How to Despair the Climate: Against Eco-Optimism

Brian Huang[[1]](#footnote-0)

Abstract

A common refrain in both academic scholarship and journalism on the climate and larger ecological crisis is the repeated exhortation to avoid falling into “despair,” seen to be linked with an apolitical quietism, apathy, and fatalism. Relatedly, it is often suggested that we reject an eco-pessimist orientation and instead promote an optimistic tone when discussing the climate crisis for fear that negativity engenders a defeatist despair. This paper follows other writers making the so-called “affective turn” by resisting the impulse for rescue from despair and other “negative” affects and applies their thinking to recent works in ecocriticism to see what leaning into the negative can unearth for environmental political theory. A despair that incites apolitical withdrawal, fatalistic defeat, or psychological damage should be avoided. However, a despair that is politically disquieting rather than quieting may offer the type of energetic passion, restlessness, and generative critique that has heretofore been absent from many examples of ecocriticism. Our question ceases to be “should we despair over the climate?”, to instead become, “how should we despair over the climate?”. I seek the answer through an interpretation of natality in Arendt. Human action in concert with others and our capacity to begin anew frees us from a politically paralyzed despair and permits us to encounter a despair which is a radical rejection of the given. Paradoxically, despairing human environmental relations is where we may find a new needed hope.

**Introduction**

Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope, but I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is.

-Greta Thunberg

We are often told to resist and avoid despair lest we be reduced to defeatism or apathetic resignation. But what is despair if not an apt response to a despairing situation? Why should we not despair about ecology for example? The recently released IPCC’s 6th Assessment Report places 3°C of warming above pre-industrial levels as the best estimate of climate equilibrium (IPCC 2021) which casts a pall over 2018’s special report which stated that 1.5°C of global warming would increase “risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth” (IPCC 2018). The ecological situation is matched in direness by the (lacking) political responses to it. We need “rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes across all aspects of society” according to the 2018 IPCC special report in order to avoid shooting past 1.5°C. Whether the Clean Energy Performance Program, at one time slated to be part of the Build Back Better budget reconciliation act, lives up to those standards set by the IPCC will never be known as the program is on the chopping block along with many other progressive agenda items. In the midst of the 6th mass extinction event, accelerating greenhouse effect, speculation about oncoming tipping points, environmental inequity and injustice, sea level rise, ocean acidification, permafrost layer melt, fresh water and nitrogen cycle destabilization, topsoil degeneration, deforestation, among many other ongoing ecological crisis; the *political* climate among the countries with the most historical greenhouse gas emissions remains stagnant and resistant to the types of changes that climate scientists see as necessary. There is something infantilizing, frustrating, and disconnected about the repeated injunction to avoid despair when there is so much to despair about. How can we *not* despair about ecology and our intransigent ecological orientation? What then, is behind the common refrain that we should avoid despair, and is despair indeed a disarming and disempowering affect to be avoided at all costs? What do we gain or lose by banishing despair from our affective lives?

This paper argues that the political uses of despair have been overlooked regarding the ecological crisis in a way that forestalls criticism, stifles energy, and precludes action. We hear strong warnings to avoid language that communicates a lack of options or depicts the situation as dire. A larger, eco-pessimist orientation is often discouraged because it might incite despair and thus, anti-politics. However, it is not clear if despair necessarily follows from eco-pessimism, nor is it clear if despair necessarily begets fatalism. This paper argues that eco-pessimism does not necessarily lead to a demotivating despair and that climate despair does not necessarily preclude political action. As Michal Givoni notes, “despair has its own ways of drawing people to the political, which should be recognized, assessed, and exploited on their own terms” (Givoni 2019, 596). The “political” that despair has the power to draw us to is theorized by Robyn Marasco to be a radical rejection of the given, and mutually constitutive of—rather than signaling the absence of—hope.

By way of clarifying, this paper follows many other recent works in affect studies and political theory (e.g., Cvetkovich 2012) in theorizing “negative affects” such as despair as not merely a “private feeling” but a public, political affect. At times, this paper will refer to “despair” by its dictionary definition: the complete loss or absence of hope. It is indeed important to recognize how despair can be the state of personal hopeless debilitation that prevents positive outcomes and we should work to identify and avoid that aspect or “type” of despair. Yet it might be more important to consider the ways in which despair acts as an appropriate reaction to a political situation and how when despair is not prohibited, experiencing despair publicly, with others, offers the chance for dialectical, renewed hope. The dictionary definition will eventually be left behind to embrace something closer to Marasco’s idea of despair “not as pathology or paralysis, but in connection with the passions of critique and the energies of everyday life” (Marasco 2015, 3).

This introductory section is followed by an investigation of the broader tendency to demand optimism and resist pessimism in spaces surrounding the climate crisis. Eco-pessimism is argued to be not just another form of climate denial nor is it always unhelpful or damaging to movements towards ecological reciprocity. Eco-pessimism should be avoided to the extent that it engenders fatalism and a permanent retreat from political activity, however, I argue it more often functions as a needed antidote to the far more pernicious and ubiquitous eco-optimism.

Next the paper gives a reading of the concept of *Cruel Optimism* as identified by Lauren Berlant and applies it to eco-optimism. What underscores the overwhelming majority of political responses to climate change in the industrial west is a steadfast belief in and adherence to that very same western industrial way of life. Whether its technological fixes, market based solutions, individualization of responsibility down to consumer choices, the sustaining of western capitalist consumer culture is taken as a given by eco-optimists. I argue that their optimism is cruel in that it acts as an obstacle to an authentic ecological reciprocity.

Next the paper turns to despair itself. One of the main arguments that those who would have us resist pessimism use is that pessimism leads to the politically useless and emotionally harmful affect of despair. I follow other affect theorists to rescue despair from this wholly negative light and show how its political power lies in its nesting within the act of critique. Climate despair can be a form of radical care for the world. Despair acts in a worldly orientation, not the inward retreat that the eco-optimists would warn us against. In political activism circles, despair can be debilitating and encourage de-political resignation, but this occurs largely when despair is prohibited. Despairing individuals find they have no place to feel and process their supposedly harmful affective response and choose to retreat from activism. Individualized despair then, acts in many of the ways that those who would have us resist it suggest. Despairing together however, affords us the possibility space to confront despairing situations with the full bevy of human life.

Having rescued political despair from a priori contempt, the paper then turns to an Arendtian interpretation of natality as the process by which despair unfolds into hope. What the climate can’t change is the human capacity to begin again—and this paper's encounter with Arendt shows that despairing together is a promising way to begin at the end.

In sum, my paper argues against the claim that despair robs us of a capacity to act. Instead, despair persists where there exists a needed political end without yet the means to achieve those ends. Despair, in this context, assists us in reshuffling the deck or flipping the playing surface altogether. I follow Robyn Marasco in resisting the urge to banish despair from our affective experience and instead look to the ways in which despair, as a radical rejection of the given, offers us speculative resources to imagine and seek a better world. Despair can be a route by which we create the means to our needed political ends provided we refrain from prohibiting it. Despairing the climate then, can be a form of awakening to a changed climate with a renewed political spirit more apt to face the challenges that lie ahead.

I share Deborah Gould’s view that despair can take both destructive and constructive forms. Despair sometimes does indeed cause defeatism and withdrawal. We should guard against and counteract this by recognizing the situations in which this sort of despair rears its head, namely when we banish despair and prohibit its expression from our social and affective lives, and instead push for a politicized despair that is worldly in orientation and joined together amongst our other despairing fellows. This is how we can experience the enlivening and disquieting despair that Gould cites as the catalyst for AIDS activism in the late 80’s and Marasco theorizes as the site for transformative critical theory. I claim this sort of despair is direly needed in the Anthropocene. We will feel despair over this despairing climate situation. Despairing alone is a surefire way to cause the sort of defeatism and checking out we don't wish to see. Despairing together however, is how we can marshal our despair into a politically productive human affect.

**Ecological Pessimism: What it is and isn't**

Whether it's from the conservative right like newspaper columnist George Will or the numerous progressive eco-moderns who insist on technological or market fixes to the ecological crisis, there is a unity among strange bedfellows to label as “eco-pessimist” an orientation that refuses to mince words about the climate science (Will 1992; 2009. Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). “Eco-pessimists” express doubt about possibilities for climate amelioration in the current socio-political paradigm, they often look to adaptation rather than mitigation as the more realistic path forward and are skeptical about the possibility, feasibility, and consequences of the “eco-modernist” goal of “decoupling human development from environmental impacts” (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). They take seriously the suggestions of the International Panel on Climate Change that in 2018 published despairing language regarding what it would take to keep the average global temperature to 1.5° C above pre-industrial levels, beyond which many scientists agree the risk of destabilization becomes much greater. “Rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes to all aspects of society” would be required to achieve this goal (IPCC 2018). Eco-pessimists take this as given and lament the rapid far-reaching and unprecedented changes as unlikely, thus they look to what comes next. For some, this is a detestable orientation.

The good-faith critics of eco-pessimism (by which I do not mean those who label *anyone* who talks about climate change an eco-pessimist) end up staking their claims on two arguments: The first of these is that the science driving an eco-pessimist outlook is overstated or fabricated. In other words, the facts/science/truth doesn't lend credibility to a pessimist orientation. The second argument is a warning that exuding pessimism regarding the ecological situation leads to despair and the associated apathy, defeatism, and fatalism. I address these arguments in turn, with the bulk of the paper being a response to the second.

Michael Mann’s *The New Climate War* (2021) is one example of published work which warns of this ‘exaggerated claims’ tendency in climate communication. Mann directs forceful criticisms to both the fossil fuel industry and those who engage in sensationalizing of the climate threat. An entire chapter is spent deriding doomists and chiding figures such as Roy Scranton, David Roberts, David Wallace-Wells, and Jem Bendell for overstating the science and mistaking the lack of action on climate change for lack of possible solutions. These “doomists” are “despair-mongering” and “arguably [pose] a greater threat to climate action than outright denial” (Mann 2021).

Exaggerated claims about the climate science and its upshots are legitimate concerns as manipulated figures and strained conclusions only serve to embolden those who have been attempting to sow doubt about the science for the last several decades. However, eco-pessimists are largely not overstating the science or exaggerating the consequences. Take for example the reception of Jem Bendell’s 2018 “Deep Adaptation”*.* The numerous criticisms Bendell received overwhelmingly attempt to paint him as overstating the science by suggesting that “a climate-induced form of economic and social collapse is now likely” (Bendell 2018). These critics include Michael Mann: “this paper is a perfect storm of misguidedness and wrongheadedness”, and Jeremy Lent who criticizes Bendell for “frequently slipping between the terms ‘inevitable’, ‘probably’, and ‘likely’” (Ahmed 2019). Yet Bendell was defended at the time by leading scientists like the lead author of the 2019 UN global disaster risk assessment Scott Williams: “Bendell is closer to the mark than his critics” (Ahmed 2019), and he has been joined by other leading scientists in his assessment since the 2018 publication of his piece (Moses 2020).

The critics of Bendell, Wallace-Wells, Roberts and other eco-pessimists rarely leave the argument that they are overstating the science to stand on its own. The other argument against an ecologically pessimist orientation is that pessimism engenders despair, and despair is a depoliticizing retreat from the public. This type of warning comes almost exclusively from progressive/liberal/left climate communicators. Jem Bendell describes this criticism of eco-pessimism as a turn away from science or policy prescriptions to instead question “whether such ideas should be communicated to the general public...The argument made is that to discuss the likelihood and nature of social collapse due to climate change is irresponsible because it might trigger hopelessness amongst the general public” (Bendell 2018, 15). This line of thinking is pervasive. A long line of breathless climate communicators warn of this scenario. Michael Mann warns of the “danger in overstating the science in a way that presents the problem as unsolvable, and feeds a sense of doom, inevitability, and hopelessness”[[2]](#footnote-1). Daniel Aldana Cohen introduced “climate disaster porn” into our lexicon while warning of the spectacularizing of climate reporting (Atkin 2017). What these critics would have us do is resist eco-pessimism because eco-pessimism acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy: we won't bother to respond to the ecological crisis because staving off collapse is perceived as impossible, which makes collapse inevitable.

It is fascinating that embedded within the logic is the admission that the publicly disseminated *knowledge* of climate eventualities is more dangerous than the crisis itself. This curious logic seems to suggest that the upper limit of how much danger should be communicated does not come from the science, but rather what the public can handle. In sum, these critics of eco-pessimism all agree that we should avoid it such that it contributes to ecological apathy. They claim that we should be more strategic in our messaging and communication and be wary of how information is received lest the receivers interpret the message as fatalist and are demotivated to do or change anything.

Among the numerous reasons to be skeptical about the injunction to tailor our scientific messages to an upper limit of doom or crisis is the very real danger of backlash to attempted gatekeeping of science. If science communicators engage in the sort of message framing and defanging that the critics of eco-pessimism desire, they may contribute to the growing lay person/scientist divide that climate deniers themselves seek to exploit. “Trust will increasingly erode if scientific elites fail to recognize in lay citizens any capacity for independent, different collective meaning-making, and corresponding knowledge rooted in different social needs, vision and priorities which may be different from those underpinned by science” (Eckersley 2017, 995). The references to the “post-truth” era that many scholars cite as a crisis befalling democratic governance recently came about as a result of a populist strain in lay people and a lack of trust in elites, but this is a two-way street. Scientist’s lack of trust in lay people, evidenced by the sort of orientation that mistrusts how information may be received, is at least as responsible for the public distrust of science as any other precondition—and one we should take seriously as normative ecological scholars reliant on the science to make our claims. Critics of eco-pessimism overly concerned with tailoring their message for palatability to a public they perceive as unsophisticated are risking a delegitimizing backlash that may cause more problems than they are attempting to solve.

Delving deeper into the criticism of eco-pessimism, we see that what unites all these above-mentioned critics of climate “doomists” is that they overwhelmingly derive their opinions that alarmism and doomism lead to apathy from conjecture and anecdotal evidence. Mann says that “doomist framing...breeds disengagement from the climate battle” and cites twitter conversations in the replies of then *Vox* columnist David Roberts and reader comments underneath *Vice* articles expressing the desire to “wait out the apocalypse” as evidence of people being “lead to despair” and convinced to “dissociate from civilization” (Mann 2021). However, some empirical work has addressed the topic. One oft-cited study is Meyer and Smith (2019). The study surveyed 50,000 people and found that “individuals who believe that climate change is unstoppable were less likely to engage in behaviors or support policies to address climate change.” The policy suggestions include directives to leaders to “carefully frame climate change as a difficult, yet solvable, problem to circumvent fatalistic beliefs” (Mayer and Smith 2019).

This finding has been parroted by many critics of eco-pessimism, but some investigation of research methods casts doubts on the upshots of the findings. The study purports to measure behavior and policy support but proceeds by surveying ‘you personally have taken action aimed at helping to fight climate change’ as well as a self-reported *willingness to pay* for climate policies. To say nothing of the veracity of self-reporting one's own beliefs about future behavior, which is well known to be a foolhardy endeavor in behavioral sciences, this study did not capture the concept of “supporting policies to address climate change” because, as we know, policies that address climate change are largely not individual-level behavioral changes, which is what the study actually queried. As Michael Maniates writes in the seminal piece *Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?,* “Individual consumption choices are environmentally important, but [our] control over these choices is constrained, shaped, and framed by institutions and political forces that can be remade only through collective citizen action, as opposed to individual consumer behavior” (Maniates 2015, 279). The finding of the Mayer and Smith study, then, is that individuals who believe climate change is unstoppable were less likely to engage in the largely symbolic behaviors associated with environmental consumerism—hardly the deathblow to eco-pessimism that those who cite this study wish it to be.

Another challenge to the study is critical of the limited timeframe the study uses to measure changes in behavior. It perhaps is arresting and defeating in the first instance to be confronted with the gravity of the situation. However, remembering the language the IPCC used in 2018 to describe what is necessary to avoid catastrophic warming (“rapid and far-reaching changes to all aspects of society” (IPCC 2018)), what is needed is a wholesale paradigm shift—not seasonal or year over year changes in consumer behavior. A slow recognition of the enormity of the climate crisis, unfolding alongside a border collective discourse, is perhaps far more energetic and motivating than this study can possibly measure. More will be said about this in later sections. What we should look at instead is the effect of beliefs in the inevitability of catastrophic climate change on openness and alertness to policy support and lifestyle changes over a much longer timeframe and in conjunction with shifting narratives from multiple sources.

For all there is to say about why pessimism about climate change does not necessarily lead to fatalism, there is still a question of whether fatalism is even a problem worth worrying about. Is fatalism indeed a terminal pathology in climate spaces or in our politics? David Wallace-Wells has this to say: “I look at the world we live in now and it seems to me like complacency is just so much of a bigger problem when it comes to responding to climate change than fatalism” (Becker 2017). This is a defensible position given the political agenda and what counts as reasonable policy. Climate policy is too often seen as just another agenda issue among many to say nothing about the political distance still left to cover to reach ecological reciprocity. It is not difficult to look at the last few decades of disconnect between environmental news and legislation and determine that the fault lies in an abundance of ecological apathy. Ecological fatalism may be a refreshing position compared to the blindness, ignorance, and political triaging of the problem behind more “pressing” matters that is more characteristic of the last several decades. At least the fatalists recognize the enormity of the situation!

However, I would push the argument in another direction. The danger is not that eco-pessimism would contribute to an already ecologically apathetic society. We are actually not apathetic at all about ecology. It is not something that we conveniently forget about when the agenda is set or placed lower on the hierarchy because we misperceive it as unimportant. Effective climate policy and ecologically reciprocal attitude conveyance is not ignored and unpursued because of a lack of care. We actually have a very prescribed positive and directed ecological orientation that is overwhelming in dominance and force. We work very hard at extraction, mastery, and control over non-human nature and largely devote the sum total of human energies *towards* efforts that are *causing* the ecological crisis in the name of economic growth. What we need is not a move from apathy to care. Instead, we need an arresting shock to a continuing system and pattern that we care very much about. Paradoxically, we may need *more* ambivalence and apathy about our way of life and its stability in order to allow the sort of questioning of paradigms that can introduce real ecological reciprocity. Less certainty about the righteousness of our capitalist, exploitative, and domineering relationship to nonhuman nature may be the true threat of eco-pessimism—a threat that is more aptly characterized as a benefit. The tendency to resist eco-pessimism out of fear about falling into defeatism then, seems misguided.

**Eco-Optimism as “Cruel Optimism”**

While there is reason to doubt the necessity of ecological pessimism leading to apathy, the critics of eco-pessimism rarely if ever consider the downsides and danger of an overly optimistic orientation. They are concerned about the demotivating elements of an apathetic pessimism, yet false hope and baseless optimism would seem to be just as depoliticizing and demotivating towards those who are convinced “something will be done”. Yet the repeated injunction to leave readers with a sense of hope rather than despair is predicated on an assumption that the more hope people feel regarding climate change, the greater the likelihood that some political action will take place. The following section of this paper will articulate a defense of despair as more politically energetic than it seems on its face, yet more should be said presently about the demotivating elements of uncritical and excess hope.

Remembering the myth of Pandora, hope was the blessing/curse left at the bottom of ailes bestowed upon humanity at the box's opening. Why hope, commonly understood to be an unambiguous good, was inside a box containing sickness, death, and other ailments is a matter of controversy in literary studies.[[3]](#footnote-2) Even more puzzling is the fact that it remained in the box after the other ailments managed to escape. Are we to interpret this as hope remind in the box, preventing humanity from ever experiencing it truely? This would require a positive view of hope as a good. But again, what was it doing in the box with the rest of the ills in the first place? Perhaps it was left in the box where Zeus can do with it as he will. Among those who interpret the myth with this pessimistic view of hope is Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Human, All Too Human* (1996) he argues: “Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man’s torment” (58).

Hope can function as stubbornness and stand in the way of actual change or action. This aspect of hope is identified and expanded upon by Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Cruel optimism is first defined as “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant 2011, 2). Elsewhere, she refers to “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (2006, 21). In other words, we keep returning to objects of desire (person, place, scene, thought, etc.) against better judgment because we are filled with hope that this time things will go better. Berlant theorizes this concept as endemic to our political and affective moment and it applies neatly to the critics of eco-pessimism mentioned earlier. In environmental education, academics, journalism, activism, and other spaces, hope or optimism is required in the face of ongoing crisis as a rule. Yet this adherence to an optimistic orientation may act “like a white noise machine that provides assurance that what seems like threat or static really is, after all, a rhythm people can enter into while they're dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world. (23). Claudia Ruitenberg describes environmental education in the Anthropocene as cruelly optimistic in that we often lean into a transformative tone when speaking about “fixes” to climate change, technological or otherwise when that transformation often does not occur (Ruitenberg 2020). Instead, we “dither, totter, and bargain” our way to a content complacency with an optimistic eye towards the horizon. This false hope can act as a stand in for the restless energy that comes about from grappling with failure. In other words, hope can therefore forestall needed change.

The psychoanalytic field has long recognized this aspect of hope as resistance to change. Potamianou (1997), through several studies, shows how hope can become a “perverted and omnipotent means of denying reality” in certain “borderline” cases[[4]](#footnote-3). In these cases, hope stands in as a way for patients to fixate on a future that is “to come”. Cathexis on hope replaces acceptance of their situation and acts as a “bulwark against psychic mobilization through which change might come about” (Potamianou 1997, 87). Is our ecological orientation not a perverted means of denying reality, acting as a bulwark against political mobilization that might threaten our way of life?

The connection between hope as a denial of reality, cruel optimism, and the politics of climate change is a stark one, and one that has been made before. “Perhaps the grandest example of cruel optimism is found in our collective relationship to looming climate catastrophe. What we have done is surely terrible, but apparently we find it less terrible to keep on as before than to imagine other ways of living” (Winant 2015). The insistence on hope and prohibition on pessimism may be more about making us feel better rather than a response to a reality in which there is good reason for hope. Berlant warns against this version of hope that is more an attachment to the positive feeling hope gives us rather than to the thing we actually are hopeful for. In our efforts to ensure we do feel better, we may be preventing the needed change from taking place.

False hope and cruel optimism may be what is truly lurking underneath the repeated insistence to remain hopeful. The next section will articulate a defense of despair on its own terms, but we should not be ignorant to the ways in which hope can function as a stubborn resistance to the sort of political action we axiomatically blame despair for preventing. Eco-optimism for optimism's sake seems to be more worthy of condemnation than eco-pessimism.

**In Defense of Despair**

A popular recent work of ecocriticism, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) captures the zeitgeist of the ecology movement’s thoughts regarding despair: “Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth” (Kimmerer 2013, 328). The environmental activist and academic Leah Stokes is quick to remind us that “we must not abandon hope” and tells us to “Don't despair: ACT” (Stokes 2021) and injunctions to “act rather than despair” are platitudinous in climate circles and in public writing on the climate crisis. What is behind this near-ubiquitous call to restrict this element of our affective lives? Does despair indeed forestall change or action in the way it is suggested?

A first pass refutation of reading climate despair in this way is to think more deeply about despair as an affect, rather than mere emotion. As Gabriel Winant writes, the difference between affect and emotion “is the difference between ‘I feel terrible’ and ‘this feels terrible. The latter’s implicit transitive verb— ‘this *makes me* feel terrible’— provides much more analytic purchase” (Winant 2015). What this shift does for us is place the origin of the negative feeling not on the individual, but on worldly phenomena. The “blame” so to speak for feeling climate despair is not on the individual who failed to correctly steel themselves. Instead, the affect theorist looks to the worldly conditions out of which despair is birthed. This is how mere “feelings” can become political—as springboards of critique. “The point of this way of thinking is to make explicit and external something otherwise tacit and internal, and thereby to open a new avenue of critique on the origin point of this particular affect: the institution, the relationship, the object that has generated this feeling” (Winant 2015). Recognizing climate despair as an affect, as a “public feeling”, as a reaction to a political reality, transforms our analysis of it from a clinical psychological malady requiring an introspective reckoning and overcoming into a rich political text available to us to read.

An affective theory of the climate crisis is attuned to the groundswell of so-called ‘climate emotion’ that is being identified in the current moment. Climate despair can be thought of as existing alongside and intertwined with climate grief, climate anxiety, climate anger, etc. Following Winant’s move away from understanding these as particularized and individual emotions and towards a worldy affect, I claim we should consider how our tendency to ‘treat’ these affects as neurosis needing therapeutics forestalls a more political reading of these phenomena as oriented towards the world that needs changing. In other words, the individuals experiencing climate despair/grief/anxiety are not the ones needing ‘treatment’, rather, we should attune ourselves to that which we are affected by and treat that instead.

Deborah Gould offers an illuminating reading of political despair as both defeating and quieting to political action as well as generative and disquieting to enlivened political imagination. Gould first disengages from the assumptions that motivate many of the earlier mentioned critics of eco-pessimism and despair-resistors. “The task, then, is to approach political feelings with a historical perspective, rejecting any a priori claims that would posit a necessary relationship between a specific emotion — say, political despair — and a given response — say, political demobilization” (Gould 2012, 96). Gould is unwilling to uncritically accept the link between fatalism and despair, allowing her to arrive at some uncommon insights. This decoupling of seemingly axiomatically joined phenomena allows Gould to track the ways that despair acts *both* as undermining activism and change as well as a productive force of generative political imagination by way of orienting us towards the world that needs changing.

Gould looks at the movement for AIDS justice, ACT UP, and how despair both acted as a catalyst and as a hindrance to the group’s goals. In a commonsense way, “despair contributed mightily to ACT UP’s undoing [because it] depleted many ACT UP members’ activist energy, replacing their rousing desire and forward momentum, sometimes even their anger, with frustration, exhaustion and immobility” (100). Here we see despair act in the ways it is commonly assumed, as a demobilizing and defeatist anti-energy.

However, we need to investigate this more fully. When mounting deaths, debilitating losses, and lack of political victories became too much to take, the despair that rightly was engendered in ACT UP’s members was met with hostility and expulsion. “We ignored it, denied it, repressed it, projected it onto others who we berated for succumbing to it. Despair was in the room with us, but it found no route other than denial” (103). Instead of productively dealing with despair through acceptance, concerted action, group therapy, etc., it was instead treated as a tumor to be excised. Members who nevertheless felt despair were shamed into hiding it. “The movement’s ethos against despair contributed to its inability to attend to it when it did emerge” (106). By repressing despair, by prohibiting its expression, by outlawing its emergence, ACT UP’s despairing members felt they had no place in the movement, leading to their burnout. This is the key moment in which it is suggested that it is not *despair* per say that contributed to ACT UP’s undoing, but its prohibition.

But this is only the first pass insight that Gould’s political despair offers us. Reading deeper, we can see the way in which despair acts as a politically rich affect in itself. Despair is not one sided: “Despair helped to destroy the direct-action AIDS movement, but it played a role in its emergence as well” (107). This is Gould's great intervention which is made possible by her refusal to take it as a given that despair need always be politically demotivating. On the contrary, despair actually was the locus where AIDS activism found purchase in an otherwise stagnant political climate. “In a context where existing forms of AIDS activism were coming up largely empty, people’s despair acted as a goad, inspiring creative risk-taking and an abandonment of the tried and true (but evidently ineffective) path in order to strike out in new, unrest activist directions” (107-108). To understand how this happened and to deepen Gould’s point, it is helpful to turn to Robyn Marasco and her reimagining of the political uses of despair in *The Highway of Despair* (2017).

Marasco frames her intervention against the injunction that “...the politics of despair can only be reaction or resignation from the world” (Marasco 2017, 3). Instead, Marasco does not take it for granted that despair is, or leads to, nihilism. In fact, Marasco’s despair is more correctly identified as the opposite of nihilism: “Complete nihilism...spell[s] the end of despair. What is left to despair if only nothingness remains? Does the nihilist despair of anything? Despair might be, in some instances, the surest defense against nihilism” (4). When we say we feel despair, what are we really saying? We are despairing for a better world that cannot or will not be brought about. We are oriented towards that world in anguish, longing, and desperation. Desperation and despair are etymologically linked to the latin *desperare*: to lose all hope, but when we think of a desperate state of mind we tend to think of unyielding search for answers. Our desperation drives us towards that which we need, not away from it. What about this is nihilistic or fatalistic? Where nihilism is the true absence, despair seems to be an overabundance of affect—such that the world cannot live up to its wishes. This reading of despair empowers it with energy, power, direction, and a force.

What does this energy and force beget? When we despair politically, we often transcend the obvious or the practical. We leave behind the compromising and limiting *Realpolitik* and instead despair over the lost or not yet born ideal. This is a politics of imagination: “Despair sees limitations everywhere while also having the tendency to embolden thought and praxis to press against the limits of existing conditions. It registers a revolt at what is given. In this way, despair preserves the possibility of something radically different and conjures the spirit of hope that it also quiets” (16). A new *Realpolitik* then follows that sees nothing less than total transformation as realistic. Despair then, offers us a new type of realism that is in line and attuned to existing conditions. This is an empowering aspect of despair that both Marasco and Gould recognize as an important component of transformational politics.

This reading of despair speaks back to Gould’s recognition of its importance to the founding of ACT UP. In the face of the horrific AIDS crisis, when no political space existed for LGBTQ+ persons to speak, act, or demand—despair acted as a political catalyst. “While it certainly is true that despair sometimes flattens political possibilities, exacerbating a sense of inefficacy and hopelessness and generating political withdrawal, it also sometimes works to open new political horizons, alternative visions of what is to be done and how to do it” (Gould 2012, 107). Gould and Marasco teach us to hold a dual conception of despair—bound up with the hope it is claimed to signal the absence of in that it has the capacity to afford us a remaking of the political horizon.

Neither Gould nor Marasco are despair’s cheerleaders, nor should we be. Despair indeed can be paralysis and it can be harmful to our desires, namely when we restrict its presence and prohibit it from our affective lives. But Marasco’s receptiveness to despair is not merely owing to the danger in forbidding it as Gould sometimes suggests. Marasco suggests that despair coexists with hope at the limits of human reason and offers us a route out of the emptiness that is a true absence of hope. “What I reject…[is] the presumption that despair spells disaster. What if there are no rational grounds for hope? Does this mean there is no hope? Or does it mean instead that the proof of hope lies in the persistence of despair, that to speak of despair is also to bespeak of hope” (Marasco 2017, 87). Marasco offers us this new way of thinking about despair as dialectical with the hope it portends to signal the absence of. Despair is bound up with hope just as hope is bound up with despair. This is how we make sense of Gould’s despair as being both politically energetic and politically demotivating—it depends on the context and how it is being marshaled. When we exclude despair and treat its manifestation as a disordering of an individual’s inner life, we ensure it’s more defeatist and fatalist aspects have more purchase. Instead, climate activists, communicators, academics, and the public should be aware and attuned to how they deal with their despair—for not restricting it also means we can be awakened to its politically energetic power. We should welcome it when it presents itself, offer it hospitality, and ask for it to energize us and orient us towards the world that needs changing.

**Natality and Despairing Together**

The politics that eco-pessimism and acceptance of despair provides us is a politics of ends, but also a politics of beginnings, since “the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we shall find the hope beyond hope, the paths that lead to the unknown world ahead of us” (Kingsnorth 2017, 284). The ecological crisis does not portend a final end of human existence. Life will go on, albeit a new kind of life on a new kind of planet. Eco-pessimism that is not confused about this fact then looks to beginnings. It is here that we turn to the foremost theorist of political beginnings: Hannah Arendt.

Arendt’s concept of natality exists in the pantheon of her contributions alongside evil’s “banality”, “action in concert”, and the “plurality of human beings”. Yet natality’s centrality to politics has not been fully theorized in relation to the ecological crisis. This is a mistake that I will attempt to correct and in doing so, uncover an aspect of eco-pessimism that promises almost unlimited opportunity.

The point of departure for much of Western philosophy is reckoning with the mortality of humankind. We will all die, so what is life about? What makes us special? Arendt answers this by beginning not with human ends, but with beginning itself. “Arendt holds that what is special about human beings, what distinguishes us from other animals, is the ‘capacity to begin’, by which she means the capacity to leave behind the status quo and create something new” (Totschnig 2017, 330). Haunted by the fact that humans are born out of nature and thus would seemingly have a “human nature” which is predetermined, Arendt identifies natality as our capacity to exit the realm of predetermination and remake ourselves and the world:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope (Arendt 1958, 247).

Of course, the “world” that Arendt here refers to doesn't mean the ecological “Earth” and the ruin she is referring to is not the ecological crisis, but that is irrelevant to the larger point. Natality saves us from philosophical death, saves us from a life of repetition, a life devoid of anything new. Over and above simple behavior, human natality grants us the capability for real action. Whereas we may use the terms “action” and “behavior” interchangeably, Arendt claims that spontaneous, eruptive, creative action is the exclusive capability of humans and mere “behavior” is that preordained, determined, in line with the status quo thing that we share with other beings. Since action, or break from convention is unique to humans, that is what we should uphold as the highest human activity and is precisely how humans master philosophical death.

We are granted this capacity for action because of our natality. In each human birth, a universe of possibilities is created due to the interaction between a world that is new to that individual and the individual that is new to the world. This is what defines human freedom for Arendt. “Man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence...In the birth of each man this initial beginning is reaffirmed, because in each instance something new comes into an already existing world which will continue to exist after each individual's death. Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same” (Arendt 2006, 166). Humans are special because in each birth, a universe of possibilities is created. Each new person born into the world has the capacity to do something truly new, to act, to set in motion an unknowable chain of events. For Arendt “hope” in humanity's ability to persist and overcome itself is not a belief, but action.

Action in this sense, is exceedingly rare, more so perhaps under modern conditions which reduces politics to procedure which is, by definition, status quo reinforcing. True politics is the realm of human freedom unrestricted by what came before and tuned toward that unique human capacity for action. This is why Arendt finds revolutions so interesting, they necessitate a sharp break which shocks humans into their creativity where they find their true joyous selves. “The greatest event in every revolution is the act of foundation...Those who are engaged in this grave business are bound to have [an] exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning, the high spirits which have always attended the birth of something new on earth” (Arendt 1963, 214-215). Real politics for Arendt is a cathartic experience by which we birth something new. The excitement comes from not only a break from repetition, but also from the opportunity to be an authentic individual who enters the political space fully human, free from convention.

The bright side of eco-pessimism is that eco-pessimism offers us an embrace of this fully human attribute to begin once we break with what came before. It is precisely the lack of beginnings (and ends) which is terminal in our politics today and results in the frustratingly rigid instability we consistently notice. A politics that is not oriented towards reproducing the status quo——a politics that is commensurate to the challenges we face, is a politics that recognizes its own reliance on natality. “Natality as the constant arrival of newcomers underlies the continuing existence of the realm of politics...The unending arrival of newcomers, who develop their own perspectives and opinions, prevents this kind of immobilization and keeps the political realm alive. In this sense, indeed, natality is central to politics” (Totschnig 2017, 344). Eco-pessimism need not be eco-doomism then, because we can face crisis and turmoil knowing that human capacity to begin is most powerful under these conditions. Not only is it this, but natality offers us a neat response to one of Kingsnorth’s most biting insights: “What if the ongoing fear of ‘collapse’...is a narrative designed to quell a worse fear: that things might not collapse, but continue like this?” (Kingsnorth 2017, 115). Natality is the antidote to this “worse fear”. We are not fearful of “collapse” because we know it will not be total and in the metaphorical wreckage, we find ourselves which we have lost. Arendt reminds us that we always have this capacity to begin again, and leaning into that is both how we fulfill our humanity and how we face the ecological crisis.

A reader may ask at this moment, is this focus on the human capacity to begin again just another way to sneak hope back into our affective lives? To which I respond that an Arendtian natalistic call for a revolutionary renewed social politics in the face of climate catastrophe avoids being just another reason to resist despair and remain hopeful by remembering the dialectical hope of Marasco. Hope is not in tension with despair broadly defined. In a way, what Arendtian naturalistic politics has to offer is *is* a way to sneak hope back in to our political lives as we face the Anthropocene, provided we do so while resisting the urge to banish despair.

**Conclusion**

Victor Frankl begins the postscript to *Man’s Search for Meaning* by describing what he means by “tragic optimism”. We can be tragically optimistic if we respond “yes” to the question “can life retain its potential meaning in spite of its tragic aspects?” (Frankl 1959, 137). Finding meaning even in the most tragic of life's circumstances, finding the brightness in the darkest of nights is how Frankl describes successfully surviving the camps. However, false hope is just as damaging as the absence of hope because false hope is so easily defeated. My argument for eco-pessimism and against the banishment of climate despair mirrors a lot of the wisdom Frankl conveys. As we confront a changed climate, a more hostile ecological system, and a stubbornly rigid political zeitgeist, steeling ourselves with a pessimistic orientation and a natal despair does not mean giving up or passively accepting our circumstances. It does mean we remain attuned and open to political potentialities that do not yet exist.

The natal vision of despair this paper articulates does rest on the point that human life, some kind of it, will go on. As Kingsnorth says “the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop”. Baked into this claim is a certain avoidance of the fact that the climate crisis hits communities disproportionately and that its terrible price is unequally inflicted on the already politically marginalized. An eco-optimist with a common view of despair as destructive might say that natal despair is a privilege of the lucky few. In other words, we are obliged to not despair for the sake of those for whom collapse will be total. Far from ignoring this fact, this is a concern that is at the forefront of my mind.

As a response to this criticism, the politically generative despair this paper articulates is not advocated for in spite of the unequal global distribution of adverse effects, it is done so for precisely this reason among the other catastrophic harms that are befalling us. Despair is not a luxury of the privileged few who will be insulated from the worst of the climate crisis, it is a reflexive and omnipresent affect that will be a part of human life in the Anthropocene whether we deal with it productively or not. As evidenced by Deborah Gould, despair can be as debilitating and damaging to politics as its most vocal critics claim it can be. It can also be a site for radically transformative politics and where human rebirth can be invested with all of its potentiality.

Looking to natality as the answer to the dark climate future is reminiscent of an argument that has its own critics. Michael Maniates describes what I have argued for as believing that “things only change in a crisis” and wishes us to remove this position from our thoughts and classrooms. “Believing that change happens only in the midst of crisis infantilizes our own capacities to alter our world and offers few avenues for meaningful action beyond attempts to accelerate the onset of crisis” (Maniates 2016, 142). I certainly do not advocate for accelerationism as that view is insensitive to the crisis already unfolding and the suffering already happening. I do take umbrage with the claim that crisis opportunism infantilizes our capacities to alter the world. Our capacity to alter the world was never in question, in fact our seemingly unchecked ability to alter our world is precisely the problem we are attempting to respond to. I also think it's incorrect to claim that there is nothing for us to do until the crisis arrives. There is plenty for us to do such as norm development, reducing suffering, turning towards natality in our politics to prefigure the spontaneity we need, etc. Further work is needed on this.

Another problem with looking to the generative possibilities in crisis that Maniates highlights is that this orientation “ignores the unsettling fact that crisis does not typically privilege progressive, thoughtful, longer-term thinking” (Maniates 2016, 142). Perhaps this is the ultimate imperative we are charged with in this moment. Action that we can take right now while the crisis is unfolding yet before its more politically generative instances occur, responds to this criticism and is taking the politics of beginnings seriously. If we indeed believe that natality offers us a universe of possibilities, then we should advocate and work on a politics that perpetuates natality. If crisis indeed does not favor “progressive, thoughtful, and longer-term thinking”, then we should work towards ensuring that this one does.

**References**

Ahmed, Nafeez. 2019. “The Collapse of Civilization May Have Already Begun.” Vice. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8xwygg/the-collapse-of-civilization-may-have-already-begun>.

Arendt, Hannah. 2006. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books.

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Asafu-Adjaye, John, et al. 2015. *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*. <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english/>.

Atkin, Emily. 2017. “The Power and Peril of “Climate Disaster Porn.”” The New Republic. <https://newrepublic.com/article/143788/power-peril-climate-disaster-porn>.

Becker, Rachel. 2017. “Why scare tactics won't stop climate change.” The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/11/15954106/doomsday-climate-science-apocalypse-new-york-magazine-response>.

Bendell, Jem. 2018. “Deep adaptation: a map for navigating climate tragedy.” *IFLAS Occasional Papers 2*.

Berlant, Lauren. 2006. “Cruel Optimism.” *Differences* 17 (3). Duke University Press: 20-36.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Clay, Jenny Strauss. " Works and Days: Tracing the Path to Arete". In *Brill’s Companion to Hesiod*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009) doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047440758_005>

Cvetkovich, Ann. 2012. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press.

“Despair.” 2020. APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/despair>.

Eckersley, Robyn. 2017. “Geopolitan Democracy in the Anthropocene.” *Political Studies* 65 (4): 983-999.

Frankl, Victor E. 1959 [2006]. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gessert, George. 2015. “The Sixth Extinction by Elizabeth Kolbert (review).” *Leonardo* 48 (1): 92-93.

Givoni, Michal. 2019. “Indifference and repetition: Occupation Testimonies and Left-Wing Despair.” *Cultural Studies* 33 (4): 595-631.

Gould, Deborah. 2012. “Political Despair.” in *Politics and Emotions: the affective turn in contemporary political studies*, edited by Hogget, Paul and Simon Thompson, 95-114. New York: Continuum International Publishing.

IPCC. 2018. Summary for Policymakers. in *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty.* World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland, 32 pp.

IPCC. 2021. Summary for Policymakers. in *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis.* Cambridge University Press.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. First edition. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions.

Kingsnorth, Paul. 2017. *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*. London: Graywolf Press.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2014. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Maniates, Michael. 2016. “Make Way for Hope: A Contrarian View.” In *New Earth Politics*, 135-154. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Maniates, Michael. 2015. “Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” In *Global Environmental Politics*, 269-279. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Mann, Michael E. 2021. *The New Climate War : the Fight to Take Back the Planet.* First edition. New York, NY: PublicAffairs, Hatchette Book Group.

Marasco, Robyn. 2015. *The Highway of Despair : Critical Theory after Hegel.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Mayer, Adam, and E. Keith Smith. 2019. “Unstoppable climate change? The influence of fatalistic beliefs about climate change on behavioural change and willingness to pay cross-nationally.” *Climate Policy* 19 (4): 511-523. 10.1080/14693062.2018.1532872.

Moses, Asher. 2020. “Collapse of civilization is the most likely outcome’: top climate scientists.” Voices of Action. <https://voiceofaction.org/collapse-of-civilisation-is-the-most-likely-outcome-top-climate-scientists/>.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 1996. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits.* United States: University of Nebraska Press.

Parker, Scott. 2017. “REVIEW: 'Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays.” *Star Tribune*, August 18, 2017. <https://www.startribune.com/review-confessions-of-a-recovering-environmentalist-and-other-essays-by-paul-kingsnorth/440939683/>.

Potamianou, Anna. 1997. *Hope: A shield in the Economy of Borderline States*. Taylor and Francis. doi:10.4324/9780203360170.

Ruitenberg, Claudia. 2020. “The Cruel Optimism of Transformative Environmental Education.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education,* 54 (4): 833-837.

Scranton, Roy. 2015. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Stokes, Leah. 2021. “Why congress must pass a better climate bill.” *The Atlantic,* July 14, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/why-congress-must-pass-better-climate-bill/619426/>.

https://twitter.com/leahstokes/status/1424746615315656708

Totschnig, Wolfhart. 2017. “Arendt’s notion of natality: An attempt at clarification.” *deas Y Valores* 66 (165): 327-346.

Will, George. 1992. “Chicken Littles: The persistence of eco-pessimism.” *Washington Post*, May 31, 1992.

Will, George. 2009. “Dark Green Doomsayers.” *Washington Post*, February 15, 2009. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/13/AR2009021302514.html>.

Winant, Gabriel. 2015. “We Found Love in a Hopeless Place.” *N+1*, no. 22. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-22/essays/we-found-love-in-a-hopeless-place/>.

1. Graduate Student, Department of Political Science, University of Washington. bphuang@uw.edu [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. First quoted in Becker (2017) but also found in Mann (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See Clay (2009) for a thorough survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Quoted from descriptive copy (Potamianou 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)