A Mutable Cloud

On "Dark Ecology" and "Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays"

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November 4, 2017

Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays by Paul Kingsnorth. Graywolf Press, 2017. 208 pages.

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Dark Ecology by Timothy Morton. Columbia University Press, 2016. 208 pages.

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ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE does not happen suddenly. For that reason, we have difficulty seeing it. Its point of no return is not clearly marked, which troubles a clear understanding of just how bad things are at any given time. Because environmental collapse (and indeed the environment itself) is massively distributed in time and space, its scope can only be grasped in fragments. But any way you look at it, the planet is in trouble, and all of us must come to terms with it.

This is not just an urgent political crisis; it also presents us with a conceptual challenge and unevenly distributed personal trauma. In different ways, both Timothy Morton and Paul Kingsnorth — authors of two recent books that develop an approach called "dark ecology" — investigate these components of the catastrophe. Though the environmental disaster bookshelf grows more crowded every year, dark ecology stands out for the way it makes use of the grief we feel when we face environmental collapse head-on. Most books and films about ecological crisis pull away from catastrophic thinking in the end, reassuring us with presentations of geo-engineering solutions or lists of Things You Can Do (Change your light bulbs!). Dark ecology is having none of that. Instead, it stays with the darkness. It does not deny the searing grief and horror one feels when the collapse flickers into view.

Kingsnorth's *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays* is one former activist's response to ecological collapse. Active in the UK anti-roadbuilding protests of the mid-1990s, Kingsnorth devoted nearly two decades of his life to environmental and anti-globalization activism and journalism. By 2008, however, he had lost faith that environmental activism would change the world. Written mostly between 2010–'16, *Confessions* takes us around and through Kingsnorth's grieving process, which has involved withdrawal and reconnection. It offers a defense of nature for itself alone, and an elegy for lost wilderness and lost cultures. "All the gadgets in the world cannot compensate for what we have lost," he writes. But for all its power as a critique of our current system of living, Kingsnorth's lament predictably founders upon its traditionalist notions of nature — which he conventionally envisions as "not human" — and place — which he conceptualizes in regrettably nationalist terms.

Morton, by contrast, offers a more radical vision of what ecological thought can be. *Dark Ecology* is a work of critical theory and a wholesale reimagining of terms such as "nature" and "world." Since the publication of his book *Ecology Without Nature* in 2007, Morton's ecocritical project has offered an expanding critique of anthropocentrism informed by object-oriented ontology (OOO). OOO-ers propose a "flat ontology" in which all things equally exist, regardless of whether or how they are perceived by hu-

mans. OOO and related developments such as speculative realism and new materialism fall under the umbrella term posthumanism, which more generally refers to the contemporary critical turn away from Enlightenment humanism. This decentering of the human involves a rejection of familiar Cartesian dualisms such as self/other, human/animal, and mind/body in favor of concerns such as materiality, affectivity, animals, technologies. Morton can be grouped with a number of other writers such as Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and Rebekah Sheldon (to name a few) who variously argue that critical discourse must abandon its habitual anthropomorphism and bring into consideration the nonhuman elements of the world.

Whereas Morton wants us to fundamentally rethink categories such as nature and humankind, Kingsnorth believes we should tread more lightly on the earth. Precisely because these two versions of dark ecology come from such different intellectual worlds, it is instructive to place them side by side. Morton and Kingsnorth (both British) share a background in Romantic aesthetics: Morton began his career as a scholar of Romantic literature and Kingsnorth is an author of poetry and fiction who cites Romanticism as a major influence. A dominant strand of ecological thinking in Western culture can be traced back to the Romantic era, whose writers and artists were among the first to define nature as a space of refuge, spiritual salvation, and intrinsic value. It was the Romantics, also, who developed an interest in the concept of the sublime, which remains important today. The paradigmatic sublime experience — feeling one's own mortality and insignificance in the face of a vast and powerful force — happens in a natural space: standing atop a mountain or before an ocean and feeling overcome with a complex mixture of awe, reverence, and dread. As a contemporary image of nature's power, global warming contains elements of the Romantic sublime such as terror, magnitude, and obscurity. As we perch on this precipice, dark ecology offers some tools for facing up to it.

Despite his book's title, Kingsnorth remains a champion of the environment. He writes, "I became an 'environmentalist' because of a strong emotional reaction to wild places and the world beyond the human." He has rejected global environmental politics. By his assessment, the green movement has abandoned what he calls "ecocentrism" (which we might also describe as a feeling for nature) to become focused on practical solutions to ecological problems such as windfarms and carbon taxes. He regrets the loss of what he identifies as the "Wordsworthian feel to the whole thing: the defence of the trees simply because they were trees." In one of his best essays, "The Quants and the Poets," he surveys the modern environmental movement and pronounces its decades of work more or less ineffectual: "For a long time now, the green movement has been in retreat, and that retreat now seems in danger of turning into a rout." Elsewhere in the book he discusses the Nature Conservancy (currently led by a former director of Goldman Sachs), a prominent environmental organization that works in partnership with major corporations and even drills for oil on one of its own preserves. As Kingsnorth sees it, mainstream environmentalism is no longer providing the radical critique or actions necessary for systemic change. For him, "sustainability" is a pseudo-

environmentalist decoy that merely perpetuates consumer capitalism, thus preventing real change from happening.

In 2009, Kingsnorth co-founded a group called the Dark Mountain Project with the intention of developing new forms of art and literature to deal with our age of ecocide. It quickly moved beyond its original goal to become "a way to work through the grief caused by the end of much of what we hold dear." This is certainly crucial work, and there is in fact a growing psychological interest in eco-grief. But dark ecology is not a therapeutic mode of thought. In Kingsnorth's writing, it is more like an ethical perspective and a list of practical tools. He writes that facing the grief "is a starting point, not an ending. Accepting the loss and moving through it, dropping old assumptions and thinking afresh, allows you to think again about the big question: how can I still be useful?" This is perhaps the most important part of Kingsnorth's contribution: a resistance to apocalyptic thinking. "Is it possible to see the future as dark and darkening further; to reject false hope and desperate pseudo-optimism without collapsing into despair?" His answer is yes, and in the centerpiece essay of the book, "Dark Ecology," he lays out a five-point set of guidelines about "what, in this given moment in history, would not be a waste of my time?" Feeling despair but not dissolving into it: this is the all-important line that separates dark ecology from the pitfall of nihilism and the lure of the apocalypse. For apocalyptic thinking, after all, is what electrifies the right wing. Dark ecology, on the other hand, turns away from moralistic fantasies of destruction toward a new vision of human life that incorporates the nonhuman realm as its equal.

The problem, however, is that while Kingsnorth does not believe in the apocalypse, his appreciation for nature falls back on outmoded ideas about ecosystems, earth, plants, and animals, including human animals. Kingsnorth's political caginess is tricky — his anti-globalization lament usually sounds far left, and he has described himself elsewhere as an anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist environmentalist — but his notion of place is distinctly nationalistic. In a particularly troubling essay "Rescuing the English," his carefully measured tone cannot mask what amounts to a scorn for multiculturalism and defense of Brexit politics. He writes, "Is there a future, I wonder, in a kind of ecological Englishness — an identity that sees everyone in England as part of its landscapes and thus its history." Rather than seeking ecological interconnectedness across boundaries and cultures, Kingsnorth engages in a back-to-the-land fantasy reliant on notions of homeland. It is one thing to oppose the displacement of local shops and pubs by corporate chains, but quite another to conclude that the solution to globalization is stronger borders and a mythical return to the village green. "A nation [...] is about belonging — to a specific place that is not quite like another place, and to a collective of people you share things with," he asserts, wheeling out an archaic, territorial idea of place inadequate for understanding the current complexities. Unconcerned to think through issues of diasporic, mobile, or cosmopolitan identity, Kingsnorth falls back on a reactionary vision of nationhood. His personal answer to the environmental crisis — to retreat with his family to a low-impact life in rural

Ireland — is only practical for a small number of privileged landholders. This vision of smaller-scale settlement does nothing to dislodge the current way of thinking about nature as something for humans to use.

Judging from this essay collection and his recent articles in the popular press, Kingsnorth's writing has become more impassioned lately about issues of homeland than about nature. In short, he has transmuted nature into place. This might seem to be taking us far afield from ecological thinking, except that for Kingsnorth, "nature" is the force that naturalizes his nationalism. He writes, "When I think about these questions [of nationalism], I always find myself coming back to the place itself: the woods, the fields, the streets, the towns, the beaches." This is the age-old vision of mother nature as essence that's been used to prop up all manner of bad ideologies such as colonialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia in the name of what is "natural." At the heart of this essentialism is Kingsnorth's conventional insistence that nature is something apart from humans, over there; something that exists in the wilderness rather than a city park. At one point in *Confessions* he describes the moment of his ecological conversion as a young person: "I vowed, self-importantly, that this would be my life's work: saving nature from people." But nature and people are not separate warring entities. While Kingsnorth is not a fascist (despite having been accused of "opening the door wide" to eco-fascism by one website after he published a piece in the *Guardian* this year making a case for a "benevolent green nationalism"), he has thought himself into a corner. That an environmentalist can reach such toxic conclusions is a good illustration of why we must abandon traditional thinking about nature if we hope for an ecological future worth living.

In contrast, Morton argues that we must obliterate the false opposition between nature and people. To be more precise, Morton claims the idea of nature itself is a damaging construct, and that humans (with their microbial biomass) are always already nonhuman. Morton's approach to ecological thinking is much weirder than other environmental writers, and the weirdness is intentional. "Ecological awareness is weird: it has a twisted, looping form," he announces in the opening pages of *Dark Ecology*, though this provocative claim is instantly diluted in a paragraph that continues by asserting that "all things have a loop form." He returns to the loop as one of the book's major terms (the book's single repeated illustration is an ouroboros, the snake devouring its tail who is fast becoming a totem animal for our age), although the loop seems to be heavily tasked with multiple significance as a historical, conceptual, and ontological form. Still, for all its ranginess, *Dark Ecology* offers a path through the darkness — indeed it relies on this very darkness — that can be found in few other works about ecological crisis.

If *Dark Ecology* can be said to have three main themes, one would be the Difficulty of Seeing the environmental collapse, a second would be How to Think About It, and a third might be called All the Feelings. The book is divided into three "threads" (plus an intro-conclusion switcheroo that gestures toward the loop form), but they do not break down so neatly into three separate topics. Morton is quite good on the

Difficulty. His concept of "hyperobjects" (developed in his 2013 book by that name) describes how vast entities such as global warming are too big for us to comprehend; he continues to riff on the difficulty of vastness in this book: "We are faced with the task of thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic." As an explanation for human inaction in the face of climate change, Morton's conceptualization of vastness is compelling, and its lack of finger-wagging makes it useful for bringing complicated environmental disasters into focus (plastic pollution in the oceans, for example). This setup allows Morton to push forth his idea of ecological awareness as "dark-depressing" when he writes that we are living with "global warming and its ironic by-product, awareness of global warming." This awareness is a first step toward the weirdness of what Morton calls "thinking at Earth magnitude."

In a related task, Morton works to unpack and discredit agriculture as the 12,000-year-old practice and way of thinking that has brought us to this pass. What he calls "agrilogistics" refers to a whole combine of massive effects such as settlement, civilization, and technology, and for Morton this form of logistics marks the origin of the concept of Nature as a space separate from the human. Morton asserts that the very idea of Nature — the human versus nature split, which delineates a false opposition between the artificial and the natural — is responsible for the Anthropocene. Anthropocene is a term for the current geological epoch as one in which humans — the *anthropos* — have made such an impact on the earth that we have altered its historical course, to a degree that can be traced on a geological scale. *Dark Ecology* features a persuasive defense of the term, which has been met with much criticism, in its First Thread. Morton argues that "Nature isn't just a term — it's something that happened to human-built space, demarcating human systems from Earth systems." Therefore agriculture, which brought about *agrilogistics*, is responsible for the idea of Nature, which in turn brought about the Anthropocene. "The Anthropocene doesn't destroy Nature. *The Anthropocene is Nature* in its toxic nightmare form. Nature is the latent form of the Anthropocene waiting to emerge as catastrophe." If we can think our way out of this oppressive loop and into the weird loop of ecological awareness, it seems, we can free ourselves from the logic that produced this way of life that is destroying the planet. If this all seems like a woozy unsupported hypothesis here, it also seems opaque when one carefully reads the whole book. Yet that opacity — which might be more generously described as playfulness — is part of Morton's critical project.

Any reader of Morton's work must come to terms with his writing style, one that moves in flashes of glittering assertions, grazing across references from philosophy, literature, movies, and goth music. I appreciate a critical theory writer who references *Fawlty Towers* and Robert Smith alongside Nietzsche, Adorno, and Irigaray, but as the references unspool centrifugally, it is a challenge for the reader to find a trajectory or even a rhizomatic structure. New terminology abounds: I am fond of Morton's "Easy Think" metaphor for describing too-simple objects and substances, which is a variation on the Easy Bake Oven I coveted as a child. But the terms keep piling up: arche-lithic, the mesh, subscendence, weird weirdness (this last one signifies "the secret link

between causality and the aesthetic"), and more. With such a habit of coining terms, Morton creates his own closed system rather than engaging in a critical conversation. His fondness for playful locutions (The Spectral Plain, the Realm of Toys) leads the reader to feel like she is playing a fun new board game rather than reading a work of critical theory. This might be delightful if the stakes were not so high. *Dark Ecology*'s Third Thread skips like a rock across abjection, ennui, guilt, shame, melancholy, horror, sadness, and longing, to end with joy, but it is unclear what this cluster of emotions is meant to do in Morton's theory. If you can get in the mood for his style (which can be quite funny and self-deprecating), then Morton's energetic parade of ideas provides something for everyone. But if you are not in an expansive mood, the lack of focus is grating.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morton avoids mentioning Kingsnorth, except in one footnote at the start of *Dark Ecology* when he tells us that it is he, Morton, who coined the term in 2004, and that Kingsnorth did not mention it until his 2013 essay that bears the name. There is one other moment of possible engagement when, in discussing the ennui of ecological discourse, Morton writes, "Who really wants to know where their toilet waste goes all the time?" This might be a snark directed squarely at Kingsnorth, who spends four pages discussing his compost toilet in his essay, "Learning What to Make of It," and who cannot resist the temptation to turn the flush toilet into a metaphor for civilization. This kind of ecological speech is an expression of what Morton would call "Beautiful Soul Syndrome" (another neologism), which is "ethically simplistic in a disastrous way."

Dark ecology is just one of many "dark" concepts to gain currency in our recent dystopian swirl (dark web, dark economy). As Morton says, "Nihilism is always number one in the charts these days." But in Morton's usage, the concept finally swerves away from negativity into a paradoxical "anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence." In embracing an awareness of ourselves as one of many species, Morton argues that humans can move away from depression into a kind of dark sweetness that is ecological awareness. While *Dark Ecology* may not succeed in mapping out the ethical and political strategies it promises, it at least describes an intermittently ecstatic attitude that might equip us for the dark future, one in which humans and nature are not opposing forces but weirdly coexistent.

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