Diagnosing the Present with an Ecotopian Lexicon

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An Ecotopian Lexicon (2019)

The book *An Ecotopian Lexicon* (2019) presents a collection of thirty terms and concepts from speculative fiction, anthropology, and the sociology of subcultures, each explored by a different author. The lexicon intends to address our collective "poverty of imagination" when it comes to avoiding environmental collapse and building a different world, evidenced by the increasing dominance of apocalyptic narratives in popular culture. Although the book's primary aim is to explore diverse concepts for imagining better futures, we have analyzed the form and content of the book for what they tell us about the present.

Background: the crisis has changed

Global environmental crisis has changed. In the 1970s, the crisis was popularly understood through the cold war threat of nuclear annihilation as well as through novel computer simulations that predicted future ecological collapse. In response, science fictional representations of capitalist futures either focused on a pending collapse or they imagined radical transformations toward "sustainable" utopias and dystopias. In contrast, today's environmental crisis is increasingly understood as an unfolding planetary condition driven by climate change. This recognition that the catastrophe is not coming in the future, but rather *is* the historical milieu of humanity, has come to be called the Anthropocene.

Approaching environmental crisis not only as a partially lived reality but also as an epistemic entity that can be imagined in different ways suggests large stakes politically. A "poverty of imagination" can absorb part of the blame for the mess that our planet is in; as the authors note, "we can't build what we can't imagine." But how we confront this poverty of imagination matters too.

To an extent, the edited volume is itself a work of science fiction helping to *produce* environmental crisis, as well as its goal to produce openings for avoiding crisis and creating another world. As Lisa Garforth (2019) argues, environmental crisis can itself be seen as a science-fictional object, that is, "an epistemic entity composed of orientations to planetary futures that are at once descriptive and speculative, scientific and fictional." With this formulation in mind, we asked the questions below.

Figure 1: "Plant Time" by Natasha Bowdoin

Entry example: Apocalypso

Calypso is a style of afro-caribbean dance music that has a history of being a form of colonial resistance, and is now used as a "grass-roots folklore" that takes "aim at local [and global/urban] social and political issues." Inspired by calypso's handling of one foot in the mess and other in the fun, and in resistance to apocalyptic pessimistic-nihilism and self-fulfilling tendencies, Solnick presents us "apocalypsos," which are texts, visions, and events that both "absorb" and "disrupt apocalyptic futures" by bringing together calypso's ability to engage in fun, politics and criticism at the same time, in the face of impending systemic collapse of petro-capitalist world order. By fundamentally affirming life's endurance, apocalypso, in contrast to tragedies that end in death, wants to promise a continuation, like comedies do.

What kind of an environmental crisis does this entry suggest?

One in which dystopian visions of nuclear and environmental apocalypses affirm absolutist thinking that leads to pessimistic nihilism (all is lost, so why bother?) that becomes a self-reinforcing cycle of abandoning responsibility and inactivity.

Entry example: Plant Time

Plant time represents the "slower, cyclical time-lives" that plants live. It is a practice of paying attention to non-human agency in Western herbology, where you sit with a medicinal herb for a period of time to become attuned to our "social and material entanglements" to plants. Plant time fundamentally affirms the notion of inter-agency, or the belief that agency is not isolated in an individual but rather "only emerges in relationship" to others. Plant time is thus also about becoming animate together with others with whom we share this world. Ultimately, it is about changing our bodily orientations from linear, fast-paced and growth-oriented being dictated by our coexistence with other life in the world, which is cyclical, slow, relational, and reciprocal.

What kind of an environmental crisis does this entry suggest?

One shaped by how the capitalist construction of linear time as a way of instilling discipline marks alternative knowledges with slower and cyclical conceptions of time as traditional and primitive.

Analyses

Circularity of time
• Relevant entries: planttime, heyiya, shikata ga nai, gyebale, qi
• Key words: spirals, gyres, cycles, system, karma, circular time
Intention: To disrupt the capitalist notion of infinite progress and invoke a sense of karmic order, which can help ground emotions during tumultuous times. In *shikata ga nai*, for example, the author gives an example of Japanese-American immigrants in the post-war period basically toughing it out until life got better.

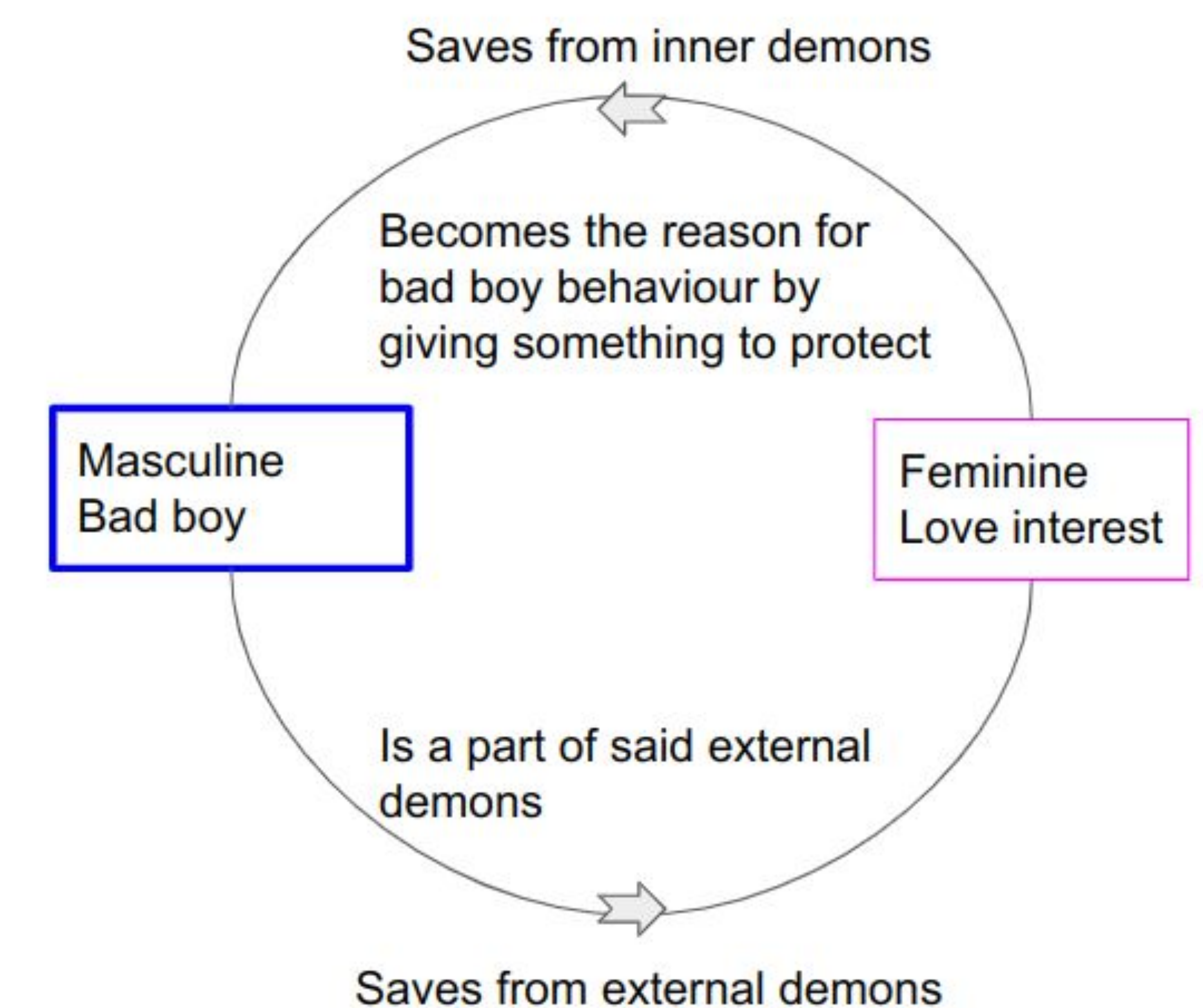What it means to be human is always negotiable and a political deployment of emotions
• Relevant entries: apocalypso, hyperempathy, shikata ga nai, sehnsucht, ghurba, solastalgia
• Keywords: feelings, emotions, hope, fear, powerlessness, grief, melancholy, homesickness, loss, longing, despair, resignation, pleasure, pain, joy
• Intention: the authors' intent is to break away from the political deployment of emotions, most notably in hyperempathy, to the effect of preventing political burnout.

Contradiction 1: What it means to be human has not been so 'negotiable' throughout history. Rather it has been quite consistent throughout colonial and postcolonial history. To be the right kind of human is to be white, male, masculine, and able. People have been actively persecuted for being Other. Even the label of 'human' or 'species' becomes problematic.

Contradiction 2: If change is what it means to be human, then there is always the *potential* for greater good, and modernity is all about potential and broken promises. It is akin to a teen romance where the main character falls for a bad boy who has a soft side and can be 'changed'. The main source of drama will then center on whether the bad boy keeps his promise, which for the sake of good drama he does just enough to not make the girl completely give up on him but also not so much that the drama becomes boring. The whole premise of 'changing someone' is faulty because taking change into account in something as rigid as to be called a 'plan' is a modern paradox.

What modes of writing characterize the book, and how do they fit into historical shifts in humanistic knowledge production?

Teen romance analogy

Saves from inner demons

Becomes the reason for bad boy behaviour by giving something to protect

Masculine Bad boy

Feminine Love interest

Is a part of said external demons

Saves from external demons

Sources and Acknowledgements

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