

Climate Fiction and Eco-anxiety in Lauren Groff's "Boca Raton" and "Ghost and Empties"

Delzi Alves Laranjeira¹

¹(Full professor, Department of Letters and Linguistics, Minas Gerais State University (UEMG), Brazil)

Abstract: The term "Anthropocene," though not officially, is now widely used to designate the epoch in which human action became a powerful force upon the Earth. Climate change fiction has emerged within the Anthropocene background by the end of the last century to provide representations about anthropogenic climate change and its consequences on the present and the future of humanity and the biosphere. What can happen to both has been a reason for increased anxiety, often identified as "eco-anxiety," "ecological grief," and "climate trauma." Lauren Groff's short stories are analyzed from the perspective of such uncertainty and how it affects the characters. In "Boca Raton," the protagonist falls apart as she realizes that unpredictable ecological consequences threaten the world and the people she cares about. Protecting herself or her daughter's generation from the disaster is no longer possible. In "Ghosts and Empties," the main character roams through the spaces of her neighborhood as a way to escape from anxiety triggered by the perception of environmental degradation. In this sense, Groff's stories are gloomy and dystopian since their protagonists see their spaces as devoid of the future under the dark perspectives of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Climate fiction, Eco-anxiety, Pretrauma Stress Syndrome, Anthropocene

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I. Introduction

Climate change, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is a "change in the state of the climate that can be identified (e.g., by using statistical tests) by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer" (Field et al., 2012, p. 556) and this variation can occur due to natural or anthropogenic causes. Fossil fuel burning, for instance, has promoted an increase in the global surface temperature as a result of accelerated emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) into the atmosphere (Maslin, 2014, p. 7), leading to harmful effects such as the rising of sea levels, the imminent danger of flooding the planet coastal areas, the incidence of powerful hurricanes, tornadoes, and tsunamis, severe droughts or heavy rainfalls, among other disasters. Scientists, environmentalists, and governments have been working on learning more about climate change, preventing its further advancement, and how to deal with its dreadful impacts.

Around the 1980s, a more vital awareness of climate change and its effects became a new concern within the environmental imagination, alongside the already established nuclear hazard, pollution, and ecological degradation. In the 1990s, the topic found its way into the literary scene as writers started exploring it through several literary genres. Cli-fi, or climate fiction, defines those narratives focused on issues concerning climate change. By the beginning of the new century, "there has been an actual increase in literary engagements with climate change, and literary scholars have been busy exploring both these texts and the concept of climate change as a cultural phenomenon" (Jonhs-Putra, 2012, p. 1-2). In this context, ecologically and environmentally oriented literary studies propose theories and procedures to analyze the questions raised by these narratives.

A key concept for these studies is the term "Anthropocene," proposed by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) to describe a new epoch. In the Anthropocene, human activity's impact on the planet's geology and ecology acquires threatening and destructive contours through the systematic exploitation of organic and inorganic entities, resulting in harmful environmental consequences. Although most scientists and environmentalists agree that global temperatures are increasing, the fact is that "many of the ecological and social consequences that will follow from this change are extremely difficult to predict, especially for particular regions and locales" (Heise, 2008, p. 205).

The uncertainty related to environmental changes (climate change included) has been identified as a source of anxiety from a mental health perspective (Clayton, Karazsia, 2020, p.1). In their study on the theme, Usher, Durkin, and Bhullar (2019, p. 1233) state that

Knowing about the changing environmental conditions and the associated mental distress this causes and that these problems will get worse with rising temperatures is manifested as eco-anxiety (Clayton et al. 2017), or solastalgia (Albrecht 2005), or if you prefer, ecoangst (Goleman 2009). Put simply, eco-anxiety is a specific form of anxiety relating to stress or distress caused by environmental changes and our knowledge of them.

People affected by eco-anxiety fear their future and the planet's future, leading them to either action, like protesting or environmental activism, or paralysis, due to intense anxiety (2019, p. 1233). Cunsolo and Ellis (2018, p. 275) also agree that global environmental changes impact mental health, causing "ecological grief" related to losses caused by environmental change, such as species extinction, ecosystem damage, and landscape destruction. For them, ecological grief "has the potential to be felt more strongly and by a growing number of people as we move deeper into the Anthropocene." E. Ann Kaplan's studies on pretraumatic stress syndrome (PreTSS) related to "climate trauma" points out fear and anxiety as the main symptoms. In PreTSS, according to Kaplan, people suffer from "an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future" (2016, p. xix), cata by a strong feeling of uncertainty and unreliability.

The short stories "Boca Raton" and "Ghosts and empties" by American writer Lauren Groff emphasize this feeling of uncertainty, anxiety, and loss provoked by the effects of human interventions on the biosphere. It is possible to identify such feelings in Groff's protagonists. The climate catastrophe has not yet occurred in their worlds; still, in their psychological realm, these events' expectation destabilizes their lives and underlines a high degree of unpredictability regarding the future. The question: "what kind of world will we leave to future generations?" becomes crucial to understanding the anxiety process the main characters undergo throughout the narratives.

II. Analysis and discussion

Fearing the Dystopia in "Boca Raton"

"Boca Raton" was published in 2018 in the *Warmer* collection, edited by Amazon, whose proposal was the elaboration of future visions from the perspective of climate change. In the story, the main character, Ange, gets into a process of increasing anxiety when faced with the possibility that environmental degradation and global warming may lead Boca Raton, a city on the coast of Florida where she lives, to face destruction, flooded by rising sea levels. Ange's awareness that human beings degrade the ecosystems and exterminate species turns her seemingly quiet life into a nightmare. Several events enhance Ange's mental breakdown within the frame of eco-anxiety and pretrauma syndrome. Four are central to conveying how she is affected by the awareness of human actions' effects on the environment.

The first event occurs early in the story, when Ange, taking part in her daughter's scout group clean-up, is astonished by the amount of trash on the local creek banks. Lily, her daughter, has her attention distracted by a turtle in the river, and Ange lets her stay this way so that she does not realize "how awful human beings could be."¹ When pushing away a large leaf, Ange comes across a bleak scene: corpses of baby birds, with pieces of plastic in their remains, indicating, in her interpretation, that the mother had fed the cubs with them, which could have caused their death. Deeply impressed by this vision, she collects the corpses in the garbage bag, throws up, calls her daughter, and rushes home. From this moment on, Ange will suffer from persistent insomnia, lack of appetite, and nausea. She will also start drinking bottles of wine every night to seek oblivion through drunkenness. Those symptoms end up undermining her physically and mentally.

The second event adding to Ange's dark elaboration about the future, comes when Phyllis, Ange's boss, says she will send her an article about the consequences of rising sea levels over Miami and the Florida coast. At first, Ange is not impressed by the information, visualizing "only sun on water and pleasure yachts with women in bikinis dancing on them drifting through the orange stucco buildings of Coral Gables" (BR, loc. 100). However, when opening the email and reading the text, under the effect of the third sleepless night, Ange's first view of Miami's beaches fades under the apocalyptic scenario described in the report: Miami Beach disappears, entire neighborhoods of the city can be underwater, the swamps and mangroves of the Everglades will become saturated with salt water, culminating in the death of countless species. The city of Boca Raton, where she lives, is threatened by flooding. Her own house, which stands near the beach, is in the devouring way of the ocean waters. There would be no more drinking water in the lands that would escape the flood. Plants, animals, and other life forms would perish: "human life in this place would be stupid, impossible. All heat and dust and thirst" (BR, loc. 186). According to the report, Miami and Boca Raton would turn into apocalyptic places. Ange recalls the dead birds she saw in the clean-up within the frame of this environmental dystopia, visualizing the Everglades as a sea of scattered plastic and people with plastic balls replacing their intestines. She throws up again under the impact of these visions, ironically assuming that insomnia will be an effective way to lose weight. Exhausted, "[s]he went back to the couch and lay there sleepless, her bones aching, seeing over and over in her mind the water seeping up the street and swallowing their little house" (BR, loc. 191). Ange is experiencing eco-anxiety caused by her environmental concerns: insomnia, lack of appetite, panic

attacks, and obsessive thinking (Usher *et al.*, p. 1233). These symptoms are amplified throughout the narrative as Ange processes new information regarding the theme.

The third significant event to trigger Ange's worries is her daughter's father's disappearance during a double hurricane in the Caribbean. Though separated, Ange and Teo got in touch with each other irregularly se of Lily. Teo, a musician, was on tour in Puerto Rico with his band when the storm hit the city. Since then, Ange hadn't heard from him for over three months, except when he

had video-chatted during the worst of the second storm, showing them how the palms outside were pressed flat against the ground, how the plate-glass windows of his apartment seemed to be pulsing under the wind, but the video cut out when the cell service died. Most of the island still had no electricity, even after months (...) (BR, loc. 121).

Ange tried to establish contact for more than two months without success. Her friends started worrying about her because she was "going around wild-eyed with anger" (BR, loc. 229). At this point, pre-trauma syndrome seems to be established in her psyche. Realizing that we are at the mercy of environmental disasters seems to destabilize Ange's fragile emotional balance: her routine with Lily, her job, her metabolism, everything is affected by the possibility of what can result from humanity's exploitative actions.

Finally, one last key event to contribute to the protagonist's breakdown is her presentiment that she might be pregnant. After Teo's disappearance, some friends tried to distract her by setting blind dates. In one of those meetings, Ange has a one-night stand with a dentist, an unpleasant experience in her assessment: "[s]he was so disgusted with herself that she took her shoes in her hands and walked barefoot in penitence the mile up to her little house" (BR, loc.236). That happened four weeks earlier, and now Angie is in her fourth sleepless night; she did not eat all day long and drank three bottles of wine in the hope they could help her to sleep. Drunk, but still insomniac, Angie's thoughts still reflect her apprehension towards environmental problems: "[p]oor Florida, Ange said aloud. She found herself swaying without pants or shoes on her porch. Poor alligators. Poor ibises. Poor stupid, greedy human beings. Boy, are you all in for it" (BR, loc. 324). There is no salvation in this context, as the character attests during her solitary walk to the beach in a state that we could classify as delusional. There, Ange gets a view of the polluted sands of the beach:

Tossed beer cans gleamed in the moonlight. Plastic bags breathed like lungs. And everywhere were bottle caps and cigarette butts and broken plastic shovels and hair ties and flip-flops and hamburger wrappers and sunblock containers and candy boxes and pull tabs and lemonade bottles and dog toys. At her feet, like a slug, a spent condom (BR, loc. 351).

The condom works as a spark for Angie's sudden realization of a possible pregnancy: "[s]lowly her hands drifted up from her sides. They met over her abdomen. Her body knew what her brain didn't want to know, not yet" (BR, loc. 355). Lily's image hits her mind, and she envisions a world full of threats for her daughter: violence, fires, and tsunamis. Such a world is not the one parents wish for their children, a world where parents can no longer protect them. That is why the pregnancy possibility sounds so terrifying to Ange. As in a dream, she hears Lily calling her, candle in hand, voices singing around. She imagines being able to save her but acknowledges that it is impossible: "I'm coming, Ange said aloud. But already she knew that she could not save her daughter, that there would be no saving, that she would be left behind among the disappointed; she knew that, even so, she had to try" (BR, loc. 364). Ange tries to walk back home in this impossible rescue attempt, but darkness envelops all.

The narrative ends without predictable answers for the reader: does the character succumb, a victim of a mental breakdown? Is she able to get home? Are the report's forecasts confirmed? Is Teo one of the hurricane victims? Is she really pregnant? There are no concrete answers, and the end of the story emphasizes the obscurity and opacity related to these questions. Ange's insomnia is a symptom of her pre-trauma, but it also signals, in an ironic way, the need to remain alert to what may happen to us and the planet. Ange tries to sleep but cannot, nor is alcohol numbing able to turn off her consciousness about an ecologically bleak future. Kaplan (2016, p. xix) says that a psychological barrier prevents us from facing the fact that we may be able to destroy life on the planet. This barrier may eventually result in pre-trauma syndrome since the recognition of annihilation is inconceivable, and we can only fear for the future. In Ange's case, the dimension of her angst linked to environmental changes engulfed her reaction possibilities, leading to her physical and mental collapse.

Anxiety and Wandering in "Ghosts and Empties"

In Groff's second short story, "Ghosts and Empties," the main character wanders through the spaces of her neighborhood as a form of escapism from the increasing anxiety she feels, brought about by the perception

of environmental degradation. This pilgrimage works, in fact, as feedback for her uneasiness and discomfort towards the world and the future.

While "Boca Raton" is told from an omniscient point of view, the narrative in "Ghost and Empties" is in first-person, by an unnamed protagonist. The other characters, also unnamed, and are identified according to the narrator's vision, as she sees or meets them during her long walks or daily routine: the young couple who jogs, the tall and elegant woman who walks her Danish dog, the obese teenager who runs on the treadmill at home and after losing weight runs in the street, the nuns of the convent, the homeless who collects cans, the man from the bar who whispers obscenities, the therapist who took a shot from a patient's husband, in short, known and unknown people who cross, in some way, her path. The characters' anonymity makes them universal; the narrator's neighborhood could be anyone's. What the protagonist sees can happen anywhere. It enlarges the dimension of personal and environmental issues that intertwine in the narrative.

The narrator is a white middle-class housewife with two children who defines herself as "a woman who yells,"ⁱⁱ signaling her anxiety right from the beginning. The reasons for such behavior are subtly exposed in her narrative. Readers can identify the origin of her concerns through her perceptions of the environmental crisis, social inequalities, and the middle class's lifestyle. To avoid being a "woman who yells" all the time, the narrator takes long night walks in her neighborhood in an attempt to relieve her stress:

It's too much, it's too much, I shout at my husband some nights when I come home, and he looks at me, afraid, this giant gentle man, and sits up in bed over his computer and says, softly, I don't think you've walked it off yet, sweets, you may want to take one more loop. I go out again, furious, because the streets become more dangerous this late at night, and how dare he suggest risk like this to me, when I have proved myself vulnerable; but then again, perhaps my warm house has become more dangerous as well. (GE, p. 7)

However, what she sees during these walks suggests increasing rather than appeasing her emotions. The protagonist's walks allude to Thoreau's famous essay, *Walking* (1862), in which the author reflects upon the meanings of walking beyond the notions of exercising or innocent wandering. Walking, for Thoreau, is man's attempt to seek and understand the savage, confront it directly on its terms, outside of everyday life and what we think we know to be reality. According to Thoreau (2002, p. 181), genuine walkers never return; they are eternal wanderers situated "outside of Church and State and People." The narrator seems to seek, even though unconsciously, this metaphorical sense of Thoreau's walking, a need to establish a connection with "the savage" that Thoreau claims is essential. It happens when she notices the beauty of an ancient oak during one of her night walks:

And so I walk and I walk, and at some point, near the wildly singing frogs, I look up, and out of the darkness, a stun: the new possessor of the old nunnery has installed uplighting, not on the aesthetic blank of the cube but, rather, on the ardent live oak in front of it, so old and so broad it spreads out over a half acre. I've always known the tree was there, and my children have often swung on its low branches and from the bark plucked out ferns and epiphytes with which to adorn my head. But the tree has never before announced itself fully as the colossus it is, with its branches that are so heavy they grow toward the ground then touch and grow upward again; and thus, elbowing itself up, it brings to mind a woman at the kitchen table, knuckling her chin and dreaming. I stand shocked by its beauty, and as I look, I imagine the swans on their island seeing the bright spark in the night and feeling their swan hearts moved. (GE, p. 13)

The narrator's description shows how she used to take the surrounding landscape hidden within the urban spaces for granted. The tree has always been there, but only when someone literally threw light on it was she able to realize its majestic presence, its robust and protective branches. A bond seems to be created when she compares the tree to a dreamy female figure in the kitchen, a feminine space par excellence, and reaffirms its overwhelming beauty. Nevertheless, the narrator is also aware of the dismantling "of the savage" and the irreversible loss of a bond:

During the day, while my sons are in school, I can't stop reading about the disaster of the world, the glaciers dying like living creatures, the great Pacific trash gyre, the hundreds of unrecorded deaths of species, millennia snuffed out as if they were not precious. I read and savagely mourn, as if reading could somehow sate this hunger for grief, instead of what it does, which is fuel it. (GE, p. 6-7)

This passage points to the character's ecological grief and also pretrauma symptoms. Frightened by the impending "disaster of the world," the narrator's reaction is to walk and watch, even knowing she cannot prevent it. The walks unveil the anthropogenic impact on the environment, reinforcing her fears, anxiety, and impotence in the face of what is to come. Like in "Boca Raton," specific passages of the narrative emphasize the

character's perceptions and concerns about what is going on in her space, like the scenario of environmental damage she testifies during her wanderings:

There's a pleasant smell like campfires in the air, and I think that the old turpentine-pine forests that ring the city must be on fire, which happens once a year or so, and I wonder about all those poor birds seared out of their sleep and into the disorienting darkness. I discover the next morning that it was worse, a controlled burn over the acres where dozens of the homeless had been living in a tent city, and I walk down to look, but it's all great oaks, lonely and blackened from the waist down in a plain of steaming charcoal (GE, p. 11)

The "controlled burn," the narrator finds out later, was set on purpose to displace the homeless who lived around the forest and expel them. Trees and animals were burned, and unwanted destitute people were sent away. She concludes, melancholically, that "it is clear that it [was] part of a larger plan, balletically executed" (GE, p. 12). A plan that includes no concern for devastating nature and human lives.

The four black swan cubs' death highlights the narrator's angst and is representative of her pretrauma symptoms. She and her children are fond of the swans who live in the pond nearby. The four cubs and their parents perform the perfect happy family in the narrator's eyes until one morning, she and her sons witness when two of the cubs are caught and devoured by an otter. They watch the shocking scene until

the wildlife service arrived to scoop up the remaining two, but it was later reported in the neighborhood newsletter that the tiny swan hearts had given out in fear. The parent swans floated for months, inconsolable. Perhaps this is a projection: as they are both black swans and parents, they are already prefeathered in mourning (GE, p. 8)

The little swans' deaths point to the powerlessness that grips the narrator regarding parents' ability to protect their children, mainly concerning the environmental crisis's consequences. The swans could not save their young, and the only thing left to them was to float around the lake, mourning their loss. The narrator feels the same insecurity that overcomes Ange in "Boca Raton" and causes her breakdown. Kaplan observes that the perception that children may be in danger

hits right at the heart of unconscious anticipatory anxiety about climate change. If they think at all about the dangers of climate change, most parents realize that their children, rather than themselves, will suffer the worst consequences of what their generation is allowing to happen. Even if they don't consciously think about such dangers, unconsciously they know (2016, p. 44).

It is not by chance that, at the end of the story, the narrator addresses her children, explaining that her long night walks did not mean she was away from them or abandoning them. Her body was not with them, but her spirit was, in a desperate attempt at nurturing and protection: "I hope they understand, my sons, both now and in the future just materializing in the dark, that all these hours their mother has been walking so swiftly away from them I have not been gone" (GE, p. 14).

III. Conclusion

In both "Boca Raton" and "Ghosts and empties," the protagonists are haunted by the prospect of a future in which environmental disasters will undo their worlds and their children's. For Ange, "[the] future was a hurricane of so many elements - plastics and tides, drought and famine - that it was difficult to know from which direction the real end point would come" (BR, loc 155). The anguish of this uncertainty is so unbearable that she collapses. In her turn, the narrator of "Ghosts and empties" cannot go beyond her solitary pilgrimage in dealing with how humans are damaging themselves and the planet. During one of her walks, the narrator gets to a drugstore to buy some medicine. While roaming the aisles, she is shocked by the realization of the place's "abundance, with its shimmering halls of trinkets and useless instant lottery packages with its plastic flaps that will one day end up in the throat of the world's last sea turtle" (GE, p.11). She is astonished by all that useless excess of plastic and consumerism, and she leaves the drugstore without buying her salts because, in her view, she "is not ready for such an easy absolution" (GE, p. 11). The narrator is aware that humans' well-being is at the cost of the environment and other forms of life and such awareness seems unacceptable to her.

Groff's short stories emphasize Johns-Putra's observation that "[c]limate change fiction (...) with [its] preoccupations with parenthood (...) circulate[s] around the problem of the legacy of environmental degradation that humans today are handing on to species of tomorrow—human and nonhuman. (...) Indeed, in many of these [stories], the problem of how we deal with future generations is a prominent theme, figured by the parental concerns of many protagonists" (2016, p. 276-277, 269).

In the postscript of his dystopic novel *The sea and summer* (1987, p. 318), Australian writer George Turner remarked that humanity is concerned about bequeathing a better world for the next generations. Nevertheless, human beings do not go beyond worrying about their daily problems, hoping “that the long-range catastrophes will never happen.” He wishes his novel works as a wake-up call for this kind of attitude and that we may reflect “on the possible cost of complacency.” Similarly, Baccolini and Moylan (2003, p. 7) ponder that dystopias “keep utopian hope out of their pages (...) for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning (...) [that] readers can hope to escape their pessimistic future”. Kaplan (2016, p. 9) also considers the narratives that approach climate change and its consequences a warning about “what could already be here, but will certainly be in the future. Such narratives force us to face horror and fear.” Lauren Groff’s protagonists face them, as they glimpse dystopian worlds within the hostile framework of the Anthropocene.

Endnotes

ⁱGroff, Lauren. “Boca Raton” (Kindle Edition, location 15). The title will be abbreviated BR and included parenthetically in the text, followed by the location where the citation was taken.

ⁱⁱ Groff, Lauren. “Ghosts and empties,” p. 1. The title will be abbreviated GE and included parenthetically in the text, followed by the page number.

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