Solastalgia

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Pronunciation: sah-luh-stal-juh (sɒləs'tældʒ(i)ə)

Part of Speech: Noun

Provenance: Ecopsychology

Example: Since the mine began clearing woodlands and wildlife corridors, many residents of the area have been suffering from stress, sleep deprivation, anxiety, and **solastalgia**.

The film begins with an attractive blonde woman stripped of her clothes by an excavator operator on a game show. The television audience raucously applauds as the male operator skillfully maneuvers the steel machinery to clench its teeth on her red silk slip and dramatically undress the woman. The pornographic exposure of the woman's body in the studio setting draws attention to the perverted ways in which human bodies are stripped bare by the machinery of late capitalism. The shot fades to black before picturing an extreme close-up of rashes covering the face of a different woman as an Italian language instructor suggests that listeners learn how to ask for help when confronting the pain, distress, and melancholia that comes from the destruction of one's homeland. Jenny Brown's 2016 film *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Symbiocene* grapples with **solastalgia**, the feeling of distress caused by negatively perceived changes to the environment. **Solastalgia** is described by the language instructor as "gut-wrenching mental anguish because a bulldozer is destroying my beloved streetscape right now." It

is the pain felt due to the inability to return to a loved place because it is irrevocably changed for the worse. The instructor's statements will resonate with readers of this volume: "I'm feeling powerlessness in the face of multinational corporations and authoritarian government," and "I can't direct my grief about needing environmental change towards anything or anyone in particular." But the woman with the blistered face does not appear to have the words to describe her psychological and physical anguish. The linguistic lesson and the woman's despair draw attention to the need for a new vocabulary to express the forms of grief and mourning that are emerging in the Anthropocene.

The term **solastalgia** was developed by Glenn Albrecht, a conservationist and environmental philosopher who was inspired by the people of the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia, a site of open-cut coal mining, pollution, and drought. Albrecht observed that residents of the Upper Hunter region seemed to be suffering from the sick landscape, and coined the term **solastalgia** to describe the sense of powerlessness and grief experienced by people when their homeland is under duress. **Solastalgia** draws on the Latin word *solacium* (comfort) and the Greek root *algia* (pain, suffering, sickness), conveying the anxiety caused by the inability to derive solace from one's home in the face of distressing events. It is part and parcel of a new abnormal of the Anthropocene, characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability, chaos, relentless change, and deep distress caused by a changing climate, erratic weather, and species extinction.[1] **Solastalgia** might be precipitated by the dwindling numbers of salmon in a river; the eradication of buffalo on the plains; the hyperextraction of natural resources through logging, mining, and tar sands development; or urbanization, through the construction of condos, ski hills, and golf courses. As Albrecht summarizes, **solastalgia** is "the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault. . . . [It] is a form of home sickness one gets when one is still at 'home.'"[2]

SOLASTALGIA

In the early 2000s, Albrecht identified the need to develop a language to describe how human psychic and somatic health is affected by changes to local ecosystems. He created a typology of "psychoterratic states": earth-related (terratic) mental (psychic) conditions that draw attention to the mental effects of exponentially expanding human development and climatic change.[3] Psychoterratic pathologies illustrate that a sense of place, and the resulting sense of belonging, are crucial to mental health and psychological well-being. **Solastalgia** is derived from nostalgia, the melancholia or distress experienced by individuals separated from their home, or the wistful desire to return to a former time or place. Coined by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss doctor at the end of the seventeenth century, nostalgia was frequently associated with soldiers fighting in foreign lands who experienced such severe homesickness that they were unable to perform their duties. It was initially considered to be a medically diagnosable illness, and doctors recommended that the afflicted return home to restore their health. Although the concept of nostalgia has taken on new significance in the context of late capitalism and is now more often associated with a desire to return to a romanticized period in the past, **solastalgia** relates to the sense of nostalgia as a diagnosable illness associated with homesickness for one's native land. **Solastalgia** also grows out of the word *topophilia*, a positive earth emotion coined by the poet W. H. Auden in 1947 to laud the rich descriptions of beloved places in the poetry of John Betjeman.[4] Topophilia describes the rich attachments and affective bonds we have to the environment.

Topophilia is especially intense for those who live and work closely with the land and who draw cultural, political, psychic, or spiritual sustenance from it. Indigenous people in particular are likely to suffer from environmental changes. Their **solastalgia** can result in what Colin Tatz describes as "existential suicide"—the ennui, hopelessness, and lack of motivation to live that contributes to the tragically high

rates of Indigenous suicide in many communities.[5] **Solastalgia** is also experienced by farming families suffering from a new wave of aggressive colonization—what geographer David Harvey has called the "new imperialism"—by extractive industries.[6] **Solastalgia** might be said to describe the experience of Inuit communities in northern Canada faced with rising Arctic temperatures; the inhabitants of the vanishing Pacific Islands; mostly black, working-class residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina; Sioux water protectors at Standing Rock; the Ogoni and Ijaw peoples in the Niger Delta; and other victims of settler colonial conquests that degrade and damage the ecosystem. Previously there was no word in the English language that encapsulated the nature of this suffering so acutely.

In order to make something of our **solastalgia**, we need to acknowledge it. **Solastalgia** offers this ecotopian lexicon a term that does not idealize the ecological relations of the past but describes one of the increasingly common socio-ecological experiences occurring today. Although a global condition, **solastalgia** has spread unevenly around the world and within nations. It is not a new feeling. It emerges from the increasingly dystopian world of the Anthropocene and describes a response to the endangerment, extinction, habitat loss, enclosure, and privatization that have been felt in the third world for some time now, and which Indigenous people have experienced in their homelands since contact. Neshnabé (Potawatomi) scholar-activist Kyle Powys Whyte explains that we already inhabit what our Indigenous ancestors would have understood as a dystopian future.[7] Albrecht also identifies a range of well-known poets and artists who were expressing the experience of **solastalgia** before it had a name, including Romanticists such as William Wordsworth, who represented the gradual loss of a loved home environment; Salvador Dalí's portrayals of the desolation of mind and landscape; and Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), depicting a contorted figure in anguish set against a lurid red sky.[8] These

well-known poems and works of art convey the feelings of disorientation, homelessness, anxiety, depression, grief, despair, estrangement, and powerlessness that result from the slow destruction of communities, neighborhoods, sacred places, and ecosystems. They speak to how our lives are entangled in ecological, cultural, and economic relationships; they also speak to the difficulty of learning from, adapting to, and responding to the challenges we face today.

While the experience of **solastalgia** is increasingly familiar, what remains to be determined is the path of healing. What, if anything, might relieve the pain and anguish of the loss of one's beloved home? In 2015, Jenny Brown curated an event called "Solastalgia" at the Cementa15 Arts Festival in Kandos, New South Wales. Brown was inspired by a scene in Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), in which members of the resistance attempt to commit banned books to memory in order to preserve them. Brown cast members of the community as "book custodians" and directed them to read excerpts from the writings of German political theorist Hannah Arendt, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Australian nature writer Sharon Munro, American poet-philosopher Henry David Thoreau, and the local newspaper. At the same time, scenes from Francois Truffaut's film version of *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and interviews of community members were projected on the train's doorway and windows. While environmental and political philosophers are not censored as they are in Bradbury's book, Brown's performance suggests there is therapeutic value in communal events in which environmental knowledge can be shared for those afflicted with **solastalgia**. In publicly acknowledging the deterioration of the biosphere, individuals become less alienated in their bereavement, and might collectively develop strategies for resistance.

Although **solastalgia** and other psychoterratic ailments are challenging to treat because victims are often unable to direct their grief and anger toward anything or anyone in particular, Brown's performance concluded with the audience being asked to set alight a pile of

yule logs named after Australia's then prime minister, Tony Abbott, representing the settler colonial regime that enforces the laws and policies of extractivist coal mining in the name of economic development. These pyrotechnics created a cleansing pagan ritual for the melancholy of **solastalgia** and other negative effects of extractivism. As art critic Ann Finegan notes, Brown's participatory performance offered the distressed community consolation and "an occasion for a small rural village to demonstrate the effects of globalized mal-development to the broader urban arts community."[9] Beyond the art world, **solastalgia** indicates the value of naming psychoterratic states and providing a space for communities to gather despite the shrinking commons, to share knowledge about protecting, restoring, and rehabilitating their homelands, and to help individuals overcome the dread, alienation, and disempowerment of contemporary politics. The feeling of **solastalgia** does not immediately motivate citizens to change their consumptive, personal, or political practices, but it does run counter to climate change denial and avoidance, and its acknowledgment can galvanize productive political projects.

Love for the land can inspire a politics of love. In an interview about the Indigenous environmental movement Idle No More with Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein, Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson articulates the importance of developing an intimate and loving relationship with the land even if it has been depleted, degraded, or damaged. She remarks, "When I think of the land as my mother or if I think of it as a familial relation, I don't hate my mother because she's sick, or because she's been abused. I don't stop visiting her because she's been in an abusive relationship and she has scars and bruises. If anything, you need to intensify that relationship because it's a relationship of nurturing and caring."[10] Despite the damage caused by settler societies and extractive industries, there is still so much to love about nature. **Solastalgia** is indicative of an estrangement from a place because of its transformation,

but not all is lost, and places must not be abandoned because they are not perfect or pretty. Developing a loving relationship with a place despite the sadness and trauma of witnessing its destruction is an important act of resilience in the Anthropocene, and one that holds a tremendous healing power.

NOTES

1. Glenn Albrecht, "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene," Glenn Albrecht (blog), December 17, 2017, https://glennaalbrecht.wordpress.com/.
2. Glenn Albrecht, "'Solastalgia': A New Concept in Health and Identity," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3 (2005): 48.
3. Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia and the Creation of New Ways of Living," in *Nature and Culture: Rebuilding Lost Connections*, ed. Sarah Pilgrim and Jules N. Pretty (London: Earthscan, 2010), 218.
4. W. H. Auden, introduction to *Slick but Not Streamlined*, by John Betjeman (New York: Doubleday, 1947). See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
5. Quoted in Albrecht, "Solastalgia," 51. The concept of existential suicide is based on Albert Camus's philosophy about of the meaninglessness of life, ennui, and lack of motivation to exist. See Colin Tatz, *Aboriginal Suicide Is Different: A Portrait of Life and Self-Destruction* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2001).
6. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
7. See Kyle Powys Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene," in *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (New York: Routledge, 2017).
8. Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia and Art," *Mammut Magazine* 4 (2010): 12.
9. Ann Finegan, "Solastalgia and Its Cure," *Artlink* 36, no. 3 (2016), https://www.artlink.com.au/.
10. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Dancing the World into Being: A Conversation with Idle No More's Leanne Simpson," conducted by Naomi Klein, *Yes! Magazine*, December 5, 2013, https://www.yesmagazine.org/.