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Grief as Invitation: Preparing for the Future Within and Beyond Pessimism

Le deuil comme invitation: préparer l'avenir au cœur et au-delà du pessimisme

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Abstract

This article explores the role of difficult ecological emotions, particularly grief and despair, in shaping how people respond to climate change. Drawing on queer-crip pessimism, it examines how human and more-than-human futures are being anticipated and prepared for beyond the binary of optimism and pessimism. Positioning grief as an invitation rather than an impediment, the article considers how difficult emotions can act as an impetus for individual and collective action. Moving beyond dominant binaries of hope or apathy, it traces how queer-crip understandings of uncertainty and precarity help articulate alternative futures rooted in justice, interdependence, and more-than-human care. Ultimately, the article argues that grief should not be pathologized or dismissed, but embraced as an invitation to reckon with loss and imagine other ways of living in the face of the climate crisis.

Cet article examine le rôle des émotions difficiles face à l'environnement, en particulier le deuil et le désespoir, dans la manière dont les individus réagissent aux changements climatiques. En mobilisant le pessimisme queer-crip, il analyse la façon dont les futurs humains et surhumains sont envisagés et préparés au-delà du binôme optimisme/pessimisme. L'article conçoit le deuil comme une invitation plutôt qu'un obstacle et explore la manière dont les émotions difficiles peuvent devenir un moteur d'action individuelle et collective. Il dépasse les dichotomies dominantes entre espoir et apathie et montre que les compréhensions queer-crip de l'incertitude et de la précarité permettent d'articuler des futurs alternatifs fondés sur la justice, l'interdépendance et le soin surhumain. Ainsi, l'article soutient que le deuil ne doit être ni pathologisé ni écarté, mais accueilli comme une invitation à reconnaître les pertes et à imaginer d'autres manières de vivre face à la crise climatique.

Keywords

Queer-crip pessimism; preparedness; ecological grief; climate change.

Mots-clés

Pessimisme queer-crip; préparation; deuil écologique; changement climatique.

Introduction

“Despair,” “frustration,” “hopelessness,” “sadness,” “grief,” “anxiety,” “guilt,” and “trying to have hope” are just some emotional responses to climate change which emerged in interviews on a non-profit urban farm in Toronto, Canada. Often understood as ‘negative’ emotions, this range of difficult emotions is presumed to lead to inaction and “doomerism” (Osaka, 2023). Drawing on these interviews, this article uses queer-crip¹ pessimism to explore how human-more-than-human² futures are being anticipated and prepared for within and beyond the binary of optimism and pessimism. The constellation of emotions described include deep levels of care that participants feel for their communities (human and more-than-human) despite their grief and despair for current ecological conditions.

Following the thinking of Bayo Akomolafe (Berkeley Talks Transcript, 2022), this article understands grief not as an impediment but as an invitation, an opening to reflect, respond, and reorient, rather than a foreclosing of possibilities. Aligned with Kim Hall’s

¹ Following Hall (2024) I hyphenate queer-crip to highlight the tensions and kinship between queer and crip.

² The term more-than-human acknowledges the agency of non-human entities, including animals, plants, and ecosystems, in shaping and co-creating the world alongside humans, challenging anthropocentric perspectives (see David Abram, 1996).

(2024) articulation of a cripistemology of eco-anxiety, this approach challenges dominant narratives that frame such emotions as purely pathological. Instead, it affirms that these feelings can be lived and understood in ways that generate critical insights into how we might live otherwise in the context of the climate crisis. As discussed below, these difficult emotions are not signs of nihilism, but of a deeply rooted attention to the human-more-than-human world, motivating people to prepare, both individually and collectively, for imagined futures.

This article asks how people working and volunteering on a non-profit urban farm in Toronto, Ontario, Canada navigates ecological grief amid conditions of racialized and economic precarity. The site offers a way to examine how preparedness practices emerge not from apocalyptic individualism but from collective care and more-than-human interdependence. Guided by the questions of how grief shapes anticipations of the future and how crip-queer frameworks reconfigure preparedness, this paper brings critical disability studies and environmental justice into conversation. It advances a theoretical framework for understanding grief as a relational and political affect, rather than a private pathology, extending current scholarship on ecological emotions, queer-crip pessimism, and preparedness.

The discussion unfolds through three interrelated threads: the emotional and political dimensions of ecological grief; the theoretical insights of queer-crip pessimism for understanding preparedness; and the lived practices of care and interdependence articulated by participants on an urban farm. Drawing these threads together, the article situates grief as both a personal and collective affect that shapes how people imagine and

enact possible futures. In doing so, it argues that grief can serve as an invitation to reimagine preparation as a relational practice within and beyond pessimism. Ultimately, I argue that ecological grief, when understood queerly and criply, invites us to prepare otherwise—for futures that are uncertain, interdependent, and rooted in justice.

Background

The interviews in this study emerged from a broader inquiry titled, *Feeling climate change: Experience of ecological emotions on urban farms*, which explores the socio-material and affective dimensions of ecological emotions, and how these are shaped through human–more-than-human relationships. Conducted at a non-profit urban farm in Toronto, the research site is located within a predominantly Black, immigrant, and economically marginalized community, the research examines how ecological emotions, particularly, grief, despair, and care, are lived and expressed through everyday urban farming practices. Participants described a range of emotional responses to climate change, ranging from grief and despair to care and concern, what Blanche Verlie (2021) calls the “intimate relationality” of ecological change. Grief, in this context, is not abstract or universal, but deeply situated reflecting uneven histories of displacement, racial and environmental injustice, and the ongoing precarity of life in urban and ecological systems under strain. These emotions made visible how climate change is not only an environmental and material crisis but also an affective and relational one; felt through daily interactions with soil, weather, plants, and community.

In recent years, scholars have developed a growing vocabulary to describe emotional responses to environmental change, including eco-anxiety (Hall, 2024), eco-guilt (Mallet, 2012), eco-rage (Westervelt, 2019), environmental melancholia (Lertzman, 2015), and ecological grief (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). These terms underscore that climate change is not only an ecological crisis, but also an emotional and relational one. While climate change is materially driven by human activity, mainly the burning of fossil fuels (United Nations, n.d.), it is inseparable from systems of power such as settler colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and eugenic logics which hierarchically categorize life and land.

Understanding climate change through this lens reveals it as a complex set of issues that requires humans to reconsider their relationships and emotional connections with our environments and the underlying systems of power that shape them. Ecological grief, the sorrow we feel in response to ecological losses, whether already experienced, ongoing, or still anticipated (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018), is increasingly visible in Canada, a country warming at twice the global average (Government of Canada, 2019), particularly among communities most affected by the environmental disruption, including Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, youth, disabled people, and those whose lives and livelihoods are deeply tied to land. Yet, as Mary Annaïse Heglar (2020) cautions, we must resist "existential exceptionalism"; for many living under legacies of colonization, dispossession, enslavement, and environmental racism, experiences of existential crisis are longstanding, not new.

Literature Review

Conjunctural Pessimism and Climate Emotions

The emotional complexity surrounding ecological grief reflects what Mark Schmitt (2023) identifies as a conjuncture: a period marked by deep social divisions and conflicts across multiple levels and dimensions and temporal disorientations. Climate change is not just about environmental degradation but also about a loss of temporal grounding, of what futures are possible, for whom, and on what terms. While optimism remains a dominant cultural imperative, particularly in North American discourse (Davies, 2016), pessimism has gained traction as a corrective, one that, rather than signaling nihilism, offers space for reckoning and reorientation.

This conjunctural moment is sharply visible in climate discourse, where emotional responses often polarize around the binary of hope and despair. The term “doomer,” popularized in the mid-2000s, originally referred to individuals pessimistic about impending ecological collapse (Doomer, 2023). Critics argue that such pessimism fosters nihilism or disengagement, framing doomers as dangerously close-minded, akin to climate deniers (Osaka, 2023), giving rise to the pejorative and dismissive phrase “OK doomer”. At the same, there are a growing number of people reclaiming the term, arguing that rather than giving up, their belief that climate change is occurring and accelerating more rapidly than previous models indicated is spurring them into action, both personal and communal (Boyd, 2023; Farrell et al., 2019). In this way, doomer perspectives suggest that grief, despair, and sadness can be mobilizing affects that reflect a deep attunement to the human-more-than-human world.

Simultaneously, hope has been championed as necessary for climate engagement. Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit (2023), for example, contends that “doomers” are “surrendering in advance and inspiring others to do the same” as they are in a “muddle about the relationship between facts and feelings” (para 2, 10). However, as Imani Barbarin (2024) describes, “condemning people’s doomerism without addressing its root causes ... is nothing more than toxic positivity” (n.p.). This critique underscores the need to take emotional responses seriously rather than dismissing them. Heglar (2019) similarly asserts that environmental movements must become “more emotional,” recognizing the power of feeling as central to collective action (para. 13). For many activists, grief and despair have been catalysts for organizing and protest. Movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Scientist Rebellion, along with public performances like The Climate Ribbon Project and the Remembrance Day for Lost Species, emerge directly from a willingness to feel and express ecological loss. As Andrew Boyd (2022), self-described “can-do pessimist” and founder of The Climate Ribbon Project, puts it, despair does not preclude action; rather, it demands that we work toward more equitable ways of sharing the burdens of present and future suffering.

This push and pull between hope and despair speaks to deeper discomfort with grief itself. Grief, a constellation of emotions including “sorrow, anger, depression, anxiety, fear, and unpleasant feelings of confusion” (Rosenblatt, 1996, p. 45), is often suppressed, individualized, and medicalized in North America. The recent inclusion of Prolonged Grief Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR) reflects this trend, framing sustained grief as a disorder requiring intervention (Rosenblatt, 1996;

Granek, 2014). Under neoliberal regimes of positivity and productivity, difficult emotions are treated as private burdens rather than politically and relationally significant states (Ahmed, 2010; Davies, 2016). Such processes of pathologizing difficult emotions not only individualize suffering but also deny the epistemic legitimacy of affective states like grief, especially when these disrupt normative and ableist visions of health, hopefulness, and productivity. Building on Hall’s (2024) proposal for a cripistemology of eco-anxiety, I consider how eco-grief might function as both a debilitating and generative state—one that resists ableist imperatives toward optimism and surfaces critical knowledge about living in damaged landscapes. This pressure to remain positive has been critiqued through terms like “hopium” or “moodsplaining,” the latter being a nod to Rebecca Solnit’s neologism, mansplaining, and her critique of doomers (Churches, 2023). Against this backdrop, this inquiry sought to explore how ecological grief was experienced by those working or volunteering on a non-profit urban farm, and how their relationships with more-than-human worlds, as well as the broader social contexts and power dynamics they navigated shaped and were shaped by these emotional responses.

Queer-Crip Pessimism

Disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has referred to the “gift” of crip pessimism as the promise of knowing that things will always be messy, plans will go awry, and things will fall apart (Piepzna-Samarasinha & Schalk, 2022). This insight from contemporary crip wisdom provides a framework for understanding how participants

expressed their desire to prepare for uncertain and anticipated futures. This desire to prepare is not new; as Piepzna-Samarasinha (Texas Centre for Disability Studies, 2022) notes, crip and chronically ill communities have long been preparing for the end of the world. Their practices of preparation reflect lived experience with uncertainty, breakdown, and adaptive strategies outside dominant timelines.

In parallel, Sara Ahmed (2010) highlights the value of rejecting the future presented by the dominant social order. She describes queer pessimism as a refusal of normative optimism, and argues that pessimism is also a survival tactic, one "becomes here a way of preparing for disappointment, as a kind of habit that accrues its force through repetition. Pessimism can offer a way of inhabiting the world through shielding oneself from possibility. In other words, acts of preparation for disappointment can function as modes of subject formation" (p. 179). Ahmed describes political movements (e.g., queer, feminist, and antiracist) as "waves of unhappiness" precisely because they challenge the status quo as "deviating from the straight path" is a cause of unhappiness (p. 196). And yet, in this collective deviation there is also joy, wonder, hope, and love.

Building on these insights, Alison Kafer (2013) argues that while the current social order is deeply flawed, rejecting futurity outright overlooks the social differences that shape who can, or cannot, afford to give up on the future. Kafer advocates for a queer-crip futurity, emphasizing that alternative, more just futures are possible through sustained collective will and action. Similarly, J. Logan Smilges (2023) suggests that while we may work toward these futures, it remains essential to embrace negativity along the way, as it

creates the time and space to grieve—a necessary part of confronting what is lost while imagining what might still be possible.

These queer-crip frameworks challenge the ableist, neoliberal imperative to remain hopeful, productive, and future-oriented at all costs. Rather than treating grief and despair as evidence of apathy, they position such affects as epistemologically and politically generative. This is echoed in recent environmental discourse through the emergence of ‘critical pessimism’ or ‘can-do pessimism’ (Boyd, 2022), stances that reject both denial and toxic positivity. Together, these literatures offer a vocabulary for understanding the affective, political, and relational work of ecological grief. They challenge the binary of hope and despair, emphasizing that pessimism can be both a critique and a practice of survival. In the following sections, I draw on these frameworks to analyze how participants in this study navigated grief not as a barrier, but as an impetus for preparing differently.

Preparation: From Preppers to Mutual Aid

The idea of preparing often conjures images of individual survivalists stockpiling canned foods and weapons. However, Bradley Garrett (2020) distinguishes preppers from survivalists by noting that preppers adopt a “pro-community rather than anti-government stance” (p. 157). Those preparing for uncertain futures represent a diverse range of approaches; those developing survival skills (Barker, 2020), racialized urban preppers

(Bounds, 2021), and those forming mutual aid groups (Spade, 2020), the range of those preparing for imagined futures is varied. Alternatively, some prefer the term “preventer” which as reflects a focus on preventive measures such as investing in renewable energy options (i.e., solar) or practicing regenerative agriculture or permaculture techniques, as well as choosing to reduce, reuse, and recycle in an effort to minimize consumption and waste (Hird et al., 2021).

Building on the diverse approaches to preparing, Anna Maria Bounds’ (2021) research with Black preppers in New York City highlights that, at its core, “preparedness is about the local ... It is about connection” (p. 13). For many in prepping communities and mutual aid collectives, disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy made clear that local and federal agencies often cannot respond quickly or adequately enough (Huddleston, 2017). For example, Bounds (2021) points to the early days of COVID-19 when accessing vital PPE, like N95 masks, was difficult, revealing governmental shortcomings in crisis response. During this time, the sharing of supplies, knowledge, and equipment was crucial, particularly among urban and racialized preppers and disability justice mutual aid groups (Bounds, 2021; Texas Centre for Disability Studies, 2022). Thus, the prepper subjectivity can be understood both as anticipatory and rooted in the present. As Kezia Barker (2020) explains, this reflects the inequalities and injustices embedded in neoliberal governance and responsibilization of the self, which limits people’s “capacity to secure the resources needed for life reproduction” (p. 484). This emphasis on self-reliance has been applauded by the state and embraced as a personal imperative for decades.

Preparation either through prepping or mutual aid, are long recognized forms of responding to a crisis. Mutual aid is defined as building new relationships to support survival in a crisis rather than relying on those provided (or withheld) by the state or formal and informal agencies (Spade, 2020). Mutual aid is not a new concept and, as Piepzn-Samarasinha (2022) notes, this type of aid, while popularized by white anarchists, has long been used by Indigenous, Black, brown, disabled, and other marginalized peoples. Recent scholarship extends these insights by articulating mutual aid as both as adaptive and prefigurative praxis for environmental and disability justice foregrounding care, interdependence, and collaborative survival beyond the state (McKane et al., 2024a/b). This work highlights how mutual aid practices are a crucial form of support for communities frequently denied or delayed access to state assistance (Arani, 2020). It has been celebrated as a “triumph” of collective action after a crisis (Solnit, 2009). However, as self-proclaimed “caremongering pessimist” Yvonne Su (2020) cautions, this “triumph” of collective action risks “happy-washing” a crisis, thereby alleviating the state of its responsibilities. And yet, as marginalized communities know, holding the state responsible does not negate the immediacy of organized community care in the face of retrenchment of state support. This is particularly true for communities that have experienced world-ending events, such as enslavement and genocide, and are subjected to ongoing systems of oppressions including neoliberal capitalism and settler colonialism (Yusoff, 2018). Mutual aid in this sense is not only a survival strategy but also as Ashanté Reese and Symone Johnson (2022) illustrate, an urban ecology of care through which Black

communities reimagine collective life, countering extraction and cultivating liberatory geographies within conditions of ongoing crisis.

Method

Data for *Feeling climate change* was generated over 16-months using critical posthuman ethnography (Collins, 2023) on a non-profit urban farm and included a variety of methods: participant observation, field notes, digital photographs (n=270), and audio recorded soundscapes (n=10), as well as in-depth interviews (n=12). While the photographs and soundscapes provided contextual richness and are discussed elsewhere (Collins, 2024; Collins, under review), the analysis presented below is based exclusively on the interviews. Following the tradition of go-along interviews, participants acted as guides to the farm, offering deeper insights into the significance of place (Carpiano, 2009). The importance of place is also what brings me to this research. Growing up as a white settler on a small rural family farm located on land subject to the Between the Lakes Treaty (No. 3) adjacent to the unceded Haudenosaunee territory known as the Haldimand Tract in Ontario, Canada, I hold a deeply rooted (and complicated) relationship to land. It is from this positionality that I conducted the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The two-phase interview process allowed a minimum of one week between interviews, allowing for reflection. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and consisted of open-ended questions inviting stories and detailed descriptions (Seidman, 2013). Interview questions were provided upon request as a form of access to account for

the harms some marginalized communities have encountered in research processes. Participants were invited to complete a voluntary demographic survey to ensure the sample reflected the farm’s neighborhood diversity. All participants except one³ choose to complete this survey and are described here using their self-identified social locations. After transcription, the interview transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to coding using MAXQDA.

While coding provided a close review of each interview, it lacked in-depth theoretical linking and did not capture the “sparks” emerging from other sources. Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2023) describe these “sparks” as moments arising from the non-linear process of “plugging in,” which, through deep engagement with various texts, creates “room for encounters in the unthought” (p. 4). This concept of the unthought resists positivist knowledge production and reflects how unexpected snippets of conversation, imagery, or memories surface spontaneously, sparking new directions. These moments, unpredictable and without set instructions, can be cultivated through plugging in, a method revealed only through its practice, described as a simultaneous process of sensing, thinking, reading, and writing (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). During data generation, two such sparks emerged from moments of unthought: a podcast interview with Bradley Garrett about *Bunkers: Building for the End Times* (2020) and a 2022 book talk for Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *The Future is Disabled*. Plugging these seemingly

³ The participant who opted not to complete the demographic survey will be described with gender neutral terms and without any descriptors of social location.

unrelated events into the analysis sparked new concepts like queer-crip pessimism and the desire to prepare for anticipated crises.

Findings and Discussion

This research explores how participants imagine anticipated futures and how they prepare for them both individually and communally. Emerging from difficult emotions such as grief, hopelessness, and despair, their desire to prepare resonates with queer-crip pessimism as well as practices of prepping and mutual aid. Participants emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of human and more-than-human communities.

Crucially, the more-than-human world is understood as deeply entangled with concepts of justice and social position, including race and class. As described below, eugenic logics commodify and exploit the more-than-human world while categorizing certain humans and non-humans as more expendable than others. Yet, these difficult emotions that motivate preparation are dynamic and not without hope. Moving beyond a simple binary of pessimism and optimism to a dynamic form of crip-queer pessimism, participants describe how their engagement with the more-than-human world can create moments of hope

Preparing for Imagined Futures

In different but overlapping ways, each participant spoke about their desire to prepare for the futures they anticipated. One white disabled participant, for example, joked

that her Arborist Apprenticeship courses were skills she and her children would need at “the end of the world.” A racialized woman, noted, “We already live in challenging times, but the greater challenges are what we’re going to be facing in the future.” Many participants emphasized learning to grow food as a personal and community necessity. A Black disabled interviewee stated, “If all of these things do happen and we need food to survive, I want to know how to actually grow food.” Others highlighted specific farming practices, aligned with preventer strategies (Hird et al., 2021), such as regenerative farming and permaculture. One participant saw regenerative farming, a series of practices focused on soil health and increasing biodiversity, as essential, believing that “in any future we’re going to have to be growing food; that will always be a constant.” This interviewee turned to regenerative farming because of their belief that “higher tech solutions ... like geological repositories [for] pumping and extracting carbon dioxide” are not feasible. Rather learning regenerative farming was something that could make tangible changes now. A racialized interviewee noted her desire to learn about permaculture, particularly to grow plants for herbal medicine and make tinctures for remedies rooted in her family’s country of origin. Permaculture is an approach to land use that embraces patterns found in thriving natural ecosystems; developed by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, it has been critiqued for commodifying traditional Indigenous growing practices (Ellis, 2021). Similarly, a Black immigrant participant described how learning to grow food could create a “domino effect,” supporting more locally grown produce and fostering deeper connections to the natural world.

Other participants noted the importance of teaching children and youth where food comes from and how to grow what we need. One white disabled parent envisioned a future 15 years from now in which her children would be able to not only identify plants and mushrooms, a skill necessary and not often taught in urban settings, but also provide for themselves and their communities. This desire to teach the next generation ranged from supporting children to get into the garden to teaching with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders to support children to learn with and about the land and settler colonization. One white disabled participant described her role as a teacher and a settler, expressing her responsibility to support decolonizing efforts in classrooms, noting that “the world right now ... it's scary. It's scary. Between climate change, like the flooding in Pakistan right now and people losing their lives ... we're teaching about Sir John Macdonald in history class. It's just such a disconnect.” These desires to prepare children were also marked with grief. For example, when discussing her children's future, a white disabled parent noted, “There's a lot of sadness ... the future looks very uncertain.”

Almost all participants spoke about the tensions they experience in trying to balance a desire to prevent possible futures with the impossibility of reconciling the large-scale changes needed with the limitations of individual actions. Timothy Clark (2015) describes the psychic disruption of this dilemma as Anthropocene disorder—the disorienting attempt to connect everyday choices to the unfolding “slow-motion catastrophe” of the climate crisis (p. 140). Many participants reflected on these small, day-to-day actions, such as recycling, which featured in several interviews. Yet, in Canada, up to 25% of materials placed in recycling bins are rejected due to contamination like food

waste (“Why Your Recycling May Not Actually Get Recycled,” 2019). Furthermore, plastic producers have known for over three decades that recycling is not a viable large-scale solution (Noor, 2024). Several participants recalled how their early interest in environmentalism was shaped by school recycling clubs or television shows like *That’s So Raven* and *Lizzie McGuire*. Although this early awareness was rooted in the familiar three R’s—reduce, reuse, recycle—many later recognized how greenwashing, or the use of misleading environmental claims, obscured the deeper consumerism underpinning recycling campaigns. As one racialized woman reflected, the focus on recycling overlooked the broader issue: “the impact we’re having on the planet with [our] consumption levels.”

Moreover, several participants noted how they felt that reducing consumption in any large-scale way was likely impossible. Two participants described how for them, degrowth, a political and social movement critical of current capitalist consumption which argues for a reduction in economic growth, was necessary but unlikely. One participant stated that while studying degrowth they came to the realization that addressing climate change in any meaningful, large-scale way was impossible, so began to accept collapse as inevitable. This led to significant life changes: switching their professional career to focus on regenerative farming and reducing their consumption to live with “less technological comforts.” This anticipation of collapse underscored their feelings about the future: “I feel bad ... for all the kids who are being born now. It feels like they’re not going to have much of a future.” A racialized participant involved in several activist movements also believed that large-scale change was unlikely and made the decision not to have children, stating “I’m in

my 40s right now ... so at the age of 19 in the late 90s I already was like, ‘I don’t trust where we’re going as a society. I’m not bringing kids into this world.’ ... I didn’t have faith in the future.” While both responses gesture to anti-natalism, the deep care demonstrated through their activism and life choices suggests that their views may also be rooted in Donna Haraway’s (2016) motto, “make kin, not babies.” This perspective supports diverse forms of relationality that move beyond traditional reproduction, embracing a multiplicity of connections and affinities.

Others noted how grief, despair, guilt, and anger were underscored by their belief that systemic injustices were the root causes of climate change. Several participants made links between injustice, social location and identity, and systems of oppression, such as settler colonialism and capitalism. For example, most noted how countries in the Global South were experiencing the brunt of climate change, with little to no action being taken. As one white disabled participant noted, climate change is “a problem that has been perpetuated by the global white elite.” A Black disabled participant felt that climate change was accelerating because “I don’t think many white governments really care about racialized people.” Moreover, her frustration was fueled by the fact that “oil and gas companies knew about [climate change] since the 70s” and the current ecological situation could have been prevented by corporations that had the power to make change. Another Black participant described how the “tentacles” of injustices like colonialism were widespread, impacting all social justice movements. She went on to describe the oil drilling, air pollution, and the murder of activists in her home country of Nigeria as rooted in colonial extraction and profit driven capitalism. These injustices left participants feeling

that those in power were “stealing from the future” and left them worried about “repercussions ... generations from now.”

Interdependence and Human-More-Than-Human Communities

The desire to prepare for anticipated futures was individual and communal. Notions of community were expansive as many participants had a keen understanding of interdependence and considered the more-than-human world to be a part of their communities and integral to their imagined futures. Human-more-than-human communities are demonstrative of a desire to “make kin” differently under the crisis of climate change (Haraway, 2016). This framing is also a path to “reckoning with the ways in which kinship networks have been pathologized, decimated, and destroyed through slavery, mass incarceration, settler colonialism, and eugenics” (Kafer, 2019, p. 6). As one racialized woman noted,

“it’s not only the disconnection from each other but the disconnection from the land that sustains us, right? ... my family ... can understand me caring about other people but [not] trees and plants. And I’m just, like, “Do you understand that, like, plants are where we get our oxygen from?” ... the land is where we get clean water, clean air and clean food.”

Participants noted how their health was intertwined with the health of the planet, with a Black participant gesturing to how noticing and feeling this interdependence enabled her to connect to “something bigger” which often brought her to tears.

This sense of interdependence with the more-than-human world was sometimes fostered in childhood, with participants spontaneously describing their early relationships

with more-than-humans. A white disabled parent noted how in her turbulent childhood, trees provided stability, and a sense of calm. For her, it was imperative to ensure her children understood how the natural world, even weeds and snails in their garden, were a part of their collective community. Another white participant noted her early sense of connection to the more-than-human world and described how her disability, which can require sustained periods of hospitalization, means that she is often unable to go outside for long stretches at a time. After a recent hospitalization, she said, “the first thing I did when I walked out of the hospital door was, I just went and stood underneath this big oak tree and just breathed in.” For her, this moment of reconnection reminded her “how important having those natural spaces are” and “put that in perspective for me because I am someone who because of my race and my class ... ha[s] such privilege in being [able to] access green space.” Later in our conversation, the same participant described an experience of emotionally breaking down at a zoo when she began to realize how the treatment of more-than-human animals was emblematic of the eugenic logics which have led to climate change—that is, nonhuman life becoming property and resources for human consumption.

The connection between human–more-than-human interdependence and social location, such as race and class, was emphasized by several participants, who linked community well-being to broader understandings of justice. For them, conversations about justice, including the privileges and impacts of race and class, also needed to extend to the more-than-human world. Many interviews referenced Indigenous land dispossession and white settler privilege as key examples of how justice is entangled with

more-than-human relations. Participants consistently described justice movements, ranging from food justice to Indigenous sovereignty, labour rights (in Canada and abroad), animal advocacy, and environmental justice, as inseparable and deeply interconnected. One racialized participant explained justice this way:

Justice to me means that all life has the right to live and have their needs met. I very much want to stress the ‘needs’ part, because in our consumer society ... needs sometimes get conflated with wants, so that all living beings on the planet can live their lives and have their basic needs met without ... any type [of] hierarchy. [Because] ... we’ve organized [societies] in these hierarchical ways, “this is good, this is not so good,” and “these people are better than these people,” and that’s based on class and race.

For several participants, justice-seeking communities necessarily included the more-than-human world. As one Black woman noted, a major shift was needed, since capitalism encourages people to “gather the most wealth instead of sharing,” but if we recognized that “you need land to live, quite literally you do, you’d treat it better.” Others questioned the distinction between human and nonhuman life altogether. One racialized woman emphasized the life force present in elements like “rocks,” “minerals,” and “trees,” explaining that she did not make “distinctions between animate and inanimate.” For her, this perspective was essential, as humans and more-than-humans are profoundly interconnected, and caring for the “more-than-human life that exists in the world” is necessary for both “a healthy planet” and human survival. Recognizing these interdependencies illuminates how disablement and ecological degradation as co-produced by social and environmental injustice (McKane et al, 2024b). Through this lens,

care and relational become adaptive strategies for surviving and reimagining damaged worlds (McKane et al., 2024a).

Beyond the Binary

The “doomer” or queer-crip pessimistic desire to prepare for imagined futures is not without hope. As Bradley Garrett (2020) suggests, all preparation is born of hope. A racialized participant described the “dichotomy”: her activist life was “full of despair,” whereas farming was “full of hope” and this sustained her “even though it feels like we’re losing the war.” She summarized her feelings, stating that “Climate change is scary. The future of food is scary but learning how to grow some of your own food, there’s hope that comes with it.” Another participant who positioned themselves as collapse aware⁴ said they found meaning outside of the binary of optimism and pessimism: “Well, I think you just keep living. I mean, you just have to keep doing the best you can, just because something is hopeless doesn't mean that life can't have meaning... if anything, it might ... make you more appreciative of living.” Additionally, both participants articulated how they often self-silenced their despair, describing the limited spaces where they felt they could express this emotion; with one describing how they felt “reluctant to take that hope from other people.”

⁴ “Collapse aware” refers to those who believe that simultaneous crises (social, economic, and ecological) are leading towards an uncertain future marked by deindustrialization and social breakdown.

Several of the participants described how “being involved in actual hands-on doing something” like farming brought them out of grief and despair, and offered moments of hope. A white disabled participant described how “having [her] hands in the soil and seeing all this food that can come from this land” is rewarding, which meant she felt “effective and ... less hopeless.” For those participants who were parents or working with children there was a deep desire to pass these moments of hope on to younger generations. For example, one disabled white participant suggested that including farming and gardening as part of any curriculum was vital. In her experience, she noted,

When kids plant those seeds and then they get to harvest their tomatoes or their peppers they’re like, “Oh my god! I grew this!” I think that is so important to foster. I think that it is hope fostering because we talk about the resiliency of plants and how this little, tiny seed grows up ... all these different things it has to contend with, and it still grows ... It's such a powerful experience. I think ... it's so important to teach the skill of growing food to foster that hope.

For children and adults alike, many participants described the need to find activities, like farming and growing food, that “actually give hope.”

The dynamic process of moving between grief and “trying to have hope” was a recurring theme among participants. One racialized woman expressed her belief that it was likely “too late,” but added that she tried to be hopeful “because what other choice is there?” This sense of desperation was echoed by a Black disabled participant who asked, “What else can I do? Beyond what I’m already doing. So, hope is just what’s left, I guess.” For her, hope born of desperation was not static but a fluctuating emotional state, one that left her oscillating between believing “we are all going to die” and trying to hold on to hope

despite feeling that "there isn't any proof" climate change would be meaningfully addressed. Both participants also spoke about the isolation they felt in naming these difficult emotions. As a racialized participant noted, many of the activists she worked with "don't want to talk about emotion." Yet, recognizing the full spectrum of feeling can be a catalyst for action. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022) reminds Robyn Maynard in *Rehearsals for Living*, "the absence of hope is a beautiful catalyst. Tenacity, persistence, stubbornness, rage, resentment, pessimism, and despair are all motivators. So are joy, love, attachment, care, truth, optimism, respect, and reciprocity. So is the delicious soup in which all those exist at once" (p. 182).

For participants, care, for both human and more-than-human communities, was central to finding and sustaining hope. Many described the simple act of growing and nurturing plants from seed as a tangible source of hope. Yet, questions about how to cultivate care more broadly proved harder to answer. When asked how we might foster care, one Black disabled participant expressed doubt, observing that "nobody cares about anything besides themselves and the people closest to them." Another participant pointed to the current political climate in both the United States and Canada, arguing that the rise in divisive politics reflected a collective lack of care, and suggesting that even if degrowth were possible, deep social divisions would prevent meaningful change. Offering a way forward, a Black participant proposed that if people could begin from an embodied sense of relationality, care for others, human and more-than-human, would follow instinctively. In other words, starting from a foundation of interconnectedness could nurture empathy and relational hope within communities.

Conclusion

This article has explored how ecological grief and related emotions, despair, anxiety, and hopelessness, can catalyze climate engagement. Drawing on queer-crip pessimism, I have argued that these difficult emotions should not be treated as pathological, but as relational affects that prompt alternative modes of living, learning, and preparing. Rather than choosing between optimism or despair, participants moved through a dynamic range of emotional states. Their actions reflected a form of crip-queer futurity: a way of imagining and preparing for futures that are uncertain, unjustly distributed, and already unfolding. This futurity is not defined by salvation or collapse, but by staying with complexity, by refusing compulsory hope, and by affirming care as a political and affective act. As Sarah Jaffe (2024, p. 21) notes, “in accepting loss we make possible the future,” a perspective that resonates with this article’s framing of grief as generative rather than merely disruptive.

Currently much scholarship gestures to how grief currently plays a significant role in contemporary western societies (Head, 2016; Poole & Galvan, 2021). For example, Jennifer Poole and Jennifer Ward (2013) describe how Western perceptions of grief have historically favoured rationality, leading to the suppression of prolonged grieving, as they are overshadowed by the perceived linear progression of what is considered “normal grief” or “good grief.” As Leeat Granek (2014) points out, grief has been politicized and closely linked with psychiatry, resulting in its treatment becoming privatized, specialized, and

handled predominantly by mental health professionals. This is clearly evidenced by the inclusion of prolonged grief disorder in the DSM-5, which now categorizes certain forms of grief associated with human loss as “disordered” and positions those who cannot conform and perform their grief in socially acceptable ways as sick. The process of medicalizing and isolating grief serves to strip away its political implications, reducing it to a personal matter instead of recognizing that grief as a response to social injustice. These reactions to injustices, these moments of grief, are essential in this current moment.

This has important implications for both disability and environmental scholarship. Queer-crip frameworks illuminate how affective states like eco-grief are epistemologically rich, revealing how those most attuned to this emotional resonance may also be best positioned to model new forms of preparedness. These forms are not about rugged individualism or personal resilience, but about collective refusal, relational responsibility, and deep attention to place and community. In a context where grief is increasingly medicalized, privatized, or dismissed, this article insists on its political significance. Grief, when understood queerly and criply, resists the demand to be resolved. It opens space to reimagine preparedness not as self-protection but as mutual responsibility—to humans and more-than-humans. Ultimately, if we are to confront the climate crisis in ways that honour grief, we must also honour what grief makes possible: new configurations of care, solidarity, and relational survival. Not despite grief, but because of it.

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