

Get Well Soon: Planetary Health and Cultural Practices

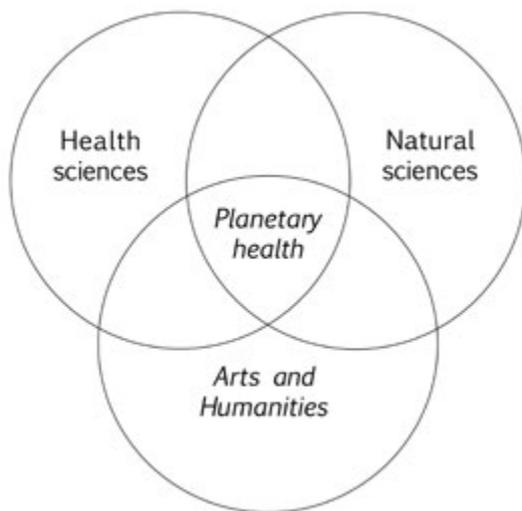
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Liberating Creativity and Criticality

As this double impulse activates feedback loops of social breakdown and ecological extinction, the supremacist fantasy of omnipotence, and its corresponding pathology of powerlessness, engender mental disorders from anxiety and depression to psychosis, afflicting both the oppressed, and the oppressors. As James Baldwin observes, “It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: ‘Whoever debases others is debasing himself’” (Baldwin, 1963). Unlike the deliberate brutality of colonial rule, the injustices of neocolonialism may be unwittingly perpetrated through negligence, ignorance and misrecognition. Within the mechanistic paradigm of cause and effect, the dualistic separation of nature from culture, and a system of law that favours private interests over the public and commons, harm

to people and the planet is routinely excused as the unfortunate consequence of legitimate business. For the people who have suffered trauma, injury, and illness as a result of what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” (2013) of ecological destruction, such excuses compound physical harm with the psychological burden of injustice. Meanwhile, for privileged people benefitting from this status quo, feelings of anxiety, guilt, and anger are repressed by an orthodoxy of positivity that dissolves criticality and suspends judgement. Such psychological defences can have a paradoxical effect — psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe examines how climate denial can attack the rational mind in a destructive feedback loop:



↑ Figure 7. Planetary Health and the Arts and Humanities, 2020 © David Cross

Disavowal can lead us further and further away from accepting the reality of climate change, with murderous and suicidal consequences. This is because the more reality is systematically avoided through making it insignificant or through distortion, the more anxiety builds up unconsciously, and the greater is the need to defend with further disavowal. (Weintrobe, 2013, p.7)

As Baldwin warns, “To defend oneself against a fear is simply to ensure that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced” (Baldwin, 1962). Confronted with the explosive injustices and existential threats of the social-ecological crisis, fear is part of a healthy response. But so too is creativity: alive to complexity and uncertainty, art and design can offer “safe spaces” enabling people to test their assumptions, compare different perspectives, and explore hopes and anxieties. By combining the power of creativity with the self-reflexive and emancipatory focus of criticality, people might envision alternative possibilities (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016, p.63), and make discerning choices between them. Here, then, is potential to develop the ideal of planetary health, bringing together ecological regeneration with restorative justice in a project of cultural transformation.



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