

Albrecht, “Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World”

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Volume 38, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095397ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095397ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

0832-6193 (imprimé)

1705-9429 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Chang, D. (2022). Compte rendu de [Albrecht, “Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World”]. *The Trumpeter*, 38(1), 130–136.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1095397ar>

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Book Review

Albrecht, Glen A. *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*. Cornell University Press, 2019.

City dwellers are likely familiar with the jolt of disorientation when a familiar city block is seemingly razed overnight, or when a crop of gleaming towers suddenly replaces weather-stained edifice. In many cities, older structures fall prey to development as the skyline dashes upward, exclamatory marks on the crowded page. The transformation of urban landscapes can leave inhabitants bewildered. Meadows and valleys are flattened, neighborhoods vanish in an instant; along with their disappearance, so goes culture, community, and memory. Australian eco-philosopher Glenn Albrecht has coined the term “solastagia” to denote “the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory.”¹ Solastalgia is the feeling of homesickness while being at home, the anguish associated with watching an unwanted transformation of a beloved place.² Landscapes have never been static, nor have local places ever been exempt from geological forces of change; however, with the advent of industrial technology deployed on a mass scale, mountains can be flattened, valleys flooded, and rivers drained in a matter of weeks and months. With the exception of natural events, such as earthquakes and volcano eruptions, previous generations of homo sapiens rarely witnessed such transformation at this astounding pace. Solastalgia, that feeling of desolation at the sight of a transformed landscape, is new and singular in an era of industrial exploitation.

Since Albrecht’s coinage in 2003, solastalgia has seeped into many facets of environmental discourse. If the neologism conveys an astute observation of those subtle yet unnamed valences that haunt inhabitants of the Anthropocene, Albrecht’s recent book *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* serves a rich offering to the nascent topology of emotions. With soulful reflection and informed analysis, Albrecht lays out a glossary of psycho-emotional experiences that mark the encounter with ecological disturbance. Albrecht’s diction evinces a philosophical clarity matched by a poetic sensitivity; each observation joins insight with creative flair.

Many of Albrecht’s ideas will be of interest to educators who want to address the challenges posed by the global ecological crisis. For example, Albrecht begins his book with a story of his upbringing in South Western Australia, of his love for local rivers and forests, and of the formative figures who helped him put roots in his home range. This “sumbiography,” defined as the

¹ Glenn A. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 38.

² Glenn Albrecht, “The Age of Solastalgia”, *The Conversation*, accessed 16 November 2017, <http://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>.

cumulative influences that shape a life, both human and more-than-human, becomes the starting point from which to launch an investigation into the relationship between people and their places. This is the first of Albrecht's offering that holds import for educators: a life is shaped not only by human society, but also by the multifarious lifeforms and landscapes that carve an emerging psyche, and the ongoing formation of identity needs to recognize this broader context of life. Although Albrecht is not the first to propose this form of eco-biography, the insertion aligns with the trajectory of a book that attempts to sketch a fuller range of emotional experiences that attend the ecological crisis.

In addition to sumbiography, Albrecht offers educators a glimpse into the ambiguities that unfurl from the present era, and the solidarities that indicate future prospects. Among them, Albrecht proposes "eutierria," the positive and good feeling of oneness with the Earth and its life forces, and "endemophilia," the particular love of what is locally and regionally distinctive. These affiliated emotions arise from a sense of wellness associated with living well in place, a rootedness that sees inhabitants thriving in harmony with the vitality of local lands. Conversely, Albrecht also offers a menu of difficult emotions. For anyone who has ever shuttered at the thought of flash floods and raging wildfires, "mermerosity" refers to a state of anxiety that anticipates the transformation of familiar places. Readers who have been gripped by indignation over hidebound industries, corporate greed, and effete governments, have experienced "terrafurie," which Albrecht defines as "the anger unleashed within those who can clearly see the self-destructive tendencies in the current forms of industrial-technological society."³ The book is rich with anecdotes and philosophical reflections, each illustrating sentiments not aptly captured by the existing lexicon. As people across the world experience dire predicaments and suffer under worsening conditions of chronic stress, these neologisms may well become useful in naming subjective states that will become ever more common.

Despite the clarity provided by new words, words related to subjective experience are often reflections of cultures and dispositions that give emotions their shape and texture. The Buddhist notion of "mudita" or empathetic joy, the happiness one feels from watching someone else's joy, in contrast to the German word "schadenfreude," enjoyment of the misfortunes of others, are two examples of unique expressions of distinct, but perhaps not uncommon, emotional experiences. The circulation of these cognates confirms the prevalence of certain experiences. In giving name to a feeling, in assigning a noun to a subjective state, a cognate certifies singular forms of experience. A culture that has a name for vicarious joy (mudita) makes available to its members a psycho-linguistic tool for identifying certain emotional experiences. Vicarious joy becomes *real*, something that many people experience, something reified by virtue of its

³ Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, 201.

circulation in discourse. To this end, the naming of emotions is creation through circumscription, of crystalizing something amorphous and undetermined, thus carving out a template for what we feel.

In this way, a project that aims to invent words for a new era can also retrace existing metaphors that underwrite affective states in a given culture. The struggle between good and evil is a perennial theme in Western culture, and many themes stem from this overarching binary. Albrecht's view of the current era is no exception. He deems "terrascia" as the earth creator, the forces that promote life, diversity and flourishing; "terrathora" is the earth destroyer, the forces which tend to obliterate life on the planet. It is no surprise that Albrecht points to James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster *Avatar* as the archetypal narrative that traces the struggle between terrascia and terrathora. The film portrays a clash of civilizations, as a group of human colonizers driven mad by greed seek to plunder a planet, Pandora, for rare minerals. They face resistance from the Na'vi, sapphire-skinned natives who espouse a sophisticated land-based culture that sees members living in sacred harmony with the land. The story, in Albrecht's view, can be read as "an allegory on the plight of contemporary Earth,"⁴ and argues for the forces of terrascia, so apparent in the culture of the Na'vi, over the rapacious destruction of human colonizers.

That Albrecht references *Avatar* says much about his ethical orientation. *Avatar* is a classic story of good and evil, of moral lines starkly drawn, of the absence of ambiguity and complexity. To be clear, there is much to learn from the Na'vi worldview. However, it is the underlying moral frame that troubles me: the bluntness of moral conviction that so easily descends into hostility between an *us* against a *them*, the recurring conflict written into the metaphor itself. I submit that this moral frame lies at the heart of the ecological crisis, for the binaries that have motivated so much of Western cultures tend to construct an irreconcilable "other," the conquest of which lends moral gravitas to the protagonist. In this war between terrascia and terrathora, the subject of dispute may shift, but conflict remains constant. With conflict endemic to the moral frame, so goes the prospect for a holistic view of life that rests on interdependence, symbiosis, and mutuality.

From these cosmic forces of creation and destruction, Albrecht derives the concomitant terrascient and terrathoran emotions. In his view, the challenge for current and future generations lies in the promotion of terrascient emotions that are expressed as "an ethic of love, care, and responsibility [which] are directed at the protection of life — all life."⁵ On the other hand, terrathoran emotions "range from mild forms of forgetfulness, neglect, and

⁴ Albrecht, 137.

⁵ Albrecht, 3.

impotence to those that are despotic, necrophilic (characterized by love of all things connected to death), and highly destructive.”⁶ If we put aside for a moment the awkward definitions (I doubt whether forgetfulness and neglect are emotions at all), the binary does not aptly describe the forces at play in the ongoing life of the planet, and of the universe at large. What Albrecht describes as destructive — collisions between galaxies, rogue meteorites smashing into Earth — are in fact vital to the emergence of life. The catastrophic asteroid that extinguished the dinosaurs paved the way for the proliferation of mammals. If forced to remain with the given frame, we might say that creative and destructive forces are intertwined and inseparable. In fact, we may see that *terranascia* and *terraphthora* are one and the same thing, two manifestations of a united principle; they *appose* rather than *oppose* one another. Destruction fuels creation; disintegration finds reintegration. This recognition of creation and destruction as one indivisible course does not issue a blank cheque that renders ethics obsolete by rationalizing ruinous patterns of industrial-capitalist expansion. Rather, the critique underscores the inadequacy of the binary. Many eco-centric cultures respect and honour the transcendent wholeness of life, which includes mortality and impermanence. Adherence to, and even a reverence for, limits and constraints (death being the ultimate constraint) is crucial to shared flourishing. Viewed in this way, the creation-destruction binary cannot provide impetus for a culture characterized by symbiosis and interdependence.

Instead of the oppositional binary between creation and destruction, there are ancient traditions that expound a more holistic cosmology. For example, Taoism sees the universe as an emanation of a unified principle, the Tao, manifested in both the Yin and the Yang. Yin is the supple, facilitative, and pregnant space of formlessness and possibility. The Yang is form, assertive, bold, and surgent. Though apparently distinct, the two forces cohere in seamless unity within the principle of the Tao, the Way⁷. The Taoist worldview rests not on the struggle between competing forces but enjoins balance and harmony within an unfolding cosmos. Within this cosmology, what rises must in time subside; what takes shape must return to shapelessness. The journey from form to formlessness is not degradation nor destruction, but merely the flow of Tao within the protean universe. Death is simply one station in Life’s ever-flowing flux. The task for adherents is to navigate the changes, to work with primary forces, to find equilibrium in the exigencies of every moment. Pesticides, pollution, and spills evince a glaring neglect of interconnections that constitute a vibrant community of life. Instead of seeing a razed forest as *terranascia* defeated, a Taoist will see this harmful conduct as an errant partiality and an alienated consciousness that is severed from the formative principles that imbue the universe. I venture that such a worldview is more conducive to the kind of ecological life that Albrecht dubs the “*Symbiocene*,” a geological

⁶ Albrecht, 69–70.

⁷ Alan Watts and Al Chung-liang Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

era when humans are integrated into support systems and leave no harmful traces, than the recurring struggle between terranascia and terraphthora.

My reference to Taoism leads me to a final point in response to Albrecht's book. Attuned to the psycho-spiritual dimensions of the ecological crisis and pining for a revival of spiritual traditions, Albrecht calls for a new, secular spirituality that appreciates and reveres the natural world. He uses the term "Ghedeist" (from Old English and Germanic words "together," "to gather," and "good") to denote "the secular positive feeling for the unity of life," and "the awareness of the spirit or force that holds things together."⁸ Albrecht's wariness of institutional religion is evident from his repeated use of "secular." However, as I argued above, much of his ethical compass is set in the moral landscape of Christian theology, which sees the universe as a battle between good and evil. While I laud his entry into spirituality, an effort to address the disenchantment that afflicts much of the Modern West, Albrecht perpetuates some foundational aspects of Christian cosmology, a move that confounds his secular leanings and his love of Indigenous spirituality. The proposed "Ghedeist" spirituality is not as new, nor as secular as Albrecht supposes. This inadvertent turn may not be detrimental, for the ethos of the Symbiocene may not lie in the creation of a new spirituality and new words, but in the rediscovery and renewal of ancient traditions that have been expunged by the modern era. The task, therefore, is not so much one of *invention as re-interpretation*, of *revitalizing* traditions that have helped human societies to live in harmony with local lands for many millennia prior to industrialization. The challenge lies in the reclamation of inherited wisdom, which includes a stringent critique of institutional orthodoxy and the rejection of harmful doctrine (for example, the belief in human supremacy over all life), as well as the renewal of philosophies that promote wholeness and interdependence⁹.

In summary, despite the strained ethics derived from a limited cosmology, Glenn Albrecht's book is a provocative tour through the subtle valences that accompany those who are dismayed by the Anthropocene. His observations are astute, and his coinages evince a playful invention that supplies the English language with fresh and perceptive cognates. After touring his gallery of coinages, I came away with an urge to dream up neologisms of my own. And this might be Albrecht's lasting contribution to ecological literature: by expanding the lexicon, he invites us to pay closer attention to our inner experiences, enjoins us to see the confluence between land and mind, and celebrates the power of language to make clear that which is otherwise opaque. Such

⁸ Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, 131.

⁹ For more on the re-interpretation and reclamation of religious traditions, see Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

a move toward clarity and precision in articulation will be vital in an age marked by messy disruption to landscapes, both inner and outer.

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