

Chapter 6

From: *Engaging with Climate Change*

The myth of apathy

Psychoanalytic explorations of
environmental subjectivity

Psychoanalytic and
Interdisciplinary
Perspectives

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Introduction

'People don't care. The public is apathetic. If people cared more, or understood the threats we face, they'd be doing more.' We have all heard this refrain, in one form or another. I am reminded of Freud's reflections when he wrote about the splitting of the ego, 'I find myself for a moment in the interesting position of not knowing whether what I have to say should be regarded as something long familiar and self-evident or as something entirely new and puzzling' (Freud 1940: 275). On one level, apathy is familiar and commonplace, as a way of describing a *lack* of response or action commensurate with increasingly urgent ecological challenges we have been experiencing and face in the future. On another level, when we explore apathy through a psychoanalytic lens, the picture changes quite dramatically, and becomes altogether more complicated.

When considering psychoanalytic engagements with climate change, apathy provides a useful handle for critically engaging with common conceptions of behavioral change and 'public response' to global climate change. Its pervasiveness masks the fact that the concept of 'public apathy' itself came into being in the 1940s, when information campaigning was increasingly used to shift policy and opinions (Hyman and Sheatsley 1947). For market researchers, when the public did not respond to information campaigns in desired ways, they were deemed 'apathetic'. The label has stuck and remains an acceptable descriptor for a lack of response, action or expressed concern (or outrage, as the case may be). Apathy is presumed when 'the public' does not respond adequately to efforts to educate, inform, motivate, cajole, induce guilt or pressure them to change their behaviors in light of an array of social problems, including climate change. However, as I argue, focusing on apathy elides the complexity of potential states that can make 'action' or responsiveness difficult. As Harold Searles wrote presciently in 1972, 'The current state of ecological deterioration is such as to evoke in us largely unconscious anxieties of different varieties that are of a piece with those characteristic of various levels of an individual's ego-development history. Thus the general apathy . . . is based upon largely unconscious ego defenses against these anxieties' (Searles 1972: 363). In other words, there is

arguably more than meets the eye when it comes to ‘apathy’ and lack of response in the form of specific actions (such as political engagement, supporting advocacy groups, consumer choices). In dismantling this myth of apathy, I seek to reframe environmental subjectivity in light of prevailing assumptions regarding a unitary rational subject (i.e. the lamented ‘gap’ between attitudes, values and behaviors, rather than attending to potential conflicts, ambivalence, contradictions, losses and so forth), and outmoded theorizations of the ‘information-deficit’ model.¹

I argue that psychoanalytic approaches – such as attention to unconscious processes, defensive mechanisms such as denial, projection and splitting, and nuanced understandings of anxiety, loss, mourning, and grief – can help us bring back into the frame the potential presence of concern, anxiety, worry, fears, desires, aspirations and hopes in how we conceptualize environmental engagement (or its lack).

Reframing subjectivity and the ‘public’

I will explore not only why apathy is a problematic concept, but also specifically what psychoanalysis and psychodynamic perspectives offer towards an understanding of environmental apathy. As a psychoanalytically informed social science researcher, I want to suggest that psychoanalysis offers perhaps the most powerful tools for working with the problems confounding those in the environmental advocacy and education sectors. These problems involve how to inform without alarming and how to educate without engaging in a pedagogy of despair and disempowerment. Psychoanalysis may be perceived as not having enough ‘praxis’ and real-world application beyond the consulting room. However, the questions on most people’s minds at all levels of climate outreach, engagement and mitigation, questions such as how do we motivate behavioral change in individuals and in organizations, can be addressed through investigating what specific issues, topics, objects and relationships mean for us, and how we are more often than not bound up in a tangle of contradictory desires and impulses. Rather than focusing on ‘levers’ for change, as if people and societies can be engineered, psychoanalysis offers the potential for ‘deep’ shifts through first asking the most fundamental, interrelated questions: what does this mean, how can we best facilitate change?

I begin with one aspect of the analytic attitude that seems most salient: the capacity to focus on relations between what is conscious and unconscious. I present a brief case study drawn from my doctoral research (Lertzman 2010) and highlight selected theoretical contributions from psychoanalysis that have informed this work. These contributions include Freud’s work on transience and on melancholia; Bollas (1987) on the transformational object as a way of thinking about environmental object relations; and Klein (1937) and Winnicott’s (1963) concepts of reparation and concern, respectively. I conclude with brief comments about how this work may translate in terms of practice and application in the way we communicate about these difficult issues.

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Analytic attitude and climate change

In 1992, Ivan Ward convened a conference, 'Ecological Madness', at the Freud Museum in London. In bringing together environmental activists and psychoanalysts, he proposed that a psychoanalytic engagement with environmental degradation does not preclude action or praxis and suggested possible tensions between an 'analytic attitude' and environmental activism (Ward 1993). In addressing his audience of activists and analysts, he emphasized that a psychoanalytic approach is not antithetical to a political orientation – indeed, it offers the ability to inquire into motivations, desires and (often) unconscious forces that is needed for an effective political movement (Ward 1993: 179). It can do this through exploring the relations between what is conscious and unconscious, rather than on the relation between the individual and the social. This helpful distinction is useful for distinguishing how a psychoanalytic approach can work fruitfully and collaboratively to support more effective political analyses and engagements.

Following Ward, I will contextualize how certain concepts in psychoanalysis – particularly those concerned with reparation and repair, mourning and loss, and the bases for concern – may be seen to dovetail with existing concerns in environmental circles. Generally there appears to be recognition that climate change can generate anxiety in individuals, groups and culture (e.g. see Norgaard 2011 on the social production of denial). It also seems self-evident, albeit tacitly, that there are competing desires with regard to industrial development: Western industrialized societies provide pleasures, but these pleasures also can occasion fears.² While psychoanalysis is relatively new to the topic of climate change and related ecological threats, there are parallel and overlapping discussions taking place in psychology and communication studies concerning the role of guilt and fear-based appeals to action, and how our emotions may interfere with effective responses to climate change threats (i.e., Moser 2007; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009). These concerns regarding what makes it difficult for individuals (for it is often individuals that are being referred to) are often articulated in terms of 'barriers' or 'obstacles' to engagement or desired behavioral change. However, there is a lack of robust research and insight as to *why* fear and guilt may cause such impediments to constructive adaptive practices such as reducing carbon, changing consumption patterns, and so on. Environmental ethics also touches on these themes, in terms of how difficult issues or contradictions are negotiated. For example, Simon Blackburn writes:

Ethics is disturbing. We are often vaguely uncomfortable when we think of such things as exploitation of the world's resources, or the way our comforts are provided by the most miserable labour conditions of the third world. Sometimes, defensively, we get angry when such things are brought up. But to be entrenched in a culture, rather than merely belonging to the occasional rogue, exploitative attitudes will themselves need a story.

(Blackburn 2001: 7)

We can ask from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, what does it mean to tell stories that help maintain exploitative attitudes? What are the stories we tell to each other and ourselves? How might defensive mechanisms enable or produce certain strategies for such stories? Engaging concepts of unconscious processes, phantasies and desires, what might we learn about the psychic processes involved when facing the 'ethics' of ecological sustainability, particularly if this touches on distress, reduction of pleasure and the reminder of limits and boundaries? As Searles (1972) pointed out in writing of resistance around relinquishing our attachments to practices such as driving or flying, to what extent do we defend against the perceived threats to our hard-won technical accomplishments, such as the automobile, the plane, the luxuries provided through wealth and exploitation?

One of the most simple and powerful contributions of psychoanalysis to the way we approach climate change and the way we as individuals, societies, communities and nations respond are in the concepts of ambivalence, contradiction and conflict: that we are able simultaneously to hold conflicting desires, thoughts and impulses, even those that appear diametrically opposed. As Walt Whitman wrote, 'We contain multitudes.' Some of these 'multitudes' are more preferred than others. This seems to be a basic point that is consistently overlooked, or possibly split off, in how environmental communications and campaigns are designed. Even research methods used to understand what people 'really think' about climate or environmental threats preclude the recognition of ambivalence and contradiction through the use of polls, surveys and focus groups, as if what people say is what they feel, and that we can distill our views or feelings into a set of multiple choice questions.³ Environmentalists are often the unwanted guests at the dinner party, spoiling the fun in pointing out the conditions that provide us with our shrimp and pineapples. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we may consider what environmentally concerned or active people are 'holding' for others, what is being projected or introjected. Might it be our anxieties? People do not want to be reminded of the dark side of our pleasures; conditions in which our food was grown, picked and shipped, our own imbrications in practices that we may on the face of it find abhorrent and opposed to our sense of ourselves as good and virtuous. And yet we are, in hundreds of small and large ways, reminded of our complicity in the destruction of our own home, our planet's ecosystems. How we manage, cope, process, reflect and respond is where psychoanalysis can help us recognize the power of unconscious desires: that we may in fact want our cars and cheap flights and also want to avoid global climate-induced catastrophes. Further, we possess both reparative and creative capacities and destructive capacities; while industrial practices may in fact involve a certain form of splitting in terms of 'good nature' and 'bad nature', what we know of human history, how we relate to nature, environment, ecology is far from straightforward and must always be contextualized socially, historically, culturally and politically.

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Field study: Great Lakes and Green Bay

How psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity can revise our concepts of environmental engagement was made clear over the course of my fieldwork in the Great Lakes region of the United States (Lertzman 2010). I chose an ecologically troubled region on the edge of the Great Lakes in Wisconsin, home to much industry and to paper processing plants, and designed in-depth interviews with ten participants.⁴ While the region has a reasonably active yet small environmental community of highly concerned scientists, advocates and educators, the city is more known for its paper industry, its football team the Green Bay Packers and the Fox River, listed as a Superfund Site by the Environmental Protection Agency (federal funds are committed for a mass-scale clean-up effort). At the time of my study there was an active campaign taking place to mobilize people to go to a website and support a new initiative to help pass legislation to protect the Great Lakes. Administered by a coalition of organizations, it was called 'Healing our Waters,' and one aspect of this campaign was through a print advertisement. This featured a girl facing a body of water, with a large sign lettering reading, 'WARNING: No more swimming. No more fishing. No more drinking water. NO MORE GREAT LAKES.' I was curious as to how well this advertisement spoke to people and whether or not it reflected their concerns; also, if the prompt to visit a website would be experienced as 'attunement' or 'mal-attunement' to their particular needs and desires.

I designed and administered an online survey to 3,024 = n residents in Green Bay through a partnership with a local public opinion research firm. The survey was constructed so participants could both rate their own levels of engagement and awareness – i.e. how often do you think about environmental issues, from 'never' to 'frequently' – and respond to short questions demonstrating levels of awareness and issue literacy. I selected ten participants, based largely on their self-rating (in the middle range, which includes 'occasionally' and 'depends on events', and the quality of their responses, to signify moderate levels of awareness of local and global environmental issues. None of the participants was actively involved in any form of environmental activity or 'activism.' In other words, if polled about their actions and attitudes about nature and the local environment, these participants may appear as 'apathetic' about chronic or acute ecological threats.

A more complicated story

I designed the interviews based on psychoanalytic research methodologies, such as the 'psychoanalytic research interview' (Cartwright 2004): as open-ended, free associative and narrative-based. I interviewed each participant three times, each interview lasting approximately one hour, in the participants' homes. During these interviews, I heard complicated, often contradictory accounts, containing high affective investments in the region and in specific objects (such as the river, beach, dunes, boat, fish). I also witnessed a capacity for distancing proximity to the threats facing these same objects.⁵ To paraphrase Whitman, how the region

was articulated itself was a 'multitude': it was spoken of alternately with affection, disgust, anger and appreciation. There was nothing monotonous about how people related and experienced their place, the environment and the degraded resources. The industry had brought thousands of jobs and made the city prosperous; it also damaged the ecosystems and, more recently, is putting the entire drinking water supply for thousands into jeopardy. The water itself was an enormous focus for the participants as sites of intense affective investments, associated with family, autonomy, love, creativity, as well as fear, threat and abjection. I began to detect narratives concerning how industrial threats and development may be negotiated affectively and seemingly in largely unconscious ways, that had little to do with more consciously expressed 'concern' or even attitudes about the environment. There appeared a surplus of affect with regard to these topics, and yet these individuals kept their emotional investments largely private and channeled in various intimate practices, from food choices to teaching grandchildren about the value of nature. It was, as one participant related to me, 'something I keep close to my person', and he said that he would never dream of becoming involved with any environmental groups or activities.

While extremely cautious about the risks of conducting 'wild analysis' (Cartwright 2004; Kvale 1999) and wary of using a psychoanalytic approach to data analysis, I nevertheless found the data powerfully suggestive of complicating issues that may produce difficulties for engaging in reparative practices, such as being involved with a local restoration project, political engagement to regulate pollution, or being involved with an environmental organization. In other words, I found high levels of concern – sadness, anxiety, loss and even grief – regarding the condition of the waters so close to home. While I had entered the project initially interested in how anxiety may inform a lack of engagement or responsiveness to environmental issues, I was struck by narratives of loss and what I sensed as an 'arrested mourning' with regard to the places and ways of life, and earlier selves, that environmental issues seemed to evoke. For example, when people spoke of specific sites (for instance a river or a beach on the Great Lakes) it was with nostalgia, as if the site itself no longer existed, it had ceased to exist. While there seemed to be longing for the reparation of these sites, at the same time they were not actively relating to them, as for instance those who are engaged in reparative practices such as clean-ups, etc. The 'environmental objects' here were often bodies of water facing chronic threats, from pollution and toxicity to invasive species, and appeared to be held in a static, idealized state. They had ceased to be alive and active for the participants.

Case study

Donald was a 69-year old man, a native of Green Bay, whose father had worked for the paper mill. He grew up with a strong connection with the region and its waters. A 'self-made man', he had started at an entry-level job at a local vegetable cannery and had worked his way up to become the president. He was not involved

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with any environmental activities or organizations, although he clearly had strong affective investments (demonstrated through personal narratives and activities such as caring for a small piece of private land much revered for its beauty and ecological attributes). Such concerns were to be 'held close to my person' and kept private, not to be shared in the public sphere. To understand more about this, I tracked a few themes and looked at how specific objects were invoked possibly to help maintain certain 'good object relations' with an object that had clearly also been a 'bad' object: the Fox River.

Donald lived near the Fox River, with a view of the paper mill. Two incidents in Donald's life were associated with this river. First, his father had had a serious accident, resulting in physical injury and being dismissed from the company, resulting in a severe family crisis. Second, Donald had lost a front tooth while playing with some friends on the shores of the river, resulting in a painful and shamefully visible false tooth for his entire adolescence and into early adulthood. The Fox River was hardly registered as a 'river' in the sense of a body of water used for recreation, and yet he told me in our final interview, as an afterthought, about a canoe trip he had made down the length of the river with a friend, 'just to do it'. At the same time, Donald spoke with deep affection for the region, the industry, and his affective associations with the city. I noticed there were also a few 'good objects' that seemed vital for his ability to remain positively connected with this place. One such object included a childhood book given to him by his aunt, *Paddle-to-the-Sea* (Holling 1941): an adventure story about the journey a carved wooden figure takes through the entire course of the Great Lakes.

The story presented a new dimension of analysis, in which perhaps Donald had introjected his young boy self into the adventures of this river, while remaining anchored home out of loyalty to the father (as is the case in the story, of the boy who carves the figure). The book was given to him in 1949, and he continues to read it and handle its pages. The book potentially offered Donald a 'positive' relationship with the region, as the story includes themes of resourcefulness, loyalty to family (father specifically), the love of his aunt, the kindness of strangers, and the mythic journey a boy makes in leaving home and returning a man. The second 'good object' for Donald involved a holiday home he bought with his newly wed wife: a pristine parcel of land on a river about twenty miles out of town, similar to the woods and river he played in as a child, which had since become developed and degraded. I noticed an affective investment in a new place, enabling Donald to maintain positive reparative energies, and yet not directed towards the region most in need of repair. There were a few traumatic associations with the region and the river: his father's downfall and his own loss of an adult front tooth (with potential symbolic import), but also a profound sense of affection and appreciation for what the river and the town has provided for him and his family. And yet he expressed at the end of our three interviews an intense sadness and concern for his children and grandchildren's future, and the fate of the waters he loved. Why would Donald's reparative energies not be directed actively towards the river and the Great Lakes?

The revolt against mourning: environmental melancholia

Across the interviews with the ten participants were accounts of affection and longing for the rivers and lakes of childhood. I listened to the articulations of environmental identity and also certain mantras likely inherited by family and culture, such as, 'Get on with it, one must move on, there is nothing I can do.' I began to consider more carefully a form of social melancholia that may be constituted by a lack of action or response to pressing, even urgent issues. It seemed the issue was not so much a lack of affect or concern, as is often assumed in environmental advocacy circles, but a static set of relationships with the lost or damaged object: in this case a body of water or a way of life. Building on the fundamental psychoanalytic insight concerning splitting, the topic of loss and mourning is central to a consideration of the affective and psychic dimensions of contemporary ecological issues. I have found Freud's work on mourning and melancholia particularly fruitful, including his short essay 'On Transience' (Freud 1916). While the essay speaks to modes of response to an awareness of loss through change – in this case, the seasons and the transience of nature and indeed of life – I feel they can be extended to provide a powerful lens onto how we might manage encountering environmental degradation. He begins with an account of how an awareness of loss leads to a withdrawal of affect and engagement:

Some time ago I took a walk through a blossoming summer landscape in the company of a silent friend and a young and already well-known poet. The poet admired the beauty of the nature around us, but it did not delight him. He was disturbed by the idea that all this beauty was bound to fade, that it would vanish through the winter, like all human beauty and everything beautiful and noble. . . . All the things he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be devalued by the fate of transience for which they were destined.
(Freud 1916: 179)

He added, 'We know that such absorption in the susceptibility to decay of all that is beautiful can produce two different impulses in the mind. One of these leads to the painful world-weariness of the young poet, the other to revolt against the asserted fact' (Freud 1916: 179). That is, we can either withdraw affectively from the world, or we can deny the prospect of loss (reality).

While Freud was writing in a different historical and ecological context, he articulated one of the fundamental aspects of the experience of industrial change and ecological threat: anticipatory mourning and the risk of withdrawing affect from those damaged objects (what can appear as 'apathy'). The vignette speaks to dilemmas of experiencing and encountering environmental issues, the way our experience of our material world and invested objects can be mediated by the sense of impending loss or change. Freud's walk in the summer landscape, with the devastation of the First World War on the horizon, is not unlike a walk through

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a surveyed forest, or viewing a mountaintop slated for mining, or perhaps watching a nature documentary about rare creatures whose very existence is in peril. There is the turning toward or away from the risk of loss, from the sense of unpleasure Freud writes about, or as the 'silent friend', not engaging directly with what we see before us.

The essay suggests how environments and affectively invested objects may be experienced through (imagined or actual) loss and impending threat. He presents a parable of three modes of being: one in suspended engagement, the poet who cannot be fully present, who is arrested by an anticipatory mourning that is neither active nor inactive and a silent witness. The mourning experienced by the poet is not 'worked through': objects in the garden were transient, fated to extinction: mocked by its own frailty, beauty was eclipsed by its negation and had no value and no meaning. The other mode (the narrator, presumably Freud) reflects a capacity to appreciate what is, to be present to it; the fleeting quality of existence increases, not diminishes, appreciation of value and beauty and potentially mobilizes the desire to engage and *connect* (we can think of environmental activists who, while being aware of the ecological threats, are avid outdoors enthusiasts, with a keen appreciation for nature, wildlife and recreation). Freud describes the mode of being his friend the poet manifests as a 'revolt in their minds against mourning'. The knowledge of loss so disturbed him that he could no longer appreciate beauty except as something already lost (von Unwerth 2005: 3). Freud considered it must have been the psychical revolt against grief that devalued the pleasure of beautiful things and gave 'a foretaste of mourning its decease, and since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience' (Freud 1916: 306).

Freud writes that the war

broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and the works of art which it met with on its path, but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists, our hopes of a final triumph over the differences among nations and races . . . In this way it robbed us of so much that we had loved, and showed us the fragility of much that we had considered stable.

(Freud 1916: 307)

Freud presciently notes the way such an affected society tends to cling 'all the more intensely' to that which remains in the aftermath of such loss, including a renewed passion for nationalism, kin and pride on what is held in common. (This echoes Randall's work on loss, identity and climate change; see Randall 2009.) In what appears to be an articulation of reparative capacities, Freud notes that mourning does, indeed, come to an end, and our libido is 'free' to become attached to new objects. What has been lost can be mourned but does not damage the capacity to love again:

As long as we are still young and active, it is also able to replace the lost objects with objects that are, where possible, equally precious, or with still more precious new ones. . . . Once mourning is overcome, it will be apparent that the high esteem in which we hold our cultural goods has not suffered from our experience of their fragility.

(Freud 1916: 200)

In the poet's stance towards the garden and his affective withdrawal (unable to take pleasure or even be present to the surroundings), we recognize what appears and is often labeled as 'apathy' or complacency. While it is impossible to know what may be taking place for those who withdraw from the world for a variety of reasons, we must also remain open to the possibility of a form of psychic revolt as described by Freud, if we seek to understand what may appear as apathy or a lack of 'engagement'.

Toward an environmental object relations theory

The interviews I conducted in Green Bay led to the second theoretical construct so helpful in thinking about environmental object relations. The phenomenon of loss, particularly of specific objects – such as a clean lake, a woodland, a bit of riverbank behind the house to enjoy, the ideal of clean air and water – is both a subtext of environmental issues and a topic engaged with in psychoanalytic work pertaining primarily to the loss of human (object) relations. To view ecological, nonhuman objects, or at least to allow for the ways in which we imbue our object world with associations that may involve human others, sensations, memories or desire, calls on a different way of approaching environmental 'objects' (and thus, to try to understand the potential meanings of their losses). Bollas (1987, 1992) developed in his 'transformational object' relations theory (in addition to and building on Winnicott's theory of the 'transitional object', 1971: 86–94) the notion that things and events have psychic resonance, and how we relate and respond to them potentially presents another language, one of desires, longings and unconscious wishes. It is not to say objects are 'only' a construct of our imagination, but to acknowledge place of subjectivity in the human-non-human object world.

To illuminate the significance of certain environmental object relations, in terms of how certain places or objects contain resonances or meanings (i.e. what is the Fox River to a participant? Or the shores of Lake Michigan, enjoyed as a child?) I created maps for how participants related to and articulated specific 'objects' and began to trace potential lines of affective associations. For example, as discussed, for Donald the river was a site of a traumatic accident (losing a front tooth), his father's trauma (an injury leading to job loss) and ecological degradation (a perception of the river as an abject object). I could see how he potentially channeled his reparative energies into a different object – a holiday home nearby on a different river, a more pristine and 'wild' site. As also discussed, Donald also introduced (literally and figuratively) a childhood book about the Great Lakes

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(*Paddle-to-the-Sea*) and spent much of one interview telling me about the story, and the aunt who had given it to him (the same aunt who took him hiking in the woods at age five). I was fascinated how this object helped him perhaps maintain a 'positive object relation' with the region that had created great distress and crisis in his family, as well as with his beloved aunt who had first taken him into the creek – literally, as they both fell in on their walk – as a child.

The theory of the 'transformational object' is based on the premise that in adulthood we seek out objects – relationships, things – that offer the potential to alter our internal mood as our mother once could. It is the endless quest for a reconnection, the ability to re-experience 'an uncanny fusion with the object, an event that re-evokes an ego state that prevailed during early psychic life' (Bollas 1987: 16). It would seem that this orientation to environmental object relations could be fruitful for understanding the complex binds we find ourselves in. Our worlds are often full of objects that are, in fact, connected with ecologically degrading practices, whether or not we are conscious of this. Once these connections are made visible or at least felt through awareness or literacy, dilemmas arise of how we may shift modes from consumptive to reparative. To seek the transformational object in adult life is to recollect an early object experience, to remember not cognitively but existentially – through intense affective experience – a relationship identified with cumulative transformational experiences of the self. The object itself is being identified with specific states of being, with affective relations. Bollas is thus conveying the often unconscious and mysterious – or not so mysterious – attractions and longings expressed for certain places, things, events, as transformational objects. As Bollas points out, the concept of the transformational object brings us to transference and countertransference, the more operationally relational aspects of psychoanalytic practice (1987): 'Transformational-object-seeking is an endless memorial search for something in the future that resides in the past,' Bollas writes. 'I believe that if we investigate many types of object relating we will discover that the subject is seeking the transformational object and aspiring to be matched in symbiotic harmony within an aesthetic frame that promises to metamorphose the self' (Bollas 1987: 40).

Guilt, loss and ambivalence

Finally, it is of no minor significance that the concept of reparation itself is a central topic for both environmentalists and psychoanalysts. Klein addresses the process by which reparation – the desire to repair, make right, restore – arises out of experiences of guilt, loss and ambivalence. Our ability to experience (tolerate) ambivalence toward that which we have harmed (mother, nature, lakes, sibling, etc.) enables the desire to repair others and our environment (Klein 1937; Segal 2003). It is the inability to tolerate ambivalence (socially and psychically) that can lead to splitting and manic defenses (Segal 1997). Object relations theory has been applied and discussed primarily in the context of clinical treatment (Anderson 1992), with rare forays into social and political topics (e.g. Ben-Asher and Goren

2006). However, object relations theory also provides persuasive and compelling theoretical schema for approaching human–environment relations, specifically concerning ecological environments and human treatment of nature.

As Joseph Mishan (1996) wrote, it is the avoidance of these feelings of loss, guilt, and subsequent mourning that acts as the greatest barrier to reparative capacities. On the other hand, when ambivalence can be recognized, aggression is felt as damaging an object that is also needed and desired (e.g. the mother, or our natural resources) and brings in its wake not more hatred but a mobilization of loving impulses and the desire to repair and restore. This is referred to as ‘reparation’ and is seen to exist in dialectical relationship with aggression and hate; that in order to be moved to repair, we must be able to tolerate and acknowledge our destructive capacities. As Segal points out, ‘the recognition of ambivalence, guilt and fear of loss is extremely painful, and powerful defenses can set in, manic defenses, paranoid defenses, all necessitating some degree of regression to more primitive forms of functioning’ (Segal 1997: 159). Segal explicitly makes this point in considering the ability to move from destructive to constructive modes of being. It is essential to differentiate the fact of the existence of ambivalence, which is there from the beginning, from the achievement of knowing one’s ambivalence, accepting it and working it through. Such working through is accomplished primarily through the recognition of guilt and loss brought about by ambivalence, which leads to the capacity to mobilize restoration and reparation. This does not mean that aggression is absent; but it becomes proportional to the cause, as does the guilt attached to it (159).

Psychoanalytic theory has a unique contribution to make towards the understanding of contemporary social and political problems, in this case specific to human–environment relations and current crises in the various formations of public response. Because of its focus on the experience of conflicts between constructive and destructive attitudes, the psychoanalytic approach is well placed to shed light on some of the destructive forces taking place socially (Segal 1997: 157). While a central problem as articulated in environmental sectors concerns a lack of public responsiveness or what appears to be apathy or inertia (e.g. the ‘attitude–behavior gap’ and ‘barriers to action’ discourses), psychoanalytic and psychodynamic thought has for decades engaged with problems of anxiety, defenses, and the phenomenon of resistance. To be precise, psychoanalysts and psychotherapists have had to develop strategies for working with impaired and neurotic processes that present barriers for engaging with reality more effectively and competently. Such resistance has close parallels with the manifestations of ‘resistance’ observed in relation to climate change and other ecological degradations, such as the increase in consumption and enjoyment of toxic goods (Randall 2005), denial of the problem, aggressive belief in technological fixes and rescue schemes, scapegoating and blame and forms of disavowal and rationalizations.

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Situating psychoanalysis within environment, social relations and human subjectivity

Placing psychic analysis within broader social, political, economic and ideological contexts has been a notorious weakness in psychoanalysis. The tendency is to focus with a fine grain on the interior worlds, with some neglect to the forces beyond that arguably help shape affective experience. Therefore, rather than focus exclusively on the content of in-depth interviews in my research, I endeavored, with varying levels of success, to take account of the place as having its particular circulations of stories, mythologies, legacies and identities. Thus when participants told me what a wonderful place Green Bay is to raise a family, or the fact that industry has provided such resources for the community, I considered the meaning and function of such tropes in terms of community identity, historical mythologies and specific meanings in individual biographical lives. The constellations produced are therefore place-based, affective, social and cultural. Guattari's political philosophy of the 'three ecologies' – the (ecological, biotic) environment, the social, and subjectivity is concerned 'with visible relations of force . . . but also take into account molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire' (2000: 28). This is an approach that refuses to compartmentalize and parse out these relations, which are in fact mutually shaping one another dynamically, although within clear asymmetrical power relations (e.g. the species of frogs under threat from human activity are arguably with less power than, say, those capable of either ruining their habitat or poisoning the waters in which they live).

Guattari sought to acknowledge the paradox we find ourselves in on these various levels:

Wherever we turn, there is the same nagging paradox: on the one hand, the continuous development of new techno-scientific means to potentially resolve the dominant ecological issues and reinstate socially useful activities on the surface of the planet, and, on the other hand, the inability of organized social forces and constituted subjective formations to take hold of these resources in order to make them work.

(Guattari 2000: 31)

It is important to note that he does not articulate these observations through the language of a 'disconnect' or the 'gap' between attitudes, values and practices, for the similar reasons psychoanalysis would never do so: because it would ignore the mutuality and systemic nature of these processes (e.g. Bateson 1972; Trist and Murray 1990). In fact, the notion of a 'gap' between values, actions and attitudes would be incoherent and unproductive. Thus, paradox is a term for this apparent gridlock between awareness, recognition, and action. If we can replace apathy with paradox, contradiction, grief, shock, loss and other affective processes, we may start to get somewhere.

Reframing the myth of apathy: contributions from psychoanalysis

An analytic attitude – afforded by a psychoanalytic perspective – privileges an emphasis on the relations between conscious and unconscious processes, making space for the presence and influence of psychic negotiations with conflict, distress, contradiction and ambivalence. Further, in exploring our relations with the natural world and human impact on ecological systems, an analytic attitude would recognize the integral phenomenon of loss, mourning and grief in human experience and seek to insert such sensitivities into how we understand the (often) painful confrontations with ecological issues. It is an attitude – or, perhaps more accurately, an underpinning epistemology and ontology – that assumes the constitution of human subjectivity as conflicted, anxious and ambivalent, but also creative, reparative and capable of great concern. Seen in this light, it is possible to rethink conceptions of apathy, not as a clear lack of concern but, rather, as complicated expressions of difficult and conflicting affective states. If we can approach apathy through this perspective, we may start to see how in fact messages and vehicles for transmitting environmental issues may in fact do more harm than good. If we appreciate and are sensitized to the myriad ways we may respond to distress, anxiety and potentially frightening information, such as the extreme fragility of the Great Lakes or the prospect of eating fish contaminated with PCBs – depending on our respective social and biographical contexts – we may think twice before alarming the public into swift action. Further, messages of moralizing and admonishment of poor response or action may also reify self-states or self-concepts of an ‘apathetic subject’ which do not necessarily help mobilize reparative energies.

How does this translate into practice? As my work, professionally and academically, has been concerned primarily with environmental communications and engagement, I consider how a particular campaign can be made both to *acknowledge* and *offset* anxieties, guilt and ambivalence. I believe this has traction for the various ways climate change issues are communicated, across sectors and contexts (i.e. education, outreach, campaigns, media, entertainment). Such work requires research and piloting to support its efficacy. There is a profound need for investment in further research and pilot projects in the domains of affect and emotional attributes of contemporary environmental subjectivity and politics. An approach that manages to integrate the lessons outlined here – how to acknowledge and provide space for contradiction, ambivalence, loss and mourning – avoids the simplifying and patronizing tone of many environmental messages and the manic emphasis on ‘solutions,’ as if the messiness of our situation can be avoided and glossed over. Acknowledgement of the painful dilemmas we grapple with can have a potentially disarming effect, ideally softening defenses and sparking creativity and concern (Winnicott 1963). If we frame our communications presuming a presence of care and creativity, rather than an absence, as is often the case, we may see some radical reframing of public engagement.

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It is my hope that in presenting these particular contributions from psychoanalysis, a field that is generally considered to tend towards being too esoteric and insular to have real-world effects outside the consulting room, we can begin to appreciate how a psychoanalytic conception radically shifts the ways in which environmental issues and responses are played out. There remains much work to be done. I believe a psychoanalytic engagement with environment and climate change is not only productive, it is vital. It is up to all of us to consider the most effective ways in which this can be carried out. The portability of clinical work into social and political arenas is not at all clear and is rather fraught with potential pitfalls, such as the ignorance of socio-cultural and historical contexts, the over fixation on the psyche and internal processes, and an inability to move outside a rarified esoteric language to build bridges with other communities of practice. The best antidote to this tendency is actively to interface with multiple sectors dealing with these issues: climate scientists, artists, poets, social scientists, engineers. It is time for us to have humility in our limitations of knowledge and at the same time, be forceful and strong in advocating for a place for these dimensions. This is the challenge and the opportunity that faces us.

Notes

- 1 The 'information-deficit' model refers to the theory that if people knew more about climate change, had the facts and the information, there would be more action and response towards mitigation and general acknowledgement. This theory has been consistently proven to be otherwise (e.g. Norgaard 2011; Lorenzoni et al. 2007).
- 2 In an interview conducted with geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, Tuan comments, 'We have finally managed to regulate nature, and after we have done so, tend to worry, instead of feeling contented. We feel uneasy and wonder why we are doing this. Why? Could it be ignorance of history?' (Lertzman 1997).
- 3 For example, see the Yale Project on Climate Change and Communication report, *Climate Change in the American Mind*, Nov., 2008.
- 4 My interview methodology was based largely on the work of South African psychoanalyst and researcher Duncan Cartwright (2002), who had created an approach to the 'psychoanalytic research interview' as a mode of exploring highly sensitive and possibly charged content, and psychosocial methodologies innovated in the United Kingdom (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Walkerdine 2002; Wengraf 2001).
- 5 For more background and information about the research methodologies used and developed, see Lertzman 2010.

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