Review of *Dark Pedagogy: Education, Horror and the Anthropocene* by Jonas Andreasen Lysgaard, Stefan Bengtsson & Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen
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French philosopher Meillassoux (2008, p. 7, his italics) offers what at first sight might appear to be an appropriate way of connecting contemporary philosophy with the practical interests of outdoor and environmental educators:

...it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere.

For many Australians, the idea of “the great outdoors” is likely to be associated with one of the longest-running programs on Australian television, a travel magazine series broadcast by the Seven Network, beginning in 1993 and broadcast regularly until 2009, with a short-lived revival in 2012.¹ The program featured a team of reporters who travelled around Australia and overseas, reporting on travel destinations, tourist attractions and accommodation. However, this is definitely *not* “the great outdoors” to which Lysgaard et al. (2019) refer in their several borrowings of Meillassoux’s words. Rather, in Saldanha’s (2009, p. 310) words, they appear to accept their positioning of the outdoors as a “space-time absolutely indifferent to humanity and even to animal life” and interrogate contemporary philosophical questions about the ways in which humans construct their discourses about “the great outdoors.” In their own words, Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 4) “draw inspiration from speculative realism, and occasionally from other

¹See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0320021/>

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contemporary trends...in our attempt to develop new perspectives on environmental and sustainability education (ESE).”

Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 5) begin by explaining that both the concept behind and the narrative situating their book are “inspired by the ongoing surge of interest in the classic horror and weird tales [of] author Howard Philips Lovecraft (1880–1937),” an interest that is explicitly shared by speculative realist Harman (2012), among others. Lysgaard et al. (2019, pp. 4–5) explain their rationale for linking Lovecraft’s horror fiction with ESE as follows:

A central point that we borrow from speculative realism is an emphasis on the constructive aspects of focusing on the darker side of central ESE concepts, such as nature, place, body, learner, climate and environment and how this approach can be a useful point of departure for trying to deal with these concepts in an educational context. By drawing on recent research on the purpose and potential of the horror genre (Haraway 2015; Harman 2012; Morton 2016; Thacker 2011; Wallin 2014) we set out to explore how the different perspectives on the notion of “the great outdoors” (Meillassoux 2009) can be understood and incorporated in a new and darker understanding of the role of pedagogy and ESE in a new and darker understanding of the role of pedagogy and ESE in engaging with the nonhuman aspects of the Anthropocene.

The passage above exemplifies a number of the book’s annoying deficiencies, which include what seems to be a degree of carelessness in proof-reading and/or copy-editing. For example, citing “Wallin 2014” is clearly an error; Wallin’s (2015) chapter was published a year later. Another example of such carelessness is that Thacker’s (2011) book is titled “*In the Dust of This Planet* [sic]” in the reference lists at the ends of chapters 2 (p. 36) and 5 (p.102), although its correct title appears in two other places (pp. 46 and 62). These errors might seem trivial, however given the ubiquity of proofing/spelling/grammar software tools, they should be avoidable.

In regard to the passage quoted above, I am much more irritated by the far-too-common practice in academic writing of making multiple terminal parenthetical citations (I call this practice “sandbagging,” because the cited works appear to be shoring up the assertion or proposition that precedes them), which is particularly uninformative because it tends to homogenise what might be disparate sources. How are readers expected to interpret the suggestion that the string of authors listed (Haraway 2015; Harman 2012; Morton 2016; Thacker 2011; Wallin 2015) typify “recent research on the purpose and potential of the horror genre”? Are the authors of *Dark Pedagogy* insinuating that all five of these authors are saying much the same thing? If so, they might be seriously misinterpreting Haraway as exemplifying “recent research on the purpose and potential of the horror genre.” Although Haraway (2015, p. 160, my italics) adds “Chthulucene” to “Anthropocene, Plantationocene, and Capitalocene” as designations for the present epoch, she also insists that Chthulucene is “*not* named after SF writer H.P. Lovecraft’s misogynist racial-nightmare monster, Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things.” For a more detailed and nuanced critique of Haraway’s position on Lovecraft’s misanthropy and xenophobia, see Gough and Adsit-Morris (2019).

Despite these reservations, I commend the authors of *Dark Pedagogy* for adding creatively, critically and constructively to academic literatures that respect the significance of popular media texts, including those that exemplify the popular horror genre, for educational scholarship writ large and for environmental and sustainability education in particular. For example, a recent special issue of *JCT: Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, guest edited by McNulty and Osmond (2019, p. 1) is devoted to “the theme of monsters – vampires, ghosts, aliens, and anything that identifies as more-than-human, less-than-human, post-human, sub-human, or non-human”. McNulty’s (2019) contribution to this special issue, to which her (2018) novel, *Blood’s Will* makes a genre-challenging addition (she wisely describes it as a “ficto-currere” to signal that it bridges sub-genres of both literary fiction and curriculum theorising), but these are by no means the first or only instances of vampires inspiring curriculum scholarship (see, for example, Gough 1996; Reynolds 2004).

More recently, Parker and Poland (2019, p. 1, their italics) introduce the inaugural issue of a new journal, *Gothic Nature*, by comparing two “tales”:

A tale of two Gothic Natures:

One: You are lost in a wood. Now survive.

Two: The planet you think you live on no longer exists. Now survive.

[D]espite the ostensibly dwindling relevance of the wilderness to our everyday and increasingly urban lives, fears of the nonhuman world are as rampant as ever. The very thought of being alone in these wild, more-than-human spaces still provokes a sense of unease for reasons that go beyond simple physical safety. In the cultural imagination, Nature has always engendered fear, wonder, and fascination. Tale One, above, is a classic if concise example of how Gothic writers engage with our imagined fears of the nonhuman world: Nature is consistently constructed in our stories as Other, excessive, unpredictable, disruptive, chaotic, enticing, supernaturally powerful, and, perhaps most disturbingly, *alive*. It importantly threatens our very definitions of “humanness”. Tale Two, meanwhile, indicates something far more sinister and unsettling: from climate crisis and collapsing permafrost to mass extinction and microplastics inhabiting our bodies, Gothic depictions of Nature seem to have slipped, uninvited, into reality while we were busy making other plans. This journal aims to explore these two Gothic Natures critically and creatively – that is, the Nature in Gothic and the Gothic in Nature. *Gothic Nature* provides a timely scholarly forum for established and emerging scholars alike to investigate both perennial fears of the nonhuman world and new fears about its degradation, disappearance, and mutation.

Lysgaard et al. (2019) do not explicitly situate Lovecraft’s stories in the Gothic tradition, although they clearly share a number of its characteristics (see, e.g., Van Haegenborgh 2015). Luckhurst (2017, p. 1043) notes that the stories in *Weird Tales* (a “pulp” magazine in which Lovecraft published several of his best-known stories) were “not just a continuation of the late Victorian Gothic revival, but a mutation of it: something on the way to modern horror, which had not quite coalesced.” In 1925, Lovecraft (1973, p. 15) himself composed an essay in which he defined the weird as “a literature of cosmic fear” that reached beyond the narratives and tropes of the Gothic:

The true weird tale must have something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.

Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 5) rightly observe that while “Lovecraftian perspectives are proving inspirational and influential in contemporary philosophy, little has been done to link these perspectives on horror and the monstrous to ESE.” I am aware of at least three exceptions to this generalisation:

- In *Education Out of Bounds: Reimagining cultural studies for a posthuman age*, Lewis and Khan (2010) explore our cultural/historical fascinations with monsters and the monstrous and their omnipresence in our posthuman world, recalling Haraway’s (1992, p. 333) reminder that “monsters have the same root as to demonstrate; monsters signify.”
- In “Dark places: Ecology, place, and the metaphysics of horror fiction”, Tabas (2015, p. 1) argues that horror fiction (exemplified by Lovecraft among others) “is in many ways more realist than other forms of writing, and as such deserving of far more critical attention than it has thus far been accorded by eco-critics.”
- Saari and Mullen’s (2018) “Dark places: environmental education research in a world of hyperobjects” draws upon Morton’s (2013) concepts of *hyperobjects* and *dark ecology* (Morton 2016) as springboards for articulating “the uncanny – the withdrawn, unknowable, excessive and anxiety-provoking – aspects of place that events like global warming disclose for place-based pedagogies.”

Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 1) situate *Dark Pedagogy* as “an effort to understand and rethink current pedagogical and educational perspectives on how we handle issues such as the imminent climate crisis, environmental issues on a global level and ways to include the more than human into our theories and practices.” Lovecraft’s representations of “the things that threatens and haunts us humans” lead the authors to “argue for a tri-partite reaction pattern that the meeting with the more than human of e.g. climate crisis can result in: (1) Denial, (2) Insanity, (3) Death. These three reaction patterns form the basis of the book and our development of the concept of Dark pedagogy” (Lysgaard et al. 2019, p.1, their capitals).

I suspect that readers of this journal who identify themselves primarily as outdoor educators are unlikely to find the concept of *dark pedagogy*, with its attendant “reaction patterns” of denial, insanity, and death to be as resonant with their practices and experiences as the concept of *wild pedagogies* has recently shown itself to be (see, e.g., Henderson 2018; Jickling et al. 2018b; Jickling et al. 2018a; Morse et al. 2018; Quay and Jensen 2008). Indeed, the only references to the outdoors in *Dark Pedagogy* are in the context of the metaphorical “great outdoors” to which Meillassoux (2008) refers in the quotation with which I begin this review.

From my standpoint as an environmental educator with particular interests in educational philosophy and theory (and the ways in which these interests are represented in popular culture and media), *Dark Pedagogy* makes two key contributions. Firstly, *Dark Pedagogy* expands the philosophical bases that inform much Anglophone/Anglocentric philosophy and theory. Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 15) write:

One way to demarcate how our conception of darkness and dark pedagogy distinguishes itself from other contemporary conceptions is to highlight that it orients itself towards the *Bildung*- and *Didaktik*-tradition of Central European and Scandinavian pedagogical thinking since the eighteenth century. Accordingly, our conception of dark pedagogy is historically and contextually grounded in a critical engagement with, especially, German pedagogical philosophy and thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Wilhelm von Humboldt, N. F. S. Grundtvig, Maria Montessori, Wolfgang Klafki, Thomas Ziehe and Gert Biesta among others.² With its focus on character formation, spiritual development and the synthesis of existential self-realization and academic ascent we link the continental European pedagogical tradition to the pedagogical challenges humanity now face in the Anthropocene epoch.

The second key contribution that I see *Dark Pedagogy* as making to environmental educational philosophy and theory is exemplified by Lysgaard et al.'s (2019, p. 38) critical, thoughtful (and thought-provoking) interpretations of Lovecraft's (1936) story, "At the mountains of madness," which they address from the standpoint of Harman's (2018) "object-oriented ontology," and with a "specific view to insanity as one of the three possible human reactions to the cosmic horrors of the so-called world-without-us" (on the world-without-us, see also Weisman 2007). Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 38) take Lovecraft's story to be "highly relevant for pedagogical practitioners and theoreticians due to its profoundly allegorical meaning(s) in the contemporary context of global warming, planetary mass extinction and, consequently, accelerating climate change." Their exploration begins by accounting for the specific ways in which "insanity" and "madness" can be understood in the present context, their point being that not all of insanity's possible meanings are equally relevant for the project of dark pedagogy, hence the need for an initial conceptual clarification. They interpret Lovecraft's literary exposition of insanity as a human response to the confrontation with landscapes, architecture and lifeforms surpassing human categories and scientific prognostics, and assess the pedagogical relevance of insanity in the age of destructive anthropogenic climate change.

Lysgaard et al. (2019, pp. 38–39) then make an adroit rhetorical move by initiating their discussion of the ways in which insanity is represented in public discourse by quoting from Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg's (December 2018) speech at the COP24 meeting

² I suspect that this passage exemplifies the carelessness in proof-reading and/or copy-editing that I previously noted. Rousseau (French), Montessori (Italian) and Biesta (Dutch) are not German. Punctuation in this passage might have been deployed to distinguish "German pedagogical philosophy" from "[other] thinkers".

in Katowice, Poland³: “I don’t care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet”. Lysgaard et al. note that exclamations such as “That’s just insane!,” “He’s completely mad!,” and “She’s out of her mind!” are commonplace in everyday conversation and that it is likely that we have all heard somebody judge someone else’s actions, statements, or opinions by questioning their sanity. Most of the time, when people deploy such psychopathological reductions, they do not have literal mental illness in mind. Rather, they usually intend such statements to be condemnations of a state of anomalous abnormality which, from the perspective of the condemner, seems to be in such a stark contrast to his/her values, political opinions, ways of behaving, and/or worldview, that they are motivated to label the person in question as insane. That is, they effect propositional stigmatization by deploying a psychopathological exaggeration. Such exclamations as those quoted above can be used jokingly to tease a friend, or they can be used in earnest to actually condemn someone or someone’s actions, values, opinions or psychological traits, and it is not always clear which of these two semantic possibilities is actually at stake, but when it is used in earnest it amounts to nothing less than a serious act of dissociation.

Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 39) argue that when Thunberg stated that she did not “care about being popular” what she did, in effect, was to pre-empt the significance of anyone calling her out as insane or mad⁴:

She flashed her accurate self-consciousness that she would and will, probably, be judged as insane or mad due to the relatively radical demands she presents to elected politicians around the world. Calling well-established world leaders out as “immature,” Thunberg signalled her fundamental opposition to the global political establishment and the “system” it represents. The willingness to be unpopular is, simultaneously, the resolution to accept being perceived as crazy, mad or insane.

I am particularly grateful to Lysgaard et al. (2019, p. 43) for alerting me to Sassower’s (1994) insightful – albeit polemical – essay, “On madness in the academy,” in which he asserts that “There are two traditional sites where one could “go mad”, that is, be oneself without regard to external conventions and social pressures: the insane asylum and the academy.” They add:

Sassower’s use of the term “madness” to designate something positive and ideal is not to be understood in accordance with the logic of the psychopathology of, say, serial killers or gang rapists, but is...to be seen as a constructive and deliberate misuse in order to engender the will to transgress in the otherwise anaemic mental states of average academics (Lysgaard et al. 2019, pp. 43–44).

As Sassower (1994, p. 483) himself puts it towards the end of his essay:

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzeekxtyFOY>

⁴ Exemplified by US President Donald Trump saying her selection as Time magazine’s Person of the Year was “so ridiculous” (see <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-13/donald-trump-again-mocks-teen-climate-activist-greta-thunberg/11795508>)

If we turn out to repeat ourselves or the dogmas of yesteryear, we ought to relinquish our positions of power and look for other jobs, or at least admit that we are careerists and not courageous and responsible intellectuals.

At the time of writing this review (in late March, 2020), we are experiencing unprecedented disruptions and threats to our personal and professional lives as a result of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. *Dark Pedagogy* offers fresh perspectives on pedagogical possibilities for these dark times in which our encounters with the more-than-human (such as the climate crisis and a novel, highly contagious virus) are often manifested by denial, insanity, and death.

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