



Embodied experiences of environmental and climatic changes in landscapes of everyday life in Ghana



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ABSTRACT

Science and policy attention to global environmental and climatic change has been growing substantially. Yet, the psychological and emotional distress and pain triggered by these transformations have been largely ignored, particularly among poor and marginalized populations whose livelihoods depend on the living land. Building upon key geographical concepts of landscapes and place and embodied engagements within, we focus on environmentally-induced distress and loss of belonging ('solastalgia') in the coupled context of environmental and climatic changes and internal migration in Ghana. We assess the differential emotional experiences and memory among those who migrate from deteriorating environments in the North to urban slums in the capital Accra and those who stay behind in these altered homes. We use participatory mapping and 'walking journeys' in northern regions to examine understandings of landscapes of everyday life and identify places that induce solastalgia. Results illustrate that the combination of withered crops, drying up of wells, loss of beauty, and deteriorating social networks trigger strong emotional responses, in particular feelings of sadness. We conclude that these emotional responses are expressions of solastalgia in what we call "hollow homes" where place and self of agrarian livelihoods undergo both figurative and literal desiccation.

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1. Introduction

Science and policy attention to climate change impacts, adaptation, and mal-adaptation has been growing significantly over the past years. Much has been proposed with respect to adaptive management responses to sea level rise, the melting of the ice sheets, shifts in seasonal rainfall patterns, extreme events, and movements of vector-borne diseases (e.g. Adger et al., 2007; Ensor and Berger, 2009; Leary et al., 2008; Parry et al., 2007; Pelling, 2010; Schipper and Burton, 2008; Schneider et al., 2007; Yohe et al., 2007). Yet, the cultural, emotional, and psychological dimensions of distress and pain triggered by slow-onset, incremental climatic and other environmental changes have been largely ignored. For instance, already in 2004, O'Brien et al. (2004) asserted that subtle impacts on people's sense of belonging, socio-cultural heritage, and control over one's destiny were consistently disregarded as trivial and inconsequential. Adger et al. (2009: 347), speaking to loss of landscapes and the

immaterial values attached to them, note that climate change debates framed around earth science processes and economic measurements "fail to recognize that the experienced worlds of individuals and communities are bound up in local places and that the physical changes will have profound cultural and symbolic impacts." Implications of framing and the "epistemological hierarchies" in climate change discourses (O'Neill et al., 2010: 998) seem particularly marginalizing for poor and vulnerable populations and their lived yet largely unnoticed experiences. Arguably most affected and most overlooked are embodied experiences of those who depend on the living land for their livelihoods, especially in the Global South.

We consider two major streams of inquiry within recent academic debates that examine the complex linkages between environmental transformations, lives and livelihoods, cultural identity, and mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The first, including ecopsychology (e.g. Doherty, 2009) and solastalgia (e.g. Albrecht, 2005), focuses primarily on the psychological, emotional, and clinical dimensions of disrupted mind–nature relationships. Most of the work in this domain addresses psychological traumata such as eco-anxiety and social dysfunctions in affluent societies in the West and the North, driven by unconscionable environmental degradation and unchecked materialistic consumption.

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The second stream of scholarly engagement upon which we draw builds on longstanding academic traditions in human geography centered around notions of place, belonging, and connectedness, including seminal work such as Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Yi-Fu Tan's *Space and Place* (1976). It attracts our attention to the intimate relationships between self and place and the embodied experiences of people in everyday lives and landscapes. This body of literature also engages with broad philosophical reflections on linking place and self and the loss in both (e.g. Casey, 2001; Kelly, 2009a,b), indigenous geographies and human–environment interactions (e.g. Basso, 1988; Hermann, 2008), and grounded spatialities and temporalities that explicitly explore the local manifestations of climate change in familiar landscapes (e.g. Brace and Geoghegan, 2010; Sakakibara, 2008). We examine both streams in more depth in the following section.

Building on this existing literature, we bring together observations of embodied experiences in deteriorating environments in a rural African setting and the concept of environmentally-induced illness, distress, and loss of belonging ('solastalgia'). The term 'solastalgia' has been coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht working in areas radically altered by large-scale open pit mining and drought in the Upper Hunter Valley, Australia. It addresses the sadness, depression, and desperation caused by the lived experiences of profound environmental change (Albrecht, 2005; Higginbotham et al., 2007). Solastalgia combines *solacium* (solace), *nostos* (return home), and *algos* (pain) – the sadness caused by environmental change, homesickness while still being at home, as well as a sense of powerlessness and injustice and lack of control over unfolding trajectories.

Of particular interest to us is people's sense of belonging, or lack thereof, in their everyday landscapes in the concurrent context of slow climatic and environmental changes and the deterioration of social networks due to rural–urban out-migration. Our focus on the potential existence of environmentally-triggered psychological and emotional conditions in the northern part of Ghana is deliberate as these regions (Northern, Upper East, and Upper West), emblematic of endemic poverty and lack of access to government resources, are particularly prone to out-migration and potential solastalgic illness because of great reliance on climate-sensitive farming and herding. Migration from these regions toward the central and southern regions amounts to 10–46%, with an average of 18% in 2000 (Van der Geest, 2008: 4).

Specifically, we assess the differential emotional experiences and memory of those who migrate from the economically neglected north of Ghana to urban slums in the capital Accra and those who stay behind in homes increasingly altered by environmental and social deterioration. These environmental changes may be directly or indirectly linked to climate changes while social erosion occurs due to the impacts of pervasive out-migration on social networks. We compare perceptions of migrants now living in Accra relating to their prior homes in the north with landscapes and specific places of pain, sadness, and grief, as well as happiness, as perceived through the eyes of those family members left behind. Through participatory mapping and walking journeys, we aim to assess the state of self-place relationships among poor, resource-dependent families and the ways they make sense of climate change and other disturbances to their everyday lived experiences.

2. Understanding environmental distress and assaults on everyday landscapes

2.1. Ecopsychology and solastalgia

In 2009, the American Psychological Association released "Psychology and Global Climate Change" (Swim et al., 2009),

a report that explored the emotional costs of widespread environmental change, including anxiety, despair, grief, being overwhelmed, and powerlessness, particularly in the affluent North. Loss plays an important role in the narratives about the climate problem, including the loss of ecosystem services, habitats, and livelihoods. Although such losses are predominantly portrayed as terrifying, they are largely delegated to the future and distant populations far removed from our daily lives in the Global North; since they don't feel real, they prevent mourning and potentially amplify alienation (Randall, 2009).

Two fields of inquiry that investigate disruptions in mind–nature relationships – ecopsychology and solastalgia – focus primarily on the psychological, emotional, and clinical dimensions of lived transformations in one's physical environment. Ecopsychology, an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the 1960s, addresses feelings of loss, grief, and environmental angst at the interface of human well-being and ecological (mis-) functioning. Its unequivocal focus on the pathology of the mind–nature relationship is based on the premise of intrinsic and synergistic connections between planetary and personal well-being. Loss and mourning occur when environmental degradation threatens meeting basic human needs such as feeling safe and secure and connected with others, needs that exceed those for food, water, or clean air (Kasser, 2002; Kasser and Kanner, 2004). According to Smith (2010), the erosion of one's physical surroundings and unease over the state of the planet can result in several mental-health issues, referred to as "nature-deficit disorder", "eco-anxiety", and "ecoparalysis". In contrast, intact natural settings and their restorative qualities have the potential to enhance emotional well-being (Doherty, 2009).

The concept of solastalgia, introduced by Glenn Albrecht (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007) and subsequently applied to varying contexts, although primarily in the Global North, embodies a "profundity of human distress resulting from displacement and loss due to ecological crises by which places are traumatized to the point that they can no longer provide solace and sustenance" (Kelly, 2009a: 2). The realization that something as seemingly permanent as a landscape around one's home can be altered beyond recognition, thereby assailing a person's mental construction of home and coupled sense of belonging (Mason, 2010), has been found to trigger social dysfunctions, including substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. All are symptoms of insufficiently articulated and reconciled loss (Kelly, 2009a). This feeling of loss and despair and perceived threats to one's identity that people experience when valued environments become dramatically transformed have been described predominantly for cases of white farmers, fisherfolk, and other rural residents deeply committed to their land and community, particularly in Australia and Canada (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007; Horton et al., 2010; Kelly, 2009a; Pereira, 2008; Sartore et al., 2008). Yet, solastalgia is likely to become a global condition, fueled by similar environmental transformation albeit felt and articulated differently by different people in localized geospatial and socio-cultural settings. Albrecht refers to this universal looming threat as "climate change queued up" from which nobody can get away (Smith, 2010: 2).

2.2. Places of great loss and existential outsidership

While the contributions of ecopsychology and solastalgia have received most attention in the urbanized or industrialized North, a potentially more dangerous time bomb is ticking in rural areas mainly although not exclusively in the Global South; these are areas being transformed by rapid development, rising out-migration, and both fast and incremental environmental changes. According to Kelly (2009a: 2), "rural places, now more than at any other point in history, are places of great loss – of people, natural resources, and,

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