



Xinyue Liu · Sep 22, 2023

Reflections on Coral Grief

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I dare say you have seen specimens of Corals, because they are so beautiful that all who travel to the tropical oceans where they grow [...] bring home specimens of them. But when we see them at home, as they are brought from foreign lands, we must remember that all the soft and moving parts, the tentacles or fringes that wave so gracefully in the water, are gone: for they decay when the animal dies, and nothing remains but the hard frame which I have described to you.

From the naturalist and educator Elizabeth Cabot Agassiz's 1859 book, *A First Lesson in Natural History*, these words allowed a glimpse of the late nineteenth-century coral frenzy. Corals became what art historian Ann Elias calls in her book *Coral Empire* an 'imaginative force' that propelled scientific engagement with marine life more broadly. While coral, no doubt, attracted an audience because of its formal qualities, it is evident to Elias that Victorians appropriated 'the coral reef as a metaphor for imperial ambitions and empire building.' Reefs consisting of myriad exoskeleton-encrusted polyps were congruent with an imperial ideology that venerated great structures aggregated from many small clusters—the colonial form. This imperial gaze rendered coral reefs a *subaqueous terra incognita*, a submerged new frontier that, to some, merely awaited exploitation by virtue of its hitherto inaccessibility and alienness to land-dwellers.

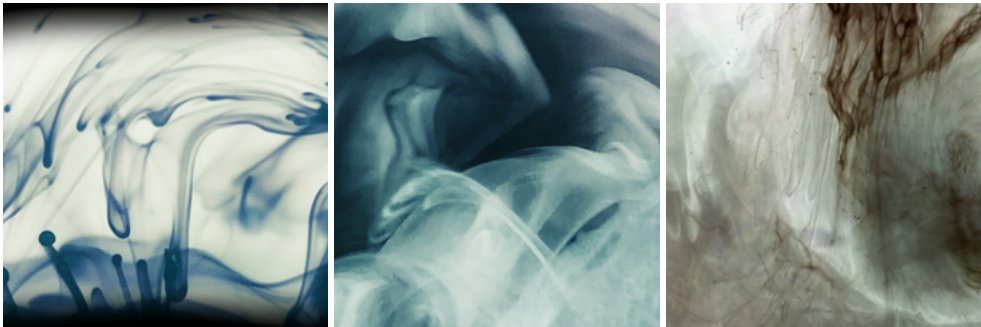
Perhaps it is worth thinking more carefully about Agassiz's position. As an advocate for women's education who founded Harvard's Radcliffe College, her view on coral reefs eschewed the predominantly male, voyager-naturalist model of scientific exploration in the

nineteenth-century (where the study of nature seldom considered its sentient dimension). In contrast, Agassiz's words read to me radically melancholic. Melancholia as she saw the softness of corals harden when lifted from the oceanic ecosystem that gave them life; as they become souvenirs that perpetually signify a gap between the original ecological location and a marketplace position that cannot be closed by human adoration. However fleetingly, Agassiz's observation touched upon the fact that the acquisition of nature entailed a sanguine intent. Indeed, species removed from their natural habitats can never represent the totality of the ecological environment. Studied in isolation, they are irreparably deprived of their biosocial enmeshments with a place.



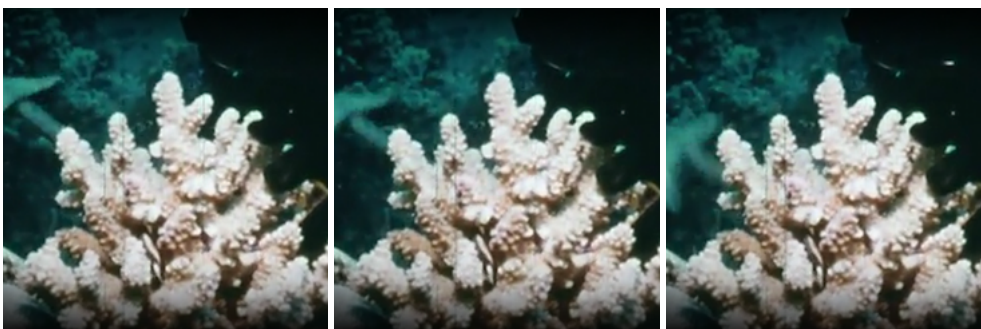
Agassiz's sentiment precludes the emergence of ecological grief in the Anthropocene, defined by environmental scholars Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis as, 'the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.' The kind of attentiveness that separated Agassiz from her contemporaries brings to mind the marine biologist Rachel Carson, who since a young age would kneel on a wet carpet of exposed seabed for hours on end to observe the tidal pools in which sea creatures swell and sway with vigour as they awaited the returning tides. Less than a century later, Carson's was a time when pollution, pesticide, and industrial agriculture envenomed the oceans on a massive scale. Already in *The Sea Around Us* (1950), Carson noticed that the 'beautiful reef corals are a perfect example of the way the inhabitable areas for any particular class of creatures may be established by temperatures.' In 2023, the rising sea temperature along with increased solar irradiance and sodium cyanide poison are causing stressed corals to expel the algae that live in their tissues and become bleached. Along the coasts of Florida, where Carson once abandoned herself to the entrancing beauty of the reefs, seven tenths of coral reef habitat has been lost. The situation is only worsening. According to the 2021 IPCC report, '70–90% of coral reefs are projected to decline at a warming level of 1.5°C, with larger losses at 2°C.'

The bleached coral has become a synecdoche for the accelerating environmental crisis. This is not surprising as centuries of searching for, categorising, and studying seem to only have amounted to the briefest co-existence between reefs and humans. Before we can claim any substantial knowledge of the reef systems, we now enter an era where coping with the agony of watching their decay has become a daily practice.



It is cruel that oftentimes the same people who make oceanic preservation their lifework are the first to contract the malaise of climate despair, both physically and psychologically. Rachel Carson died of breast cancer in 1964, a disease often linked to carcinogens in the environment, which she likely contracted during her research on toxic chemicals. By virtue of their proximity to an ecosystem, coastal Indigenous communities such as the Melanesian Torres Strait Islanders near present-day Queensland not only have to witness the destruction of a biome that enlivens their cultural beliefs, but also have to bear the heaviest material and economic burden. Gone with the coral reefs is a guarding ecosystem that, when healthy, acts as a barrier that mitigates the impact of floods, hurricanes, and tsunamis, without which coastal residents face further economic devastation, climate displacement, and forced migration. ‘Coral grief’ as a term came from a wordplay that changed the Great Barrier Reef into the ‘Great Barrier Grief’ by scientists based on the northeast coast of Australia, who witnessed healthy coral reefs turn into brittle white bones within the span of a research project. When asked how they cope with the loss, some scientists blatantly admit that they desensitise themselves. One attitude common to all coral scientists, however, is what legal scholar Irus Braverman calls in *Coral Whispers*, ‘the pendulum effect,’ referring to the oscillation between despair and hope when dealing with massive coral bleaching events.

It is this swinging that envelops me. Hope is indispensable in staving off climate despair, yet once exposed to the ‘ecological context that scars,’ as the film scholar David Anthony Pittaway names it, how can one still seek safety in cultural productions that promote blind climate optimism the same way?



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By now it should be common knowledge that the climate crisis is unevenly experienced by people based on their geography, race, and class. A 2018 Australian study on coral grief and place meaning conducted by a team of social scientists led by Nadine Marshall further solidifies that ecological grief could be gendered as well. After surveying over two thousand people, the researchers found that among residents and tourists, women are more likely to report symptoms of ‘Reef Grief’ than their male counterparts. Media and film culture affirm (and often take advantage of) this gender bias—as film scholar Kasia Van Schaik points out, the prevailing cinematic

representation of ecological grief relies on a human scale, particularly using the vessel of the female body. Women socialised to be more sensitive in feeling this pain are then exploited for their sharp sensibility, readying plenty of symbolisms at hand in the discourse of climate grief.

In reframing the ocean as a cascade of intersecting diversions, physicist Helen Czerski refers to it as the main engine responsible for cycling and recycling the Earth system's energy. In the same way that 'we are the ocean', as Czerski muses, we are our afflicted environment. Yet the representation of sickness still puts an overwhelming emphasis on those who are affected, not the ones affecting. Tragedy seems forever to be reserved for the conscientious whose varying degrees of erosion by the catastrophe have become the default aesthetic expression.

The exploration of coral grief presents an opportunity to reflect on the nuanced connections between suffering individuals and a sick environment. We must recognise a particular community's propensity to grief as *a result of* generational subordination and socialisation. It can be true that some are more susceptible to environmental violence and therefore have a more robust vocabulary for expressing loss; at times it might be convenient to use ready-made expressions of grief as a vehicle to cross the threshold of human-nature divide and bring injured nature into view. Yet the emotional processing of the bleak reality through grief must always preserve a subversive edge, first and foremost by calling into interrogation the perpetrators who dealt weakness to the Earth. As theorist Kate Wilkinson Cross proffers in *Feminist Frontiers in Climate Justice*, without overthrowing the structural imbalances that pin vulnerable individuals into existing social institutions, further efforts to address climate justice will be in vain. That the ideological mechanisms that oppress women, nature, and the socially and racially dispossessed are interrelated means the liberation of one must coincide with the revival of the other. There exists no solitary amelioration.



If we were to be reckoned as a geological force vehement enough to alter the composition of our planet, let us also consider our emotional responses as valid players. Those who hold grief closely are not victims devoid of agency. Rather, they are the people capable of

identifying the underlying wrongness in the current system. Our problem, I feel, is one of inattentiveness and callousness, dismissing the warning signs as senseless cries and whispers as we carry on maiming the Earth.

That is to say, I do not wish to let our sadness slide idly by, uninterrogated. Let us mobilise our melancholy. Let it be a reminder for recalling our enmeshment with and our interdependency on the ecosystem. The devastating sight of coral reefs exposes unresolved issues, untaken accountabilities, and our fundamental, Earth-dependent condition. We must take seriously this sadness, listen attentively to what the grievors are trying to tell and take their knowledge into account. Behaving like an open wound, grief tirelessly *let felt* our shared biological vulnerability with an environment that is before all else, injurable, and dying as we speak.

What if there is no more time? To what extent can we outlive the ocean? As political theorist Apolline Taillandier reminds us in her essay, *Staring into the Singularity*, the neoliberal project now charts a technocratic utopia 'by making intersecting claims about unknowability and forms of anticipatory knowledge.' Blind optimism predicated on such uncertainty is both used as an antidote against the fear of nature and mobilised by capitalists who bank on technological advancement such as geoengineering. Instead of fixing the root cause of the environmental collapses, they now aim to modify the environment even more, so that we will have corals that can grow in warming waters, beehives built on plastic waste, livestock strands that are resistant towards cases of flu that plague the Earth with ever-exacerbating force. How much more destruction? How many more sick women's stories go unlistened, unregistered, or dismissed? How is it so easy to forget our first lesson, that without a support system in place, *all* lives perish?

I fear nothing will remain but the hard frame which I have described to you.

*This is an accompaniment to **Once She Dries**, an experimental opera about coral reefs and climate change created by Xinyue Liu—the author of this piece—along with Nancy Cohen and Meagan Woods and musicians Casper Leerink, Kouros Ghamsari-Esfahani, and Amanda Sum. In March 2023 **Once She Dries** premiered at SMUSH gallery in Jersey City, New Jersey, USA and will be presented as part of **Earth Speak: Giving Voice to Paper** at the International Biennial of Paper & Fibre Art at both the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei, Taiwan and the NTCRI in Caotun Township, Taiwan from November 2023 to March 2024.*

Xinyue Liu is reading for a DPhil in fine art at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford. She is a practice-led Clarendon scholar aiming to posit the 'Cinema of Ecological Grief' as a distinct visual genre using film, text, and installation. In understanding the genre as a filmic endeavour that carries ecological grief through the work of mourning, her research spans the disciplines of visual anthropology, contemporary film studies, and ethics. Her website is liuxinyue.com

Nancy Cohen is a visual artist and intersectional environmentalist whose work examines resiliency in relation to the environment and the human body. In 2022 she was a recipient of the Murray Reich Distinguished Artist Award from New York Foundation for the Arts, a Works on Paper Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a Denbo Fellowship from Pyramid Atlantic Art Center and a Studio Residency Grant from Women's Studio Workshop. In fall 2023, she will be a Fellow at MacDowell. Her website is nancymcohen.com

Meagan Woods is an interdisciplinary artist who works in dance, theatre, and costume design. She holds an MFA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Simon Fraser University and a BFA in Dance from Rutgers University, where she earned the Margery Turner Award for choreography. Meagan's TEDx talk "Stitching a New Form of Progress" uses sewing as a metaphor to explore the benefits of moving backwards, and is available at [TED.com](https://www.ted.com). Her website is Meaganwoods.com

Co-edited by **Emma Schneck, Troy Vettese, and Meagan Woods**

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