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Pihkala, Panu

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Eco-Anxiety and Planetary Hope

Douglas A. Vakoch • Sam Mickey
Editors

Eco-Anxiety and Planetary Hope

Experiencing the Twin Disasters of COVID-19
and Climate Change

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Editors

Douglas A. Vakoch
METI International
San Francisco, CA, USA

Sam Mickey
Department of Theology and Religious
Studies, Environmental Studies Program
University of San Francisco
San Francisco, CA, USA

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Introduction: Eco-anxiety, Climate, Coronavirus, and Hope

Abstract This chapter provides an overview of the theme and contents of this anthology. It introduces the main ideas, theories, and methods related to research on eco-anxiety, including its appearance in the anxieties people experience in relationship to the crises of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several ways to categorize these various anxieties, but in general, eco-anxiety is here used as an overarching term that includes climate anxiety and coronavirus anxiety. This introductory chapter highlights the psychological, phenomenological, existential, and artistic perspectives explored in the book, and indicates how these perspectives on eco-anxiety provide grounds for hope in a time of crisis. The chapter concludes by providing a brief summary of each of the book's chapters.

Keywords Eco-anxiety; Climate change; Climate anxiety; Coronavirus anxiety; COVID-19; Hope; Phenomenology

People all over the world are feeling various kinds of distress because of the global ecological crisis and its local manifestations. This phenomenon has been growingly called eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2020a; Hickman 2020). Since December 2019, another major form of global distress has been strongly felt in nearly all corners of the world: anxiety because of COVID-19. This coronavirus anxiety, which has also been called COVID-19 fear, is a phenomenon of its own (Asmundson and Taylor 2020), but it also has profound connections with eco-anxiety, and it could be considered a type of eco-anxiety. The origins of pandemics are closely tied with known problems in human interactions with the more-than-human world, such as industrial animal farming (Blum and Neumärker 2021).

In practice, numerous people have felt both eco-anxiety and coronavirus anxiety at the same time. Many dynamics are similar, although there are also profound differences due to the diverse characters of the threats. A virus can spread rapidly and cause serious illnesses, even death, over a time period of just some days. The ecological crisis moves more slowly, but is no less deadly, quite the contrary. There are numerous forms of ongoing slow violence (Nixon 2013) to both humans and the more-than-human world, and sometimes the ecological problems erupt as powerful

and sudden events. Extreme weather events, grown more intensive by climate change, are a prime example. Both coronavirus anxiety and climate anxiety can have profound connections with death-related anxiety (for eco-anxiety and “mortality salience,” see, e.g., Adams 2016).

This book provides in-depth explorations of eco-anxiety and coronavirus anxiety. These phenomena are approached in their wide scale: they can sometimes fulfill clinical criteria, but fundamentally they are sensible and adaptive responses to very real problems. The term anxiety itself is wide-ranging: it can refer to an emotion, to a mental state, to an anxiety disorder, and to existential anxiety (Barlow 2004). Moreover, many other feelings and emotions often manifest along anxiety, such as fear, worry, confusion, motivation, sadness, guilt, or anger (Pihkala 2020a). Thus, when speaking about eco-anxiety and coronavirus anxiety, one needs clarity about what forms of it are currently discussed.

Anxieties often evoke problem-centered framings: anxiety is usually seen as something negative, a problem that needs to be overcome. As an eco-anxiety researcher, I’ve answered to numerous questions by journalists about ways in which eco-anxiety could be transformed into action. However, the issue is complex: some kind of anxiety is required in order for people to respond adequately to threats which include major uncertainty. The aim is not to get rid of eco-anxiety, but to help channel its energy into constructive outcomes instead of paralyzing anxiety, depression, or trauma. (For practice-oriented guidebooks about eco-anxiety, see, e.g., Ray 2020; Grose 2020; Weber 2020.) The adaptive potential of anxiety, which researcher Charlie Kurth (2018) calls “practical anxiety,” is much needed (Pihkala 2020a).

In relation to COVID-19, it has been even easier to notice that some forms of fear and anxiety have been very much needed. Actually, some of the biggest problems related to COVID-19 were born because there was too little fear and anxiety, or misplaced forms of them, by especially decision-makers but also by common people. Anxiety tried to warn humanity in January 2020, but most people were overconfident, indeed over-optimistic. If the warning signals had been heeded in time, there would not have been need for the strong forms of fear and anxiety, which then became widespread since February 2020. Panic results from a situation where normal fear and anxiety are not anymore enough; think about the massive buying of toilet paper and other emergency responses when the pandemic spread.

The chapters in this book are not making overly simple statements about the goodness or badness of eco-anxiety or coronavirus anxiety. The authors are exploring these phenomena in the variety of forms they take. There are forms of them which include human rights violations, such as the facts that many children feel dread because of the climate crisis (see Hickman, Chap. 8, this volume). There are terrible existential anguishes, such as the ones felt by many young people over whether they can try to have children because of predicted climate futures (see Arnold-Baker, Chap. 6, this volume; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020). Suffering must be taken very seriously, but many forms of anxiety are also fundamentally very important because they rupture a false sense of security and challenge unjust economic and social structures (see Part I of this volume).

Both eco-anxiety and coronavirus anxiety are felt in a time when humanity is facing existential threats in all senses of that concept, and is at a threshold. Unfortunately, governments and decision-makers have often displayed a great lack of wisdom in reacting to these global anxieties. Swift action to alleviate systemic problems would help enormously in alleviating the problematic forms of these anxieties. This book does not frame eco-anxiety or coronavirus anxiety only as a therapeutic issue, but the authors constantly point toward the need for a critical socio-political understanding of the causes of these anxieties (see further Adams 2020b).

The Question of “Hope”

Another major keyword for this book is hope. Hope is a very big word, which has deep meaning for numerous people (for a wide popular overview, see Scioli and Biller 2009). However, like anxiety, hope is also a term that is used in various connotations. Some associate hoping with wishful thinking and inaction, as did the young climate activist Greta Thunberg in her famous speech by in 2019: “I don’t want your hope—I want you to act ...” (Thunberg 2019). Indeed, there is a strong need to critically analyze the various meanings of hope and hoping.

In research, there are nuanced discussions about various modes of hoping (Webb 2006) and different kinds of environmental hope (Kretz 2013). Hope often has targets and aims, but there are also open-ended forms of hope, which point to a desired direction, but are not so strongly tied with a particular practical outcome. Ethically, hope is often differentiated into unconstructive and constructive forms. Wishful thinking or over-optimism is a classic form of unconstructive hope. McGeer (2004) observes another important and problematic form of unconstructive hope: “willful hope,” the imposing of one’s own view of hope onto somebody else, not respecting the autonomy of the other. Constructive hope refers to such attitudes where people also act in accordance to the aims expressed in hoping (Ojala 2017).

The term “planetary hope” in the title of this book refers to deep desires for the future flourishing of Earth’s ecosystems. In the 2020s, humanity has reached a point where its impact on these ecosystems is so huge that many planetary boundaries of ecological well-being are being breached (Steffen et al. 2015). Some people argue that there is no hope left at least in the ways that hope is classically defined: as a belief in an uncertain outcome. Numerous others argue that hope is still possible and actually elementary: defined, for example, as “radical hope” or “realistic hope,” hope is something that keeps people going. These forms of “gritty hope” (Doherty and Cunsolo 2021) are not based on optimism in the philosophical sense, even though they may have a cheerfulness in them, in addition to a sense of tragedy (Kelsey 2020). These are more open-ended forms of hoping, and fundamentally connected to meaningfulness. In these views, hope is intimately tied with finding meaning in being and action toward good, even though the future is truly uncertain (Jamail 2019; Pihkala 2018; Moser 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the dynamics of planetary hope and despair in many ways. On the one hand, there has been much despair and even feelings of hopelessness amidst the suffering. On the other hand, there emerged, early on, new intensities of hoping. There were many news items about animals returning to areas where quarantine measures had restricted human activity, and of clear skies because of decrease in pollution; people wished that these would be signs that more-than-human nature could recover quickly if only societies stopped polluting (Daly 2020). Many people noted that the political measures taken because of the pandemic showed that contemporary societies are actually able to make decisions of that level, and hoped that something similar could be seen in relation to the climate crisis and other major ecological crises. An overview of many such dynamics is provided by the interdisciplinary research group BIOS (2020).

However, as the pandemic has continued, the initial hopes have been in turmoil. There are profound fears and expectations that the required structural changes will not be made. On the other hand, some new developments, such as more ambitious climate politics by both the United States and China, have sparked new hopes during the pandemic. The future is genuinely open, although it is evident that much damage will anyway occur because of the climate emissions already produced. As a result, there is a need for critical analyses of power and hope. There are many examples of “willful hope” in relation to climate hoping: efforts to impose one’s own view about hope or hopelessness to others. Weber (2020) has coined the innovative terms “hopium” and “reverse hopium” to describe two major versions of this dynamic. Some people cling on fervently to optimism (hopium), while others adhere to collapse beliefs with equal efforts for certainty (reverse hopium). Many commentators have argued that people should have the right to their constructive hope (e.g., Florsheim 2021), even while the grief and indignation that many collapse-believers feel is very understandable (for emotions and collapse thinking, see Baker 2013).

The depth dimensions of hope include meaningfulness and vitality. Hope enables people to continue living, to continue the struggles for something better. In this sense, hope is different from optimism or pessimism. Despair can be a part of the cycles of hope. The ability to find meaning or purpose in life becomes crucial (Gillespie 2020; Macy and Johnstone 2012; Macy and Brown 2014; Nairn 2019; Pihkala 2018; Stoknes 2015).

Research About Eco-anxiety, COVID-19, and Hope

Currently, both eco-anxiety and coronavirus anxiety are subjects of great research interest. Among various forms of eco-anxiety, climate anxiety has received the most attention (Clayton 2020; Pihkala 2019). Researchers are mapping theoretically the various dimensions of these wide phenomena and different forms of empirical research are being conducted. The chapters of this book are geared more toward theory, but there are also many empirical observations.

The chapters bring important insights also to the currently growing efforts to construct measures and scales for these anxieties. A preliminary scale for climate anxiety was proposed recently by Clayton and Karazsia (2020), and it has been further developed by new research (Hogg et al. 2021; Wullenkord et al. 2021). A weather-focused Climate Change Worry Scale was developed by Stewart (2021). Several different scales were rather quickly developed for coronavirus anxiety: the brief Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (CAS; Lee 2020), the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S; Ahorsu et al. 2020), and the COVID Stress Scales and the COVID Stress Syndrome concept developed by Taylor et al. (2020). On the basis of theoretical work, it is clear that these kind of scales have significant overlap with each other, because fear, anxiety, and worry are so closely connected with each other. Theoretical in-depth discussions can help scholars and medical professionals to observe various forms of these anxieties, fears, and worries, and help in differentiating those forms which need special psychological support.

Coping methods have understandably been a major theme in related research and practical efforts. More research is warranted, but it has been observed that many kinds of methods can help with these anxieties. There is a need for self-care, psychological support by professionals, and peer groups. Political actions are closely tied with coping, because ardent efforts to counter the threats would increase people's sense of security and their resources for coping (see Juliano, Chap. 10, this volume). (For overviews of coping with climate anxiety, see Mah et al. 2020; Pihkala 2019; for discussion of coping methods in education in relation to eco-anxiety, see Pihkala 2020b.)

Hope becomes intertwined with coping, as psychologist and education researcher Maria Ojala has insightfully shown in many empirical studies (e.g., Ojala 2012a, b, 2016). It seems that the connection is dynamic: hope is generated by coping, and sometimes coping is generated by constructive hoping. There have been many recent efforts to study the relationship between coping with climate change and various forms of hope: scholars have observed that for most people, hope and action are connected (Li and Monroe 2017), but some people act out of sheer determination and moral values, even though they have no optimism (Bury et al. 2020). In the chapters of this volume at hand, many kinds of hopes are explored, and it is often found that hope is closely connected with determination and joint endeavors in caring.

Arts and Coping with Global Anxieties

Arts have been found to be a highly important means to engage with difficult topics such as these global anxieties. Emotions live in our bodyminds, and arts provide opportunities for embodied reflection and action. Indeed, many kinds of art-based methods have been applied to both eco-anxiety and coronavirus anxiety.

There have been art-based interventions aimed directly at engaging some important aspect of eco-anxiety, such as enabling people to encounter ecological grief

and/or eco-guilt. Examples include art exhibitions where names of lost species have been displayed as a kind of memorial. These kind of events often evoke both sadness and guilt (for examples, see Barr 2017; Adams 2020a; see also Hron, Chap. 7, this volume). In addition, many art-based methods enable great openness and variety in people's engagements with them: each person may reflect on something which is important for her/him in that moment. Because of the complicated and manifold character of people's feelings related to the climate crisis, art-based methods can serve especially well in their exploration (e.g., Bentz 2020). Some feelings may be so difficult to encounter that arts can offer highly significant means to tentatively approach them.

Art-based methods have been important also in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Building connections between historical events and the present, several experienced art therapists (Potash et al. 2020) published an article relatively early during the COVID-19 pandemic where they draw from their work experiences amidst various pandemics in recent history such as Ebola and SARS. While the authors focus on art therapy, the borders between explicit therapy and other uses of art are often fluent here. With an example from an Ebola pandemic, they capture insightfully the various potentials of art:

Art in the context of psychosocial support groups allowed for the expression of emotions both positive and negative—gratitude, love, sadness, fear, anxiety, depression, anger, disbelief, grief—while engendering a sense of control in a safe environment. Art making altered perspectives and combated disconnection. Exhibitions of paintings allowed for communication and feedback. Not limited to visual arts, music (and particularly prayers) played an essential role in facilitating solidarity and offering inspiration. Lastly, art, music, theater and dance helped provide levity in the form of comedy and satire. (p. 105)

During COVID-19, visiting art spaces live was often difficult or impossible, which gave rise to creative virtual methods. There is already some research about this, such as the article “The Use of Online CB-ART Interventions in the Context of COVID-19: Enhancing Salutogenic Coping” (Segal-Engelchin et al. 2021). Even a single online meeting can help people to process their distress and receive both peer support and professional support. Creative expression at home can also help in many ways with anxiety and distress, as an analysis of paintings by women during lockdown demonstrates (Lakh et al. 2021).

The art-focused chapters in Part III of this volume, which will be introduced in more detail below, are geared toward narrative methods, used both privately and publicly. There is growing interest in environmental humanities and especially eco-criticism toward these kinds of methods (e.g., Garrard 2014; Bladow and Ladino 2018), and websites have been created to help educators and communicators to make use of these kind of methods (Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators 2021). Information about lived experiences of pandemics and ecological crises can serve as peer support and as a motivator for political and ethical action (for climate anxiety, see, e.g., Johnson and Wilkinson 2020). Indeed, arts are not only therapeutic or creative in a nonpolitical sense, but can be closely connected with efforts for justice (e.g., Foster et al. 2018).

The chapters and parts of this book, which are introduced below, provide many connections between the global anxieties described in this introduction. In the future, the work will continue to combine insights provided by research and action in both spheres. Scholarship on climate anxiety and scholarship on coronavirus anxiety can inform each other, as well as scholarship on arts and coping in relation to each of these global distresses.

Part I: Phenomenologies of Eco-anxiety

The first part discusses psychological and philosophical foundations for understanding eco-anxiety, climate anxiety, and pandemics. The main focus is on COVID-19, but the discussion extends much further. Several of the chapters use phenomenological and existential approaches.

In the first chapter, “Not to Be Unworthy of the Event: Thinking Through Pandemics with Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze,” Eva-Maria Simms engages in a two-fold investigation. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is applied to probe “the event structure of the body” and Deleuze’s philosophy to discuss “the event structure of the socio-political world.” Pandemics as anxiety-producing events challenge us to gain new understandings of the various aspects of our bodily existence, but also of the larger, systemic connections between humans and the ecosystems in which we live. The ethical challenge is to be worthy of the event, she argues, using Deleuze’s concept.

In “We Breathe, Therefore We Are: The Gasp of Life,” Tina Williams explores the central role of breathing. Air and breathing enable our subjective existence, but they also link us with the natural world and other human beings. Williams approaches eco-anxiety as an existential angst, drawing from Heidegger; eco-angst is a warning signal, manifested by stifled breath and shaped partly by air pollution. COVID-19 is a danger that spreads through air and that threatens our co-breathing relationships. Phenomenologically, all these breathing relationships are interconnected, and this fact directs us toward caring for all life.

Sam Mickey continues phenomenological reflections about air relationships in his chapter “Atmospheres of Anxiety: Doing Nothing in an Ecological Emergency.” Simms and Williams already touch on ways the ecological crisis and the COVID-19 crisis cause a “rupture” in our “attunement” to the world, but Mickey extends this discussion further into Heidegger’s thought as well as the ideas of the contemporary environmental philosopher Timothy Morton. Mickey applies the existential idea of *Gelassenheit*, doing nothing, into our current plight. Asian-American artist Jenny Odells’ work is discussed in relation to the key task of cultivating both inner and outer dimensions of doing nothing.

Simon Lafontaine engages especially the work of Lauren Berlant and Alfred Schutz in his chapter, “Anxiety and the Re-figuration of Human Action: Living in a Crisis-Shaped Present.” Berlant, a leading theorist in affect studies, provides conceptual tools to analyze various “genres” through which events are interpreted.

Schutz's analysis of anxiety and the structures that guide an individual's apprehension of events are then brought into creative discussion with Berlant's thoughts. As in previous chapters, the topic of death and mortality is touched upon, as Lafontaine examines these fundamental issues of life.

In the concluding chapter of Part I, "Authentic Compassion in the Wake of Coronavirus: A Nietzschean Climate Ethics," William A. B. Parkhurst and Casey Rentmeester apply Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy to our era of climate crisis and COVID-19 crisis. Nietzsche discussed pandemics both in medical and in existential senses. Pandemics reveal true characteristics of humans, and Nietzsche warns against "pity combined with disgust," which is actually reflected in many responses to COVID-19. The authors suggest that the coronavirus provides the opportunity to practice "deep compassion," based on an existential awakening to human finitude.

Part II: Beyond Birth, Existence, and Environment

The chapters in Part II bring various phenomena and groups of people into creative dialogue with eco-anxiety and COVID-19 anxiety. The case examples include children and youth, birth strikers, the #MeToo movement, and those grieving stillbirths.

In her chapter "Birth Strike: Holding the Tension Between Existence and Non-existence," Claire Arnold-Baker explores the existential underpinnings of maternity, birth striking, and the climate crisis. Maternity or hopes for it have a strong existential dimension, but the climate crisis strongly intensifies these challenging questions. Arnold-Baker discusses the ethical issues related to women's choices, freedom, and responsibility, and she points out that contemporary existential crises may also inspire people to find more meaningfulness. She concludes that questions of mortality and continuation of life are ever present in our era.

In "Stillbirth Grief, Eco-grief, and Corona Grief: Reflections on Denialism," Madelaine Hron focuses on several socially difficult types of grief: ecological grief, pregnancy and infant loss (PAIL), and COVID-19 grief. Drawing both from interdisciplinary research and her own experiences, Hron points out that the social attitudes to all these griefs include denial, dehumanization, and disgust. Examples of the actions by PAIL groups show how unethical discourses can be resisted. For instance, Hron discusses memorialization, sentimentalism, and lamentation, and she invites readers to apply these approaches to ecological grief and COVID-19 grief.

Caroline Hickman discusses the challenges and possibilities of intergenerational relations in "Saving the Other, Saving the Self: Exploring Children's and Young People's Feelings About the Coronavirus, Climate, and Biodiversity Crises." She explores the emotional landscapes of children and youth, pointing out that many of them are sensitive to the interconnectedness of humans and the rest of the planet. They often engage in climate activism, both for the sake of their futures and for the rights of other species. However, the COVID-19 crisis sparks the need for even more discussion across generations, since risk perceptions are different: many youth fear climate change more than the coronavirus. There is a need to imagine shared

futures together by people of various ages and to resist intergenerational misunderstandings.

Christoph Solstreif-Pirker applies insights from feminist psychoanalyst and artist Bracha L. Ettinger to our current plight in “Participating in the Wound of the World: A Matrixial Rethinking of Eco-anxiety.” He discusses a relational and transitive constitution of human subjectivity and explores Ettinger’s “matrixial” theory for understanding the contemporary relationship between humans and nature. Solstreif-Pirker proposes a “psycho-planetary plurality,” wherein anxiety is transformed into a proto-ethical agency of relationality and care. He argues that the “ecological trauma might be overcome in establishing a shared borderspace between the human and the planetary unconscious,” and he exemplifies this investigative venture with a specific art-based performative methodology.

Merritt Juliano’s “From Oppression to Love as Mother Earth Joins the Time’s Up and #MeToo Movements” examines the interlocking dynamics of oppression of both women and nature. She conducts an interdisciplinary review of ecofeminist theory, ecofeminist theology, various psychological theories, and the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari to understand the roots of the problem. Juliano asserts that mindfulness and mentalization may help in efforts to dismantle oppressive behaviors, but this requires the broadening of mentalization-based therapy by also including human-nonhuman relations. She argues that the current dominant paradigm bears similarities with narcissistic modes of thinking and behaving in the world, which run counter to a systems-based understanding of life that can allow for the development of empathy and a sense of interconnectedness.

Part III: Eco-Poetry and Creative Writing

The final part of the book is devoted to the role of imagination, creativity, and the arts. The contributors focus especially on written texts, but many of the case examples have circulated online and are thus combinations of visual elements and text.

In “Ecoprogramming the Vulnerable Bodies,” Om Prakash Dwivedi explores the possibilities amidst the current pandemic for a worldview that would give environmental issues a more central role. Using a theoretical framework related to vulnerability, Dwivedi examines ways in which a sense of interconnectedness might be extended. He discusses literary readings from different cultures and knowledge traditions in order to reflect on the possibilities for a better, “ecotopian” world. He introduces “ecoprogramming” as a concept to describe the changing of mindsets to become more deeply ecological.

Abhik Gupta explores the possibilities of ecocentric poetry in his chapter “Anxiety in Isolation: Anointing with Ecocentrism.” Going back to some older poetry and philosophy, such as the writings of Walt Whitman and Martin Buber, Gupta discusses “a dialogue with Nature” as a means to overcome the loneliness generated by quarantine conditions and anxiety. He proposes that “identifying with

Nature” might transform loneliness into more tranquil solitude, with the help of poetry.

One important part of the viral online responses to the coronavirus crisis has been the wide circulation of poetry and other narrative writings, which explore ways to survive the crisis. Nicole Anae studies this “corona writing” in her chapter “‘Narrative Medicine’ in the Age of COVID-19: The Power of Creative Writing to Reimagine Environmental Crisis.” Taking the concept of narrative medicine beyond a clinical setting, Anae analyzes the ways in which such writing can productively discuss people’s feelings about global problems and their local manifestations. She argues that creative literary expression can explore climate anxiety as well as the coronavirus crisis, with a therapeutic impact.

In the final chapter, “Soul Suffrage: A Narrative Eco-poem,” Michael Hewson explores the feelings of solastalgia—feelings of loss and nostalgia due to changing environmental conditions—through a narrative setting in the Swiss Alps. An old sign tells travelers to “make sure the vista stays natural,” but Hewson asks: What should be considered natural, now or in the future? The human interventions in the scenery are manifold, both in the forms of cleared pastures and the metallic structures of the ski lifts. Explicitly and implicitly, Hewson discusses the potential of art for shaping environmental attitudes.

Panu Pihkala
Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science
University of Helsinki
Helsinki, Finland

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Panu Pihkala PhD, is Adjunct Professor (title of Docent) of Environmental Theology in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki. His interdisciplinary research deals with the psychological and spiritual dimensions related to environmental issues and especially climate change. Pihkala has become known as an expert in eco-anxiety and has had his work published widely on the topic. He is also affiliated with HELSUS (Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science). Pihkala also researches environmental education, and he participates in the multi-disciplinary environmental studies in the University of Helsinki. Psychosocial studies, communication, environmental history, ethics, and philosophy are especially close to his studies.

Contents

Part I The Experience of Eco-anxiety

- 1 **Not to Be Unworthy of the Event: Thinking Through
Pandemics with Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze** 3
Eva-Maria Simms
- 2 **We Breathe; Therefore, We Are: The Gasp of Life** 15
Tina Williams
- 3 **Atmospheres of Anxiety: Doing Nothing
in an Ecological Emergency** 25
Sam Mickey
- 4 **Anxiety and the Re-figuration of Action: Living
in a Crisis-Shaped Present** 33
Simon Lafontaine
- 5 **Authentic Compassion in the Wake of Coronavirus:
A Nietzschean Climate Ethics** 43
William A. B. Parkhurst and Casey Rentmeester

Part II Beyond Birth, Existence, and Environment

- 6 **Birth Strike: Holding the Tension Between Existence
and Non-existence** 57
Claire Arnold-Baker
- 7 **Stillbirth Grief, Eco-grief and Corona Grief: Reflections
on Denialism** 67
Madelaine Hron
- 8 **Saving the Other, Saving the Self: Exploring Children’s
and Young People’s Feelings About the Coronavirus,
Climate, and Biodiversity Crises** 77
Caroline Hickman

9 Participating in the Wound of the World: A Matrixial Rethinking of Eco-anxiety 87
 Christoph Solstreif-Pirker

10 From Oppression to Love as Mother Earth Joins the Time’s Up and #MeToo Movements 99
 Merritt Juliano

Part III Eco-Poetry and Creative Writing

11 Ecoprogramming the Vulnerable Bodies 111
 Om Prakash Dwivedi

12 Anxiety in Isolation: Anointing with Ecocentrism 119
 Abhik Gupta

13 “Narrative Medicine” in the Age of COVID-19: The Power of Creative Writing to Reimagine Environmental Crisis 129
 Nicole Anae

14 Solastalgia and Soul Suffrage: A Narrative Eco-Poem 139
 Michael Hewson

Index 149