

CLIMATE PSYCHOLOGY

A Matter of Life and Death

*Wendy Hollway, Paul Hoggett,
Chris Robertson, and Sally Weintrobe*



PHOENIX
PUBLISHING HOUSE
firing the mind

First published in 2022 by
Phoenix Publishing House Ltd
62 Bucknell Road
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 2DS

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-912691-32-6

Typeset by vPrompt eServices Pvt Ltd, India



www.firingthemind.com

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Acknowledgements

As we have written this book as a collective, our acknowledgement is, appropriately, a collective one, and goes out to a larger collective, the Climate Psychology Alliance itself. This creature, perhaps part bird and part plant, has been developing for a decade now. Starting out in South-West England, it has grown to have rhizomes across the globe. There has been no grand plan, just a dedicated group of people making it up as they went along, some of them from the very beginning. They know who they are and we extend our thanks to them for tending to this creature with patience, diligence, and care.

It is sometimes asked, did the parent raise the child or was the parent also raised by the child? We have certainly been raised by our friends, colleagues and comrades in the CPA and beyond, and by the hundreds of discussions, online and face to face, that have accompanied this co-evolution. We extend our heartfelt thanks to them all and to the spirit of inquiry and the ethic of care that have marked these discussions, which have been our nourishment. We thank our readers of an early version, Matt Adams, Yaba Badoe, Colin Izod, and Breda Kingston, for their careful, incisive comments that occasioned a further round of thinking about the project of this book.

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Chris Robertson has been a psychotherapist and trainer since 1978. He was the co-creator of Borderlands and the Wisdom of Uncertainty, which in 1989 became the subject of a BBC documentary. In 1988, he co-founded Re-Vision, an integrative and transpersonal psychotherapy training with an ecopsychology component. He retired from Re-Vision in 2018. He was chair of the Climate Psychology Alliance, with which he still works.

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Climate psychology: a big idea (with Paul Hoggett). In: H. Flynn (Ed.), *Four Go in Search of Big Ideas* (2018). London: Social Liberal Forum.

Transformation in Troubled Times (co-editor) (2018). London: Transpersonal Press.

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Communicating psychoanalytic ideas about climate change. In: P. Garvey and K. Long (Eds.), *The Klein Tradition* (2018). London: Routledge.

The new imagination. In: Trogal et al. (Eds.), *Architecture and Resilience* (2019). London: Routledge.

Climate crisis: the moral dimension. In: D. Morgan (Ed.), *The Unconscious in Social and Political Life* (2019). Bicester: Phoenix Publishing House.

The climate crisis. In Y. Stavrakakis (Ed.), *Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory* (2019). London: Routledge.

Moral injury in neoliberalism's culture of uncare. *Journal of Social Work Practice* (2020).

Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare (2021). London: Bloomsbury.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: A matter of life and death

*Wendy Hollway, Paul Hoggett,
Chris Robertson, and Sally Weintrobe*

In late 2019, when the four authors discussed the idea of this book—brought together by a Climate Psychology Alliance meeting—we shared a sense of urgency. Climate activism in the UK had leapt into prominence with Extinction Rebellion, Deep Adaptation, and Greta Thunberg-inspired school strikes. Climate science—that combination of disciplines involved in the long hard slog of demonstrating that the global climate is really changing—was telling us that it was more serious than previously stated, that it was not an event that we could locate in a distant future, that there were feedback loops and tipping points that augured dangerously for the future of humanity and other species.¹

The dominant view of climate change relayed through the media is too narrow—focusing on carbon emissions and phased reductions of greenhouse gases—when earth systems being affected speak of a more complex problem concerning how human cultures related to the living planet. Humanity must change radically to overturn the assumption that the earth's resources can be infinitely plundered in the name of perpetual growth. This is a psychological and a cultural imperative,

¹ Over 13,000 scientists have signed the report, “World scientists warn of climate emergency” by W. J. Ripple, C. Wolf, T. Newsome, P. Barnard and W. Moomaw (2020). *BioScience*, 70(1): 8–12.

as well as an ecological one. Human beings of the global north—those we call Moderns throughout this book—will need to find and re-find unfamiliar connections to the living world, including our own living and dying bodies, including learning from still existing pockets of indigenous knowledges, albeit threatened by the pervasive spread of modernity and the neoliberal organisation of the globe. We are not starting from scratch.

Modern humans now live domesticated lives shielded from matters of life and death. Many younger people never come across dead bodies until attending a funeral, where, if the corpse is visible at all, it looks like it could come back to life at any minute. The deceased are often spoken of as having “passed on”. Death is present only in its absence. The dominant avoidant culture has treated the climate crisis in the same way.

The Covid-19 pandemic changed this. Death was in the air, as if carried by the unseen threat of the virus. Initially in the UK we cheered our doctors and nurses as protective heroes of this shielding. Subsequently they have been left to carry the burden of this exposure to death; of the aloneness of patients bereft of family as they breathe their last. This tragic state of healthcare (where it exists) is a reminder of the unsentimental aspect of nature, the precariousness and preciousness of life.

What does a conception of “nature” carry for culturally domesticated humans? Our destructive emotions seem to get disowned, projected outwards onto a dangerous, deadly “nature”, one that is split off from the life-giving mother and that has to be controlled and subjugated. When death is no longer part of life, as Rilke says, “Death is the side of life averted from us, unshone upon by us”. Death is to be shunned or cheated through fantasies of immortality.

Knowledge of this new and very imminent sense of danger to life systems has been spreading rapidly, especially amongst young people. It was clear that climate psychology needed to be loud and clear in its treatment of climate distress as a realistic response to real threat, and that repression and avoidance of the climate threat were psychologically unhealthy as well as fatal for the planet. We knew that climate distress was the hugest existential threat that mental healthcare or psychology would ever have to face.

This book is not about environmentalism, nor is it about practical solutions like clean energy, no-go fishing zones, new economics, or managing migration. The predicament we are addressing in this book is not the fact of climate destabilisation. Rather, we focus on facing the fact that humans, particularly those living in the global north, by continuing to live as usual, are bringing about widespread extinction. The reasons for this require psychological insight.

Climate psychology explores current existential anxiety and its associated defences, the ways old beliefs can be relinquished, and the ways we can open up to new ones. It imagines new sets of practices, forms of support, ways of living and being-with that can help communities survive and thrive. Climate psychology indicates a new way of imagining our internal worlds in all our connectedness and interdependence with the vital forces, the animate objects, the creatures with whom we share habitats.

Our title foregrounds the fact that the new age emerging with the end of modernity is one in which both life on earth and human culture in its diversity are threatened. From the Holocene, a period of relatively hospitable weather and less turbulence, we have entered the Anthropocene, typically described as the period when human activity dominates climate and environment. By this, we mean the period brought about by humans' failure to act within the limits of the earth's resources—a failure that gathered pace during the industrial revolution and the “Great Acceleration”² after 1945 and speeded up yet more from the 1980s during the neoliberal era. This encompasses the climate and biodiversity crises. In the phrase “anthropogenic climate change”, Modern humans are defined as the agent of this disastrous transformation.

Beyond Modern psychology to the eco-psycho-social

This is why psychology needs reimagining. Irreversible damage has already been done to the climate's stability that characterised the age of the Holocene, the 11,000-year period when our prolific biosphere

² J. R. McNeill and P. Engelke (2014). *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

and human civilisation co-emerged. Whatever happens next, however widespread the extinctions produced by climate destabilisation, there will be no return to climatic conditions as humans have known them during these last few centuries of modernity. This way of understanding the end of the world is not apocalyptic, in its literal meaning of the complete, final destruction of the world: we mean the end of the world as we know it.

This book explores an emergent field: the “eco-psycho-social”. While Modern thought became increasingly specialised with different frames, domains, and modalities competing and lacking interconnections, tipping points have been reached. Making those interconnections involves stretching psychology, climate psychology, ecopsychology, and psycho-social studies to points beyond familiar recognition, particularly for those schooled within a westernised Modern tradition. Linking psyche with social means an analysis based on the principle that the social environment shapes and is shaped by human *beings* (in the sense of experiencing, feeling, beings with *psyches*, both individual and group *psyches*). The link with “eco” acknowledges systems of reciprocal relationships with the other-than-human. This can transform the ground on which human practices towards the earth are built. Social science has tended to neglect this relationship with the natural environment because it has been seen as belonging to the natural sciences.

Fractured thinking and limited language

We four authors struggled with the inadequacy of current language to express what we wanted to convey. The climate crisis is a symptom of how modernity has constructed the world with humans at the centre. Our anthropocentric language mirrors back these same constructs, so it seems impossible to break out of the limits of our own thought forms. For example, as authors we felt trapped within a conceptual world still framed in binaries. When we sought to break out, we found ourselves constrained by the words that psychology and other ways of thinking afford.

Modern thinking creates either-or binaries, also called dichotomies: individual/social, human/environment, natural/cultural, thinking/feeling. The dashes we use between eco-psyche-social are constant

reminders to focus on the processes of interconnection and linkage. Humankind is part of nature. Social and natural environments are inside human creatures as well as outside. Picture the links as having arrows at both ends to indicate interpenetration.

Exceptionalism

However, escaping binary thinking will require more than merely modifying vocabulary. It will involve undoing hierarchical racial and gendered fracturing, allowing a more integrated concept of the “human”, genuinely “post”-modern. By fracturing we mean the tendency to split apart, to create oppositions and comparisons between things and ideas. One such is the distinction between human and animal, a distinction that erases the fact that humans are animals too while it serves the comfortable idea that humans are superior, an exception to what it means to be animal. As Melanie Challenger puts it in the opening lines to her book *How to be Animal*, “The world is now dominated by an animal that doesn’t think it is an animal.”³ Moreover, this hierarchical fracturing is applied by humans to humans, by granting fully “human” status—rationality, individuality, agency—only to the few, largely white, males who have held dominion at the top of this hierarchy throughout modernity.

Exceptionalisms distort the meaning of being human, robbing it of what humans have in common with each other and with other living creatures. Yet this view should not wipe out the real differences that exist between species of creature: sophisticated consciously experienced symbolic thought is, as far as we know, probably unique to humans. The profound changes required in humanity’s relation to all other living creatures on earth will involve mourning the idea that humans are exceptions, finding—and re-finding—a place to be human within more-than-human life and ceasing to define humans as having boundaries that demarcate each person as separate from what is external.

Many are now waking up to the wealth of unconscious and pre-symbolic communication in the human and other-than-human

³ M. Challenger (2021). *How to be Animal: A New History of What It Means to be Human*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

world; others never lost this. If we come out of the spell of privileging our abstract, dominantly linguistic world, we drop into animistic terrain where everything is signing to everything else in the intimate ecosystemic environment that evolution has produced. Plants and insects communicate, trees speak to each other through a fungal web, and the earth speaks to all in what Thich Nhat Hanh has called “interbeing”.

Re-animating the human

How do we—four writers shaped by residing within the Modern western world—start to think beyond its world-view? Let us start with an example whose intention is to describe human selves who, by being embedded in a part of the Amazon forest, are relatively untouched by modernist forces of “progress”. A key to the relation of the Runa people to their Amazon environment is in the idea of animism. Let us be magic-carpeted out of our Modern individual selves and deposited, briefly, with the Runa people in their ancestral living-forest home, courtesy of Eduardo Kohn, anthropologist.⁴

Settling down to sleep in the open on a trip with his Runa friend, Kohn recounts,

Juanicu warned me “Sleep face up! If a jaguar comes, he’ll see you can look back at him and he won’t bother you. If you sleep face down, he’ll think you’re prey and he’ll attack”. For the Runa, nonhumans are animate. They are persons.⁵

Before we continue, pause and consider what does and doesn’t make sense to you in this advice. Do you notice a resistance to its characterisation as a thinking creature, a strange personification of the jaguar? And perhaps—less accessible—was there a feeling of recognition, a fantasy of meeting the jaguar’s gaze in a mutual exchange of meaning?

A Modern individual, reading the above, will probably wonder how Runa come to treat non-humans like jaguars as having thoughts. For the Runa people, by contrast, their foundational assumption is “there exist

⁴ E. Kohn (2013). *How Forests Think*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁵ Kohn, op. cit., p. 1 and p. 93 respectively.

other kinds of thinking selves beyond the human”⁶ Kohn proceeds by applying a wider understanding of meaning and thinking than is familiar to us Moderns.

In the encounter anticipated by Juanicu, the key is that the Runa know that the jaguar is capable not only of being seen but looking back and having thoughts—capable of representation. This is what for Kohn makes selves “soul-possessing, signifying, intentional selves”. All living beings are, in this way, loci of selfhood. They all have a point of view. For Runa, “all sentient beings, be they spirit, animal, or human, see themselves as persons ... identical to the way the Runa see themselves”.⁷ At the same time, Runa can differentiate themselves from these other categories and understand the shape-shifting way their selves are distributed and can move into animals and spirits, for example the “were-jaguars”.⁸

This example is not provided in the spirit of advocating that Modern individuals can solve our position in today’s climate derangement by finding this specific kind of animistic relation to non-human living creatures. Kohn makes it clear that Runa living and Runa animism are pragmatic, deeply grounded in what is required of them to survive—to hunt and eat.

Kohn uses the word soul to mark the ways in which meaning-making selves are co-constituted in interaction with other such selves. Clearly there is a yawning gap between the Modern idea of the separate individual and this example of soulful selves from outside modernity. Yet the end of modernity faces us with the requirement of almost inconceivable change to human selves: an existential threat at species level with all the psychological effects this involves.

Joanna Macy makes more tangible the psychological upheaval when she points out the loss of certainty that “there will be a future for humans ... felt at some level of consciousness by everyone”. This, she says, “is the pivotal psychological reality of our time”.⁹ Do other cultures provide lessons here too? In *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2007), Jonathan Lear shows how Crow Indian

⁶ Kohn, op. cit., p. 94.

⁷ Kohn, op. cit., p. 95.

⁸ Kohn, op. cit., p. 109.

⁹ J. Macy (1991). *World as Lover, World as Self*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, p. 12.

society, faced by the onslaught of western civilisation, used dreams to struggle with the intelligibility of events that lay on the horizon of their ability to understand. The blind spot of any culture, according to Lear, is the inability to conceive of its own destruction. To face into collective catastrophe, such as the extinction of one's tribal environment or even of the end of human civilisation as we have known it, requires the courage to let go of known values.

Re-animating the planet

When the scientist James Lovelock proposed a view of planet earth as a connected living entity and called it Gaia,¹⁰ it was received with shocked opposition by many scientists. To understand the reaction to the Gaia hypothesis, it is necessary to consider how embedded scientific discourses had become within a male-dominated, patriarchal way of seeing, based on the belief that Man controls nature and the female. The Gaia hypothesis also unsettled existing separations of the sciences into discrete disciplines.¹¹ Lovelock and Lynn Margulis had pushed boundaries outside the usual limits of a predominant scientific ethos riddled with compartmentalisation, a certain fetishisation of measurement, ultra-empiricist caution, and viewing nature as passive. Lovelock's Gaia was "the fragile, complex system through which living phenomena modify the earth". Margulis, Lovelock's biologist collaborator,¹² proposed a "symbiotic" relationship of living molecules, equally shocking to the prevailing idea that units are separate, able to be thoroughly known in their individuality. That Gaia was misunderstood was likely due in large measure to the old available frame for construing nature. Gaia was made into a single organism, despite Margulis' insistence that "Gaia is not an organism" but "an emergent property of interaction among organisms": "symbiosis seen from space".¹³

¹⁰ J. E. Lovelock (1972). Gaia as seen through the atmosphere. *Atmospheric Environment*, 6(8): 579–580.

¹¹ Likewise, emerging earth systems sciences and complexity theory go beyond disciplinary divisions.

¹² J. E. Lovelock and L. Margulis (1974). Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis. *Tellus. Series A*. Stockholm: International Meteorological Institute, 26(1–2): 2–10.

¹³ L. Margulis (1998). *Symbiotic Planet*. New York: Basic Books.

The sociologist Bruno Latour clarifies just how radical Lovelock's introduction of the concept of Gaia was:

The simplification introduced by Lovelock in the comprehension of terrestrial phenomena is not at all that he added "life" to the earth, or that he made the earth a "living organism" but, quite to the contrary, that he *stopped denying* that living beings were active participants in biochemical and geochemical phenomena ... He refuses to *de-animate* the planet by *removing most of the actors* that intervene all along a causal chain.¹⁴

Bringing humans back down to earth

For Bruno Latour,¹⁵ the new climate regime involves a profound shift of the sciences (we include psychology) from an outside view (the view from Sirius, he calls it) to a terrestrial view. The outside view is abstract, rationalist, "objective"; it has been a part of the placing of nature as remote and, since the birth of modernity, a "factor in production". Only when we bring nature back close to the earth where we are located will it become instead a "whole range of transformations: genesis, birth, growth, life, death, decay, metamorphoses". The category "humans", opposed in binary fashion to "nature", compounds the problem here and Latour's preference is to use instead the term "terrestrials", which has the advantage of not specifying the species and not assuming *a priori* differences between humans and non-humans. It is defined by an entirely new politics, beyond left and right: "I am '*radically terrestrial*'. A whole set of positions that we shall have to learn to recognise, before the militants of the extreme Modern have totally devastated the stage."

Reimagining psychology

Existing psychology, the discipline often defined as the "science of the individual", has for over a century largely taken the view from the outside (in the name of objectivity). At the beginning of the twentieth century,

¹⁴ B. Latour (2018). *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime*. From the French *Ou Aterrir?* (2017), p. 76.

¹⁵ Latour, op. cit. Following page references, p. 70, 68, and 56 respectively.

in the wake of the gripping successes of the natural sciences, a new—scientific—psychology strode onto the scene. Stringent methodological principles defined what counted as scientific research: null hypotheses, controlled laboratory conditions, operationalisable behaviours, quantification, psychometrics. What counts is what can be counted and if it can't be counted then it doesn't count. A psychology of this kind falls short in the following ways.

1. It is individualising.
2. It focuses on behaviour and neglects conscious and unconscious meaning.
3. It is preoccupied with “what” and “how” and neglects “why”.

The domination of the individual in modernity has been helped by the discipline of psychology, with its founding assumption about the separateness of the individual from its surroundings. An Anthropocene¹⁶ psychology needs to go against the grain of this narrative. It must attempt to uncover as yet unthought characteristics of being human.

Climate psychology has borrowed and invented a new set of methods,¹⁷ based on different epistemological foundations, methods designed to delve “beneath the surface” of the rational intentional individual subject.¹⁸ We illustrate just one of those methods here, social dreaming,¹⁹ which is especially appropriate for topics that, because of their existentially threatening nature, are unlikely to be articulated in typical research circumstances. Dreaming as a way of knowing has a long history in psychoanalysis and in pre-modern cultures. Social dreaming not only moves away from cognitive knowing towards an emergent feel-knowing but it removes focus from individual symbolic meaning by enabling the construction of

¹⁶ M. Adams (2020). *Anthropocene Psychology: Being Human in a More-Than-Human World*. London: Routledge.

¹⁷ A range of methods useful for climate psychology was presented in a previous CPA-inspired book *Climate Psychology: On Indifference to Disaster*—frame analysis, group inquiry, interviews which deploy imagery as well as words, naturalistic observation.

¹⁸ S. Clarke and P. Hoggett, eds. (2009). *Researching Beneath the Surface*. London: Routledge.

¹⁹ J. Manley (2018). *Social Dreaming, Associative Thinking and Intensities of Affect*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

a social matrix or collage of dreams and associations that bring to thought ideas and images that are normally kept at bay because they are “unconscionable”.²⁰

Here is a good example of such a dream, from a social dreaming matrix about climate change:

[In my dream] I remember hearing that a friend’s Great Aunt Vera was driving and that she shouldn’t because she is so frail and I had to do something about it, but I didn’t know where she lived, apart from the fact that it was in Devon. So I went to a local post office store and asked the lady there if she could help. She said she was bound to know someone who could track her down. She went into the back office in the back of the shop and came out again and said “Sorry, we haven’t been able to find Vera, but I believe she isn’t driving, but rowing down a river”. I said “Vera? Rowing down a river? She’s far too frail for that!” Apparently the way she had done it was she had an inflatable snowman in the bow of the boat with two ropes attached to it, and if she pulled the snowman forward and let it go, it sprung back and rowed the boat ... end of dream.

So often, encountering a dream for the first time, it feels like there’s no sense to be made of it.²¹ The point here is to demonstrate how different the “data” of social dreaming are from what scientific psychology would produce or feel able to analyse. Attitude surveys, for example, work for certain kinds of questions and they assume self-knowledgeable respondents; transparent, logical, individual minds. Social dreaming asks questions about the kind of knowing that lives beneath the surface of the conscious mind: it assumes unconscious processes of knowing and of processing experience. When it comes to the “unthought known”²² of climate change, such a method is insightful, although control and certainty are not on offer.

In this book, the idea of psychology being about “individuals” will be stretched. Thus, we begin to reimagine human psychology beyond its Modern straitjacket. Here psychology means how we live

²⁰ See J. Manley and W. Hollway (2019). Climate change, social dreaming and art: thinking the unthinkable. In: P. Hoggett (Ed.), *Climate Psychology. On Indifference to Disaster*. London: Palgrave, pp. 129–152.

²¹ Some analysis of this dream can be found in the Manley and Hollway reference, above.

²² Christopher Bollas introduced this concept in *The Shadow of the Object* (1987).

our personhood, the sum of capacities that a person can draw on over time to enact our places in the living world. We are part of a Gaian, interconnected living earth, but humans are also a unique species: human consciousness and human action must be part of the transformation.

Writing together

Our relationships to humans as well as other-than-humans are at stake here. The climate psychology we and others are in the process of defining involves a new ethical basis in relating. In CPA we are building collaborative models for changed future contexts. At the same time, we four come from different psychological backgrounds, shaped through various therapeutic and academic trainings and practices, over many decades. Each chapter represents a unique voice influenced by the others as readers. Through this diversity, we share a vision that has emerged gradually.

We wrote our chapters during the Covid lockdown of 2020, meeting online to discuss our chapters in turn. Our writing processes needed to reflect a collaborative principle through the linking of our unique voices represented in each chapter along with co-authors' multiple readings of drafts. In the first instance, we wanted to locate our many differences, to find similarities and to further clarify what each of us meant to convey. We found we needed to generate a style of thinking and talking that questioned and avoided academic conventions of intellectualised critique in favour of a relational style.

The often-linear logic of intellectual writing gradually made way for something more free-form. We found that a personal imagination expressed widely recognisable cultural themes, with which we hope readers can readily identify. We could celebrate differences by holding them relationally and finding new links. In this process we were changed (see Ending chapter). We valued living with the uncertainty of where a given chapter, or idea, or method, or recommended reading would end up. We started enjoying the "not knowing" and the creativity that could only emerge through our several minds in collaboration. Our experience in this group of four is of being nourished by the kind weather of respect: we took each other and our

differences seriously, and we felt taken seriously. That gave room for thinking to grow.

To think further with ideas that could feel uncomfortable, we needed the containment of the group. We rediscovered what we knew well from more therapeutic contexts: the importance of checking in at the beginning of a meeting, to find out what we each brought from our lives (lockdowns, isolations and separations, insomnia, health, birth, death or just shopping). There is no clear-cut separation between climate psychology and everyday existence. Even more so during a pandemic. Our different backgrounds and traditions made for a rich loam. These helped us forge links between eco, psyche, and social.

This loam includes Wendy's experience in academic writing, her penchant for historical critique, concern for adequate methodologies, and involvement in psycho-social research and feminist psychology. All this balanced by a love of psychoanalytic thought and growing sensitivity to bodies' communication. During the writing, she was changed by ecological and more-than-human literatures. Chris brought experience of directing a transpersonal psychotherapy training. He draws on post-Jungian ideas and includes ecopsychology. His attention was with process and flow in approaching the unknown and attending to liminal spaces. He often struggled with a language that could carry intensity of thought, the terrible dark emotions as well as the creative possibilities. Paul has been fascinated by group psychology for more years than he cares to remember and has found rich material throughout his long engagement with politics. He started working life in community mental health, went on to be a researcher and academic, and has finished up near to where he began but this time working in private practice as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. Sally has spent her professional career working as a psychoanalyst, first in the NHS and then in private practice. For over a decade now, her focus has increasingly been on the human climate that is driving the climate and environmental crisis. This has led her to widen her area of study to include politics, culture, and groups.