Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Pastoral Theology

ISSN: 1064-9867 (Print) 2161-4504 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ypat20

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To cite this article: Leah R. Thomas (2025) Mourning Together: The Climate Crisis as Collective Trauma, Journal of Pastoral Theology, 35:2, 128-143, DOI: 10.1080/10649867.2025.2605397

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2025.2605397

Published online: 19 Dec 2025.

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JOURNAL OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY
2025, VOL. 35, NO. 2, 128–143
https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2025.2605397

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Mourning Together: The Climate Crisis as Collective Trauma

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that theories of collective trauma provide a much-needed lens within pastoral theology when considering the human relationship with the climate crisis. Given the shift toward more communal, contextual paradigms within the field, collective trauma illuminates communal dynamics in need of attention in the care for communities impacted by the climate crisis. The paper first investigates the hallmarks of collective trauma – including the different responses of victims and perpetrators – observing that manifestations of collective trauma are apparent in the signs and symptoms that mark modern communal life. The theory of embodied cognition serves as an additional framework that explores how collective traumatic reactions may arise from human relationship with (and the destruction of) the ecological landscape. Finally, the frame of collective trauma impacts thinking and praxis within pastoral/practical theology around healing the communal ruptured relationship with the earth, centering communal embodied spiritual practices and action for justice.

KEYWORDS

Trauma; collective trauma; climate crisis; pastoral care; spiritual care

Introduction

The multi and inter-disciplinary discourse around the climate crisis reveals that this emergency not only devastates the natural world, but also impacts the mental, physical, and spiritual health of human beings who inhabit it. The destruction of the natural world – including the growing frequency of severe hurricanes, floods, prolonged droughts, and wildfires – has made climate change concrete and tangible, particularly for those in the global South who experience disproportionate suffering from these phenomena. This is coupled with the knowledge that the actions taken by developed countries to mitigate climate change are not enough. When speaking about the UN's 2024 climate summit, Sierra Leone's representative noted that the $300 billion deal was 'less than a quarter of what science shows is needed and barely enough to forestall a climate catastrophe.'[1] Given these realities, it is not surprising that the climate emergency continues to be detrimental to both the mental, physical, and spiritual health of humans and the wider earth of which we are a part.

Conversations around the impact of the climate emergency on the mental, physical, and spiritual health of human beings are taking place in the fields of psychology

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(notably in ecopsychology), sociology, cultural and literary studies, and theological spaces (ecotheology, ethics, and practical/pastoral theology).[2] Within this conversation, there are also interdisciplinary scholars who have explored implications from the field of trauma studies in the wider framing of climate change and its impact, including figures such as English professors E. Ann Kaplan[3] and Lee Zimmerman[4] and ecopsychologists Stef Craps,[5] Zhiwa Woodbury,[6] Steffi Bednarek,[7] Benjamin White[8], and others.

In pastoral theology, there has been an increased focus on climate change and its relationship with pastoral/spiritual care and practical theology since 2015, as demonstrated by such scholars as pastoral theologians Ryan LaMothe,[9] Bonnie McLemore,[10] Storm Swain,[11] Pamela McCarroll,[12] Emmanuel Lartey and Melinda McGarrah Sharp.[13] Conversations naming the climate crisis as a traumatic event have also made their way into the realm of practical/pastoral theology, including (but not limited to) the work of pastoral theologians such as Lartey and Sharp,[14] Swain,[15] and McCarroll.[16] As McCarroll notes, the existential, theological, and spiritual dimensions of both the climate crisis and trauma invite the realm of pastoral/practical theology to both learn from and contribute to this conversation.

It is significant, however, that within pastoral/practical theology there has been less attention to the climate crisis as an instance of collective trauma. Framing the climate crisis as collective trauma within pastoral/practical theology is important because it responds to a significant shift in the field from defining 'care' as individual counseling toward care as part of a wider communal, cultural, and social context. This shift has resulted in increased attention to social, political, and cultural analysis in approaches to caregiving and has contributed to the adoption of more liberative and decolonizing frameworks. A lens of collective trauma expands conversations about climate trauma in caregiving from a focus on individual psyches, spirits, and bodies (where it most certainly resides) to include the ways that trauma influences communities, including their social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Figures including theologian Carolyn Yoder, ecopsychologist Steph Craps, and climate scholar and communicator Britt Wray have named the climate crisis as collective trauma. Yoder argues that the climate crisis is among those traumagenic events that function as an unprecedented collective challenge to all species on the planet.[17] Traumagenic events are marked by certain characteristics: they often involve threats to human lives and bodies, produce feelings of terror and helplessness, overwhelm an individual or group's ability to respond to the threat, lead to a sense of loss of control, and challenge a person's or group's sense that life is meaningful and orderly. Wray agrees that the climate crisis is an instance of collective trauma, likening this crisis to notions of cultural trauma, a 'social process that involves the systemic disruption of the cultural basis of the social order.'[18] She notes that since the climate crisis is ongoing, it is more akin to the cultural traumas of racism or sexism, which continue to harm people over a lifetime. The climate crisis is similar to these cultural traumas in that it disproportionally impacts some communities – particularly communities of color – more than others.[19] Craps suggests that current conceptions of trauma are anthropocentric, proposing that the climate crisis should be conceptualized as 'geo trauma,' a post-humanist communal/collective trauma that includes the suffering of the natural world.

In line with these scholars, I argue that theories of collective trauma provide a much-needed lens within pastoral/practical theology through which to view the human

relationship with the climate crisis. In the first part of this paper, I examine hallmarks of collective trauma, including the different ways that victims and perpetrators respond to it, observing that manifestations of collective trauma are apparent in the signs and symptoms that mark modern communal life around the issue of climate change. In the second part of this paper, I explore the theory of embodied cognition as an additional framework that illuminates how collective traumatic reactions may arise from human relationships with (and the destruction of) the ecological landscape. Finally, I examine how the frame of collective trauma might impact thinking and praxis within pastoral/practical theology around healing the communal ruptured relationship with the earth. The lens of collective trauma centers communal embodied spiritual practices (including mourning and lament) which are inclusive of the natural world, while also calling humans to justice on behalf of the suffering world. The role of embodied cognition also provides a potential pathway toward healing from collective climate trauma, drawing on the ways that practices of the first people in the US have modeled restoration of relationship with the earth.

Trauma and the Climate Crisis

Trauma therapist and author Karen Saakvitne defines psychological trauma as an 'experience of an event, series of events, or set of enduring conditions in which the individual's or community's ability to integrate their emotional experience is overwhelmed.' She suggests that 'overwhelmed' means 'the loss of ability to stay present, understand what is happening, tolerate the feelings, or comprehend the horror of events unfolding. These events are experienced as a threat to life, bodily integrity or sanity.'[20] Since potentially traumatic (or traumagenic) events are perceived as threatening existence itself, they shake the very foundations of orderly life, sending bodies and minds into neurobiological responses of fight, flight, and freeze in a last-ditch attempt to survive potential horror. Traumatic events can provoke long-lasting and intrusive physical, emotional, and spiritual effects on people's lives. These include (but are not limited to) an erosion of trust and human connection, as well as difficulty with memory, attention, and cognition. On one hand, traumatic events can cause some to remain hypervigilant (always being on guard for danger) and on the other, can also cause avoidance of certain potential triggers, resulting in disconnection, dissociation, or numbness. Trauma can impact physical and mental health, and any type of trauma can also provoke a crisis of meaning and create spiritual/religious struggles.[21]

As Craps notes, a 2017 report sponsored by the APA and EcoAmerica found that climate change, particularly climate-change-induced extreme weather patterns and damaged food, water, and air, produces 'increases in trauma, shock and posttraumatic stress disorder (alongside compounded stress, anxiety, substance abuse and depression).'[22] The 2021 APA and Eco America report provides a more in-depth focus on the presence of trauma, noting that data collected from a variety of sources support the 'high potential for both immediate and longer-term psychological trauma from acute, climate-fueled disasters.'[23] The 2021 report also recognizes that PTSD is one of the most frequently reported mental health outcomes in post-disaster communities. Some interdisciplinary scholars speak to the way(s) that climate trauma continually triggers past traumas – personal, cultural, and intergenerational – while others also point to the ways it potentially creates pre-traumatic stress reactions (such as intrusive images, nightmares and avoidance behavior) to perceived future devastation and

destruction. Zimmerman proposes that the term 'trauma' is preferable to 'crisis' or 'catastrophe' because it not only refers to violent happenings but also 'raises questions about how these happenings are known or not known and experienced, how knowing or experiencing those happenings is felt to dissolve the knower itself . . . and thus cannot be processed into meaning or intelligibility.'[24]

Pastoral Theology and the Climate Crisis: Toward a Collective Trauma Lens

As noted above, in pastoral theology there has been an increased focus on climate change and its relationship with pastoral/spiritual care and practical theology since 2015. Scholars such as LaMothe, McCarroll, McLemore, Lartey, Swain and others highlight that in the US and Canada, the relationship with the natural environment and the subsequent environmental destruction is interrelated with a sordid history of colonialism, genocide, enslavement, racism, classism, and sexism. The climate emergency is also inextricably linked to the rise of neoliberal capitalism and the values that it advances – notably that of exploitation.[25] These exploitative values have been codified in political, economic, and cultural institutions and practices that continue to get played out in relation to certain 'othered' groups and the natural world, whether in environmental racism and classism and/or in ongoing ecological destruction. The history of exploitation of the natural world is interconnected with these other types of oppression.[26]

For those who name the climate crisis as a traumatic event, Swain and McCarroll argue for the need to recognize the anthropocentric nature of Christian theology, calling us to expand pastoral theology to include the existence of planetary or ecological trauma, to see the earth itself as also suffering or traumatized. Swain suggests that this particular crisis is in need of a postmodern, post-colonial, and post-traumatic pastoral theology to begin to address it. McCarroll applies trauma theory to the public behaviors associated with the climate crisis, suggesting that this lens offers a way forward in the midst of challenging times.[27]

I propose that understanding climate change through the lens of collective, intergenerational trauma should not be seen as an alternative to other theories but in addition to them, contributing to a multilayered reality around this complex issue. Collective trauma shares features with (and does not negate) individual trauma, yet is also distinctive. In the wake of a catastrophe, people might experience either individual or collective trauma or both. Collective trauma is a dynamic socio-psychological process that, as scholar of anthropology Antonius Robben and scholar of human development Marcelo Suárez-Orozco remind us, 'disrupts social bonds, undermines communality, destroys previous sources of support, and may even traumatize those who were absent when the originating event took place.'[28] Collective trauma asks how traumagenic events impact communities and societies, with particular emphasis on how new collective identities are formed in the wake of such disastrous events. The way(s) that the traumagenic event is represented in the memory of the group becomes important, alongside how it is reconstructed in attempts at meaning-making.

Hallmarks of Collective Trauma

Scholars of collective trauma note that it functions differently for members of perpetrator groups and victims. Social and political psychologist Gilad Hirschberger argues that for

victims of collective trauma, remembering and reconstructing the trauma narrative has both adaptive and maladaptive manifestations.[29] Although he recognizes that engaging with the memory of trauma may at times foster a paranoid and paralyzing post-traumatic outlook, it can also create an 'adaptive vigilance' that enhances the group's survival and efficacy. The process of meaning-making in the wake of collective trauma can promote a sense of continuity between past, present, and future members of the group, which contributes to group cohesion, importance, and a sense of a common destiny. It also reestablishes a sense of control and self/collective worth. When speaking of the climate crisis in particular, Hirshberger notes that 'the collective memory of natural disasters and the collective memory of traumas intentionally caused by humans have much in common – they serve as guides for future generations on how to identify threat and how to respond to it effectively.'[30]

When a community must grapple with its members being perpetrators of collective trauma, collective modes of remembering the past are 'prone to conflicts and subject to public debates. . . .'[31] For perpetrators of collective trauma, the trauma produces a crisis in moral identity, as it provokes tension between the desire to see the group in a positive light and the acknowledgement of severe moral transgressions. Professor of sociology Bernhard Giesen notes that the community can cope with this fundamental contradiction 'only by a collective schizophrenia, by denial, by decoupling, by withdrawal.'[32] Hirshberger agrees, suggesting that members of perpetrator groups may address collective trauma by denying the events, disowning them, and refusing to take any responsibility for them. He further reflects that one of the most difficult tasks for perpetrators is to acknowledge responsibility for past transgressions and harm, as this may be detrimental to both a group's moral image and its sense of meaning. In response, some group members may distance (or dissociate) themselves from the perceived actors of the crime/harm, resulting in a solidification of the rift between members of the 'in-group' and 'out-group.' When speaking about the climate crisis in particular, the complexity is only intensified, as many who are victims of this collective trauma are also its perpetrators, placing them in what is defined by Holocaust survivor Primo Levi as the 'gray zone': 'a nebulous area wherein the distinction between victims and perpetrators is not always clear cut, and victims may behave as perpetrators and perpetrators are victims.'[33] Hirshberger suggests that members of groups that exist in this category are often motivated to 'defensively represent' their history in a manner that highlights their goodness and downplays any ways they may have contributed to harm.

Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan has also spent several decades working with sociopolitical conflicts of large groups and studying collective trauma.[34] When naming communal reactions to natural disasters induced by climate change, he describes them as reflecting shock, chaos, survival guilt, and preoccupation with images of death and destruction. These often last for months or years. Volkan also notes that survivors experience a shared anxiety and helplessness from having lost trust in Mother Nature, along with a loss of safety.[35]

Climate Crisis as Collective Trauma

Drawing from Stephen Porges' Polyvagal theory, potentially traumagenic activities activate first the social engagement system, then the mobilization system (fight, flight), and

finally the immobilization system (freeze). These responses impact both individuals and communities, although they take slightly different forms in each. There are a number of scholars who have noted what they perceive as communal responses of fight, flight, and freeze around climate change, with the climate crisis as the traumatic stressor that triggers these protective trauma responses. Pamela McCarroll presents a summary of the research around these responses, and I draw many of these from her work.[36] Fight can be seen in struggle/preventative action towards climate change, and also ' … in practices of blaming and shaming so common in our increasingly polarized society and in perpetuating cycles of violence, the expression of which function as a kind of cathartic release valve.'[37] Some might also place eco-anxiety in this category, which can include sleeplessness, elevated heart rate, and anxious thoughts.[38] Flight can frequently take the form of denial or spiritualizing, and also as a tendency to create distance through intellectualization or addictive behavior. The freeze response manifests in helplessness, numbing, and inaction.[39] McCarroll also suggests that deflection, climate denial, and indifference could also be manifestations of the freeze response.

Trauma reactions can function not only to cause activation within the individual but also to rupture social bonds and undermine community. Giesen and Hirshberger's insights that the perpetrators of collective trauma frequently engage in denial, decoupling, and withdrawal correlate with the communal reactions of denial, deflection, and inaction in modern society around the issue of climate change. The increase in group identity – particularly around those who deny climate change – and the level of activation around this ideological position (alongside the difficulty in expressing empathy for those who feel differently) also resonates with Hirschberger's argument that perpetrators of collective trauma can respond by denying, disowning, and refusing to take responsibility for traumagenic events. Our increasingly polarized modern society reflects the solidification of the rift between members of the 'in-group' and 'out-group,' particularly around the issue of the climate crisis. Those who defensively downplay their role in the climate crisis might also exist in the 'gray zone.' All of these responses could be seen as hallmarks of collective trauma around the issue of climate change.

Turning to other manifestations of collective trauma as they relate to climate change, a 2021 study of 100,000 young people across ten countries also found that respondents in all ten countries were highly worried about climate change.[40] More than half of young people reported feeling sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty, and 75% said that they believed that climate change rendered the future 'frightening.' This increased fear of the future induced by climate change is also deftly chronicled in the work of Kaplan, a cultural critic who examines how it manifests in the prevalence of futuristic dystopian scenarios in various types of media.[41] While the aforementioned survey highlighted the individual trauma responses of youth, it is notable that when viewed from the perspective of communal trauma, the reaction of young people, along with representations in the media, correlate with Volkan's observations that communal reactions to climate change include expressions of shock, chaos, survival guilt, a shared anxiety, helplessness, and a loss of safety.

Most descriptions of collective trauma, however, privilege the human community over and above the larger ecological community in which human life is a part. Given that humans cannot live more than a few days without fresh water and not more than a few minutes without oxygen, the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world

seems obvious yet is frequently overlooked. Swain draws upon ecotheologian Mark Wallace who argues that the earth should be seen as a 'living organism' itself rather than a commodity to be bought and sold. This organism also undergoes ongoing trauma in the form of ecological devastation, not only evidenced in increasing carbon dioxide emissions levels and severe climate-related weather events, but also in disappearing plant and animal species, which impacts the organism's adaptation and resiliency.[42] The human reactions to the climate crisis become even more understandable when one considers that humans are a part of the broader ecological world, rather than separate from it. McCarroll notes that 'ecopsychologists emphasize the intrinsic organic ways human emotions and bodies are part of the earth and expressive of its distress in specifically human form.'[43] Similar to the way that relational trauma within a family system impacts both the individuals and the system itself (albeit in different ways), frameworks of collective trauma recognize that ongoing trauma in the larger web of life impacts the health and flourishing of both individuals and the entire community. Humans are both 'dependent and emotionally and physically regulated'[44] as part of the earth and therefore mirror the distress of the earth. Yet, without recognition of this interconnectedness of all of creation and the way(s) that this traumatic stressor may be functioning in the community, it also cannot be acknowledged, mourned, and integrated in the form of action on behalf of the earth.

Embodied Cognition and Collective Trauma

Theories of embodied cognition also highlight the connections between humans and the broader ecological world, providing another vantage point through which to view the experience of the climate crisis as collective trauma. Embodied cognition, or 'the extended mind,' argues that mental processes are not confined to the brain, but that knowledge, experience, and memory are active processes that involve our whole bodyselves and the way(s) they interact with the surrounding environment. Ann Pederson and Jennifer Gubbels (professor of religion and biology respectively) have done research on the ways that embodied cognition and epigenetics speak to the communal heritability of trauma and also to its spiritual – religious manifestations; in particular they examine the interrelationship between the loss of geographical spaces and trauma as this plays out in several communities of First peoples in the US.[45] They remind us that, 'Our memories extend into the environment around us and also the environment or ecology of our place leaks into the expression of our memories.'[46] Pederson et al. note that people often feel like they 'lose their memory' when a fire or flood destroys a particular place, or family heirlooms such as pictures, furnishings, and mementos. Given this analogy, it follows that the ongoing devastation of the natural world might also impact our collective memory in similar ways.

Theories of embodied cognition intersect with the science of epigenetics, which 'examines the expression or suppression of genes based on environmental exposures without changing the genetic code itself.'[47] Studies in epigenetics reveal that during and after traumatic experiences, the expression of certain genes can change and be passed down to subsequent generations. This theory, however, also emphasizes that biology is not the only factor in the inheritability of intergenerational trauma, rather, it involves a mixture of genetic, environmental, contextual, spiritual, religious, familial,

and cultural factors. Pederson et al. reveal that stories about historical trauma may be inherited through bodies, the blood of ancestors, memories, and communal religious practices. All of this influences the way that generations cope with and express the effects of historical trauma: 'Where and how we remember shapes what we remember.'[48] Social scientists Katerina Walters et al. have engaged in an exploration of diverse types of historical trauma. From their research, they suggest that those events that cause 'direct physical harm to community, body, land, or sacred sites'[49] are more likely to be associated with PTSD and anxiety than other types of events. On a communal level, these theories have been borne out in the experiences of the first peoples in the US, whose communities frequently exhibit higher instances of trauma responses than in the general population. It follows that a country such as that of the US, with a history of pervasive and ongoing ecocide and destruction of the very earth that nourishes and sustains life, the relationship between our bodyselves and our geographical environment could become an instance of traumatic memory that could also be passed to subsequent generations through intergenerational trauma.

Given this reality, it is also possible that some (or many) of the collective trauma responses that we spoke of earlier could be some combination of traumatic collective memory and/or a manifestation of epigenetic alterations that may emerge as 'embodied memories' in light of certain situations, notably the ongoing destruction of the natural world, natural disasters, loss of landscapes and species. Pederson et al. also highlight that intergenerational trauma can be passed through certain religious practices. When considering the climate crisis, it seems plausible that theologies that have justified the domination of peoples and the natural world (while also providing theological rationales for such behaviors) would be prime places where this might have occurred.

When attending to the importance of social location, this further highlights the possible presence of collective trauma around the climate crisis, including the fact that this collective trauma is likely more apparent in certain communities than others. As noted by Swain, the history of the US includes:

> two deep and variably un/conscious scars of colonization: (1) the historic enslavement of African persons from another continent . . . and (2) the slaughter and disavowal of the rights, land, culture and self-determination of the first peoples (at least in the United States)[50]

This history becomes increasingly important as theories of intergenerational and historical trauma recognize that collective traumas such as those mentioned by Swain can also become inscribed on the body, and that cumulative exposure to traumatic events in communities creates environments where traumagenic events are more likely to be experienced as traumatic. Given the disproportionate impact of climate change on populations who have already been subject to other types of human-caused collective trauma due manifestations of racist, sexist, classist and exploitative economic systems and policies (notably communities of color, those whose livelihood is connected to the land, and those in the global South) it becomes a distinct possibility that the ongoing loss from climate disasters and/or the loss of species and landscapes could be experienced as a communal traumatic stressor in these communities. In line with Hirshberger's analysis, those communities might respond more as 'victims of collective trauma' as opposed to 'perpetrators.' It follows that the traumagenic event of the climate crisis would be less

likely to be experienced as collective trauma in communities that have not experienced as many intersecting and overlapping forms of human-caused trauma and are not subject to the same frequency and severity of tangible markers of climate change. It is in the latter that people might be more likely to respond as 'perpetrators of collective trauma.'

Healing Collective Climate Trauma

Expanding the conversation around the climate crisis in pastoral theology to include the presence of collective trauma also impacts dialogue about healing and integration. While there are a variety of frameworks for healing collective trauma, many of them focus on building resilience in communities in the wake of the traumatic event. Resilience is a concept that comes from the realm of physics, regarded as the ability of a substance to withstand force or to absorb energy. It is a material that can absorb pressure and bend, but then bounces back to its original form. Transporting this concept to trauma healing is a bit misleading, as human beings and the created world do not simply 'bounce back' to their original state or level of functioning after a traumatic event, but are often changed in a variety of ways. Resilience can involve the presence of post-traumatic growth, though not always. Clinician Leslie Davenport, in *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change*, defines resiliency as.

> the capacity to face and handle life's challenges with flexibility and creativity and relies on a set of skills and perceptions that can be cultivated with practice. . .. Resilience means rediscovering and cultivating forms of inner strength that we may not realize already reside within us. It is the capacity to tolerate difficult feelings, which also expands our capacity to experience greater joy. Resiliency helps to grow beyond our current comfort zone to develop a fiercely compassionate and honest engagement with life.[51]

While Davenport's definition of resilience is worthy of attention, psychologist Jack Saul, in *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing*, also differentiates between individual and communal resilience. He notes the importance of contextuality in communal resilience, alongside attending to the collective processes of readjustment and adaptation in the wake of the traumatic event.[52] Psychologist Froma Walsh, noted for her work on family resilience, has called for a multisystemic, resiliency-oriented approach to healing from collective trauma. She names three integral social processes in facilitating communal resilience: belief systems (including meaning-making, transcendence, and spirituality), organizational patterns (flexibility, connectedness, and economic and institutional resources), and communication.[53] Psychologists Hobfoll, Watson and Bell et al., contributors to the standards for mass causality, propose five essential elements of communal intervention based on clinical studies. These are promoting a sense of safety, calming, a sense of self and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope.[54]

Collective trauma necessitates communal methods and spaces for healing and integration. Many studies have spoken to the power of spiritual and religious practices and actions as a tool for fostering safety, resilience, and posttraumatic healing and growth in the midst of trauma and suffering.[55] Eco-theologian Pihkala reminds us that the communal life of faith communities can offer 'a safe place, a so-called holding environment' in which traumagenic events can be processed. He notes that the rituals of faith communities invite participants into holistic communal ways to engage their bodies and minds.[56]

Embodiment and Theology

Attention to embodiment in the field of pastoral care/practical theology (and in other arenas) in the healing from trauma, grief, and violence also becomes relevant to this conversation. As noted in the field of somatic psychotherapy, if trauma becomes inscribed on the body, this necessitates methods of intervention and integration that privilege and center the body. The science of embodied cognition comes alongside these assertions in its emphasis on embodied activity as essential for meaning-making. Pastoral theologian James Jones reveals that bodily activity changes how we experience ourselves and the world, and how we make meaning of experiences. He notes that reading, thinking, and arguing alone will rarely give rise to new or transformed religious convictions and moral actions. If knowing is an embodied activity, then 'new or transformed religious understandings will arise primarily from new or transformed embodied practices. . .. Making meaning is not simply thinking; it is also engaging in embodied, meaning-making practices.'[57] This is increasingly important in the case of collective trauma, where we know that meaning-making is disrupted. Scholar-practitioner Resmaa Menakem, known for his work on racial trauma, also speaks to the importance of communal embodied practices in healing the collective trauma of racism.[58]

Research on embodied knowing highlights that 'it is by listening to our bodies, and the many ways they manifest and communicate earth's suffering, that we may discover pathways for earth-bound healing.'[59] As noted earlier, humans are both 'dependent and emotionally and physically regulated' as part of the earth. We know that human physiological arousal can be regulated by being in nature. Perhaps it is as simple as inviting communities to spend more time mindfully engaging with the earth, as movements like the Wild Church Network[60] exhibit. Scholars of pastoral care such as Carrie Doehring note that 'spiritual integration at an embodied, emotional level comes about through spiritual practices that foster compassion, particularly self-compassion'[61] Practices of 'embodied compassion' toward the self and others (and I would add, toward the earth itself) elicit pro-social responses in the face of suffering, while also fostering positive emotions such as gratitude and love, making people and communities more resilient. These practices create new neural pathways that, over time, can begin to transform the ways bodies respond to stressful situations. As such, individuals and communities need practices that center embodiment and offer individual and communal practices of embodied compassion, a compassion that extends to the suffering of the world. These practices will also aid people in remaining grounded in situations that are chronically activating, such as prolonged anxiety and stress that arises from an ongoing collective trauma like the climate crisis. They will enable communities to regain a sense of self, community efficacy, connectedness, and hope.

Theologies of domination over the natural world have likely contributed to ongoing collective climate traumatization in religious spaces in both individuals and communities. Swain and McCarroll note the need for reconfigured theologies that support 'earth-centered rather than colonizing' approaches to life, center the suffering of the earth, and hinge on values of mutuality, reciprocity, and interdependence. These are theologies that connect the suffering of our own bodies and communities to the suffering of our wider body, the natural world. McCarroll draws on the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass* to suggest a theology that sees humans as

'earth-formed creatures' who are called to embrace postures of receptivity, humility, and gratitude toward the earth. This moves humans toward a relationship of reciprocity with the earth that enables all of life to flourish.[62]

Theologies of trauma, such as that of Shelley Rambo, also become important. Rambo recognizes that trauma shifts many theological concepts, including those of death and resurrection. She claims the nature of trauma disrupts our primary claims about death and life. In her words, 'We come to see that the relationship between death and life is a more mixed one. Death is not an event that is concluded. Neither is life victorious . . . on the other side of it. Trauma uncovers the middle of this narrative in that it reveals a theological territory of remaining.'[63] Our experience with a natural world that is literally groaning with pangs of death while at the same time supporting life speaks to this interplay between life and death. What might it mean for human communities to attend to the way(s) that the earth engages in a witness of 'remaining' amid ongoing, destructive forces, and allow it to speak its wisdom to us?

Practices of Lament and Mourning

Communal practices of lament and mourning – practices that religious communities have modeled for generations – are crucial in the healing journey from collective traumatic experiences. They create space for communities to voice and mourn the losses that have occurred, recognizing the grief of God and others in the face of traumatic events. Lament is truth telling, and through this truth telling, it brings the darkest of experiences into the light for God and a community to bear witness. We also know that the process of bringing these situations of disorder to speech also helps trauma survivors to fully experience, embrace, and integrate these emotions and experiences. Wray suggests that communal mourning in particular 'shows what we choose to value' and carries both ethical and political weight, enabling groups of people to stand together against injustice. Mourning externalizes private grief into a public event, while also offering support and cultivating resilience: 'when private pain becomes a political-working through, possibilities for structural change emerge.'[64]

There are communal barriers to lament and mourning, however, that can stand in the way of these important practices. In terms of collective trauma in particular, Robben's work with the Argentine dirty war reveals that the combination of denial and chronic anxiety in communities that have experienced collective trauma has resulted in impaired mourning in those communities. Yoder names other obstacles to grief and mourning, including trauma that is ongoing, fear of being overwhelmed by emotions, an inability to face what has happened, and/or a fear that acknowledgment of the cause of trauma would threaten the existing social and political order. Given the climate crisis in particular, there are many potential barriers to lament: it is both a trauma that is ongoing and one that is consistently denied; it provokes fear and anxiety; there is an absence of a coherent communal narrative of the trauma. The role of guilt and shame in the climate crisis (brought on by the fact that the victims of collective trauma are also the perpetrators) is yet another challenge to being able to tolerate the work of remembrance and mourning without becoming emotionally activated and fleeing into an unhelpful defense strategy. As Yoder notes, 'regardless of the reasons why grieving and mourning are incomplete, the resulting frozen and suppressed emotions thwart healing.'[65]

Embodied cognition may provide one way of addressing these obstacles in its assertion that memories are connected to place and space. Research from Pederson et al. speaks to the importance of the first peoples in the US returning to certain geographic sites along the 'Trail of Tears' to engage in the work of retrieval and healing/integration of memories. This was followed by practices of art, music, dance, drama, cultural rituals, communal prayer, and ceremonies to give voice to stories of collective trauma and to allow space for public lament. Given this, it seems that the work of pastoral theology must be encouraging communal engagement with spaces in the natural world where 'what has been dis-membered can be remembered'[66] in order that it can also be publicly grieved and mourned. Identifying the power of communal public lament (and the barriers to it) alongside the example of practices of the First People of the US, such as the one above, provides glimpses of hope and healing for humans and the natural world amid collective climate trauma.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've argued that collective trauma provides a necessary lens for viewing the climate crisis, both in signs and symptoms of collective trauma that mark communal life and in the ways that the theory of embodied cognition sheds light on human interaction(s) with the ecological landscape. The theories of collective trauma have much to offer pastoral/practical theology in terms of future implications for practice and research. As caregivers ask important questions about the care of communities experiencing the climate crisis, the lens of collective trauma provides not only an explanation of some of the way(s) that the climate crisis might be influencing communal behaviors and social bonds, it also impacts conversations around healing and resilience, including the crucial role of public witness and action for justice on behalf of the earth. Future research would be well served to inquire further about the presence of collective climate trauma in the care of communities, particularly as the field seeks to construct more trauma-informed, earth-centered approaches to caregiving amid the climate crisis.

Notes

1. United Nations, "COP29 climate talks end with $300 billion annual pledge, Guterres calls deal a 'base to build on,'" *UN News*, November 24, 2024. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157416 (accessed April 15, 2025).
2. For example, environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2011) has coined the term *solastagia*, a combination of solace and nostalgia and speaks to the reality that places and place connections which used to give solace are being destroyed. Panu Pihkala (2018), trained as a theologian, is well known for his research on eco-anxiety, often engaging interdisciplinary methodologies and perspectives.
3. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*.
4. Zimmerman, *Trauma and The Discourse of Climate Change*.
5. Craps, "Climate Trauma".
6. Woodury, "Climate Trauma".
7. Bednarek, "Climate Change, fragmentation".
8. White, "States of Emergency".

9. See LaMothe, "This Changes Everything"; *A Radical Political Theology for the Anthropocene Era*; "Climate Emergency as Revelation".
10. See Miller-McLemore, "Climate Violence and Earth Justice"; "Trees and the 'Unthought Known'".
11. Swain, "Climate Change and Pastoral Theology".
12. McCarroll, "Embodying Theology: Trauma Theory, Climate Change"; "This Changes Everything"; McCarroll and Kim-Cragg, eds., *Practical Theology Amid Environmental Crises* (MDPI AG, 2023).
13. Lartey, and McGarrah Sharp. "Seeking Steadiness in Storms"; Lartey and Moon, eds., *Post-colonial Images of Spiritual Care*.
14. See above, Lartey and Sharp, "Seeking Steadiness in Storms".
15. See Swain, "Climate Change and Pastoral Theology".
16. See McCarroll, "Embodying Theology"
17. Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing*.
18. See Wray, *Generation Dread*.
19. Not only are communities of color more likely to experience extreme weather events caused by climate warming, they are also at greater risk for developing climate-related health impacts such as mortality, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, mental health, and heat-related illness. For more see Berberian et al. "Racial Disparities in Climate Change-Related Health Effects".
20. Saakvitne et al., *Risking Connection*.
21. Spiritual/religious struggles can include feeling punished by God, abandoned by God, questioning God's powers or how God could allow this to happen. Trauma can cause God to be experienced as punitive, wonder about God's love and goodness, and can cause discontent with one's community of faith.
22. Craps, "Climate Trauma," 275.
23. Clayton, Manning, Speiser & Hill, "Mental Health and Our Changing Climate".
24. Zimmerman, *Trauma and the Discourse of Climate Change*, 12.
25. As LaMothe notes, the neoliberal capitalistic system secures privileges for the few while leading to disproportionate suffering of much of the world.
26. Interestingly, this has also been reinforced by climate scientists, as evidenced in the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. See Pörtner et al., IPCC, Climate Change 2022.
27. See McCarroll, "Embodying Theology."
28. Robben and Suárez-Orozco. *Cultures Under Siege*.
29. See Hirshberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction".
30. Hirsherger, "Collective Trauma," Part I, "Victims."
31. Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators".
32. Giesen, "The Trauma of Perpetrators," 114.
33. Hirshberger draws on Primo Levi (1959) here.
34. Some of Volkan's works include *Bloodlines, From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*; *Blind Trust:* and *Killing in the Name of Identity*.
35. Yoder articulates Volkan's categories in *The Little Book of Trauma Healing*, 47.
36. See McCarroll, "Embodying Theology: Trauma Theory, Climate Change, Pastoral and Practical Theology" for a fuller description of these trauma responses.
37. McCarroll, "Embodying Theology," 4.
38. Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope".
39. Also see Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing.*
40. Hickman et al., "Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change" .
41. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*.
42. Swain, "Climate Change and Pastoral Theology."
43. McCarroll, "Embodying Theology," 6.
44. McCarroll, "Embodying Theology," 6.

45. Pederson et al., "Remembrance and Resilience".
46. Pederson et al., "Remembrance and Resilience," 1024.
47. Pederson et al., "Remembrance and Resilience," 1020.
48. Pederson et al., "Remembrance and Resilience," 1023.
49. Walters et al., "Bodies Don't Just Tell Stories, They Tell Histories".
50. Swain, "Climate change and pastoral theology," 618.
51. Davenport. *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change*, 51.
52. Saul, *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing*.
53. Walsh, "Family resilience: a framework for clinical practice".
54. Stevan Hobfoll et al. "Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention".
55. For more, see Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, and Pargament, "Spirituality: A Pathway to Posttraumatic Growth or Decline?".
56. Pinkhala, "Eco-anxiety, Tragedy and Hope".
57. Jones. *Living Religion*, 53.
58. Menakem. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma*.
59. McCarroll, "Embodying Theology".
60. For more on the Wild Church Network, see https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com/
61. Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, 10.
62. McCarroll, "This Changes Everything".
63. Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma, A Theology of Remaining*, 16.
64. Wray, *Generation Dread*, 208.
65. Yoder, *Little Book of Trauma Healing*, 60.
66. Bednarek, "Climate change, fragmentation and collective trauma."

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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