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CULTURE REVIEW

Rain

Kate Wright

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität

Corresponding author: Kate Wright: katherine.wright@rcc.lmu.de

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(for Rory)

Emmanuel Levinas argued that it was the face of the other that calls us into ethical response for ‘no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home.’¹

I was ten weeks pregnant when I first saw the face of my child. Through the technical gaze of an ultrasound I watched a black and white shadow of a face-in-becoming. My eyes tried to pull the image closer, to recognise something familiar, emerging from the haze of amniotic fluid. Contemplating this face immersed in the nourishing arterial waters of my own body, it occurs to me that water is the reason for faces, water creates faces and so water, in relations of presence and absence, faces us all.

R. Joshua b. Levi said, ‘When the rain descends it makes a face for the ground.’²

Out of the lakes and streams and oceans and rivers all human faces emerge. Glistening in sunlight - the dew moistened leaves, the patterned rain falling in circles on a dam—these vivid expressions are reflected in our eyes that take refracted light and transform it into the colours of the world. The meandering river can be found in a tender half-smile, the billowing cloud in the furrowed brow.

And as we face another in their suffering we cannot forget that the anguish in the face that we are called to attend to might be suffering in the name of the faceless. The suicidal farmer, wrinkles around a grimace, eyes downturned, grieving the desolation of drought. The displaced refugee whose river has been damned, traditions lost.

The face is a nest of relations. In it is an ethical call, not only to the suffering of the world carved onto its flesh, but to the aeonic worlds each face inherits. You have your grandmother’s blue eyes they say, to the face born out of the faces of others, a chain of faces stretching back over ancient rains before blue eyes even existed, before human beings were even human.

In the Jewish liturgy there is a special blessing for rain that links its fall to the resurrection of the dead, to the ‘revivifying of the human face by its creator.’³ Rain calls deceased faces

forth and rebirths them. Rain creates a face for the earth in all those faces that emerge from amniotic fluid – faces that carry the pattern of autumn leaves and falling snow, of waves and currents, of black cockatoos circling overhead, faces that harbour memories of the world before they have even seen the sun.

And so, in the face of my unborn child, I was called into the depths of creaturely time from which his shadowy half formed face was emerging—ancient, and yet untouched. I was faced with all the faces that would nourish him, and the waters that would bring those faces into being—the waters that remember the beginning of the earth, the first rains. I was compelled to witness the defacement of the maternity of the earth, an attack on the rains that nourish the earthly ‘capacity to give birth and to sustain life, to fructify creation.’⁵ And I was bound to a duty to protect waters that allow life to transform itself into new life, that create nourishing death.

Anaiwan Elder Uncle Steve Widders’ told me that ‘water is the blood of life, the blood of the land.’⁴ If we all understood this poetic truth—that rivers run inside us—would our waterways be dying? The Anaiwan lands where I was raised are in the midst of a devastating drought. Eucalypts are dying on their feet, and in other parts of the continent kangaroos have started to eat the intestines and stomachs of their deceased kin because all of their natural food sources have dried up.⁶ In an arid country it is sometimes easy to forget that drought is not a state of water scarcity, but the state of a (dysfunctional) relationship where humans treat the land as if it has more water than it actually does.⁷ In unceded Anaiwan country the deathscape of drought is a by-product of violent dispossession, extractive colonialism and the disastrous land management practices of the Australian agricultural industry.

Indigenous peoples have known for a long time that Country keeps us, and that if people fail to respect land and kin they get sick. Recently, the American Psychological Association has recognised that environmental precarity and devastation are triggering psychological disorders.⁸ What if, instead of building a self-care toolkit to mitigate our vulnerability and enhance our resilience, we witnessed ‘disordered’ affects as modes of attention? What if we understood our painful enfolding into a damaged planet as an opening into an anticolonial way of being—an affective subversion of the ongoing pathologies of colonial and capitalist disconnection and alienation? What if we responded to the suffering in our own faces and in the faces of others as a call to the suffering earth?

One of my favourite musicians, the blues legend Elmore James, sings ‘the sky is crying, look at the tears roll down the street’.⁹ James’s rainfall of grief rhymes with the lament of groaning rivers and in his atmospheric tale of the storm of lost love James reminds us that as we mourn dying waterways we should remember that our ability to cry is born of the waters of the world. Grief, so often an emotion marked by saltwater patterned across our cheeks, could help us to respond to the many faces of rain.

The face of my son (now three years old) still carries echoes of rivers and storms. ‘Mummy, Mummy’ he cries when upset ‘I’ve got tears!’ In the innocence of this literal observation is an embodied truth: weeping is a visceral relation with waterways. Perhaps a human cry is not only a song of vulnerability and suffering, but also an arterial obligation to the rains that fall within and beyond us – to the forever that can be heard in amniotic fluid vibrating with an unborn child’s heartbeat, or in the resounding thunder of a waterfall.

Acknowledgement:

This short reflection is greatly indebted to James Hatley's discussion of rain and aeonic time in 'The Virtue of Temporal Discernment: Rethinking the Extent and Coherence of the Good in a Time of Mass Species Extinction,' *Environmental Philosophy* 9.1 (2012) 1 – 22. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (LMU, Munich), particularly Christof Mauch and Arielle Helmick, as well as my many other RCC colleagues, for providing a collegial and inspiring atmosphere in which to write this piece.

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Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas. 2007. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 172.
2. Genesis Rabbah, XIII, 17; cited in Hatley, 'The Virtue of Temporal Discernment: Rethinking the Extent and Coherence of the Good in a Time of Mass Species Extinction.' *Environmental Philosophy* 9.1: 1.
3. Genesis Rabbah XIII, 6; cited in Hatley, 'Temporal Discernment', 16.
4. Steve Widders, Interview with Kate Wright, Armidale, 23rd December, 2011.
5. James Hatley, 'The Virtue of Temporal Discernment: Rethinking the Extent and Coherence of the Good in a Time of Mass Species Extinction,' *Environmental Philosophy* 9.1 (2012), 16.
6. Lucas Forbes. 'Drought Sparks Desperate and Extreme Behaviour for Native Animals.' *ABC News* 5 October, 2019
7. L. Botterill, 'Uncertain Climate: The Recent History of Drought Policy in Australia,' *American Journal of Politics and History* 49.1 (2003), 62.
8. American Psychological Association, 'Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance' (March, 2017).
9. Elmore James, *The Sky is Crying*, Fire Records, 1960.