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# Climate Tragedy

Manya Lempert 

*I hypothesize that tragedy is the genre best suited to represent climate catastrophe. Tragedy, I contend, is committed to diagnosing the ideological and material conditions that make for mass, undeserved suffering—conditions of colonization and racialization, for instance, in Greek and modern drama and in modern tragic fiction. Not only does tragedy reveal injurious forms of power, it stages or incites rebellious collective action against them. These features of literary tragedy, I suggest, are non-Aristotelian. Aristotle lodges the source of crisis in individuals, who inadvertently cause their own misfortunes and suffer from them. The literary tragedy that I theorize, however, locates the origins of communal suffering in external agents of death and domination.*

**Keywords:** tragedy, climate change, colonialism, modernism, Anthropocene, suffering

## Climate Cassandras

To imagine climate catastrophe as Aristotelian tragedy is, I think, to misrepresent climate catastrophe and to see the shortcomings of Aristotle's theory. A case in point: in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff contests origin stories of the Anthropocene. These origin stories sound, to me, decidedly Aristotelian in their framing:

Humanity has failed to understand the violent repercussions of colonialism, industrialization, or capitalist modes of production. .... These violences were an unforeseen by-product or excess of these practices and not a central tenet of them. .... In this telling, the Anthropocene is white man's overburden.<sup>1</sup>

Pitiable, tragic white man (synonymous with all "humanity") committed his climate crimes unknowingly. His voluntary acts precipitated outcomes the opposite of those he envisioned (climate crisis is an "unforeseen by-product" of his prior deeds). This tragic hero shoulders the unintended consequences—his "overburden," an unexpected and inadvertently accrued guilt. He does his best to survive in newly straitened circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 26, 28.

This is Aristotle's ideal tragic hero in the *Poetics*: the unwitting self-destroyer, at fault by mistake. Aristotle's tragic figure is, from a psychological, a legal, and a moral perspective, blameless. He is simply susceptible to error. He is deserving of audiences' sympathy. And he is universal; in him, everyone fearfully sees themselves. But colonizers are not unknowing Aristotelian tragic heroes. They knowingly shackle and exterminate others, for profit. They knowingly cause "the directed colonial violence of forced eviction from land, enslavement on plantations, in rubber factories and mines, and the indirect violence of pathogens through forced contact and rape."<sup>2</sup> In Aristotle's preferred scenarios, the tragic hero's conscious designs are commendable; these are not. Perpetrators of climate tragedy do not fit the Aristotelian mold because they are not good men, as Aristotle requires. Yet we see the authors of the Anthropocene figured as Aristotle's surprised victims. Whether the Anthropocene is dated to colonialism, industrialization, or the nuclear era, its advent is said to be the unanticipated "excess" that attaches to well-meaning actions. Neocolonialists, then, paying lip service to climate change today, cast themselves as nationalist heroes to the rescue. These climate saviors will orchestrate "a future in which the right politicians, coupled with the right scientists and corporate executives, will turn climate change into an opportunity, not a crisis, with jobs and profits for all! It's an epic saga in which they are the heroes."<sup>3</sup>

Weary of this palaver, could we seek out climate tragedies that feature protagonists subject to colonialism, industrialization, and nuclear testing? Or in another version of this counter-narrative: Could climate tragedies focus on so many insubordinate Cassandra, fully cognizant of past, present, and future catastrophes? Told that everything is fine when they know it isn't? Dismissed and unheeded because violent Apollos have determined that their knowledge is not to be credited? To resist Apollo was ancient Cassandra's initial crime. To have her inculpatory and prophetic "naked cry," as Virginia Woolf called it, denigrated as mad was the punishment that Apollo reserved for her.<sup>4</sup> But Cassandra was always right.

Aristotle's favored template does not account for Cassandra; the further problem with Aristotelian tragedy is that it looks away from forces that bear down on tragic subjects from outside, whether they see it coming, like Cassandra, or have little idea, like Esch in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. Aristotelian tragedy turns a blind eye to both divine and social malevolence. In Aristotle's ideal tragedy, only the hero's misprision is the source of his suffering. Aristotelian tragedy, then, cannot take stock of the colonizer or assign him a role in tragic plotlines, as the Greek tragedians themselves did, implicating conquerors in nightmarish denouements. So Aristotle contends that Sophocles's Oedipus brings his reversal on himself, while Jean-Pierre Vernant, for instance, points to the "supernatural power attached to his person, which directs the course of his whole life."<sup>5</sup> In Greek tragedies, that is, "The agent is not the sufficient cause

2 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 30.

3 Amy Westervelt, "The Case for Climate Rage," *Popula*, August 19, 2019 (<https://popula.com/2019/08/19/the-case-for-climate-rage/>).

4 Virginia Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek," in *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 31.

5 Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, eds. Jean-Pierre and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 78.

and reason for his actions.”<sup>6</sup> Tragedies, Greek and modern, must be unbound from Aristotle’s proscriptions if they are to address catastrophic environments and environmental catastrophes. In which case, they may speak of coercion, disempowerment, and persecution, and of intergenerational traumas (so many tragic curses) that engulf communities.

Such reclaimed tragedy could say, in a modern context, that manifest destiny is tragic destiny. Yusoff writes: “The invasion of the ‘New World’ produced the first geologic subjects of the Anthropocene, and they were indigenous and black.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the first geologic subjects of the Anthropocene are also the Anthropocene’s first tragic subjects.

### European Tragedy after Darwin

To frame climate catastrophe in Aristotelian terms is a recipe for deflection and inaction. For Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, and Albert Camus, however, tragedy was not the genre of gaslighting. Tragedy was the genre of insurrectionary truth-telling. Tragedy was the generic antidote to denialism; it insisted on structures of harm. For these writers, the Greek art form modeled the breaking of silences. Greek tragedy, in these authors’ view, dared to say that death and pain served no legitimating purpose. It was this conviction that they sought to illustrate in their own tragic fiction.

At the close of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, these writers evinced a post-Darwinian view of mortal precarity. To them, Darwinian evolutionism pointed to a common, baleful fate, and showed exclusionary classifications of the human to be false. Hardy, Woolf, and Camus did not recast Darwin’s amoral accidents of birth and circumstance as benevolent winnowing. Nor did they cast the haves and have nots of capitalism as the products of “fitness” differentials. A post-Darwinian eugenic logic was not theirs. Allen MacDuffie captures this social Darwinist thinking as follows:

If evolution seemed like the mechanism through which creation and complexity arose directly out of competitive struggle and lavish overproduction, then the disorder and waste produced by industry could seem to be the labor pains that must be endured in order to birth the future.<sup>8</sup>

These writers understood “disorder and waste” to be tragic. They treated “competitive struggle and lavish overproduction” in a manner that was radical and mutinous: they did not valorize its pains.

Hardy, Woolf, and Camus saw Greek tragedy’s telltale glut of loss in Darwin’s desacralized account of natural history. “For both Hardy and Darwin,” writes George Levine:

The most telling criticism of Christian theism was the existence of suffering. Neither could believe that an all-loving and all-knowing God could have been responsible for the horrors

6 Vernant, “Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy,” 80.

7 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 57.

8 Allen MacDuffie, “Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial,” in special issue titled “Climate Change and Victorian Studies,” *Victorian Studies* 60.4 (Summer 2018): 548.

and tragedies of human (and animal) experience. Natural selection mindlessly builds life out of death, and along the way is regardless of the pain that is built into the process.<sup>9</sup>

That agony and ill luck attended survival and reproduction seemed to both Hardy and Woolf in equal parts tragic and scientific. Woolf says of classical Greeks writers: “There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate.”<sup>10</sup> In her novel *The Waves*, she attaches this sadness to an “immitigable” apple tree.<sup>11</sup> The tree is neither a tree of life nor a tree of knowledge. It signals death without reason or redemption: “the immitigable tree; the implacable tree.”<sup>12</sup> In this vein, Hardy’s antitheistic poem “A Sign-Seeker” evokes the “eyeless countenance of the mist.”<sup>13</sup> The mist “is regardless of the pain” of the poem’s speaker. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf also calls flowers “eyeless, and so terrible.”<sup>14</sup> They are “standing there, looking . . . yet beholding nothing.”<sup>15</sup> Emblematic, for Woolf, of the unscripted time of “mindless” evolution is this eyeless vegetation that does not, so to speak, look out for us. In the face of annihilating processes and time scales—“the waste of the years and the perishing of stars”—Woolf emphasizes characters’ minuscule staying power.<sup>16</sup> Woolf says of Aeschylus, too, that his tragic poetry stalks “eyeless” across the stage.<sup>17</sup> Aeschylean verses testify to “visionless” realities, beyond the “I’s” purview and control.<sup>18</sup> Camus contends, furthermore, that modern European history “has no eyes,” is devoid of moral vision.<sup>19</sup>

These presuppositions about evolution and society work in tandem: these writers’ aversion to death per se grounds and incites their aversion to murderous ideologies. Writing in the midst of fossil modernity, these writers did not directly indict capitalist, colonialist extractivism and immiseration. But in recurring to tragedy, they modeled a line of thought at loggerheads with western Europe’s genocidal and ecocidal practices. Their thinking ran as follows: if mortality is an immitigable horror, what of models of society, then, that are themselves extincional? What Camus called modern nihilism was the consolidation of state power via mass murder. Tragedy, these writers knew, did not exclusively represent apolitical disasters, opaque in origin; it encompassed both stochastic mischance and witting brutality, without conflating the two. As Anne McClintock stipulates in *PMLA*’s special issue on the genre: “To identify a tragedy as a political atrocity . . . is to allocate agency, identify political intention, acknowledge historical complexity, and claim ethical accountability.”<sup>20</sup>

9 George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 35–36.

10 Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” 38.

11 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 24.

12 Woolf, *The Waves*.

13 Thomas Hardy, “A Sign-Seeker,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), line 7.

14 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt: 1981), 135.

15 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*.

16 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 35.

17 Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” 30.

18 Woolf, *The Waves*, 285.

19 Albert Camus, “Prometheus in the Underworld,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1970), 141.

20 Anne McClintock, “Imperial Ghosting and National Tragedy: Revenants from Hiroshima and Indian Country in the War on Terror,” in special issue titled “Tragedy,” *PMLA* 129.4 (October 2014): 821.

Still, as MacDuffie details, Darwinism seemed an alibi for harm; it was enlisted in the European campaign to subjugate environments and peoples. One authorizing premise was the following:

Nature never appears as something that could *itself* be in danger, because, with apologies to Walter White, it *is* the danger. It does not need to be mourned in its own right when it seems the chief cause of mourning.... The forces of destabilization and disintegration are not what humans unleash but what they hold back.<sup>21</sup>

Darwinian natural processes understood as tragic, however, argue against brutal politics and recriminatory violence. There is a rival message to be taken from nature figured as fearsome: if *it* is destabilizing, human practices mustn't be also. The disease is not the medicine. So-called ethical action that amounts to demolishing ecosystems only exacerbates the threat that an uncaring environment poses.

Tragedies make this structural critique. Agamemnon in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* cannot, as he mistakenly thinks, hold back social disintegration with the equally calamitous execution of his daughter. Euripides's Dionysus in the *Bacchae* purports to condemn the ruinous fanaticism of King Pentheus. But the god is a hypocrite, no less controlling than Pentheus, no more measured, no more just. Hecuba, too, rallies the enslaved Trojan women to punish Polymestor, the man who has killed her son for gold. But in maiming him and murdering his children, this female collective reproduces the sexual and filicidal violence encircling them. "Hands went around me," says Polymestor, "stripped me."<sup>22</sup> He describes the Trojan women "marveling / at my children, fondling them and passing them / hand to hand."<sup>23</sup> He recounts: "If I try to lift my head they drag me back by the hair."<sup>24</sup> In such tragedies, access to power means freedom to injure; liberty and autonomy entail degradation of others. Crucially in these tragedies, such initiative violence compounds—never contains or corrects—the destruction that it reproaches.

In this way, perhaps, tragedy may anticipate a contemporary understanding of racial capitalism, the driver of climate change, as voracity that only increases the volatility of Earth systems. Such voracity does nothing to rein in destabilization and insecurity. One of tragedy's signature insights, Greek and modern, is this: characters perish from resembling their antagonists. This is part of the tragic wisdom of Aimé Césaire's *The Tragedy of King Christophe*. Diversifying oppressors is not emancipatory; tragic characters cannot contest an end with the means that serve it.

### Subversive Tragedy

Tragedy might be called skeptical art. It could even be said to represent and lament the horrors of dehumanization. Simon Critchley writes in *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* of the Athenian precedent:

21 MacDuffie, "Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial," 554, 552.

22 Euripides, Hekabe, in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, trans. Anne Carson (New York: NYRB Classics, 2006), lines 1117, 1122.

23 Euripides, *Hekabe*, in *Grief Lessons*, lines 1123–25.

24 Euripides, *Hekabe*, in *Grief Lessons*, line 1130.

As Edith Hall makes clear in a fascinating discussion, classical Athens was a xenophobic, patriarchal, imperialist society based on slaveholding and imperial tribute. Yet the figures who are silenced in the public realm are represented in the fictions of theater, as if the democracy that was denied to those figures publicly is somehow extended to them theatrically. Hall examines the tragic representation of Athenians interacting with outsiders, women, and slaves. . . . Hall makes the compelling suggestion that tragedy is *polyphonic*. It both legitimizes the chauvinism of Athenian power and glory at the same time as giving voice to that which undermines it. . . . What we arguably need is a bifurcated or Janus-faced reading of tragedy, where what appears to be at stake in the drama is both the norm . . . and its subversion.<sup>25</sup>

Conservatively, Greek tragedy gives the appearance of endorsing the status quo. At the same time, it shows the depredations of power. Such plays could pass for reactionary cautionary tales—warning against the dangers that marginalized people pose when they seize power (think *Medea*). Such drama could read as a xenophobic dog whistle.<sup>26</sup> All the while, it puts forth the anguishes and arguments of the wronged and the victimized.

Critchley speaks, too, of Greek tragedy’s “prebuttals” of Aristotle.<sup>27</sup> The Greek plays themselves, he contends, controverted Aristotle’s theory. Modernist tragedies also refute Aristotle. Hardy expressly positions outside forces as the assailants of innocent characters; he works against the Aristotelian preference for unintended but self-wrought demises. Tess is asleep when Alec rapes her. Tess’s downfall, too, feels inevitable when she is forced to marry her rapist—to internalize the values that subtend his predation and capture of her. Little Father Time in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* likewise ends his own life and that of his siblings because he internalizes violent norms. The child leaves a suicide note—“Done because we are too menny”—but this is not Hardy’s Malthusian object lesson in resource scarcity.<sup>28</sup> Overpopulation is not the cause of the child’s suffering. His suffering is clearly a product of social prejudice and punitive resource allocation.

Woolf’s Septimus Warren Smith, similarly, is chased from the species by eugenic doctors. He manifests a post-traumatic stress response to violent circumstances; his symptoms are caused by Western militarism. He is an inadvertent whistleblower, whom the medical elite must silence. What *Mrs. Dalloway* exposes is that Septimus, like Little Father Time, dies because he is made to bear social ills as personal fault. The logic of tragedy, then, little resembles the logic of sacrifice, in which exiling or exterminating a castigated “other” is understood to cleanse the community. Dissent against tragic conditions must, first and foremost, contest the idea that social catharsis comes of scapegoating.

### Tragedy’s Excesses

Camus delivers an account of genocidal modern Europe in a lecture on tragedy in 1955 in Athens. He argues that the very mindsets that hold themselves invincible—self-determining, world-mastering—are the modern sources of tragedy. Camus says:

25 Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 55, 60, 62. Thanks to Melina Rodriguez for drawing my attention to the middle portion of this quotation, from page 62.

26 Thanks to Enrique Alan Olivares-Pelayo, who likened tragedy’s conservative messaging to a dog whistle.

27 Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, 226, 278.

28 Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Norman Page, 2nd ed., (New York: Norton, 1999), 264.

The world that the eighteenth-century individual thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science has in fact taken shape, but it's a monstrous one. Rational and excessive at one and the same time, it is the world of history. But at this degree of *hubris*, history has put on the mask of destiny.<sup>29</sup>

Modern mainstays of power claim to have expelled tragedy from their midst. A counter-tragic enlightenment ethos is also what Horkheimer and Adorno write of in 1944.<sup>30</sup> New ruling orders claim to have banished the fears and superstitions of their predecessors. But these new paradigms instantiate new fears and superstitions, and require superseding in turn.

In Athenian and early modern tragedy, Camus sees evidence of this transition. In both instances, he contends, forms of divine reign are in the process of ceding their place to forms of secular reign:

Both periods mark a transition from forms of cosmic thought impregnated with the notion of divinity and holiness to forms inspired by individualistic and rationalist concepts. The movement from Aeschylus to Euripides is, roughly speaking, the development from the great pre-Socratic thinkers to Socrates himself (Socrates, who was scornful of tragedy, made an exception for Euripides). Similarly, from Shakespeare to Corneille we go from a world of dark and mysterious forces, which is still the Middle Ages, to the universe of individual values affirmed and maintained by the human will and by reason (almost all the sacrifices in Racine are motivated by reason). It is the same transition, in short, that links the passionate theologians of the Middle Ages to Descartes.<sup>31</sup>

In Greek and early modern tragedy, the older ruling order of gods and tyrants is called into question; these dominant powers are subjected to criticism but never overthrown entirely. It is “the final victory of individual reason, in the fourth century in Greece, and in the eighteenth century in Europe” that in Camus’s view ends one era of literary tragedy—and paves the way for another.<sup>32</sup> In Camus’s assessment, the victors in the early modern context are well positioned to step into the role of tragic antagonist.

These newly ascendant values enable and embolden the enslavers, dispossessors, plunderers, and torturers who traffic in death for profit. Sylvia Wynter articulates this historical dynamic more fully; she explains how European changes in outlook do nothing to root out racialized violence. Wynter, too, reaches back to “late medieval Latin-Christian Europe,” in which *homo religiosus* believes himself consigned to Earth as punishment.<sup>33</sup> He will be saved in the hereafter. The heathen is already his foil, his antithesis and inferior. His early modern successor is *homo politicus*, who reenvisions

29 Albert Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1970), 306.

30 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

31 Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” 306.

32 Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” 297.

33 Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 15.

himself as the preordained ruler of Earth, a kingdom to which his reason is fit.<sup>34</sup> Earth is now made for his comprehension and command. This early modern recalibrating of “Man’s” place in the cosmos, says Wynter, has a cardinal continuity: its anti-Black, anti-indigenous prejudice. Only its supposed rationale shifts; denigration and exclusion of the heathen becomes denigration and exclusion of the phenotypically other.

David Scott has argued that Toussaint Louverture, in C. L. R. James’s analysis of him, is fatally caught within the contradictions of Enlightenment thought, which emerges from this early modern reiteration of racist hierarchies. Toussaint is torn between the liberatory potential that he sees in French values and their complicity in slavery. Along Wynter’s and Camus’s lines, Scott suggests that Toussaint’s modern “tragedy inheres in the fact that . . . he must seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which modernity’s rationality has sought his enslavement.”<sup>35</sup> He is trapped within an Enlightenment belief system still premised on the “coterminous birth of Man and his Others,” as Yusoff says following Wynter.<sup>36</sup> In keeping with *homo religiosus*, *homo politicus* defined himself on the basis of this division. His descendent, “the overtly imperial *homo oeconomicus*,” perpetuates this dichotomy; in the nineteenth century, he sees himself as a post-Darwinian biological organism, and his trademark is his specious race science.<sup>37</sup> Wynter writes: “Those black, indigenous enemies of Christ, irrational savages, human-Other(s)-by-nature” are mapped onto “a figure barely evolved and wholly subhuman that is Other to the fully evolved.”<sup>38</sup> *Homo oeconomicus*’s “telos of mastering Malthusian natural scarcity,” Wynter concludes, “is precisely *the cause* of the problem itself” today, that of climate change.<sup>39</sup>

Camus, too, evokes the apotheosis of Enlightenment reason (“deified human reign”), which in his view silences renaissance tragedy, conserves racism, and ensures “monstrous” futures.<sup>40</sup> Wynter’s analysis is more specific and complete, as Yusoff elaborates:

Rather than slavery predating capitalist forms of labor, Wynter (n.d., 106) argues that the interrelation of slave labor power and free labor power in sugar production meant that the “plantation was an intrinsic and functional part of a capitalist system. . . . The latter large-scale de-humanization of the European proletariat, *followed on and did not precede* the total negation of the black as human.”<sup>41</sup>

Yusoff, too, shows how “slavery predates and prepares the material ground for Europe and the Americas in terms of both nation *and* empire building—and continues to sustain it.”<sup>42</sup> Camus implies, consonant with this argument, that even if early modern tragedies

34 Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 35.

35 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). 168.

36 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 55.

37 Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 42.

38 Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 46, 47.

39 Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 24.

40 Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” 297.

41 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 41.

indicted the irrationality and injustice of hegemonic norms, their critical activity did not coincide with or precipitate a transition away from racial capitalism. As early modern tragedy rose and fell, he says, it did not effect emancipatory social transformations. It ushered in the same structures of domination in new guises.

Camus's point is that a groundswell of religious or anti-monarchical skepticism in early modern tragedy did little to decenter Europe itself. Camus calls this uncontested Europe apocalyptic. He writes scathingly in 1948:

We have preferred the power that apes greatness—Alexander first of all, and then the Roman conquerors, whom our school history books, in an incomparable vulgarity of soul, teach us to admire. We have conquered in our turn, have set aside the bounds, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has swept everything away. Alone at last, we build our empire upon a desert.<sup>43</sup>

At the dawn of Greek thought, Heraclitus already conceived justice as setting limits even upon the physical universe itself: “The sun will not go beyond its bounds, for otherwise the Furies who watch over justice will find it out.” We, who have thrown both universe and mind out of orbit, find such threats amusing.<sup>44</sup>

We are now witnessing the Messianic forces confronting one another, their clamors merging in the shock of empires. Excess is a fire, according to Heraclitus. The fire is gaining ground; Nietzsche has been overtaken. It is no longer with hammer blows but with cannon shots that Europe philosophizes. Nature is still there, nevertheless. Her calm skies and her reason oppose the folly of men. Until the atom too bursts into flame, and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species.<sup>45</sup>

This “reason” “has swept everything away,” an apocalyptic flood. European excess is a devouring fire and the conflagration is accelerating. In Camus's lyrical and allusive formulations, France's empire building entails deserted lands (“alone at last,” via murder, exile, theft) and Earth's depletion, exhaustion, and desertification (“we build our empire upon a desert”). Imperialist hubris disregards all “limits” of the “physical universe itself.” Cassandra-like, “Nature” remains unheeded, with “reason” all her own; “men” deem her limits risible and eminently violable, and hurdle the species toward extinction.

Camus numbers himself among this world-ending “we,” both caught and complicit in a politics that terrorizes the innocent the world over. He belongs to this “we,” inheritor and beneficiary of a rapacious and malignant excess. Wynter writes of Derrida's remarks

42 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 43.

43 Albert Camus, “Helen's Exile,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1970), 150.

44 Camus, “Helen's Exile,” 149.

45 Camus, “Helen's Exile,” 151. Yusoff writes: “The first French test, Gerboise Bleue, was conducted in February 1960, in the context of the Algerian War (1954–62). From 1960 to 1996, France carried out 210 nuclear tests, 17 in the Algerian Sahara and 193 in French Polynesia in the South Pacific, causing vast swaths of radioactive fallout across Polynesia” (*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 48).

on this colonizing “we”: “The *referent-we* of man and of its ends, he implies, is not the *referent-we* of the human species itself. Yet, he says, French philosophers have assumed that, as middle-class philosophers, their *referent-we* . . . is isomorphic with the *referent-we* in the *horizon of humanity*.”<sup>46</sup> Camus, however, seems to register that the “we” to whom he refers is hardly all-inclusive. Accordingly, modern tragedy might communicate, as Anja Kanngieser says, “how climate change is part of a continuation of ongoing colonial and environmental violence . . . as opposed to some kind of ‘natural’ disaster, and that those descended from Anglo-European empires are heavily implicated in that violence.”<sup>47</sup> Tragedy must express the causes and consequences of devastating “reason.” It must express the “excess” of suffering that the “excess” of empire requires: “While Blackness is the energy and flesh of the Anthropocene,” writes Yusoff in this vein, “it is excluded from the wealth of its accumulation. Rather, Blackness must absorb the excess of that surplus as toxicity, pollution, and intensification of storms. Again, and again.”<sup>48</sup> Cyclically, like Sisyphus’s rock, the pain, the toll, the damage rebounds on those who least deserve it.

Camus proposes a partial remedy, which he locates in Greek tragedy itself. He advocates for an ethics that he considers to be Greek tragedy’s own—an ethics of restraint, that respects moral limits (to what people may do) and acknowledges practical and painful limits (to what people may fix, redeem, make right). He heralds this ethics as a much-needed alternative to Christian and secular messianisms—those of Europe’s capitalist liberal democracies, fascisms, and communisms that license death in service of their “salvific” ends. In his model of Greek tragedy, from which he derives this ethics, Camus understands ancient characters to dissent against domineering divine and social orders, but to overstep in their defiance; they take good impulses too far. The threatened ruling orders, divine or human, then respond with excessive force, with undue, inordinate repression. They do not contest or curtail excess; they manifest it in turn. What Greek tragedy therefore showed, for Camus, were the horrors of extremism. Audiences’ commitment to moderation (*mésure*) was what such tragedy inspired. Moderation did not mean support for the status quo (a “moderate” conformist posture). The status quo, rather, in Camus’s interpretation of Greek tragedy, became synonymous with immoderate violence. Moderation meant the indictment of systemic overreaching and a countervailing ethics of preservation. Moderation, for Camus, entailed anti-imperialist politics in the present. It required dismantling genocidal overextension. Boundless overreach, moral and material, was exactly the marker of Greek tragedy that he saw reincarnated in post-Enlightenment western Europe.

Amitav Ghosh singles out this same culprit, tweeting lines from a recent op-ed: “Our whole way of life is built on a series of myths—the myth of endless space, endless fuel, endless water, endless optimism, endless outward reach.”<sup>49</sup> So, too, slavery,

46 Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 23.

47 Anja Kanngieser, “Cooperating on the Frontlines of Climate Change,” interview by Krystian Woznicki, in *Silent Works* (blog), May 14, 2019 (<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/krystian-woznicki/blog/140519/cooperating-frontlines-climate-change-0>).

48 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 82.

49 Amitav Ghosh (@GhoshAmitav), “Our whole way of life is built on a series of myths—the myth of endless space, endless fuel, endless water, endless optimism, endless outward reach and endless free parking . . . .” Twitter, October 31, 2019, 6:13 a.m. (<https://twitter.com/ghoshamitav/status/1189893151416209411?s=21>).

imperialism, and extractivism are Camusian tragic excess. Karl Marx, as John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark write, had also identified a European “production system which knew no bounds, operating as if ‘the Earth is inexhaustible in its gifts’”:

Marx argued that more intensive forms of agriculture, even as they produced a record harvest, could so deplete the soil that famine followed, requiring years for the soil to recover. Ireland, he notes, was even forced to “export its manure” across the sea to England in a dramatic instance of ecological imperialism. In the East Indies, “English-style capitalist farming ... only managed to spoil indigenous agriculture and to swell the number and intensity of famines.” This was part of a colonial “bleeding process, with a vengeance!”<sup>50</sup>

Brutal, vengeful bloodletting, brooking no restraint, is Camus’s description of both Greek and modern tragic doom; it is always an abuse of power and claims to be just when it is not. Camus diagnoses and condemns this excess repeatedly: “The Europe we know .... is the daughter of excess,” he argues.<sup>51</sup> In his estimation, Greek tragedy draws attention to such exorbitance and encourages opposition to it, in the name of moderation—even “the sun will not go beyond its bounds”—while Europe veers lethally out of bounds. This transgression, he says, is also self-immolating: “In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon us to destroy. Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit.”<sup>52</sup> Camus’s assessment matches Frantz Fanon’s in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “Europe now lives at such a mad, reckless pace that she has shaken off all guidance and all reason, and she is running headlong into the abyss.”<sup>53</sup> Tragedy, Camus theorizes, is the genre to expose Europe’s unsustainable ideologies—their indefensible body count, their necessary demise. As David Scott writes: “The historical event of decolonization (unfolding right before Camus’s eyes) was yet another moment of violent collision of opposing forces (colonialism and nationalism) in which horizons of expectation and idioms and frameworks of experience were often tragically at odds with each other.”<sup>54</sup>

Camus’s lecture on tragedy aimed to answer the question: Could tragedy reemerge as the prevailing literary form of the present? In a twenty-first-century context, the reply might still be Camus’s: literary tragedy must stage a transition not within Eurocentric paradigms, but away from them.

### Modernist Antecedents: Tragic Form

Camus’s own tragic exemplar is the “proletarian” Sisyphus, who tries and fails to “put Death in chains” and is shackled to a boulder indefinitely, an inordinate

Ghosh is sharing and excerpting from Farhad Manjoo, “It’s the End of California as We Know It,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2019 ([www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/opinion/sunday/california-fires.html#click=https://t.co/t2ui4WJ4Xi](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/opinion/sunday/california-fires.html#click=https://t.co/t2ui4WJ4Xi)).

50 John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Introduction,” in *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: The Monthly Review Press, 2020), 22, ellipsis in original.

51 Camus, “Helen’s Exile,” 149.

52 Camus, “Helen’s Exile,” 149.

53 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1968), 312.

54 David Scott, “The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time,” in special issue titled “Tragedy,” *PMLA* 12.4 (October 2014): 801.

punishment.<sup>55</sup> At once “powerless and rebellious,” Sisyphus “knows the full extent of his wretched condition.”<sup>56</sup> He can break free in moments only, when he descends the mountain unburdened. In the face of his inexorable sentence, Sisyphus finds that these intermittent reprieves sustain him; by extension, were his fate subject to further contestation, these moments would be templates for change. This is Camus’s aesthetics and ethics of the moment: the hiatus that is the antithesis of the crushing norm.

John Plotz, citing Leland Monk, sees this same model in Hardy’s fiction: “Such happiness as there is in [Hardy’s] novels is only the experience of the moment, intense, evanescent, frequently lyrical.”<sup>57</sup> These moments, too, I would argue, are often hypothetical, imagined, counterfactual. They consist of Tess’s narrator’s flights of fancy or of Jude’s supplications to Sue—his exhortations that she interpret their story otherwise, as the consequence of “man and senseless circumstance” rather than her own failings.<sup>58</sup> Sue misinterprets her agony as a biblical chastisement for “my badness.”<sup>59</sup> She cries: “My children—are dead—and it is right that they should be! .... They were sacrificed to teach me how to live! .... That’s why they have not died in vain!”<sup>60</sup> Tess’s narrator and Jude, however, defend these women against self-hatred. As Plotz argues, Hardy contrasts the plot’s merciless erasure of character with “the brief moment of pleasure that is possible even in a universe that will in short order grind us to dust.”<sup>61</sup>

Woolf urges us to “call [Hardy] the greatest tragic writer among English novelists.” She feels, too, that “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick .... of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age. .... They are even more aware than we are of a ruthless fate.”<sup>62</sup> Woolf follows the Greek playwrights, Darwin, and Hardy in drawing attention to injurious chances and annihilating environments. Her characters, as a result, come together in moments of lucid solidarity. Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* strives for interludes of safety that defy—but do not deny—indomitable natural forces and vicious modern history: “They were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there.”<sup>63</sup> Bernard in *The Waves* experiences an equivalent tragic sociality at dinner: “We six .... for one moment out of what measureless abundance of past time and time to come, burnt there triumphant. The moment was all; the moment was enough.”<sup>64</sup> Camus’s Sisyphus also practices Bernard’s rescaling of value—the recalibration of affirmation, the redefinition of heroism. “Higher destiny .... [Sisyphus] concludes is inevitable and despicable.”<sup>65</sup> But

55 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 121, 119.

56 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 121.

57 John Plotz, “Speculative Naturalism and the Problem of Scale: Richard Jefferies’s *After London*, after Darwin,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 76.1 (March 2015): 49n10. For the quotation’s original context, see Leland Monk, *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 164.

58 Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 269.

59 Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 269, 210.

60 Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 285.

61 Plotz, “Speculative Naturalism and the Problem of Scale,” 51–52.

62 Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” 38.

63 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 97.

64 Woolf, *The Waves*, 277–78.

65 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 122.

“at each of those moments” when he can descend the mountain without his rock “a breathing-space .... returns as surely as his suffering.”<sup>66</sup> Camus reads Sophocles’s Oedipus the same way: facing inescapable and “futile sufferings,” Oedipus discovers that his “only bond” to life comes from the touch of his daughter’s hand.<sup>67</sup> Camus’s Oedipus does not bow to Apollo’s law approvingly, but reduced and in pain, he attests to an attachment that is enough.

Fleeting protest is what Camus associates with both tragedy and “rebellion.” For Camus, rebellion is the ethical and political activity that “says yes and no simultaneously. It is the rejection of one part of existence in the name of another part, which it exalts.”<sup>68</sup> Exalted moments populate modernist tragedies. These interludes stand in contrast to decimating narrative. Via such moments, Camus positions tragic art between “the two poles of extreme nihilism and limitless hope.”<sup>69</sup> Climate writing today echoes this stance: “You talked about these poles .... defeatism and doom, and on the other side, hope and unstoppable optimism,” says an interviewer to climate justice essayist Mary Annaisé Heglar.<sup>70</sup> Later she replies: “There’s a poem by Claude McKay called ‘If We Must Die.’ And the whole basis of it is [to be] pinned to the wall dying but fighting back.”<sup>71</sup> In another news outlet, we again hear echoes of Camusian tragic ethics: “Yes. To say ‘yes’ to what we want—and what is already created in cramped spaces—necessitates saying ‘no’ to the world that dominates save for those cracks or openings.”<sup>72</sup> Like Camus’s rebellion, this posture balks at imitating or compounding oppressive conditions: “It supposes what we have to do is survive in a way that’s antithetical to the survival of the forms of power that oppress us.”<sup>73</sup>

Much organizing around climate change, too, demasks Western denial of white supremacy at the root of the Anthropocene; such denial takes the form of the occlusion of the history and unevenness of ongoing environmental crisis. Seeking to counter this obfuscation, Chris Hedges, for instance, names “corporate capitalism and imperialism” the contemporary perpetrators of climate change.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, he names “a dominant culture that will not allow us to speak this tragic truth.”<sup>75</sup> To acknowledge tragedy would be to end the cover-up: “This censorship forces us to struggle with reality in solitude,” as the reality remains uncontested.<sup>76</sup> The greater the scope of recognition, however, the greater the movement against injustice: “Resistance grounded in action is

66 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.

67 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.

68 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Knopf, 1956), 251.

69 Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” 304.

70 Mary Annaisé Heglar, “Mary Annaisé Heglar’s Writing on Climate Change Is a ‘Punch in the Gut’—and That’s by Design,” interview by Britt Wray, *Massive Science*, September 15, 2019 (<https://massivesci.com/articles/mary-annaise-heglar-narrative-change-climate-justice-essayist-poetry-humanity/>).

71 Heglar, “Mary Annaisé Heglar’s Writing on Climate Change Is a ‘Punch in the Gut’—and That’s by Design.”

72 Out of the Woods Collective, “On Climate/Borders/Survival/Care/Struggle,” interview by *base*, June 23, 2017 (<http://www.basepublication.org/?p=474>).

73 Out of the Woods Collective, “On Climate/Borders/Survival/Care/Struggle.”

74 Chris Hedges, “The Last Act of the Human Comedy,” *truthdig*, September 2, 2019 (<https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-last-act-of-the-human-comedy/>).

75 Hedges, “The Last Act of the Human Comedy.”

76 Hedges, “The Last Act of the Human Comedy.”

its own *raison d'être*. .... It brings us into a community with others.”<sup>77</sup> Precisely what tragic reality entails for Hedges—collectively “naming it but refusing to submit to it”—is Camus’s tragic imperative also.<sup>78</sup>

### Tragedy as Exposé

Camus considered apologies for pain to be apologies for injustice. He allied Christianity, National Socialism, Stalinism, and capitalist liberal democracy, contending that all invoked the same incontestable right to break human bodies. As counterargument, Camus wrote cautionary tales regarding inaction and moral apathy in response to French colonialism.

Camus’s novels indict characters who forgo ethical reasoning (Meursault in *The Stranger*) or who invoke reasoned bases to harm others (Clamence in *The Fall*). Meursault sops up immoderate violence like a sponge; he is a somnambulist collaborating in colonial terror. Clamence aspires to be the tyrant’s apologist. What Meursault ignores, Clamence would justify: the slaughter of the innocents, for instance, or Buchenwald. Setting Clamence’s World War II prisoner of war camp in North Africa, Camus alludes to French colonial fascism in his novel’s catalogue of atrocities. From 1955 to 1961, France forced millions of Algerians into *camps de regroupement* (regroupment camps) in Algeria and France.<sup>79</sup> Camus’s novel, that is, draws multiple histories of lethal displacement and imprisonment into proximity. Clamence even tells us that he is habituated to white supremacy, but that when he realized “I wasn’t so admirable,” he vowed to spread culpability to all, in hopes it would weigh less heavily on him.<sup>80</sup> He universalizes fault like the Anthropocene label does, to dodge responsibility. Like Meursault, he is a tragic hero *manqué*—he fails to indict injustice and to commit to what reparative action he can. He does not heed tragedy’s ethical call: to confront a restricted compass for action and agency and to act nonetheless. That is, in ancient and modern tragedy, Camus argues, the paining, inordinate “weight of reality” cannot be denied.<sup>81</sup> Nor can it be lifted in its entirety. But “rejection of that reality” is still a felt imperative.<sup>82</sup>

These modernist writers whom I have discussed gave no direct thought to climate change; they did not write about ecocide or environmentalism in today’s terms. Nor did I pursue their model of tragedy with climate catastrophe in mind. But their model of tragedy may help us to represent “life after warming,” David Wallace-Wells’s subtitle for

77 Hedges, “The Last Act of the Human Comedy.”

78 Hedges, “The Last Act of the Human Comedy.”

79 See Debarati Sanyal, “Auschwitz as Allegory in *Night and Fog*,” in *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais’s “Night and Fog”*, eds. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 152–82. Sanyal writes: “[In 1957] the discretionary special powers were extended to the metropole and camps such as Larzac or Rivesaltes interned over 14,000 Algerians suspected of harbouring ties with the Front de Libération National (FLN). But in Algeria, a network of underground repression camps was already well in place, and as early as 1955, entire sectors of the rural population had been displaced into regroupment camps in an effort to isolate insurgents” (167).

80 Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 77.

81 Albert Camus, “Create Dangerously,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1995), 265.

82 Camus, “Create Dangerously.”

*The Uninhabitable Earth*. As Wallace-Wells writes, “mass climate suffering” squarely contradicts progressivist assurances that “as time marches forward, life improves ineluctably.”<sup>83</sup> Admission of harm that is irreversible, accelerating (in nonlinear ways), and wholly unevenly distributed confounds projections of a “Hollywood ending to climate change.”<sup>84</sup> This turn from a redemptive to a tragic framework is also the turn that David Scott traces in *Conscripts of Modernity*. Scott outlines the differences between triumphalist anticolonial narratives and their less assured tragic successors:

where the anticolonial narrative is cast as an epic Romance, as the great progressive story of an oppressed and victimized people’s struggle from Bondage to Freedom, from Despair to Triumph under heroic leadership, the tragic narrative is cast as a dramatic confrontation between contingency and freedom, between human will and its conditioning limits. .... If one of the great lessons of Romance is that we are masters and mistresses of our destiny, that our pasts can be left behind and new futures leaped into, tragedy has a less sanguine teaching to offer.<sup>85</sup>

Wallace-Wells writes in parallel fashion: “If the planet reaches three or four or five degrees of warming, the world will be convulsed with human suffering at such a scale .... that its citizens will have difficulty regarding the recent past as a course of progress .... or in fact as anything but a true and substantial reversal.”<sup>86</sup>

Accounts diverge regarding how much time remains to stave off how much suffering. Wallace-Wells says that “a genocidal level of warming is already .... inevitable.”<sup>87</sup> Jem Bendell foresees “inevitable near-term social collapse .... probable catastrophe and possible extinction.”<sup>88</sup> Wallace-Wells mentions, in consequence, the impulse to “retreat from a world convulsed by .... pain toward small, earthly consolations.”<sup>89</sup> I would like to contend that the small, earthly consolations that Hardy, Woolf, and Camus depict do not, however, amount to escapism. Such moments of respite instantiate, briefly, alternatives to encircling lethality. These moments can nourish tragic characters in their relentless contestation of injurious power. Still, Kris Bartkus writes of the immobilizing effects of tragic lucidity. Bartkus writes that in Sebald’s fiction, for instance, “to ignore the reality of the world, to calmly go about your book research as if you’re not walking atop a stratum of suffering, is delusional, but to look at that reality with any clarity for a sustained period of time is to be horrified to the point of mental collapse.”<sup>90</sup> This is Plato’s very complaint

83 David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019), 200.

84 Rupert Read, John Foster, and Jem Bendell, “An Open Letter to David Wallace-Wells,” *The Ecologist*, April 4, 2019 (<https://theecologist.org/2019/apr/04/open-letter-david-wallace-wells>).

85 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 135.

86 Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 201.

87 David Wallace-Wells, “UN Says Climate Genocide Is Coming. It’s Actually Worse Than That,” *New York Magazine, Daily Intelligencer* (blog), October 10, 2018 (<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/10/un-says-climate-genocide-coming-but-its-worse-than-that.html>).

88 Jem Bendell, “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy,” July 27, 2018 (<http://lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>).

89 Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 212.

90 Kris Bartkus, “W. G. Sebald and the Malthusian Tragic,” *The Millions*, March 28, 2018 (<https://themillions.com/2018/03/the-malthusian-tragic.html>).

against tragedy, that confronting loss and outrage head-on will overwhelm us. Socrates stands opposed to tragic poets in the *Republic* because tragedy “awakens this [mournful] part of the soul and nourishes it, and, by making it strong, destroys the calculating part. . . . For the pitying part, fed strong on these examples, is not easily held down in one’s own sufferings.”<sup>91</sup> This is also why Clamence advocates for insensibility; he finds knowing and weeping unbearable. This is the criticism, too, of Wallace-Wells and Bendell—that their “paralyzing narrative of doom and hopelessness” will incite only despair.<sup>92</sup> But tragedy is the art form of those who cannot look away, for whom suffering is, indisputably, a reality. This is also the reason that modernist tragedians supply moments of joy and replenishment, as counterweights to necessity. Modest, tenuous, these moments bear no resemblance to messianisms. They do not purport to be total fixes. But they are ballasts in the tragic tide.

Wynter speaks of W. E. B. Du Bois’s vision in this vein. She speaks of a profusion of defiant acts that contest sweeping injustice: “a multiplicity of local, small-scale anticolonial, antisetler apartheid, and overall anti-imperial ‘gaze from below’ perspectives and struggles that were as global in their reach as that of the color line itself.”<sup>93</sup> Tragic rebellion takes this form. It responds to concomitant political, sexual, and environmental violence. It answers to cataclysmic fires—those that attend enslavement, war, and empire, and the spoliation of air, water, and earth. Tragic communities confront, for instance, the fires that raze their cities in Euripides’s *Trojan Women* and Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu*. They persist in the wake of oceanic upheaval in Euripides’s *Helen* and H. D.’s *Helen in Egypt*. In *Women of Owu*, the Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife “Allied Forces” send birds “flying across the wall” to seal the fate of their adversaries.<sup>94</sup> The vanquishing armies conscript an avian fleet for an aerial campaign, “a hideous armada of fire.”<sup>95</sup> These birds prove “heralds of horror and death . . . with flaming brands in their talons.”<sup>96</sup> Weaponized flocks, smoke “everywhere,” and cries of pain fill the air: “Huge balls of smoke! Screams in the air!”<sup>97</sup> In turn, the leader of the Owu chorus exhorts her comrades to “Sing! Sing! In defiance of their whips!”<sup>98</sup> Their song is one of indictment: “Our curse on all men, and especially men of violence!”<sup>99</sup> On behalf of Ife, too, another woman denounces Owu’s denigration and exploitation of Ife’s labor and resources. “Ancestral mother” Lawumi also charges Owu with immoderation, with “selling / Other Yoruba into slavery,” setting retributive war in motion.<sup>100</sup> We “common folk,” respond the women of Owu, were powerless as “slaughtered cows” before our leaders; their god replies only that “the deer must train themselves to seize the gun from / Their hunters!

91 Plato, *The “Republic” of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 605b, 606b.

92 Michael Mann, “Fear Won’t Save Us: Putting a Check on Climate Doom,” *Common Dreams*, July 10, 2017 (<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/07/10/fear-wont-save-us-putting-check-climate-doom>).

93 Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?,” 51.

94 Femi Osofisan, *Women of Owu* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 2006), 1, 35.

95 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 35.

96 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 35.

97 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 35.

98 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 38.

99 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 38.

100 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 21, 19.

The cows to take over the narration of / Their own story.”<sup>101</sup> The women of Owu have yet to disarm their persecutors or to hold this authorial power. But the wronged parties in tragedy do bear witness to their destroyers’ tactics—self-enrichment at the expense of peoples and ecosystems.

Such is the case in Euripides’s *Bacchae* and Césaire’s *And the Dogs Were Silent* as well. In the latter, it is “the Rebel,” for Césaire as for Camus the quintessential tragic hero, who asserts that “under no circumstances would I trade my place for that of the executioner.”<sup>102</sup> He knows that “the wind is contaminated with whips,” as does “the Narratress,” who recounts the enslavers’ invasion: “the town collapses on its hams . . . in the slow vertigo of rape . . . amidst the ticklings in a bed of smoke and screams.”<sup>103</sup> A “Madwoman” corroborates her testimony: “I see lizards of fire, grasshoppers of fire, crush-crushes of fire.”<sup>104</sup> Continuing to tyrannize the women and the “magnificent land” is the “Great Promoter” of colonialism, who speaks for “the Admiral,” “the Troop Commander,” “the Surveyor,” “the Geometrician,” “the Super Jailor,” and “the Banker.”<sup>105</sup> He pronounces his assailant’s credo—“Let the earth groan until it breaks in our virile embrace.”<sup>106</sup> The communal “Echo,” opening the play, rings with the Rebel’s challenge: “Blue-eyed architect / I defy you.”<sup>107</sup> “Beware, architect,” resounds the Echo, “for if the Rebel dies it will not be without making everyone aware that you are the constructor of a pestilential world.”<sup>108</sup> The Rebel determines to stand at the forefront of a revolt “that regenerates a land without pestilence, rich, delectable.”<sup>109</sup> In this pursuit, “I want to be the one who says no to the unacceptable.”<sup>110</sup>

Césaire’s tragic Rebel suffers “irreparable visions,” those of a past that he cannot heal: “our life—a raped, forsaken wasteland, how you reduced it, Fortune, / to grey weeds dry weeds sad humiliated weeds.”<sup>111</sup> But he envisions and embarks on renewal: “I dreamt of light, of golden banners, of enpurpled sleeps of besparkled / awakenings. . . . Then came the attack on the master’s house.”<sup>112</sup> Imprisoned and blinded for his dissent (vision irreparable), he still evokes fragmentary images of remembered loves; “all that I care for now are my recollected skies.”<sup>113</sup> He cleaves to the fragile spark of a nascent life that he meant to set alight: “all that I have left is the little rose of a stolen ember.”<sup>114</sup> He has taken this one glowing coal, a small red-hot bloom, the seed of a brand-new blazing world.

101 Osofisan, *Women of Owu*, 66.

102 Aimé Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 190), 32.

103 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 43, 10, ellipses in original.

104 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 10.

105 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 39, 11.

106 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 12.

107 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 3.

108 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 3.

109 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 32.

110 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 34.

111 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 44, 65.

112 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 59, 40.

113 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 62.

114 Césaire, *And the Dogs Were Silent*, 62.

Contamination, inferno, and incendiary desire for life to be otherwise characterize Marie Clements's *Burning Vision* as well; for its victims, a nuclear "explosion ... whites out their world into blackness."<sup>115</sup> Among the interconnected dramatis personae, "the Dene See-er" endures "the visions, the bombing, the burning" in advance, knowing that radium and uranium mining will "harm my people from the inside" and bring fire and obliteration.<sup>116</sup> "The Widow," too, attests to a lethal, Sisyphean shouldering of toxic rock:

Coolies. Some word for people that do the dirty work, I guess. The people that get their hands dirty. The coolies, the Indians, the Dene, the People—our men, my man worked hauling those sacks [of radioactive ore], in long lines, from one man to the next, one coolie to one coolie, one Indian to another. A chain passing the rock. The rock we called the money rock.<sup>117</sup>

In parallel fashion, in Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*, heroine Amparo laments the deaths of children, casualties of industrial agriculture. She condemns the planes that spray pesticides in California's Central Valley, an aerial bombardment. Amparo is beaten for her resistance, for naming fatal conditions: "¿Qué significa que the three things in life—el aire, el agua, y la tierra—que we always had enough of, even in our pueblitos en México, ya no tenemos?"<sup>118</sup> Another tragic rebel, Cerezita, calls for the return of nourishing earth, "the radiant red mother rising."<sup>119</sup> Now besieged from the air with gunfire, Cerezita martyrs herself for the cause. Furious at her assassins, her fellows burn the carcinogenic fields.

Tragedy juxtaposes its killing conflagrations against mutinous flames and the flickers of more livable climes. Although much "climate fiction" today may not read as tragedy, some bears its imprint. Representations of environmental racism and ecological disaster foreground and entwine, as tragedies do, fateful convulsions and precarious, rebellious aftermaths. Moreover, a good deal of recognizable tragedy speaks to climate degradation.<sup>120</sup> As a mode, tragedy is well suited to do so. As Amy Westervelt writes in "The Case for Climate Rage": "The story of climate change, both its history and its future, needs to be told by people who have already experienced injustice and disempowerment, people who are justifiably angry at the way the system works." Anne Carson writes in regard to the tragedies of Euripides: "Why does tragedy exist? Because

115 Marie Clements, *Burning Vision* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2005), 110.

116 Clements, *Burning Vision*, 96.

117 Clements, *Burning Vision*, 70–71.

118 Cherríe Moraga, *Heroes and Saints*, in *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1994), 111.

119 Moraga, *Heroes and Saints*, 135.

120 For instance, a more recognizable tragedy that attends to environmental devastation might be Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. A climate drama with tragic dimensions might be Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*; Churchill translated Seneca's *Thyestes* and Senecan imagery finds its way into *The Skriker*. Elin Diamond makes this argument in "Churchill's Tragic Materialism; or, Imagining a Posthuman Tragedy," in special issue titled "Tragedy," *PMLA* 129.4 (October 2014): 751–60. Other works on this list have tragic structures and preoccupations: <https://bookriot.com/novels-about-eco-disasters/>). Tragedy may overlap with naturalist, dystopian, speculative, and post-apocalyptic narrative.

you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”<sup>121</sup> Climate tragedy perhaps discloses climate rage born of ecogrief. Climate tragedy, that is, revolves around characters who labor to concede not one inch more to senseless pain and absent justice. In the modernist vein, it pairs unremitting rebellion against life-negating circumstances with life-affirming moments—apertures onto counterfactual worlds. These fleeting reprieves, amid an onslaught of harm, sustain tragic collectives in their demand for the utmost transformation possible. Such tragedy confronts imperiled communities with “all” they have, “all” they can salvage, “all” they can do, compared to all, everything, limitlessness. Such tragedy registers painful constraints on action, and respects moral limits—tragedy’s circumscribing coordinates, Camus would say. But it makes the securing of this “all,” perhaps, “enough.”

121 Anne Carson, Preface to *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2006), 7.