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From Arctic dreams to nightmares (and back again): apocalyptic thought and planetary consciousness in three contemporary American environmentalist texts

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Introduction

Sparsely populated but richly imagined, the circumpolar Arctic, discursively reframed by generations of people with few if any intentions of living there, has evolved into one of the most thoroughly instrumentalized areas on Earth (Craciun; Ryall et al.). Over time, the Arctic has come to mean—has been made to mean—very different things to very different people. But the recent scramble for mineral resources in the region, which shows every sign of intensifying as fast as the sea ice is weakening, also suggests the continuation of a protracted era of colonialism in which the name "Arctic" signifies much the same dizzy dreams of conquest that have come collectively to characterize "a centuries-long mad pursuit" of personal ambition and material wealth (Craciun 109; Sale and Potapov). Of course, not all of these dreams have been fulfilled, while some of them have been ignominiously thwarted, allowing the Arctic to be associated instead with one or more of several negative dream images: frozen killing field, deathly gulag realm, spectral Cold War battleground, ecological disaster site.

In these and other ways, the Arctic has served as a free-floating idea that, whether phrased in the florid language of Romantic desire or the more hard-nosed terms of global Realpolitik and colonial commerce, moves energetically—as if to mirror the volatility of its own surroundings—between dream and nightmare states. Thus, in the words of the American nature writer Barry Lopez, the Arctic may conjure up stereotypically Romantic images of "sublime innocence, of the innate beauty of undisturbed relationships"; but it is just as likely to summon "dream[s] gone awry, [unwanted reminders] of the long [and continuing] human struggle, mental and physical, to come to terms with the Far North" (xxii).[1]

If these are outsiders' dreams and visions, idealistically inclined if painfully aware of the histories of conflict within which those ideals are entangled, others appear more

attuned to the violently shifting social and environmental realities of everyday Arctic life. Consider, for example, the creative work of the (late) Baffin Island Inuit writer-artist Alootook Ipellie. "Dreaming in the Arctic," suggests Ipellie in his gloriously irreverent sequence of self-illustrated stories, Arctic Dreams and Nightmares (1993), "is not quite like dreaming in other parts of the world. And so it is with nightmares. Perhaps there is something to be said about the mindset of different cultures. We [Inuit] do have a different outlook on life, don't we? And this unique outlook has given us the experiences to dream unique dreams" (128). Ipellie's mischievous shaman-narrator duly transliterates his dreams, which prove to alternate between those "undreamable dream[s]" of a paradise in which "struggling to survive is unheard of [and] the animals come to you whenever you need them," and those seemingly inevitable nightmares in which, "in the dead of winter, with the fierce wind wreaking havoc on your psyche, the closing of one's eyes [at] night brings only fear [and we] draw conclusions even before losing ourselves in our sleep" (126-127).

In what follows, I want to look at the dream/nightmare dialectic—one in which nightmares are "dreams gone awry"—from an environmentalist perspective. More particularly, I aim to chart the relationship between apocalyptic thought and planetary consciousness within a part-experienced, part-imagined Arctic setting, and to examine some of the ways in which this relationship is explored in three early twenty-first-century American environmentalist texts. I will argue that these texts—Marla Cone's Silent Snow (2005), Gretel Ehrlich's This Cold Heaven (2001), and Elizabeth Kolbert's Field Notes from a Catastrophe (2006)—all emerge, to a greater or lesser extent, from a twentieth-century tradition of American environmentalist writing. Within this tradition, planetary consciousness—broadly speaking, the consciousness that what connects us is "our shared dependence on biophysical life support-systems" (Sachs 101)—is filtered through transcendentalist and deep ecological philosophies, and environmental advocacy is linked strategically to apocalyptic thought.

This argument, or at least the second part of it, is often taken as a given. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer assert, "apocalyptic narratives, long recognized as a major thematic and structural component in science fiction […] have for the last three decades also served as a standard feature of environmentalist polemic" (21; Buell, "Short History"). Also largely accepted here is the foundational

status of Silent Spring (1962), Rachel Carson's "visionary polemic," (22), which would tap in, with a success that was astonishing even to its author, to a growing public awareness of the possibilities of environmental catastrophe in the technological and ideological contexts of the Cold War (Killingsworth and Palmer; Nixon, Slow Violence). Finally, the popular application of apocalyptic and planetary rhetoric to the Arctic—both of which have served to confirm the region's synecdochic function[2]—has become a commonplace for at least two generations in a row now. As the British travel writer Sara Wheeler puts it, there is "something about the region [that] attracts millennial anxiety" (6), whether this anxiety is inflected through the prospects of nuclear holocaust or apocalyptic climate change. Meanwhile, both of these dismal possibilities have obvious planetary dimensions, underlining the imperative for urgent preventive action on a global scale.

Such standard formulations of apocalypticism and planetarity tend to simplify these two intrinsically difficult and internally fractured concepts while relying on a similarly reductive tendency to conscript them uncritically to a global "environmental movement" that collapses significant social, cultural, and political differences into a common environmental cause. Equally problematic, of course, is the assumption that only a certain kind of text qualifies as "environmentalist writing," and that there are literary models to hand—the aforementioned Silent Spring and Arctic Dreams both occupy a formative if far from identical role here—that provide an aesthetic and ethical template for the articulation of planetary environmental concern. (That such troublingly generic terms as "environmental movement" and "environmentalist writing" have their own rhetorical force is still worth admitting—as will prove to be the case in this essay, and as also proves to be the case in each of its three primary texts.)

Definitional uncertainties have long surrounded environmentalist writing, though in the U.S. at least it has been strongly identified with American writing of a kind that has combinational qualities to it—e.g. through its imaginative splicing together of some of the formal and thematic characteristics of nature writing, science journalism, and travel narrative—and that demonstrates a heightened awareness of the ethical demands of the advocacy-oriented literary text (Nixon, "Environmentalism"). For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the further uncertainties surrounding

"apocalypse" and "planet" as multifaceted, internally contradictory figures for the expression of a "millennial ecology" (Killingsworth and Palmer) seen, via the particular Arctic-oriented examples through which I track it, in both temporally and spatially indeterminate terms.

This insistence on indeterminacy may seem, on the face of it, counter-intuitive: after all, "apocalypse" is popularly understood as a composite figure for eschatological, i.e. end-oriented, thinking, while "planet" is an equally generalized—and just as easily co-optable—term for the biophysical finitude of an ecologically connected world (Sachs). However, as several commentators have pointed out, temporal uncertainty is embedded within the general-purpose adjective "apocalyptic," which may refer simultaneously to time running out, i.e. in the (Christian) theological sense of a divine order of space-time that has been allocated to humans, and to "the revelation [the original Greek meaning of the term, theologically re-inscribed] of [a semi-permanent] crisis in our midst with no predictable end" (Skrimshire, "Eternal Return" 220-221; Buell, "Short History"; Cohn).

As Stefan Skrimshire notes, apocalypse may alternately present an unraveling—a nightmarish exposition of those attritional processes by which the planet is imagined to be gravitating towards its own inexorable extinction, or an unfolding—a dreamlike opportunity, anxiously anticipated, for the ushering in of a new planetary order of things to come ("Introduction" 4). In either case, the decisive moment of apocalyptic disclosure is located at some indefinite point in the future, but there are any number of ways in which this future can be individually or collectively imagined, just as there are multiple possible understandings, apocalyptically encoded, of the relationship between the future, the present, and the past. There is thus a sense in which apocalyptic thought (which itself needs to be understood historically) not only opens out onto many different—potentially conflicting—versions of world history, but also provides the general conditions of possibility for a philosophical and theological "experiment in thinking about time" itself (Skrimshire, "Eternal Return" 221).

"Planetary consciousness" is a similarly experimental concept. One influential understanding of it is that adopted by the British social theorist Paul Gilroy. For Gilroy, planetary consciousness consists of those solidarity-demanding forms of

social and environmental responsibility that are linked to "a change of scale, a whole re-imagining of the world [that has] moral and political dimensions [to it]," and that also reflect critically upon the cognitive processes by which the world is now understood more fully, "not as a limitless globe [but as] a small, fragile and finite place" (290). But as Mary Louise Pratt among others has argued, planetary consciousness, seen over time, has served many different moral and political ends, not all of them socially progressive or environmentally enabling, while "planetarity," the still more abstract term into which "planetary consciousness" is sometimes folded, has provided opportunities for top-down forms of social control and environmental management that are the opposite of morally enlightening in their intentions or politically liberating in their effects (Pratt, Imperial Eyes, "Planetarity"; Ross; Sachs).

As I have argued elsewhere, it may be possible to distinguish between two, not necessarily compatible understandings of planetarity: one eco-cosmopolitan, the other ecologistic (Huggan, Na*ture's Saviours* 88). An eco-cosmopolitan understanding of planetarity "forces collective acknowledgement of the social and environmental threats that face us, and insists on the need for global cooperation in the face of these" (88). Still, it "falls well short of endorsing the more radical kinds of planetary ecology envisaged by [probably most notably] Gayatri Spivak, for whom 'the planet is in the species of alterity', populated by but by no means reducible to humans, who for all their efforts to control it 'merely inhabit it on loan'" (88; embedded quotation: Spivak 72).

Planetarity, suggests Spivak, is best understood as an "undecidable figure" transposed onto a "responsible literality" (72). While it encourages those kinds of social and environmental responsibility that are usually associated with planetary consciousness, it is not reducible to these, and attempts to co-opt the planet for whatever human motive are "catachrestic" (102) insofar as they offer reminders that the planet will always resist being turned into a figure for our own (human) origins even if, in an instrumentalist sense, this is exactly what the vast majority of "planet talk" does (73). For Spivak, it is not so much that the planet is prior to humanity, or that it will likely outlast humanity, but rather that it will not permit itself to be subordinated to humans or seconded for human concerns. Similarly, planetarity is not—or at least not just—the spatial equivalent of a concept of deep (geological) time, but rather a confirmation

of an order of space-time that is fundamentally inaccessible to humans. It exists "in the species of alterity" (72) insofar as it is indifferent to human difference—more specifically those differences that humans impose on others they define as being in oppositional relationship to themselves.

Like "apocalypse," "planet" is a necessarily ambiguous term that flies in the face of human efforts to define it. "Finality" and "finitude" are perhaps the most common tropes to be attributed to this effort; but these too are catachrestic insofar as the planet as "undecidable figure" remains "an experience of the impossible" (102)—a utopian horizon that, by definition, can never be attained. Spivak has been criticized for short-circuiting attempts to "open up new avenues into ecological consciousness" (Heise 55) by invoking the planet as a more-than-human world in which individuals and groups can be envisioned "as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (Heise 61). But as I hope to have made clear here, Spivak's figure of planetarity invokes an other-than-human world that is not shaped by—is wholly indifferent to—human needs and interests. By Spivak's own admission, there is "no formulaic access" to planetarity (78). This does not mean there is no common ground between planetarity and more conventional, cosmopolitan forms of environmentalist thinking; indeed at one level planetarity is wholly amenable to—albeit irreducible to—standard ecological injunctions about human limits and the need for cooperation and respect.

I would argue that it is also of a piece with the notion of "risk society," Ulrich Beck's seemingly ubiquitous term, recast more recently by Frederick Buell as a catchphrase for the combined ways in which apocalypse has turned "paradoxically into [a] way of [modern] life" ("Short History" 30; Beck). In various important work, Buell has convincingly traced some of the processes by which apocalyptic thought is currently being re-invented in an era of escalating risk and increasingly desperate attempts to manage it (Buell, Apocalypse; "Short History"). Indeed, as Buell suggests, loosely following Beck, "risk today is actually not finally manageable or limitable. Increased consciousness of it [now] haunts us far more than any sense of ends to come" ("Short History" 30).

As Buell recognizes, the conversion of the planetary motif of apocalyptic finality into the temporal indeterminacies of world "risk society" has profound implications for environmentalist thinking. At one level, the transformation of apocalypse into way of life provides a rationale for environmental passivity while ceding ground to those more cynical exponents of "disaster capitalism" (Klein) who—to take Buell's two main examples—reap full advantage of the socio-economic opportunities afforded by the latest environmental catastrophe, or profitably "adapt" to global warming since it clearly cannot be "stopped" (Buell, "Short History" 30-31). At another level, though, the uncertainty of risk "opens up new sites for action and coalitions for change [that reflect] the creeping spread of crisis into [the] physical, social and psychological spaces" of everyday modern life ("Short History" 31).

As I will go on to suggest, environmentalist writing has become one of the primary locations for a working through of contemporary crisis narratives that move uneasily between "apocalyptic" and "risk" perspectives while questioning the somewhat manufactured distinctions that have been used to separate them: for uncertainty and contingency, if perhaps more integral to the latter, are apparent in them both (Buell, "Short History"; Heise). That these narratives, while generally site-specific, often have a global or planetary dimension to them should not strike us as surprising at a time when the "environmental movement," always more dispersed and differentiated than it has sometimes been assumed to be, is coming increasingly to terms with globalization as "the central term around which theories of current politics, society and culture are organized" in our times (Heise 4). To some extent, as will be seen, the particular narratives I want to explore all exhibit one form or another of planetary consciousness though they are characteristically, even symptomatically, anxious about their own pretensions to planetarity (Spivak). These anxieties are made apparent in the spatio-temporal uncertainties that surround the Arctic region as both apocalyptic portent and planetary dream-child. However, these twin iterations are also part of a long symbolic legacy in which the Arctic has repeatedly been made to serve the needs of those who do not live there, and in which contending European and indigenous narratives of conquest, resilience, and survival play out in a wide variety of alternatively imagined sites and across "incommensurable historical scales" (Craciun 112; Ryall et al.).

Apocalyptic violence: Silent Snow

Rachel Carson's Silent Spring is often seen as the foundational environmentalist text (Sale). Written from an ecological perspective by a trained biologist, but deliberately aimed at a general audience, it is the rhetorically accomplished work of a "renegade synthesizer" (Nixon, Slow Violence xi) whose gift for hard-hitting generalization acts as a powerful counterweight to "an era of [scientific] specialists, each of whom sees [only] his own problem and is unaware or intolerant of the larger frame into which it fits" (Carson 13). Silent Spring has been criticized for being rhetorically overblown, but this is missing the point insofar as the text makes free use of apocalyptic rhetoric in the service of environmental advocacy (Killingsworth and Palmer 22). Arguably defined more by what it aims at than by what it actually says, the text—which never loses sight of its broader consciousness-raising objectives—presents a congeries of hardnosed popular science and lyrical natural-historical description, making powerful rhetorical use of both factual and fabular modes.

At the center of the text's apocalyptic vision is its nightmarish view of chemical contamination as planetary plague. Insecticides in particular function as "agents of death" (Carson 18), some of whose destructive effects can be seen almost immediately but others of which, passed unbeknownst from one generation to another, have devastating long-term consequences that emphasize the systemic nature of twentieth-century chemical toxicity in a world where, "for the first time […] every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals from the moment of conception until death" (15). It is crucial not to mistake *Silent Spring's* apocalyptic tone for an acknowledgement of defeatism. The apocalyptic environmentalist text may chart wholesale death and destruction, but it also suggests ways of preventing these from happening—in this particular case, by using natural means of pest and disease control. However, the text is relentless and repetitive, with death appearing on almost every page, conveyed by a shocking abundance of different carriers whose provenance may be from above or below, hidden in the soil or distributed from the air, constituting a ubiquitous "tide" of deadly chemicals that threatens to "engulf" us all (187). In this sense, Silent Spring exemplifies the surreptitious workings of "slow violence" (Nixon, Slow Violence 2). Slow violence, in Rob Nixon's words, involves

those “incremental and accretive” forms of creeping harm that occur “gradually and out of sight, [leading to] a delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2). Attritional in its effects, it is “typically not seen as violence at all,” but may still end up being more devastating in its impact than those overt kinds of violence that are “immediate in time” and “explosive and spectacular in space” (2).

The American investigative journalist and science writer Marla Cone’s 2005 study Silent Snow, as its title already suggests, operates self-consciously within this Carsonian environmentalist tradition, adapting it to the Arctic, which—Romantic images of purity and innocence to the contrary—is now increasingly acknowledged to be one of the most chemically contaminated regions in the world (Emmerson). Like Carson’s, Cone’s environmentalism is generously eclectic, revolving around what she calls the “Arctic Paradox”: that while “Arctic people and animals are hundreds of miles from any significant source of pollution, living in one of the most desolate spots on the planet […] they are among the planet’s most contaminated living organisms” (Cone 43). Cone’s self-appointed mission is to try to “unravel [some of] the mysteries behind the Arctic Paradox” (5). This duly requires “a voyage through time and space” (5) incorporating elements of “an environmental whodunit, a scientific detective story, an anthropological journey, a chronicling of natural history, a lesson in biology and atmospheric chemistry of worldwide relevance, all wrapped together”—a mixed-diet epic that is only lacking for a villain, though “the villain, [as] it turns out, is the whole rest of the world” (4).

As Cone tours (she visits five Arctic countries in all), she builds up seemingly incontrovertible evidence that toxic pesticides and industrial chemicals, drifting from the south, often end up in far northern regions, enacting their own particular forms of slow violence on local people and wildlife. This means, at worst, that “[t]he Arctic’s people and animals have been transformed into living, deep-freeze archives storing toxic memories of the industrial world’s past and present” (23). The spread of toxic substances in the far north is a global problem, globally dispersed and requiring global action to tackle it (“Chemicals cross borders en route to the Arctic, so the solutions must, too” (199)). But it is also a planetary issue in which the uncertain future of the Arctic holds equally uncertain clues about mankind’s future on the planet. Similarly, formulaic iterations of Arctic functionality (“The Arctic is the

barometer of the health of the planet, and if the Arctic is poisoned, so are we all" (Watt-Cloutier, quoted in Cone 45)) cannot disguise the fact that both regional and planetary futures—both with and without humanity—are inherently incalculable ("When it comes to the future of Arctic inhabitants, only two things are certain: Everything we know will change. And no one can predict how" (168)).

The unwritten laws of planetarity—much like the winds, waves, and rivers that carry spilled chemicals from one place to another, where they may eventually take up residence in human and animal bodies thousands of miles away from their original point of origin (17)—are subject to the combined vagaries of drift, migration, and scale effect.[3] In the Arctic, this can result in extreme variations, some of which are as scary as they are strange—pseudo-hermaphroditic polar bears with male and female genitalia (Svalbard); the sudden, unanticipated collapse of entire ecosystems (the Aleutians); brain malfunction from eating mercury-contaminated whale-meat (the Faroes); and, probably most frightening of all, extraordinary chemical build-up in human and animal bodies that reaches levels that would normally lead to their classification as hazardous waste (Greenland). While scientific explanations can be offered for most of these phenomena, scientists themselves continue to be baffled by their own discoveries, and—in the Aleutians, for example—"[s]cientists have not figured out what role, if any, pollution may be playing in the [islands' recent] ecological shift" (183).

Meanwhile, apocalyptic scenarios are avoided, at least to some degree, although Cone dutifully follows Carson in seeing apocalypse, less as the end of life tout court than as the end of a life lived free from chemical interference (Carson 15). Here, Silent Snow takes Carson's cue in tracing "the ecology of the world within our bodies" (Carson 189). In puncturing the distinction between "inner" and "outer" worlds—in demonstrating that "our bodies are not our boundaries" (Lear xvi)—it also makes visible the ecological irony that it is the same "intricate web of life whose interwoven strands lead from microbes to man" (Carson 69) that helps account for the "chain of devastation" (109) by which toxins are passed from one organism to another and poison spreads through the system, often without the knowledge of either the carrier or the receiver, both of whom are oblivious to the threat (36).

Also in a similar fashion to Silent Spring, Cone's text recasts planetary apocalypse in the everyday language of social and environmental risk—albeit heightened risk, and albeit risk experienced in a part of the world that is so far away from many of us that it becomes difficult to imagine what at another level we might already suspect: that the Arctic is not apart from us but a part of us, integral to the geopolitical imaginary of an increasingly interconnected world (Beck; Buell; Emmerson). This is not to say that the Arctic does not remain "one of the most isolated places on Earth" (Cone 27), or that it is any easier for an outsider today to understand or appreciate the lives of the people who live there (85-86). But part of the task Cone sets herself is to show, like her mentor Carson, that actions taken in one part of the world have significant if not always recognized effects in another, and that—in the indignant words of one of her interlocutors, Faroese Prime Minister Anfinn Kallsberg—"We [Faroese] are victims of the pollution that other nations create. […] We ourselves do not have these heavy industries that leak […] poisons into the ocean. Once [these poisons are] released, it's not anymore their problem. It becomes ours" (Kallberg, quoted in Cone 143). In fact it is a problem for both. As Cone concludes, there is a double burden of responsibility placed on the governments and corporations of the industrialized world—to better manage the risk of the chemicals they use, "restrict[ing] or replac[ing] those that are becoming globe-trotters" (218), while also granting greater autonomy to Arctic peoples, who "have [all too] often been treated like foreigners in their own land[s]" (219). However, whether this risk is ultimately manageable or not remains an open question in the text, and the possibility remains that the slow violence of chemical contamination will continue in the Arctic, its "calamitous repercussions" being registered across a "range of temporal scales" (Nixon, Slow Violence 2).

Apocalyptic vision: This Cold Heaven

Calamity also shadows the Californian writer Gretel Ehrlich's 2001 poetic travelogue This Cold Heaven. While ostensibly documenting seven seasons of travel in Greenland during which Ehrlich comes to "prefer ice and a failing sun to summer's warmth and open water" (xiii), This Cold Heaven might best be seen as belonging to the longstanding tradition of Arctic travel narrative as spiritual quest (Holland and Huggan). As its epigraph to Ralph Waldo Emerson implies, the text—in keeping with

Ehrlich's other work—is embedded within a transcendentalist tradition of American nature writing. The is tradition is reflected, in turn, in some of the philosophical tenets of deep ecology, the twentieth-century environmentalist movement whose main aims are to offer "a new science of nature, a new spiritual paradigm, and a new ecological ethic" in which each involves "the total intermingling of person with planet," and in which equal importance is accorded to each intricately woven strand of nature's living web (Merchant 86; Huggan, *Nature's Saviours* 163-164).[4]

In the Arctic context, probably the best-known example of the deep-ecological spiritual travelogue—though it is many other things as well—is Barry Lopez's Arctic Dreams. Lopez's seminal text shares the contemplative tenor, strongly anti-materialist emphasis, and mystical inclinations of This Cold Heaven, although Ehrlich's non-orthodox religious views, explicitly influenced by Buddhism, should probably not be conflated with Lopez's, and theirs are rather different understandings, differently historicized, of the Arctic's dual Romantic status as violent theater of horrors and blissful, sanctified space (Holland and Huggan; Ryall et al.). Notwithstanding, Ehrlich shares Lopez's sense of the Arctic as a dream-cum-nightmare world. This world opens up a space of multiple desires, both physically exhausting and spiritually uplifting. It is also a space of suffering and fearful darkness that "made being awake seem dreamlike" (Ehrlich 35), even if at other times darkness proves welcoming, functioning like a protective cloak (38). Ehrlich echoes Lopez's view of the Arctic as a contemplative site for alternative visions of the future in which the apocalyptic possibility of planetary destruction is one vision among others, and the all-encompassing nature of Arctic darkness becomes an oneiric metaphor for the futility of human endeavour in a world which, transcending human knowledge, finds new ways of keeping its knowledge to itself.

At another level, though, darkness is not an obstacle to vision but the pathway to a different kind of vision, as "the mind empties out and refills […] with another order of things" (39).[5] "[I]t occurs to me," Ehrlich muses at one point, "that there are all kinds of blindnesses and all kinds of seeing, that a dark world is not emblematic of death but of a feral clarity" (44). Or, in similar vein: "Darkness reconciles all time and disparity. It is a kind of rapture in which life is no longer lived brokenly. In it we are seers with no eyes" (47). Counter to these almost ecstatic visions comes the stark

realization that light, not dark, is the Arctic's destructive element, while far beyond it, at the edges of the galaxy, a merciless "sun was burning brighter and hotter as it extinguished itself" (346). The sun, throughout the text, is an agent of destruction, "cut[ting] through the horizon's silver thread, demarcating heaven and earth like a welding torch, burning, burning" (347). It is excessive light, rather than the absence of light, that triggers some of This Cold Heaven's apocalyptic moments, for example when Ehrlich, half-crazed by lack of sleep, gazes out on the bay where a "collapsed iceberg holds a tiny lake in its center, a turquoise eye glancing upward. The moon comes up in the east as if it were a sun rising, and for the second time in one day the mountains go bright. […] Today winter was a burning lake and I watched it catch fire" (44).

Ehrlich's rich celebration of Greenlandic Inuit life, and of its own appreciation for and adaptation to "the beauty of impermanence" (xiii), is continually shadowed by moments like these, which seem to gesture beyond worldly transience to a planet that is fundamentally beyond the reach of human knowledge and, still further, to a galaxy the immensity of which only reiterates "the tininess of the human being hunting in order to survive" (342). Ehrlich implies, however, that the Inuit know how little they know, and also know how to inhabit that lack of knowledge. Hence her deep-ecological appreciation for (which always risks becoming an appropriation of) an Inuit view of multiple worlds-within-worlds in which there is no clear dividing-line between the known and the unknown, body and spirit, dreams and waking reality, and where the stories that bridge these different worlds are regarded "as living things" (4). Hence also her sympathy for an Inuit dream/nightmare world populated by a wide variety of both benign and malicious spirits: "sprites with no noses, giants traveling open water in half-kayaks, inland ice dwellers, naked spirits who steal hunters' seals, mountain dwarfs, and stones that are alive" (356; Ipellie).

"Arctic beauty," Ehrlich suggests in a typically Romantic flourish, "resides in its gestures of transience. Up here [in the far north], planes of light and darkness are swords that cut away illusions of permanence, they are the feuilles mortes on which we pen our desperate message-in-a-bottle: words of rapture and longing for what we know will disappear" (117). Prematurely elegiac contemplations such as these situate the text in terms of contemporary "discourses of human-environmental mourning,"

one of Buell's proposed categories for the re-invention of environmental apocalypse at a time when it is clear that both "wildness" and "wilderness" are compromised concepts, and when it is becoming increasingly easy, if no less agonizing, to produce documents of natural disappearance, "intimately realistic portrayals of [ecological] damage already done" ("Short History" 30). But as Buell also suggests, the "quiet desperation" (31) that attends such mournful gestures may not be the best response to a planetary crisis in which the increasing normalization of risk "represents a much more sustainable sense of urgency, and uncertainty fosters experiment, small and large" (31; Beck). Another possible response to transience is to turn to planetary ecological terms that stress that "the biosphere and everything in it has always been evolving and changing," and that disequilibrium, now generally acknowledged to be the main driver behind biospheric evolution, "has been shown to be a creative force, not just an index of damage and agent of collapse" (29; Prigogine and Stengers).

This puts a slightly different spin on This Cold Heaven in which the emphasis is no longer on death, destruction, or decay but rather on the possibilities of transition. These possibilities occur within a broader (planetary) context of temporal uncertainty in which perceptual shifts of speed and scale make it difficult to know, as Ehrlich asks herself during one particularly exhilarating sled-ride, whether it "was […] the end of the world or the beginning, or [maybe] something after and before those two things" (170). Such temporal confusion, as I have been suggesting in this essay, may be one of the main points of contact between planetary consciousness and apocalyptic thought as these intersect in contemporary discourses of environmental apocalypse. Perhaps its most obvious expression today can be found in the multiple anxieties surrounding global warming; and it is to the debates on global warming, and their inflections in one last Arctic-oriented environmentalist text, Elizabeth Kolbert's melodramatically entitled Fieldnotes from a Catastrophe (2006), that I turn next.

Apocalyptic voice: Fieldnotes from a Catastrophe

The subtitle of Fieldnotes from a Catastrophe (henceforth Fieldnotes) is A Frontline Report on Climate Change, thereby situating the text within the tradition of "hands-on" investigative journalism for which Kolbert, currently a staff writer for The New Yorker, has become well known. Despite this opening gesture to the "field," the text turns out to be an eclectic mix of first- and second-hand reportage taken from a wide variety of locations and featuring an equally generous selection of expert voices, most of these with some connection to the climate science field. These scientists—biologists, geophysicists, climate modelers, glaciologists, geochemists—appear at times to have been selected for their doom-laden views; these are then filtered through Kolbert's melancholic narration, which puts popular-scientific explanation into the service of a miserabilist rather than sensationalist interpretation of current climate events. Not that the text is without its own fair share of apocalyptic alarmism, from the opening scene, in which Kolbert charts the dramatic effects of an ice-stream in Greenland that has doubled in speed since the 1990s, to the epilogue in post-Katrina New Orleans, the "perpetually sinking" city whose disastrous buffeting in 2005—presumably as Kolbert's book was in progress—merely holds out the promise of future mega-storms to come (198-199). Meanwhile, much of the material that comes in between relentlessly accumulates hypotheses of future catastrophe, each of them couched in the vivid language of environmental apocalypse: entire ecosystems at the point of collapse; whole cities threatened with inundation; the specter of climate-change refugees "numbering in the millions" (188)—all of these examples and more point to the fact that, while it "may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, […] that is [exactly] what we are now in the process of doing" (189).

Still, the idea of apocalypse as singular event is undermined in the text, not only by the plurality of possible apocalyptic futures, but also by a catastrophist approach to history in which disasters—especially natural disasters—are embedded in the past. In image after image in Fieldnotes, the past is identified in terms of environmental catastrophe: buried in the Greenland ice, to take just one prominent example, "there is nuclear fallout from early atomic tests, volcanic ash from Krakatau, lead pollution from ancient Roman smelters, and dust blown in from Mongolia on ice age winds" (50). The overall effect is to gesture towards what Stefan Skrimshire calls the "Eternal Return" of apocalypse—the process by which apocalypse, far from being a single

defining event, is caught up in a historical pattern of recurring cycles of global crisis, and the "normalization" of catastrophe serves to confirm the "persistence of cyclical time" ("Eternal Return" 232; Buell, "Short History"). Hence, I would argue, the melancholic tone of the text, which is moved repeatedly to mourn that which it seems powerless to alter; and which in so doing ironically confirms the very political inertia it seeks to denounce. ("Even as the news about the climate has grown more urgent, the situation in Washington has remained essentially static" (Kolbert 196; Skrimshire, "Eternal Return" 232-233.) Seen in this context, Fieldnotes emerges as a "dark ecological" text, which, in the eco-philosopher Timothy Morton's words, articulates a "melancholic ethics" that is based on "negative desire rather than positive fulfillment," and is borne of the realization that we all live "in the shadow of ecological catastrophe," continuing to live our lives as the environment around us effectively disappears (186-187).

The Arctic is the locus classicus for such dark-ecological forebodings, reflecting the "disproportionate effect of global warming in the far north" (Kolbert 13). Kolbert points repeatedly to the possibilities the region provides for negative forms of planetary thinking, i.e. popular perceptions of those interconnected processes by which small changes in one place are magnified in another, and the decline and degradation of the planet accelerate as a result. The local effects of global warming on the Arctic are clearly devastating for some—e.g. the Inupiat villagers of Shishmaref in northern Alaska, whose entire homestead has been moved inland for fear of absorption owing to rising sea levels (7-10)—while they also have potentially disastrous implications for the planet as a whole. Here, Kolbert seems unable to resist rehearsing the standard environmental-apocalyptic scenario of the total disintegration of Greenland's ice sheet, which—so the experts tell her—would displace enough water to raise world sea levels by 23 feet (52).

Overall, though, her emphasis is on the deterioration rather than the destruction of the Arctic: the steady reductions rather than sudden, violent disruptions that are turning the world for which the Arctic stereotypically stands as environmental symbol into a "diminished" place (86). Uncertainty is the watchword, along with an appropriate skepticism about total civilizational collapse and the specter of "divine retribution" (98-99). One arresting example Kolbert cites is the means by which the Akkadians

made sense of the great drought that effectively spelt an end to "[t]he worlds' first empire" (93). As she suggests, this is one instance among many possible others of an extreme climate variability that early societies were powerless to anticipate, but that our own society, equipped as it is with the latest computer-generated climate models, may have the capacity to forewarn against if not necessarily the political good sense to forestall (98-99).[6]

Above all, Kolbert's forays into the long history of climate change—though by no means free from apocalyptic inflections of their own—stress the contingencies of climate change that are not always apparent in some of the noisier contributions to current debates on global warming. She also brings out—hilariously at times—the weirdness of these debates and the eccentric ideas and ideologies that derive from them. A chapter on the Netherlands is punctuated by deadpan descriptions of the "amphibious homes" and "buoyant roads" that are part of an emerging "flood market" (131-132); further commercial opportunism unearths the unlikely educational figure of McDonald's "Climo Dino" (174); while climate scientists themselves often seem to be odd specimens, one typical boffin at Princeton sporting "wire-rimmed glasses [and] vaguely Einsteinian hair" (134). In semi-jocular examples like these, Fieldnotes seems slightly disabused of, or at least distanced from, the apocalyptic alarmism that it otherwise attentively documents. This is not to the extent, though, of compromising the broader planetary consciousness for which the text advocates, or of casting doubt on the untold damage currently being caused by anthropogenic global warming and the moral irresponsibility of those—especially those in government—who find it "easier, both psychically and economically, to turn away from the facts" (199).

This stinging rebuke, clearly targeted at the Bush administration, arguably puts Fieldnotes in the exalted company of Silent Spring as a major environmentalist eye-opener. Kolbert's text is notably less original than Carson's, probably less challenging than it aims to be, and definitely less able—if in large part for historical reasons—to tap into the national anxieties that Carson would so successfully redirect "away from the Red Peril to the aerosol can of Doom perched on the kitchen shelf" (Nixon, Slow Violence xi). For all that, Fieldnotes, like Silent Snow and This Cold Heaven, is a deeply American text: one which reaches out primarily (if not exclusively) to an American readership, and one which emerges from a distinctly (if by no means

uniquely) American tradition of the consciousness-raising environmentalist text. The book begins and ends in the U.S.; the vast majority of its informants and interlocutors are Americans; it is endorsed by a number of prominent American politicians and writers; and it co-opts all-American celebrities, from the climate-change activist Al Gore to the climate-change skeptic Michael Crichton, as symbolic capital for its own environmentalist debates.

This is not to suggest that the text succumbs to U.S.-style "ecoparochialism" (Nixon, "Environmentalism")—that it is much less globally aware than it claims to be—but rather to repeat Spivak's truism that "the planet is easily claimed" (72).[7] If one of the few shared aims of American environmentalist writing—that otherwise most disparate of genres—has been to challenge the materialism of the American Dream, millennial ecology has periodically aided and abetted in that challenging (Killingsworth and Palmer). Perhaps the main task today is to move beyond this environmentalist rephrasing of the national narrative. Perhaps the main task, instead, is to recast the apocalyptic dreams and nightmares of a broader—an explicitly post-national—planetary consciousness in the temporal uncertainties of risk society, and in the spatially indeterminate language, writ large in the disorienting Arctic, of an alien home. But as I hope to have shown here, there is an equal-and-opposite task at hand, which is to resituate the Arctic in time and space, making sure that the apocalyptic forebodings that continue to be projected onto it do not overshadow the lives of its own inhabitants, whose dreams and nightmares are ultimately not the planet's but their own.

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[1] The Arctic is notoriously difficult to define, not least because loose geographical terms like “the Arctic,” the “far north,” “circumpolar north,” and “the northern regions” tend to be used almost interchangeably. In any case, definitions of the Arctic, from both “within” and “without,” are less geographical or climatic than they are political or ideological: thus, while the Arctic is sometimes defined in terms of that loose conglomerate of countries and regions that falls geographically within the Arctic Circle, with other northern areas qualifying as climatically “sub-Arctic,” this distinction, which is of limited political value, is not always observed (Emmerson). For the purposes of this essay, the Arctic will be generously defined in terms of the northernmost regions of North America and Russia, upper Fennoscandia (Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Kola Peninsula), and north-lying islands/archipelagos of various

sizes (e.g. Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, the Faroes), some of which technically belong to Europe and others of which almost certainly do not.

[2] There is a long discursive tradition in which the Arctic stands in for the planet as a whole, or is seen as a barometer for global and/or planetary transformation, with its most obvious recent function being that of an "early warning system" for global warming. For reflections on this tradition, and on the various uses and abuses to which it has been put, see Ryall et al.

[3] Scale effects are those processes of reduction and magnification by which events that happen in one place are seen to have a disproportionate impact on another. As Tim Clark points out, scale effects, which are central to contemporary understandings and perceptions of global climate change, are just as likely to trivialize individual and collective human behavior as they are to magnify its importance. They also emphasize that artistic attempts to represent hyper-size "planetary" phenomena such as climate change tend to be relational and multi-scalar, with profound implications for the place-based credos of more conventional forms of environmentalist writing: "nature," "habitat," and, not least, "environment" itself. For further reflections on this—and a critique of Clark—see Huggan, "Australian Literature", also Morton.

[4] The link between twentieth- and twenty-first-century environmentalist writing and deep ecology should not be automatically assumed, any more than deep ecology itself should be assumed to be a unified political movement or coherent philosophy. As Warwick Fox suggests, deep ecology is perhaps best seen as a loosely connected set of social and economic ideas through which "the ideology of economic growth [is replaced with that of] ecological sustainability" (253). However, the political ramifications of this are complex, to say the least, and for some radical environmentalists, e.g. those of the Bookchin-inspired social ecology "school," deep ecology is either politically naïve, tacitly apolitical, or not political enough. Interestingly enough, key environmentalist writers like Carson have been claimed for both deep ecology (Naess) and social ecology (Grey), despite the frequent assertion of incommensurability between these two approaches. For alternative, but equally illuminating, accounts of the historical infighting between different radical environmentalist "schools," see Dobson and Merchant.

[5] The Buddhist concept of sunyata (emptiness) comes to mind here. Ehrlich's Buddhism is sincere, but strategically loose, and "mysticism" might be a better term

to describe her religious outlook. There are also clear debts in her work (as in Lopez's) to Emersonian transcendentalism, e.g. its potential for anti-materialist critique, its utopian belief in the possibilities of communal living, and its non-dualistic view that the seer and the seen, the subject and the object, are essentially one.

[6] Global warming, of course, should not be confused for or collapsed into natural rhythms of climate variation, just as "global warming" conveys a different set of associations than the more general term "climate change." As Kolbert suggests—not entirely accurately—"[t]he retreat of the Arctic sea ice, the warming of the oceans, the rapid shrinking of the glaciers, the redistribution of species, the thawing of the permafrost—these are all new phenomena. It is only in the last five or ten years that global warming has finally emerged from the background 'noise' of climate variability. And even so, the changes that can be seen lag behind the changes that have been set in motion. The warming that has been observed so far is probably only about half the amount required to bring the planet back into energy balance. This means that even if carbon dioxide were to remain stable at today's levels, temperatures would still continue to rise, glaciers to melt, and weather patterns to change for decades to come" (186). Here as elsewhere, Kolbert demonstrates what might be generously described as an environmentalist's strategic rather than a climatologist's scientific understanding of global warming. For a more precise delineation of the differences between (anthropogenic) global warming and climate change, the latter of which involves a complex interplay between internal and external "forcing mechanisms," see Maslin.

[7] The charge of "ecoparochialism" is perhaps too easily made, especially given the increasingly global tendencies of ecocriticism and the equally wide scope of such influential movements as EJM (the Environmental Justice Movement), which originated in the U.S. but consciously brings together the social and environmental concerns of the global north and the global south. Broadly postcolonial approaches to ecocriticism such as Nixon's sometimes overemphasize the isolationist tendencies of American environmentalisms in order to make a case for their own more generous brands of ecocosmopolitanism and transnational social activism, but the fact remains that, within the American environmental literary sphere at least, "transcendental [perspectives] have typically trumped transnational ones" (Nixon, Slow Violence 33),

and that region- or nation-based models of literary criticism, environmentally oriented or otherwise, do not always acknowledge the limitations of their own approach.