lost* in “Our Casuarina Tree,” in which the first stanza describes a “huge Python, winding round and round/ The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars/ Up to its very summit near the stars,” and, as Lokugé notes, this “allusion to Milton’s Satan suggests an analogy between the casuarina tree and the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden” (371).

The image reflects Dutt’s devotion to a religion she accepted at six years old, by her father’s will rather than her own, so consequently, when we consider how Dutt employs the Tree of Life, we might look to poets like Phillis Wheatley, who similarly alludes to Christian imagery (most memorably in “On Being Brought from Africa to America”), to undercut the validity of the religion forced upon her as a child. Because the casuarina tree is of a genus native to the Indian archipelago, its “rugged trunk, indented deep with scars” and the python’s serpentine path around it to reach its peak suggest that the tree, in being occupied by Christian images, particularly those linked to sin, and the moment when Satan devises death, represents the colonized land as well as its people, its native culture, turned to memory. We see this most overtly narrated in the poem’s third stanza:

But not because of its magnificence
Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:
Beneath it we have played; though years may roll,
O sweet companions, loved with love intense.
For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear!
Blent with your images, it shall arise,
In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!
What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear
Like the sea breaking on a shingle beach?
It is the tree’s lament, an eerie speech,
That haply to the unknown land may reach.

In the tree’s lament Dutt introduces the grief that resonates in “The Tree of Life”: the anticipated loss narrated on the individual level but extrapolated to a greater scale, the dilution of cultural memory, and the speaker’s inability to comprehend the native tree’s speech. These themes sharpen in “The Tree of Life,” though the tree’s function changes in the latter poem. Ultimately, the appearance of the allusion across multiple titles helps us understand that its placement is highly intentional, if complicated by cultural overdetermination.

Importantly, we can also see the biblical image of the Tree of Life as contributing to the temporal collapse that I described in my introduction. If Eden, chronologically, represents the beginning of the speaking species, then its placement in this poem about death collapses the beginning and end of linguistic life into one long affective moment. The fall of man that Milton’s poem describes has as much to do with the anxiety of the loss of habitat as it does with sin, and it seems that Dutt’s use of this image wants to take advantage of these associations. In a way, it also foreshadows the consequences of the extractive culture that fed the exploitative colonization of India’s land and people: the dismissal from the garden becomes a sort of anticipatory, cautionary tale for the loss of the planet’s habitability as a result of human fallibility.
“Natural Selection” and Linguistic Death

What’s potentially even more devastating is what Dutt may not have been aware of conveying in selecting the image because of its overdetermined nature— the notion that her anglicized education would be the erasure of her linguistic inheritance in favor of the colonizing cosmology. At the end of the chapter entitled “Natural Selection” in Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, the naturalist invokes the same Tree of Life, “which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications” (100). Whether by accident or intentionally, Dutt’s poem takes up Darwin’s analogy in similar terms, describing the tree “with spreading branches and with leaves/ Of divers kinds,—dead silver and live gold,” in which death necessarily comprises the source of life. By this logic, the dying off of one language to preserve another could be justified as a form of natural selection. So the image of this Tree of Life, whether Dutt realized it or not, also functions as a symbol of the linguistic violence her country suffered under colonization, the forced death of inherited languages for the sake of assimilation, for the sake of survival.

Dutt herself faced this kind of linguistic death. In 1869, Govin Chander took his wife and daughters to France, where, according to Harihar Das, they were the first Bengali ladies to visit Europe. In the spring of 1870, they moved on to London, and later that year, Toru admits in a letter to her cousin, “I can’t write letters in Bengali very well, nor have I written Bengali letters, because I love you very much, that’s why I’m writing this letter to you in Bengali” (Lokugé, 217). Though their family trees trace back to a shared origin, the writer and her addressee diverge linguistically because of Toru’s adaptation to a new environment. Bengali has lost its utility for Toru, the letter so stumblingly constructed that it demonstrates, as Das notes, “the poor
knowledge she had of her mother tongue, even to the extent of mis-spelling her own name” (28). Consequently, after the early deaths of her two older siblings, the anticipated death Toru relates in “The Tree of Life” is the end of a family line, both in blood and language, a microcosm of the loss felt on the level of nation by colonization.

In this sense, it’s discomfiting to think of Dutt’s father as encouraging this linguistic death. Homi Bhabha provides a useful vocabulary for thinking about Govin Chander’s enthusiastic reinforcement of Dutt’s colonial assimilation. In “Of Mimicry and Man,” he describes two perspectives of the colonized figure: one who, despite total buy-in to anglicized education, is made an object of ridicule by the colonizing gaze, and the other, who, by mastering the performance of the colonizer's culture, poses a threat to its validity as anything beyond construction. In the poem, Dutt illustrates how Govin Chander’s obsessive efforts fail to grant him full acceptance from colonizing powers. The Angel, the symbol of colonizing religion, wraps Dutt’s first-person narrator’s head with leaves from the tree but refuses to crown her father, even when she pleads:

"And oh," I cried,

"Bind too my father's forehead with these leaves."

One leaf the Angel took and therewith touched

His forehead, and then gently whispered "Nay!"

The Angel doesn’t flat-out deny Dutt’s father any contact with the tree; rather, the missionary symbol allows that one leaf to touch him on the forehead, an act that both mimics anointing and points to his mind, the site of his intellectual assimilation. Despite Govin Chander Dutt’s upper-middle-class status, conversion to Christianity, and anglicized education, his family could
not find full social acceptance from the British in India, who, according to Toru, were “generally supercilious and look[ed] down on Bengalis” (Lokugé, xvi-xvii). In this way, we see Dutt position her father as Homi Bhabha’s figure of the Mimic Man, the colonial subject who, despite buying in to anglicized education and religion, even passing it on to his children, nonetheless remains unable to secure full status as English.

In contrast, Dutt figures herself as the foil in Bhabha’s essay: the seemingly ideal colonized subject who soon turns to threat, who demonstrates that the high culture revered by the colonizing empire is mere performance. Dutt positions herself through the poem’s narrating voice as the submissive, reverent colonial writer, describing the Angel’s effect on her in superlatives: “Never, oh never had I seen a face/ More beautiful than that Angel's,” she claims. This sentence in its entirety, however, spans three lines:

Never, oh never had I seen a face
More beautiful than that Angel's, or more full
Of holy pity and of love divine.

The expression of “holy pity” Dutt traces in this face is important: it places the Angel in a position of power relative to Dutt and her father; this gaze, endowed with a sense of religious and affective superiority, turns them into victims. The Angel’s exclamatory rejection of Dutt’s request to fully recognize her father, immediately followed by this victimizing pity is strange: the Angel feels pity but is responsible for the action, really the inaction, that merits pity in the first place. The Angel acts as if he has no agency to alleviate the pain he’s caused her. Another reading is that the Angel’s pity is directed not at Dutt but at her father instead, demonstrating a kind of double-condescension, first by refusing him the adornment, and again by casting him as
pitiable for not being fit to have his head bound with the tree’s leaves. Even the crown itself is steeped in colonial meaning: it’s both a symbol of monarchy and a biblical allusion to earned eternal life. For Dutt, “the crown of life” her father recalls her asking about in his notebook comes from Revelation 2:10— “be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” The crown of life, as it figures in this verse and as Dutt adopts it, isn’t merely a gift— it’s a reward for faithfulness, an exchange, eternal life as compensation for religious loyalty. It’s interesting, then, that Dutt would figure her own father, who facilitated his family’s conversion to Christianity, and whom she admired greatly, as undeserving of this crown.

**Mastering Language**

If we conclude our close reading here, there doesn’t seem much to be threat to colonial power in Dutt’s poem. In fact, it looks as though Dutt plays the part of submissive colonial subject extremely well, giving her father up to eternity in Purgatory in order to spend her afterlife with a bunch of dead white men. In contrast to her father’s fate, the Angel accepts Dutt as having earned her way into heaven and, as she claims, “plucked/ A few small sprays, and bound them round my head.” She receives both full recognition from the colonial authority— notably gendered male throughout the poem— as well as infinitely extended life as a reward for her fealty to the colonizing religion.

In this way, Dutt is a brilliant performer of the ideal colonized subject, and the poem itself enacts this performance subversively. By not only learning but mastering the English language, her poetry so exceptionally crafted as to be compared to the Brontës’ and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s, the pride of British high culture, Dutt proves that such talents are easily
learned, not inherited— that western high culture itself is a performance that can be perfected by a twenty-year-old colonial subject.

What’s more, and beyond Bhabha’s focus, Dutt brings elevates and reshapes the nature of that threat through her positionality as a Bengali woman. According to Lokugé, Dutt’s doubly dangerous status as unmarried and literate disturbed her community, and much of the poet’s romanticization of her anglicized education stemmed from the relative expressive freedom it gave her as a woman (xvii). The narration of “The Tree of Life” in first person is a reflection of that freedom; the very act gives Dutt the authority to tell her own story. We get her perspective and only her perspective. She fully owns her subjectivity, forces us to take it as truth, even as the narrative’s contents border on fantastical. The authority she wields over this account subverts both patriarchal and colonial power, and her choice to produce poetry in English then also expands the audience to which she can speak, to whom she can demonstrate ownership of her narrative. In a time when most Bengali women would not have been able to read, Dutt gains power in her own right as a woman not only literate but literary. There is, of course, a complicated split between colonial and patriarchal violence here, though, as Lokugé writes:

[A]lthough English was sanctioned as important for Hindu men who were required in the public world of employment for transaction with the British, it was not deemed necessary for Hindu women who were the spiritual guardians of the Hindu culture. Partha Chatterjee explains: ‘no encroachment by the colonizer must be allowed to enter than inner sanctum. In the world, imitation of, and adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home they were tantamount to annihilation of one’s very identity.’ (xv)

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8 It’s worth noting, however, that Dutt’s religious education acts as a repressive force that makes the individual death palatable, even accepted by Dutt, while the collective, larger scale death of language gets buried. She’s writing about the I, not even about the we that comprises her siblings and herself.
Dutt, called upon as a woman to preserve her community’s precolonial identity, is asked to do so at the cost of her own literacy. Dutt’s education, while an embodiment of colonial erasure, does give her the tools to resist patriarchal authority. Her poetry, however, proves the site in which she exposes and subverts colonial power, performing that gendered duty to her community without sacrificing her literacy.

We see this at either end of the poem. I began my close reading with the Angel’s refusal to fully recognize Dutt’s father and its parallel to the Mimic Man’s inassimability, but I want to look now to where Dutt is doing something entirely different, and I think absolutely revolutionary, with language. After the opening lines reveal Dutt’s weariness with the accumulation of death leading up to the poem, she lingers in exchanges of meaning outside of language:

Mine eyes were closed, but I was not asleep,
My hand was in my father’s, and I felt
His presence near me. Thus we often past
In silence, hour by hour. What was the need
Of interchanging words when every thought
That in our hearts arose, was known to each,
And every pulse kept time?

_In silence_, she says they were able to communicate. Without language. Their proximity, hand in hand, his presence not seen (as her eyes are closed), but felt, known. In these lines, Dutt presents a radical epistemology of intimacy as knowing—something the colonial erasure of Dutt’s mother language cannot take away. The poet’s rhetorical question drives this point home: “What
was the need/ of interchanging words when every thought/ That in our hearts arose, was known to each, And every pulse kept time?” The nonverbal works against the verbal in this poem to question the authority of language. If Dutt and her father can communicate, can know, can form a community without words, then why is she writing this poem at all? Why actively choose words and why choose them in English? Because Dutt isn’t narrating this poem to her father. She uses the third, not the second-person to describe him. She’s not speaking to the other colonial subjects for whom her father may stand as symbol. By this point, both her siblings are dead, and her mother, along with the vast majority of Indian women (to whom she is also not speaking), has no access to the language. The poem is distinctly positioned to address audiences among the colonizing force. This dismissal of the colonized subjects’ need for language in a work of language crafted in English is undeniably powerful and political.

The turn to temporality at her question’s end resists the empire’s standardization of time, the measurement that in itself acts a governance over the lives and minds of colonial subjects. Replacing the hour with the heartbeat, Dutt recenters alternative modes of measuring and experiencing time, situating the illustration of this moment, nonverbal, unstandardized, yet content, communicative, and full of care, before the arrival of the Angel. When we read the space created in those lines as such, the Angel’s sudden appearance becomes a violent disruption.

Dutt’s narration of the Angel’s presence allows her to perform that fully submissive role of ideal colonial subject, but the poem’s sequence, in narrating the Angel as a disruption, a flash, then a disappearance, structurally argues that the temporality of the colonizing force is
temporary. It doesn’t or cannot linger beyond the episode. Instead, after the encounter, Dutt returns to the image of nonverbal intimacy, the contact of her hand in her father’s:

No more, no more,

Was seen the Angel's face. I only found

My father watching patient by my bed,

And holding in his own, close-prest, my hand.

The brilliance of this shift back to the extralinguistic is that the audience, whom we’ve already identified as beyond Dutt’s intimate circle, is not privy to the final lines’ exchange. The poem makes itself inaccessible, even as it produces words recognizable to the colonizing reader.

At the same time, however, this silence is complicated. I want to think about this wordless exchange not as purely resisting the violence of colonization because to do so would be to erase the evidence of experienced trauma it evokes. Instead, I want to consider the silence as both a resistance to and a result of colonial linguistic violence. In this communicative wordlessness in Dutt’s poem, there are traces of aphasia. The risk in my word choice here is the potential for seeming to diagnose the text, or Dutt herself, with aphasia, and I want to make clear that is not my aim. Rather, I’m adopting this term to refer generally to a loss of language as a result of trauma. Though aphasia, in proper neurological terms, signals physical trauma, I want to contend that Dutt’s loss of a native language, her inability to communicate in a private language neither mediated by nor understandable to the colonizer, functions as a type of aphasia.9

9 According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, “Aphasia is a disorder that results from damage to portions of the brain that are responsible for language. For most people, these are areas on the left side (hemisphere) of the brain. Aphasia usually occurs suddenly, often as the result of a stroke or head injury, but it may also develop slowly, as in the case of a brain tumor, an infection, or dementia. The disorder impairs the expression and understanding of language as well as reading and writing” (“Aphasia”).
Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that “the subaltern cannot speak” is useful here in conceptualizing the complexity of Dutt’s poetic silence. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak defines the subaltern as the colonized subject, using the specific example of Indian women, and explores the possibility of communicative authority. Ultimately, she concludes that the subaltern cannot speak unless through a colonizing, mediating voice. Dutt, as a Bengali woman and colonial subject, assumes the role of the subaltern under Spivak’s definition, and her silence at the poem’s end reflects Spivak’s conclusion. An important nuance to Spivak’s essay, however, is that the communicative agency of the subaltern is not completely erased by the authority of the colonizing voice; silence can function as action. In Dutt’s poem, we can see silence as an agential exercise: the wordless communication between Dutt and her father precedes the Angel’s arrival and interference. The repetition of this nonverbal communication after the Angel’s disappearance cannot then be linked exclusively to the Angel’s interaction with the Dutts; rather, it reinforces the fact that this mode of communication was already an extralinguistic option that Dutt found preferable to verbal exchange. When it appears a second time, after the Angel’s disruption, it’s imbued with more meaning, but it still conveys to us a matter of choice.

**Parsing Dutt’s Positionality**

Dutt’s role in this poem is complicated, though, and it helps to look to Michel Foucault to understand the poet’s place in a dynamic, as opposed to static, power structure. Rather than a strictly-set hierarchy, there is a “multiplicity of force relations” that allow Dutt to take power and

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10 My positionality here as a white woman writing at an American institution becomes complicated, as I do not want to embody that mediating voice in the course of interpreting, that is to say, admittedly, mediating, Dutt’s words as well as her silence. My aim throughout this project is to shine a light on what Dutt has already accomplished and how it relates to colonizing structures but to also take responsibility for my capacity to misinterpret or undermine Dutt’s intentions through my own worldview.
require her to submit power in different directions (Foucault, 92). At play are gradients of westernization, subversions of gendered roles, and the matter of silence as both choice and violently forced consequence. Dutt literally cannot speak her precolonial language, but much is said in her silence, and her mastery of the colonizing tongue does provide her a voice that she would otherwise be deprived as a woman. In the poem, her father does not speak at all. His actions are mediated through her, such that he takes on the role of the subaltern, and Dutt, as she situates herself in the poem, becomes the westernized, colonial mediator. This act of positioning herself as mediator for her father subverts both generational and gendered hierarchies, in which we would expect Dutt’s father, as elder male figure to a Bengali woman, to speak for her rather than the inverse. That Dutt can speak, and speak on behalf of both her father and herself in a time and place at which her gender should have barred her from literacy, nuances Spivak’s conclusion.

The resistive energy of “The Tree of Life” complicates its seeming adherence to colonial high culture while revealing a new way to consider Govin Chander Dutt’s obsessive insistence on Toru’s anglicized education. Rather than a merely Darwinian attempt to endow her with the skills to adapt and survive in a colonial environment, and even more than an interest in assimilation, Dutt’s education provided her with a mastery of colonizing language so that it would not master her. While the superficial assumption “The Tree of Life” allows is that Dutt anticipates her earthly death as well as her heavenly afterlife, the subtext and context of the poem posit a different story: that publication and dissemination of a violent but pervasive and enduring language would extend Dutt’s life, voice, and power in the form of her literary legacy.
Dutt’s ability to charge the religious and literary symbols of a colonizing culture with resistive meaning helps us to understand why she’s so often construed by western scholars as a nature writer. Dutt is never merely writing about her reaction to the aesthetic appeal of a tree or a leaf or a lotus; her poetry accuses the colonizer of participating in systems of violence against people, lands, and culture for capitalist gains. To acknowledge that Dutt’s natural imagery posits ecocritical arguments about scales and systems of oppression and erasure would mean, for reviewers like Gosse, to acknowledge one’s own complicity in those systems. On this end of the long affective moment in which Dutt began writing, I believe we must leverage that discomfort in order to drive change. In the next chapter, however, I’ll look at ways in which we’ve attempted to suppress it.
CHAPTER II

Figuring Anticipatory Trauma: Late Style and Apocalyptic Form in Emily Brontë’s “Why ask to know what date what clime”

[B]ounded individualism in its many flavors in science, politics, and philosophy has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or any other way.

–Donna Haraway

Dark and wild as *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë’s “Why ask to know what date what clime” narrates a strangely complicit witness to something of an apocalyptic harvest scene. Like Toru Dutt, Brontë died young, at just thirty years old, and like Dutt’s “The Tree of Life,” the composition of this poem precedes the poet’s death by mere months. The sense that the poem anticipates more than the poet’s individual death is relatively obvious in Brontë’s work, however, and while Dutt’s poem artfully subverts colonial power by adhering to its linguistic standards, Brontë’s rebellion is in breaking them. In this chapter, I examine Brontë’s technical elision of bounds in “Why ask to know what date what clime” in order to create a poem that figures anticipatory trauma on a massive scale. I argue, ultimately, that this poem, though frequently treated as incomplete, should be considered as whole in and of itself, resisting grammatical and formal boundaries to stir in its reader the discomfiting confrontation of death on the scale of species.

Let me first break down what I mean by anticipatory trauma. As in the previous chapter, the framework I’m using for trauma theory comes from Paul Saint-Amour’s *Tense Future*, in

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11 From Haraway’s *Tentacular Thinking*, 2016.
which he argues that modernist novelists at the interwar period expressed both post-traumatic and pre-traumatic anxieties because of their positionality between moments of mass-scale death. I continue to diverge from Saint-Amour’s study of interwar novels in that my project focuses on Victorian poetry in order to study how pre-traumatic anxiety might be expressed or suppressed at the beginning of the first fossil-fueled society, when poets were beginning to imagine the long-term consequences of human and nonhuman exploitation. Importantly for this chapter, however, I want to highlight that while Toru Dutt’s biography and poetry occupied a position more akin to Saint-Amour’s space between traumas, this analysis of Emily Brontë’s poetry seeks to focus solely on the pre-traumatic element. While post-traumatic anxieties are widely recognized in literary psychoanalytic and affective approaches, the anticipatory counterpart that I want to explore in this chapter is much less frequently analyzed.

In the psychological sense, anticipation describes a defense mechanism through which one plans for an emotionally disturbing event in order to cope with it (Granieri et al). But anticipation, like fear, does not necessarily operate rationally, and at its essence, anticipation denotes a form of knowledge without knowledge. To anticipate, for the sake of this chapter, does not require the author’s conscious certainty of an impending traumatic event. In short, while anticipation may be rooted in conscious or unconscious knowledge in the author, I’m much more interested in how knowledge, conscious or unconscious, manifests in the text.

To employ anticipation (which we commonly think of as engaging with future events) in the textual world also requires a distinction between chronology and temporality. In this chapter, I’m conceptualizing chronology as the linear timeline of a plot, its teleology, its narrative past, present, and future. In the form of a poem, this chronology can often prove elusive, though the
structure and cycles of *Wuthering Heights* demonstrate that Brontë could execute the same chronological confusion in the form of the novel. By the temporality of a text I mean to refer to its narrator’s position (Where in time is the poetic voice in relation to the moments it describes?) which, in the poetic form, may be gleaned through its verb tenses. Functioning as a mode of knowledge with relation to the future, anticipation seems to tangle up chronology and temporality in crisis.

In “Why ask to know what date what clime,” Brontë’s opening line overtly undermines the importance of the temporal position of the moment from which the poetic voice narrates the apocalyptic account. Further, the shifts in verb tense throughout the poem deny any real grounding in past, present, or future, leaving the chronology of the poem’s narrative unclear. The first line sets itself in the present, the second shifts to past with the verb *dwelt*, and then the following three lines lack any verbs— they simply list nouns in which verbs are divorced from chronology and employed as adjectives:

- Power-worshippers from earliest time
- Feet-kissers of triumphant crime
- Crushers of helpless misery

Brontë’s poem then places in past tense what appears biblically as an always-future event:

- But we with unregarding eyes
- Saw panting earth and glowing skies
- No hand the reaper’s sickle held
- Nor bound the bright sheaves in the field
The verb tense of the stanza places the apocalyptic moment as already having passed, as if the poetic voice were narrating it from a state of death, for an audience also presumably annihilated. It is not an earth- or life-bound poem, and so it need not function as such. In its grammar, the poem positions the speaker’s knowledge of the always-future moment in the past while simultaneously destabilizing any grounding in past, present, or future of the poem’s events. In this way, the poetic voice seems to operate as the mechanism which translates unconscious knowledge into conscious knowledge, as the post-apocalyptic position from which the speaker relays the poem remains in this always-future tense in relation to the poem’s reader.\(^\text{12}\)

In analyzing this poem, it’s useful to look to the one that precedes it. In his edition, C.W. Hatfield indicates that the poem that similarly opens “Why ask to know the date— the clime?” was written on September 14, 1846, two years before the latter poem came to be. Because their opening lines so closely resemble each other, Janet Gezari considers this latter poem, numbered 169 in her edition, “a reworking of the preceding one,” and because of its relative concision, she also considers it “probably incomplete” (281). My aim here is not to perform a comparative study of these poems, nor to investigate Brontë’s techniques of revision. Rather, I want to consider this poem as a stand-alone work without disregarding the importance of its context. Accordingly, I want to push back against the idea that this poem, simply because of its relation to the preceding poem, must be a fragment. For the sake of this chapter, the lack of closure that comes with its appearing unfinished is part of the work I want to demonstrate that the poem does, whether Brontë intended so or not. I’ll trade Gezari’s “incomplete” for “open” to clarify that the

\(^{12}\) There are certainly more detailed arguments to be made about anticipation as a defense mechanism and as a dynamic between the conscious and unconscious minds, but for the sake of this chapter’s scope, I find it sufficient to ground my work in the basic conceptual descriptions provided. My aim is not to make a psychoanalytic argument about the mechanics of anticipatory trauma but to clarify the ways in which the very concept of anticipation complicates the function of chronology and temporality in a poetic text.
poem stands on its own as an intelligible piece of writing, but that it resists a standardized closure.

Gezari’s assertion has more to do with Brontë’s intention—whether this re-working was meant by its author to eventually expand into a poem of comparable length to number 168. I’m much less interested in what the poem could have been than what it is, and so throughout this chapter I will treat it as whole, and in fact, if we’re thinking ecologically, the way Brontë’s poetry does, we cannot consider this poem as untethered to the other poems in Brontë’s notebook, as much as we cannot consider any of the writer’s oeuvre as existing in a vacuum. Although the poem concludes the *Gondal Poems* notebook, the imaginative world of Gondal is necessarily imagined out of Brontë’s own exposure and experience, so my reading is not bound to contextualizing the poem within the Gondal narrative. The balance I aim to achieve here is to both recognize this poem’s relationship to the one that precedes it and treat it as whole by its own right— which is not to say insular.

**Late Style as Proximity to Death**

So why does it matter that even an editor as sharp as Gezari would think of this poem as a fragment, and why is it important to push against that notion? For me, the formal unboundedness in the last of Brontë’s poems to be published helps us rethink the critical category of late style. Of course, the category’s validity has already come into question because of a lack of collective agreement about what exactly it entails. In an introduction to a 2016 collection of essays on late style, Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles sum up the issue quite neatly:

For all the conceptual sophistication with which critics approach the so-called ‘late works’ of writers, artists, and composers, they rarely—surprisingly rarely, in
truth—confront the evidence that the idea of late style, far from being a universal creative
given, can be understood quite differently—as a critical and ideological construct, the
product of a certain kind of critical wish fulfilment. To suggest this, it should
immediately be said, is not to reject the observation that the work of creative artists late
in life may manifest remarkable changes in output and style, sometimes involving a
breaking out into new possibilities, sometimes a turning back to and rethinking of their
earlier work, but it is to require the critic to reflect on a category that is so often deployed
unreflectively, perhaps even unthinkingly. (1)

In this chapter, then, part of my aim is to reflect on this category as I deploy it. Specifically, I
assert that late style might prove a more useful tool for critical analysis if not limited to the
works of an individual nearing individual death. Ultimately, I argue for the recognition of the
late style of a species, applying Emily Brontë’s poetry as a stepping stone from examinations of
exclusively masculine individual deaths to more inclusive anticipations of human extinction.

In his influential essay on late style, Theodor Adorno\(^\text{13}\) posits that radical formal
decisions in the last works of great artists accompany their heightened sense of mortality. In the
fall of 1995, Edward Said expanded on Adorno’s exercise through a popular graduate seminar at
Columbia, in which he examined the differentiation of the last works of Richard Strauss, Ludwig
van Beethoven, Arnold Schoenberg, Thomas Mann, Jean Genet, Giuseppe Tomesi di
Lampedusa, C.P. Cavafy, Samuel Beckett, Luchino Visconti, and Glenn Gould (notably all

\(^{13}\) Interestingly, Michael Spitzer notes that Adorno’s work on Beethoven remained “unfinished at his death” and
that “the fragments were gathered together and edited by Rolf Tiedemann as *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik*”; thus Adorno’s own late style is similarly categorized as fragmented and incomplete (204).
men). This seminar served as the basis for Said’s last book, On Late Style. In it, Said makes an important distinction between two subsets of late style. The first is really old-age style, suggestive of a type of maturity that comes with the artist’s age and “a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of common reality” in the work (6). The second has little to do with age; rather, it conceptualizes “artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (7). In this vein, for Said, the marker of late style is the denial of closure, “the experience of late style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going against” (2). It’s this second form of late style that Said claims interests him most, and I find it apparent in the openness of Brontë’s poem.

McMullan and Smiles echo Said, stating that “[l]ate style is either, as for Sophocles, Titian, or Goethe, the product of unarguable old age or, for Goya or Shakespeare or, all the more outrageously, for Mozart or for Keats, of a proximity to death that makes old age per se superfluous” (6) (emphasis mine). Their phrasing proves integral to the reconceptualization of late style that I offer, and I will expand on this later in the chapter. Building on Adorno’s observation, McMullan and Smiles assert that we can locate the hallmark of late style in works whose “formal invention challenges contemporary (and, for that matter, subsequent) aesthetic understanding” (2). Brontë’s poem seems to fit cleanly into these definitions: she composes it just before her untimely death, and scholars and editors alike treat it as a fragment because its

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14 Both Adorno and Said focused on their analyses of late style as they neared their own deaths. As a result, the seminal texts they produced on the late works of great minds are now considered to be part of that very category. Perhaps in studying the final utterances of artists they found some comfort in generating their own.
formal unboundedness has resisted generations of aesthetic notions of what counts as complete, of what is or isn’t a poem.

Yet, Adorno and Said’s concept of late style is decidedly limited to the individual (and to the male) artist. When we think of traditional late style, most scholars at least make mention of Keats, and Brontë’s poem seems to openly allude to his late ode “To Autumn,” in its imagery of the harvest, though where Keats aestheticizes the harvest, Brontë makes it gory. Often noted as Keats’s meditation on his own proximity to death, “To Autumn” moves from the maturation of fruits in early fall to the harvest, and finally ends on the inevitable arrival of death in the form of winter. For Keats, an individual’s death turns the cyclical associations of seasons into a linear process, one with an endpoint. Likewise, Brontë’s poem leverages the cyclical—“Day after day, from noon to noon”—to disrupt it. Her allusion to Keats, “It was autumn of the year,” serves to play off of that same sense of false anticipation, calling to mind the Romantic sense of inevitable, naturalized death in order to destabilize it: the line “But we with unregarding eyes” promises diversion from the expected with its coordinating conjunction, and the subsequent line follows through in its imagery of “panting earth and glowing skies.” “Panting” itself seems to perform an allusion. It’s a very Keatsian word, appearing throughout his poetry all by way of relating a heightened sense of human liveliness. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” he associates panting with youth and passion: “For ever panting, and for ever young;/ All breathing human passion far above,” he writes. In “To Fanny,” panting personifies intense desires: “Ah! dearest love, sweet home of all my fears/ And hopes and joys and panting miseries,—”. In “Endymion,” we see it again, charging a womanly figure with sexual intensity: “God of warm pulses, and dishevell'd
hair,

And panting bosoms bare!” For Keats, panting is youthful vigor, sex, the energy of life at its climax.

Yet for Brontë, the word is far more a heaving, a gasp, the breath of absolute exhaustion. It twists Keats’s word for life into the sound of his own death by tuberculosis. By making earth, that placeholder for planet as well as for biodiverse life, short of breath, Brontë approximates death to the entire biosphere, taking Keats’s rumination on the individual death and stretching it out onto a much greater scale. If, in the Romantic tradition, we imagine a feminine earth, then Brontë further contorts the Keatsian panting of the female body from one in ecstatic, sexual passion to one fully exhausted, with nothing left to give, its resources extracted, its body exploited. Where Keats’s panting is the height and energy of life, Brontë’s forewarns of its fading out. In fact, Brontë’s “panting earth” seems to signal the end of all life, not just the poetic voice’s. The “gathering swallows” that remain twittering in the last line of Keats’s poem suggest that life on earth remains after the narrator’s passing, but Brontë’s apocalyptic scene leaves no room for survivors, indicating a multi-species death that permanently and totally quells the continuation of life on Earth. Keats’s poem anticipates one’s passing; Brontë’s revision bears witness to the imminence of utter annihilation.

Further, where Keats naturalizes death, divorcing it from human agency, Brontë ties it directly to human complicity in violence. Brontë treats the apocalyptic scene as a form of justice promised for human beings’ corruption. The first stanza’s *crushers* and *crushing* turn the implied violence of an unnamed “triumphant crime” physical, and importantly, they link actors to action by repeating the root word while altering its function from noun to gerand. The correlative in
Keats is the “last oozings” observed by personified autumn “with patient look,” in which
crushing necessarily precedes the ooze but is never actually narrated or given an actant.

Still, where Brontë and Keats diverge most dramatically in their representations of death,
and most importantly for this chapter, is in how they figure its anticipation in form. Keats’s
clean-cut trptic retains its symmetry; its three stanzas of eleven lines offer closure in the form of
the familiar, such that the experience of reading parallels the ability to anticipate death as calm,
natural, inevitable. In contrast, Brontë’s poem imbues the form with anticipation to unsettle what
we would expect: her poem’s svelte 25 lines stand in stark concision compared to the 263 lines
of the 1846 poem “Why ask the date— the clime?” that precedes it. The first stanza consumes
seven lines, while the second, third, and fourth take four each. We expect, for the sake of
symmetry, that the last stanza would be round out with another seven lines to mirror the first, but
it ends at six, and its rhyme scheme continues AABCC rather than repeating the first stanza’s
more complex ABAABCC structure. It invites us to expect another couplet, or at least another
line, but it refuses to deliver. Ultimately, then, the argument of Brontë’s imagery— that of
anticipated trauma presented as mass death as a result of man’s own violence, rather than the
calm expectation of individual, cyclical, and naturalized death— finds its correlative in the
poem’s unbounded form.

If late style is defined as a product of the artist’s proximity to death, an ecological
approach, to push against Adorno’s limitations, should interrogate the temporal scale on which
we imagine proximity. Proximity functions relatively, of course, and on a human life scale, the
fact that Brontë writes this poems within a year of her death aligns with the notion of proximity
to death that McMullan and Smiles employ. But the mortality Brontë envisions in the poem is
unbounded to the individual, and as such, the subjects of death—who or what is doing the
dying—require a geologic time scale. Accordingly, if we turn to female poets like Brontë who
were anticipating not only the end of their individual lives but also, and markedly in their work,
anticipating mass scale death, late style becomes complicated in both its temporal and subjective
scales.

Lydia Brown asserts that Brontë’s conceptualization of the self is an identity unbounded,
beyond the individual, by means of dissolution and annihilation. This transmutable poetic self is
instead an infinite, disembodied self, and so we cannot consider Brontë’s narratorial “I” as a
bounded figure. Unlike Dutt’s first-person narrative which extrapolates into larger scales only in
interpretation, Brontë’s poem centers at surface level on the death not of the narrator but of the
entire “panting earth,” her “we” undefined, and so subsuming and implicating readers across
generations. The account’s refusal to name the bounds of its “we” allows the poem to speak to a
scale of violence on the level of nations as well as of species, and its literary staying power
means that this inclusive pronoun is limited to neither a place nor a time, just as its opening line
dares the reader to interrogate the temporal (“Why ask what date”) and regional (“what clime”)15
bounds of its message. Thus, proximity, in this poem’s content as well as its author’s context,
functions on two scales: the individual, for whom a few months make death proximal, and the
species, for whom centuries away still feels soon.16

15 The nineteenth-century use of the word clime, according to the OED, indicated “A tract or region of the earth; now
often considered in relation to its distinctive climate,” suggesting in its lack of specificity that Brontë refuses to
place even categorical bounds on the spatial considerations of this poem—she uses clime rather than town or nation,
resisting constructs of spatial separation.

16 Under this logic, then, all of modernism might then appear to us as the late style of a species for its formal
innovation at the interwar moment when humankind senses its mass demise.
Unpunctuated as Incomplete

I’ve chosen to examine Janet Gezari’s 1992 edition of Brontë’s collected poems because her edits are minimal, and she presents this poem with more adherence to the manuscripts than any other editor. In her introductory notes explaining her editorial method regarding punctuation, Gezari clarifies, “Although I have silently added apostrophes for possessives, for contractions, and for elisions, my principle throughout has been to add little and to add nothing substantive silently” (xxix). This fidelity to the manuscript’s punctuation will prove important throughout this essay, as Brontë’s choices, as Gezari notes, imbue the poem with particular meaning that we lose in C.W. Hatfield’s edition:

The losses attributable to excessive punctuation are clear in Hatfield’s edition and involve the sense of the poems as well as their sound. The movement of the line, its momentum, and the play of the line as a unit of sense against larger units of sense—groups of lines or stanzas—are all altered by punctuation. (Gezari, xxvi)

And indeed, I think Gezari is spot-on here in identifying one of two roles of punctuation in this particular poem, which is that sense of movement and of the line or stanza as unit. There are only two instances of punctuation in the entire poem: both commas that end lines while continuing them grammatically with subsequent lines. The momentum wavers but never comes to a full stop. What, then, do we make of the absence of so much other grammatically-mandated punctuation? My answer is in my own question, as we can see Brontë employ two dashes, a

17 Because these lines have gone through so many iterations—between poems 168 and 169, as Gezari argues, as well as between editors (some more meddlesome than others)—I find it necessary to articulate the boundaries of my exercise here. My method in close reading this poem will be as follows: I consider poem 169 on its own and as an intensification of poem 168, and I often look to the garish edits made by C.W. Hatfield in his widely adopted edition to demonstrate how the work of intensification that Brontë’s choices in the 1848 poem achieve are dampened by his standardizing hand.
question mark, a colon, and a comma in just the first four lines of the 1846 version of this opening stanza. In the later poem, the absence of punctuation is all the more stark as a marker of choice. In this poem, Brontë’s choice then also functions as a refusal to adhere to standardization, a negation of neat stops and starts. The result is a sense of breathlessness, of panting, of anxiety, moving forward, never given permission by the poem to pause. The musical cues of the poem then depend exclusively on the reader’s attention to syllable, to stanza, the natural meter of the line.

Grammatically, Brontë’s elision of punctuation in number 169 also denies the poem’s opening question a clear terminating bound. In the 1846 poem, the opening line asks, “Why ask to know the date— the clime?” But by 1848, the elimination of the question mark and all other punctuation from the first stanza leaves the scope of the question open. It could, grammatically, address the entire poem as an inquisitive, or it could structure the poem as question and answer. This open-endedness echoes the formal evasion of closure that we see as the poem progresses. Without punctuation to put bounds on syntactic units, we have to reorganize our mode of reading, searching for these units, as Gezari notes, within the poem’s lines or stanzas rather than in clear-cut sentences. In this way, Brontë resists traditional reading, forces critical distance from the poem, and asks the reader to alter her perspective as she approaches the poem. What this surfaces so powerfully is the depth to which our heuristics for making meaning of language according to standardized grammatical practices in the English language have been naturalized. This is another form of grammatical opening I see Brontë performing: removing punctuation as a tool for traditional interpretation of bounds and meaning in order to make the reader aware of her unconcious adherence to such tools and to burst open the scope of possibility for interpretation.
This critique of language asks us to join in a rebellious mode of reading, one that does not blindly or passively rely on standardized cues for meaning-making, taking instead the liberty of seeing beyond them.

Virginia Jackson, in her work on Emily Dickinson, poses a similar critique of naturalized reading habits, arguing that Dickinson’s often fragmented musings have only become lyricized into what we conceive of as poems through editors’ and scholars’ adjustments and readings after her death. And while, for the sake of this chapter, I’m considering “Why ask to know what date what clime” a poem for the purposes of close reading it with the attention to the formal mechanics that literary scholarship grants poetry, I want to home in on Jackson’s assertion that these editors and scholars who handled Dickinson’s poetry posthumously followed some sort of corrective impulse.

The Editor’s Suppressive Impulse

In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that this impulse, as applied to Brontë’s poem, places bounds on it, ironically performing the erasure of its open-endedness through the insertion of boundaries that the poet originally elided. I contend that the impulse to standardize, to make “whole” poems from perceived fragments, has to do with the repressive reflex to stifle sources of trauma.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I believe it’s worth noting that for the exploitative sinners Brontë cites in her poem (“Power-worshippers from earliest time/Foot-kissers of

\[\text{18} \text{ I use repressive and suppressive nearly interchangeably throughout this section fully acknowledging that there is a technical difference between the two: repressive suggests an unconscious act of stopping a psychologically harmful thought, while suppressive indicates the conscious act of doing so. Because I cannot know with certainty whether C.W. Hatfield made changes to Brontë’s work with conscious attention to anything but the grammatical coherence of the poem and its accessibility to an audience, I use both terms to describe the process of editing as it relates to the pre-traumatic anxiety expressed in the poem, not as it relates to consciousness.} \]
triumphant crime/ Crushers of helpless misery/ Crushing down Justice honouring Wrong”), the
apocalyptic is the ultimate form of trauma; it does not allow time for redemption or recovery.
Naturally, then, editors of Brontë’s poem, finding themselves incriminated, implicated in the
unforgivable as part of the “we” at the brink of the apocalyptic scene, attempt to ameliorate the
severity of the pre-traumatic anxiety the poem figures as well as elicits.

In a study of gendered patterns in the use of defense mechanisms, Antonella Graneiri, et
al., found that men were more likely than women to stave off anxiety through suppression:
“Males used the defense of suppression significantly more than females, indicating that in our
study it was more likely for males to consciously and deliberately pushing [sic] down thoughts,
desires, urges, and actions that leads to feelings of anxiety, in order to cope with disturbing
situations.” We see this repressive, standardizing impulse most overtly in the edits made by C.W.
Hatfield, specifically in his addition of punctuation. When Hatfield presented his edition of
Brontë’s poetry as The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë in 1941, it’s a wonder he chose the
word complete rather than completed. The object of his editorial method seems to obsessively
draw in boundaries to contain the wildness of Brontë’s work, yet, in January of 1942, the New
York Times review raved that Hatfield’s edition was “an outstanding example of painstaking
research and editing,” and Hatfield’s introduction to his edition details the lengths to which he
had gone to obtain viable manuscripts—or at least clear photographs of them—from which to
create a more textually accurate volume of Brontë’s poems than the one he and Clement Shorter
had published in 1923. Yet the Times reviewer Mary M. Colum also claimed that “Brontë died at
30, too young for a poet of her range to work out the poetry that was in her. Much that she has
left is in the fragmentary, unfinished stage,” and Hatfield seems to have taken it upon himself to
make those fragments whole. In this poem, he does so primarily through the insertion of punctuation.

In total, Hatfield’s 1941 edition includes 25 instances of punctuation. If we subtract the two commas that Gezari agrees upon (at the end of the lines “Day after day noon after noon” and “Our corn was garnered months before”) that still leaves 23 forms of pause or separations of grammatical units that Brontë omitted. The experience of reading Hatfield’s version is markedly different as compared to Gezari’s. To some extent, this is because of the readerly laziness the former allows; Hatfield instructs the reader on how to interpret Brontë, but Brontë, unbounded, insists on the reader’s own effort to decide these units. For example, Hatfield adds a comma and a question mark to the opening line, closing off the grammatical scope of the inquiry. Further, his punctuation choices slow the momentum of the poem, generating a sense of full stops and cold starts by ending each stanza in a period. Without potential for enjambment, the lines fail to “intensif[y] the apocalyptic feeling of no. 168,” and this intensification, what I’ve described as the sense of pre-traumatic anxiety, is a facet of the poem which Gezari sees as essential to its nature (281). Without its momentum, the poem cannot achieve its crescendo; it loses the open-endedness and grammatical chaos that generates a sense of pre-traumatic anxiety. The anticipation is lost, rounded off cleanly in full sentences, their units of meaning marked rather than made. Whether consciously or subconsciously, I believe that Hatfield’s edits were meant to stifle that unsettling sense of anxiety figured in an apocalyptic poem.

Conclusion

So what does late style have to do with repressive editing practices? The late style of a species could function as a tool of literary periodization, one that marks points in history at
which the speaking species has seen itself most likely to decline. It matters that this poem was rethought during the violent Springtime of the Peoples in 1848; it matters that it was not published until 1915, when World War I brought mass bloodshed; it matters that Hatfield’s edition arrives in 1941, when the apocalyptic played out on a global scale again. Accordingly, this chapter urges scholarly consideration of the context both poets and of their editors, and implores that editors of poetry resist the repressive impulse in future practices. If confronted by the full brunt of pre-traumatic anxiety, perhaps as a global population we’ll be moved to do more to fight human and nonhuman exploitation. There is a difference, of course, in our reception of climate data and of poems or narratives. My intention is not to suggest that journalists and climate scientists have failed to sufficiently scare the general public into recycling and changing out our light bulbs. Rather, I wonder whether the difference lies in the kinds of reading each sort of text invites; if data is the Hatfield version, which tells us how to make meaning of our looming fate, then perhaps literature is the fragmented manuscript—messy, boundless, and intent on teaching us to shift our naturalized habits. Finally, I want this thesis to open up questions about what late style really means. In its essence, the concept asks how we create art when we know we are dying. But why do we create art when we know we are dying—as a planet? Why do we write when there are now scientifically calculated limits on the longevity of a literary legacy? My hope is that this research makes space for those questions and others

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19 In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report concluding that global warming will likely reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 unless drastic reductions in emissions are made. According to InsideClimate News, “[m]ore than 1.5°C warming means nearly all of the planet's coral reefs will die, droughts and heat waves will continue to intensify, and an additional 10 million people will face greater risks from rising sea level, including deadly storm surges and flooded coastal zones. Most at risk are millions of people in less developed parts of the world, the panel warned” (Berwyn).

20 Another important perspective asks why we consume poetry in times of crisis, and who consumes it. Earlier this year, The Guardian reported that 2018 saw a 12% increase in poetry book sales for the second consecutive year, and that two-thirds of consumers were under 34 years old—41% of whom were aged 13 to 22, primarily comprised of teenage girls and young women (Ferguson).
about the relationship of style and form— and literature as a whole— to this strange cultural moment so charged with pre-traumatic anxiety.
CONCLUSION

150 million more people would die from air pollution alone in a two-degree-warmer world than in a 1.5-degree-warmer one.

Numbers that large can be hard to grasp, but 150 million is the equivalent of 25 Holocausts. It is five times the size of the death toll of the Great Leap Forward — the largest non-military death toll humanity has ever produced. It is three times the greatest death toll of any kind: World War II. The paper’s math is speculative, of course, and there will surely be those who take issue with its methodology. But it also looks at deaths solely from air pollution — not from heat waves, drought, agricultural failure, pandemic disease, hurricanes and extreme weather, climate conflict, and more. And the paper reaches that figure, 150 million, only for a world that is two degrees warmer, when everything we are seeing now tells us that two degrees, always an optimistic target, is becoming more and more of a long shot.

–David Wallace-Wells21

In these two case studies, I have worked to offer ecocritical analyses which illuminate the phenomenon of anticipatory trauma as it relates to climate collapse. When I first began studying ecocritical scholarship in 2016, the field had been built for anticipatory work. Writers turned to texts that grappled with futurity, with the imminent, the urgent, the almost-hereness of the point of no return. Ecocriticism, just four years ago, sought to produce solutions for a future problem, but that is where I find the distinction between chronology and temporality again quite useful.

Ecocriticism today occupies a different temporal position relative to the crisis of climate collapse. The work is no longer anticipatory. As I write this, bushfires have ravaged 21 million acres of Australia, killing an estimated 1.25 billion animals and more than a billion trees (Bir). Generations are literally watching the world burn with little promise from politicians or major capitalists for immediate relief. The staggering statistics I cited from Nathan Hensley’s talk in my introduction are already outdated. The imminent is no longer imminent; it is here, it is happening, and this changes the nature of the problems ecocritical scholarship should seek to address.

My project has looked to the nineteenth century as a point of early speculation and dread over the fate of fossil-fueled society. Until recently, literary criticism has also occupied itself in the speculative mode, seeming to cohere within that long period of anticipation. Since the American Psychological Association’s definition and mainstream coverage of eco-anxiety, however, ecocritical discourse appears to be shifting into a new stage, one in which anticipation is relegated to the past tense, and the question of how climate collapse will look has evolved into how do we deal with it now that we’re in its midst?

The Future of Ecocriticism

In the space of this brief conclusion, I want to explore the direction in which ecocritical scholarship must move in order to serve rising generations. My two primary concerns for the future of ecocriticism are its integration with affect theory, as this thesis has modeled, and its implementation in classrooms as a tool for young people to cope with and build solutions for the degradation of our collective habitat. I don’t believe that we can any longer deny the inextricability of affect from the work of ecocritical writing itself or from what it aims to do—that
is, illuminate the interconnected systems through which humans interact with the nonhuman natural and the scales in which we do so. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, I’ve felt the weight and strange temporal shift of this future-turned-present, this always-future apocalyptic scene turned regular segment on the nightly news. Ecocritical work is emotional work because it forces us to confront and to get intimately entangled with the distress that our brains are primed to suppress as a form of self-defense. It’s necessarily emotional work because it operates on scales of death we are not equipped to process. For me, and for many others, I suspect, this is emotional work because it reveals a bleak form of futurity, a burden snowballing since the nineteenth century that will largely fall on the shoulders of today’s children, of teenagers like Thunberg. The fact that scholars are just now addressing the absence of critical frameworks which take seriously the psychological or affective impact of climate collapse means that the inheritors of this toxic, fire-ravaged planet will have limited tools for making sense of it. For this reason, I believe it’s imperative that we look to a new phase of ecocritical discourse which attends to the intersection of affect theory and ecocriticism as a legitimate, vital field of scholarship explicitly positioned to prepare rising generations to emotionally and intellectually confront the overwhelming scale of climate collapse. In his article on eco-anxiety, Jason Plautz poignantly poses the questions such a project invites:

As climate change continues unabated, parents, teachers and medical professionals across the country find themselves face-to-face with a quandary: How do you raise a generation to look toward the future with hope when all around them swirls a message of apparent hopelessness? How do you prepare today’s children for a world defined by environmental trauma without inflicting more trauma yourself?
I don’t believe there’s a single answer here, but as a teacher myself, I am particularly concerned with the ways in which ecocritical scholarship can interact with affect theory to both prepare students and protect researchers. Editors Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino work toward the integration of these two approaches in their 2018 collection of essays entitled *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. The book, the first of its kind, represents what I see as the necessary direction of ecocritical discourse: highly interdisciplinary, expressly concerned with embracing affect, and dedicated to recognizing the generational gap in the expression and experience of eco-anxiety. The chapters apply the combination of ecocritical and affective frameworks to texts from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, demonstrating the same temporal collapse into one long affective moment that I’ve attempted to articulate throughout this project.

In her essay “Coming of Age at the End of the World: The Affective Arc of Undergraduate Environmental Studies Curricula,” Sarah Jaquette Ray, who leads the Environmental Studies program at Humboldt State University, grapples with the pedagogical responsibility of preparing students for the affective impact of ecocritical work. Her own students, she explains, are deeply affected by the confrontation of not near but current crises, their agency seeming so limited as to evoke fantasies of self-erasure in order to preserve the environment:

[Environmental Studies and Sciences] students come to college idealistic and optimistic but become despairing and even apathetic when they learn how difficult and entrenched our environmental crises are. Internalizing the eco-mantras to “leave no impact” or, worse, to “save the planet, kill yourself,” many ESS students are seduced into a kind of
self-erasing, misanthropic eco-nihilism. They are further depressed by the stories and analyses they encounter daily in their courses. An “environmental grief” emerges; faced with the enormity of Earth’s devastation, students are given few tools to address their mourning in classrooms. (301)

Ray’s observation here speaks to the urgency of providing students with emotional and intellectual tools for bringing affect into academic spaces. If affect remains absent from ecocritical scholarship, then we ignore a massive component of scholars’ and students’ engagement with that scholarship. The stakes of recognizing, validating, and integrating discussions around eco-anxiety in classrooms are far greater than coddling a few overly sensitive Millennials, though Ray importantly argues that we cannot teach climate collapse without also teaching its relationship to power, privilege, and exploitation. Of course, not all experiences of eco-anxiety equate to the diagnosable PTSD from which survivors of Katrina suffer, but even among the least vulnerable, wealthiest populations, this sense of eco-nihilism that Ray cites could stymie the sense of hope necessary for the types of problem solving this generation will inherit as a matter of survival.

One of the greatest hurdles educators face in teaching climate crisis is combating the sense of hopelessness, of agential paralysis, that the statistics often produce in students. In 2007, ten years before the APA officially coined eco-anxiety, Glenn Albrecht, et al., defined solastalgia as “the distress caused by environmental change”:

As opposed to nostalgia—the melancholia or homesickness experienced by individuals when separated from a loved home—solastalgia is the distress that is produced by
environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment. (S95)

Ultimately, Albrecht’s study of individuals impacted by experiences of persistent drought large-scale open-cut coal mining found that “people exposed to environmental change experienced negative affect that is exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness or lack of control over the unfolding change process.” Naturally, Ray notes, students confronted with this sense of powerlessness ask for solutions that educators simply don’t have. Recovering students’ sense of agency will necessarily begin by validating their negative affect. Reducing real anxieties to oversensitivity turns students into part of the problem, reaffirming their impulse to self-erase, but bringing discomfort into the classroom, especially in conversations acknowledging their own privilege relative to the world’s most vulnerable populations, may more realistically spur the altruistic affect necessary to empower rather than paralyze students.

Another useful model for combining ecocriticism and affect theory comes from Lisa Ottum’s “Feeling Let Down: Affect, Environmentalism, and the Power of Negative Thinking.” This essay, staked in psychological research and literary analysis, speaks to the complex temporality of eco-anxiety that I have explored throughout this thesis; yet Ottum impressively recuperates negative affect, specifically disappointment, to make it useful to environmental action:

Yet, as it is represented in literature, disappointment is seldom the paralyzing affect described by its many detractors. In *The Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth’s disappointment with particular settings is figured as the catalyst for reflection, both at the instant of disappointment and at quite some distance in the future. The peculiar
temporality of disappointment leads the poet to greater self-awareness about the mediating role of culture in his encounters with nature—and ultimately to a more nuanced and, I argue, politically useful attitude toward the natural world. (259)

Throughout this essay, then, Ottum shows us how attending to negative affect in texts that describe reactions and relations to the nonhuman natural can provide more nuanced approaches to real-world activist work combating climate collapse. In the classroom, this modality can prove particularly useful in simultaneously validating students’ negative affect (and their disappointment in politicians’ and major capitalists’ inaction in particular) while converting that affect into political action.

Part of my aim in this work has been to provide scholars with a framework and vocabulary with which to have the intellectual and emotional conversations that are proving increasingly necessary to managing the study of climate collapse across disciplines. Accordingly, I close this project by acknowledging the scales of systems that will have to change in order to protect the future of our planet. Shifts in ecocriticism and pedagogy can create tiny ripples over time in a reality in which the time we have left to make changes is terrifyingly limited. Access to ecocritical scholarship and the quality of education that would bring ecocritical discourse into pedagogical approaches is narrow. Realistically, the greatest benefit of bringing affect into ecocritical discourse is that it will provide a small set of students and scholars with the opportunity to process a complex set of emotional responses that have, until very recently, been culturally repressed. Perhaps we can leverage affect more effectively into action quickly enough to implement mass-scale change, to convince the right decision-makers to protect today’s children. My aspiration in taking on this thesis has been primarily to fight the agential paralysis
of climate collapse by finding better ways to serve my students, and I hope that the strange, affective experience of reading this project, if nothing else, has provided resources for others to do the same.


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