

Book Review:
***Climate, Psychology and Change:
Re-imagining psychotherapy in an era of
global disruption and climate anxiety***

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Climate, Psychology and Change: Re-imagining psychotherapy in an era of global disruption and climate anxiety

Edited by Steffi Bednarek

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This collection of texts with over 30 contributors, and edited by Gestalt psychotherapist and climate psychology consultant Steffi Bednarek, comes with recommendations from many well-known voices in the world of climate psychology and philosophy. It seems intimidating to even begin to review its varied content. I can only share how I met its pages and ideas, and make some general comments on how others might receive it.

The book is intersectional in its content. It was seeded from a dialogue that Steffi hosted between herself and four other psychotherapists whose work is significant in the field of climate psychology: Bayo Akomolafe, Mary-Jayne Rust, Sally Weintrobe and Francis Weller. The conversation was centred around “the role of psychotherapy in a time when the familiar is dying.”

It is not a conversation that coalesces into clear directions or conclusions but rather bubbles forth gems, contradictions, discomforts and uncertainties. What is it to support health in an unhealthy culture, in which we are all steeped both as individuals and as part of our therapeutic profession? The chapters that have emerged as a result of this initial dialogue are a web of contributions that further engage with these themes. Sometimes, they are pointing to the path we have taken to arrive here, reflecting on how climate change and elements of our colonising cultures are addressed in present psychotherapies, or largely not. Some offerings

are pointing to different directions of travel, more attuned to our present circumstances.

I knew this book was coming six months before I had a copy, and I was eagerly awaiting its arrival. I opened its now familiar pink and green covers, greedily wanting to eat up its contents. Spending a while skimming the pages, I felt overwhelmed with a mixture of unexpected emotions: fear, relief, sadness and annoyance. As a psychotherapist who volunteers for the Climate Psychology Alliance and a climate activist, themes such as climate change and collapse, avoidance, anthropocentrism, and colonialism are familiar to me; however, meeting them all at once in a challenge to my work as a psychotherapist was hard to take in. I had already started to change the way I approached work with clients, making it clear that I might invite awareness of our wider “field of relationships” as part of our work. When working in person, I work in a cabin in the middle of ancient woodland and invite awareness of the outdoors into the therapy space. Taking the subtitle of the book “reimagining psychotherapy...” to heart, I started to look for the answer to a particular question I was somewhat desperately bringing to the exploration of the book. My ongoing dilemma of how to work ethically, authentically and effectively as a psychotherapist with those clients who have no understanding or interest in the current multi-crises that face humanity? How to respect my role as supporting my client’s health, whilst not wanting to support them becoming more successful at competing and consuming more of the Earth’s resources, or colluding with an idea of a certain bright future? I did not get the tick-box answers I was longing for, though not really expecting them. I noticed a similar disappointment and dissatisfaction to when I entered therapy myself more than thirty years earlier, hoping quietly for a ‘feel better’ pill.

There were writers who gave an echo to my dilemma, Trudi Macagnino describing her research on “Defenses in the Therapy Room” in her contribution *Why aren’t we talking about Climate Change*. She writes

“How do we ensure we are not ‘that kind of therapist’ who imposes our own agenda onto the client and at the same time remain open for the cues that the client may be ready to explore their own eco-anxiety? When and for whom is it therapeutically beneficial to hold the boundaries that keep the CEE (Climate and Ecological Emergency) out of the work? Conversely, when and for whom should the boundaries be softened to allow the CEE into the room.” (p. 61)

One of my dissatisfactions (criticism seems too sharp a word for this review), with

Climate, Psychology and Change, has been that little of the focus is on individual work with clients, particularly those clients not awake to the climate crisis. Where this is the focus, sometimes the change being required of me as a psychotherapist seems too great, at least too great to stay employed! In the piece *Psychotherapy, Anthropocentrism and the Family of Things*, the contributors discuss and critique the centrality of human relationships as the focus of Western psychotherapy. They celebrate “that mainstream psychotherapy is gradually becoming more sensitised to the living world” and that certain psychotherapies, Gestalt for example, focus on the interdependence of organism (generally the human organism) and environment (social and natural environment). As a Gestalt therapist, I can assimilate this and regularly invite awareness of the wider social and non-human environment to my clients. However, they then,

“gesture to a more radical refiguring of the relationship between humans and non-humans” (p. 130)

one that displaces the human as the centre of enquiry. I believe I can personally lean into this perspective, but in the present cultural expectation of a psychotherapist’s role, as the authors ask

“how can we encourage our clients to occupy a more humble position in the family of things” (p. 130).

I agree it’s a good question!

Over time, I have read each of the books’ varied chapters, some of them several times. I found that when I was more willing to let go of my need to grasp for answers and approached the texts with curiosity, the writing seeped into me, changing me and my work in subtle ways. There is a phrase that I have heard Bayo Akomolafe use, “staying with the trouble”, that annoys and comforts me in equal measure. At different times, I have found inspiration within this book for various therapeutic experiments in several workshops. There are particular contributions in the different chapters that have deeply moved me. One such is *Decolonising Psychotherapy* by Haweatea Holly Bryson, who gives her cultural identity as an Australian Maori woman. She is both a psychotherapist and a Maori healing practitioner. There is much in her contribution I can barely glean, in that it lands as true, but I can’t simplify or paraphrase her words. In her contribution, she challenges the lineage of psychotherapy, which developed largely through colonial and academic advancement and excluded indigenous lineages of therapeutic acts and healing. There is valid criticism of the Western mental health professions and

their approaches both to healing in general and for their disempowering attitudes towards Indigenous cultures. One of many descriptions that has stayed with me is the following.

“In Indigenous lineages of healing, family, community and landscape exist as one body. The idea of an individual being contained by their own individual healing process is a temporary measure, serving only to resource them for the greater task of healing or tending to the collective space.” (p. 100)

Haweatea Holly Bryson writes that this reminds her of a Maori proverb, “he waka eke noa” - “a canoe we are all in without exception”.

Another gift from Haweatea Holly Bryson’s contribution is shining a light on the values underlying a culture. As she says

“Culture is a normative part of the self that is not explicitly taught but is assimilated through participation in it. ... It refers to how we cultivate a place or a person through a specific paradigm of what is most highly valued.” (p. 95)

She asks us to consider what is being tended or neglected in our psychotherapeutic practice and profession. I now more often hold this question in mind in my work. What is being valued here, by my client, by myself? What influences of our culture are showing up, and whether there is value in bringing them to light?

The themes of values and cultures emerge at various points in the book. The collector of these chapters, Steffi Bednarek, writes a piece titled “*Climate change, Fragmentation and Collective Trauma*” in which she

“propose(s) that the phenomenon of personal and cultural fragmentation ... is a relevant perspective on adaption to a changing environment.” (p. 146)

I cannot faithfully summarise Steffi’s contribution simply here, but can highlight the things that particularly capture my interest. She describes how in the Western world, the culture of capitalism has become part of the relationships with ourselves and each other and our environment, swapping individualism for community, prioritising profit and relying on an unequal division of resources. I notice a fractal of this occurring more starkly to me in my client work. I speak to several people who, in different ways, are not engaged in their present experience but are very attached to an imagined future where money will bring them freedom, or the attention they have been longing for, or the proof that they have excelled by being

at the top of their careers. I notice how sad I now feel when I hear my clients' investments in the future, and their lesser relationship with the present. I'm not sure that was always the case. Steffi points out how many psychological theories reflect capitalist values of individualism, materialism, anthropocentrism and progress. She quotes a report by the Capitalist Institute (Confino 2015) which makes a direct link between capitalism and global challenges such as climate change and political instability, and which recommends an urgent shift towards system-based values.

There is much in the book to disturb and challenge us, perhaps particularly those of us with white bodies and immersed in Western constructs of "truth" about how the world is. *The visibly Invisible Shadow, decolonizing work in environmental movements* is a chapter by Malika Virah-Sawmy, who grew up in Mauritius, steeped in an Indian-African fusion cosmology and subjected to a colonial education. Nontokozo Sabic of Sangoma heritage in South Africa is also named as the chapter author; their words and ideas are related through Malika. Malika writes

"Racism, colonialism and other forms of oppression are baked deeply into the global predicament of climate change. This means there is an urgent need for decolonising work." (p.87) And that "many climate activists are less conscious that eco-anxiety comes with the fear of losing the privilege of Western civilisation, whilst other peoples or civilisations have already experienced some form of collapse because of the history of coloniality." (p. 87)

Growing up in a newly independent Zambia, my body and mind have learnt about colonialism in different ways. My early historical education included the movement of the Ngoni tribes up through Southern Africa rather than the kings and queens of England. An understanding of the horrendous impacts of colonialism and their imprint on me as a privileged white woman isn't news to me. I can integrate much of this chapter; I deeply appreciate the African concept of Ubuntu, "a person is a person through other people". However, I find some of the framing of this work indigestible; the apparent laying of the cause of the climate and ecological crisis solely at the door of the "monster and disease of white supremacy" seems to me polarising and incomplete. I am staying with uncomfortably chewing this over, doing my best to be curious about the part of me that would like to spit it out.

There is so much breadth in this work; some that is not directly about psychotherapy or psychological therapy, and some chapters about psychotherapy where climate is not the focus. I wonder if it might be more easily assimilated as separate publications. I do see the threads linking each of the contributions and

guess that Steffi's aim was not to produce a simply palatable work. Perhaps recognising the complexity and variety within the pages of the book, Steffi includes an *Introduction* and a helpful overview that summarises each of the sections of the book.

I hope you read this book and find things to inspire, challenge and change you and to connect you within our 'family of things', whether a psychotherapist or psychological practitioner or not. I will continue to visit its pages in the hope and intention that it continues to change and connect me.

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