

# Imagining a future for psychotherapy in Aotearoa

Claire Miranda

PSYCHOTHERAPIST, WELLINGTON

## Abstract

This paper discusses Donna Orange's idea that Levinas's philosophical position of radical ethics, when combined with the psychoanalytic concept of intersubjectivity, could unravel blindness to the climate crisis. Genocidal colonisation by Europeans across the world is a disavowed history that has been ruinous not only for the colonised, but also for the internal worlds of the colonisers. We remain in the grip of a destructive competitive mindset, driven by the forces of shame, shame anxiety, and envy. Psychotherapists could play a part in a better future by articulating the emotional defences at play in ecocide and strengthening our own workforce and those who are fighting against the climate crisis, with group work.

## Whakarāpopotonga

E whakawā ana tēnei tuhinga i ngā whakaaro o Donna Ārani, mō te tūnga tirohanga ā-whakaaro a Rāwinia tino rerekē inā honoa atu ki te ariā tirohanga ā-hinengaro whakawhitiwhitinga kaupapa hei huri whakaaro ki te whakatūpatohanga o te huarere. He mate i tau, kua ki ngā tāngata taketake anahe, engari ki āna momo tirohanga ao hoki, te whakaurutanga kōhuru a ngā Iuropiana huri noa i te ao, he hitori whakahēhia kau ana. Kai te aro nui tonu tātau ki te here o te ao whakataetae arohaehae, takia ake e te wairua whakamā, pōraruraru me te hao. He wāhanga whakahiranga pai ake kai konei mō anamata mā ngā kaimahi whakaora hinengaro ki te whakaputa kōrero mō ngā tūwatawata o te taiao ka whakakaha ake hoki i ā tātau me te rōpū e whawhai nei i te kaupapa mōrearea.

**Keywords:** radical ethics; Donna Orange; climate crisis.

## Introduction

This paper is the text of an oral presentation at the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists' (NZAP's) *Ka mua, Ka muri* online conference in February 2022. The

---

Miranda, C., (2022). Imagining a future for psychotherapy in Aotearoa. *Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand*, 26(2), 25-29. <https://doi.org/10.9791/ajpanz.2022.08>

conference theme of looking to the future by looking to the past was discussed over three days with other panels highlighting NZAP's past, while this panel was invited to imagine a future for psychotherapy. The presentation focused on the global predicament of ecological overshoot. It discussed Donna Orange's idea that Levinas's philosophical position of radical ethics, when combined with the psychoanalytic concept of intersubjectivity, could unravel blindness to what is referred to in the media as "the climate crisis". It makes the case that genocidal colonisation by Europeans across the world is a disavowed history that has been ruinous not only for the colonised, but also the internal worlds of the colonisers. Many in the world remain in the grip of a destructive competitive mindset, driven by the forces of shame, shame anxiety, and envy. By using an informal tone in the presentation, I intended to show a rejection of elitism which I see as a key driver of the climate crisis, and to give a living experience of how being touched by the emotion of the climate crisis can be inspiring. I made the case that psychotherapists could play a part in a better future by articulating the emotional defences at play in ecocide and strengthening our own workforce, and those who are fighting against the climate crisis, with group work.

## Presentation

Kia ora koutou, I am Claire Miranda, and I live in Te Whanganui-a-Tara. I acknowledge the Ngai Tara as the tangata whenua here. I appreciate being asked to do this panel because I am scared about the future of psychotherapy in Aotearoa. I'm wondering how we could have a future at all, because we need a habitable environment for a future psychotherapy. We are assaulted with continual "unthinkable" disasters such as, recently, both poles of the earth hitting 10-30° hotter than usual, and an ice shelf in Antarctica the size of Rome falling in the sea last week — an event that was not even predicted by scientists (Wilkins, 2022). It is accelerating. Twenty million of our fellow human beings in Africa are going to starve in famine this year (Davies, 2022), not at some time in the future. Climate communicators in the media keep reporting environmental impacts of carbon pollution, to zero effect, because they seldom have any clue what drives our destructive behaviour. Governments continue to preserve the fossil fuel industry above preserving life on the planet, which makes no sense at all, and shows that climate change is a psychological problem.

Sally Weintrobe (2021) observed that Westerners are living quite ordinary lives in an unconscious, complacent bubble of "uncare" while the sixth mass extinction takes place. I took from her presentation at NZAP's 2021 webinar series *The Climate Crucible — Te Ipu Taiao* that we need to feel the crisis, and that psychotherapy's role could be to hold the heartbreak of the losses we face. I have held a group since then called *Te Ipu Taiao Hui*, and it has indeed strengthened and motivated group members. Donna Orange (2016), the psychoanalyst and philosopher, builds on Sally Weintrobe's work. She sees social justice as inextricably linked to achieving sustainability (which is well understood in the climate movement), she lays out the history of Westerners' blindness, and she describes the emotional causes of it. She says there are three feeling states that keep us double-minded about the ecological crisis: shame, shame anxiety and envy, which create an evasion of knowing. Echoing *Ka mua, Ka muri's* first panel, she says the world's murderous colonial history is so shameful that it has attacked our

very sense of self. Europeans enslaved people and stole indigenous lands, then committed genocides and erased cultures so it could all be forgotten. The process of colonisation still carries on today and colonisers are vastly wealthy because of those crimes. Did our forebears feel shame for those acts? I think they did. The Pākehā inheritance is not only a big house deposit from Mum and Dad, it is also a weakened sense of self. Shame is described as “an affect reflecting a sense of failure or deficit of the self” that paralyses and silences (Morrison, cited in Orange, 2016, p. 66).

Pākehā can't fully know about being complicit in climate change in the same way we can't fully acknowledge past land theft and genocide. Exploitation still goes on as we sit here right now using devices made in the “third” world, the world we are used to not caring about. Donna Orange (2016) says,

shame in the psycho-analytic system belongs neither to the patient nor to the analyst, but is intersubjectively generated, maintained, exacerbated, and we hope, mitigated, within the relational system. Likewise, shame, hiding our vulnerability and inadequacies in the face of climate change, emerges intersubjectively. (p. 67)

It is a vast Pākehā mental cobweb that disorients us and makes us feel like losers. Shame anxiety is felt when we fear that people will see that we are disorientated losers. Shame anxiety looks like narcissism in the individual; in society it looks like toxic, “tough guy” masculinity; in the world it looks like militarism. The US military budget is currently 782 billion USD, 500 billion more than its nearest counterpart! Yet the USA hawkishly and sometimes ludicrously (Bush, 2022) points the finger at other regimes as warmongers, human rights abusers and psychopaths. Donald Trump's “Make America Great Again” is a widely resonating expression of coloniser shame anxiety.

Orange (2016) believes that envy arises out of shame. Envy is anguish about your position and your place, thinking that a better position will solve that nasty shame feeling. Unlike jealousy, which is wanting what someone else has, envy is wanting more than them, wanting their position. If I could just be stronger, thinner, younger, have a PhD, then I could stop being this unimportant loser. A by-product of emotional deprivation and contempt, it has been called “rankism” (Fuller, cited in Orange, 2016, p. 76) and it drives the mindless consumption and degradation of the environment. While we can just buy things to make us look as though we are of higher rank, envy blinds us to the people we push out of the way to reach that better rank. Those suffering are totally ignored, forgotten and looked down on in classism and racism.

When I think about possession of Aotearoa being taken by essentially armed robbery, and then being sold and resold ad infinitum, and developed, i.e., ruined, just for the sake of avoiding the shame which the exploitation itself generates, the tragedy of it causes me so much pain. I trust Māori to look after the whenua, more than I trust the psychopathic market. At late-stage capitalism, there is nothing to lose, the rising sea will soon show us what Pākehā really possess anyway.

Orange (2016) proposes radical ethics as a counterforce to the climate crisis. Based on the work of the philosopher Levinas, whose idea was that we are “hyperbolically” obligated to the face of the suffering other, she says, “to address the crisis we are living in we must

come to feel the destitution of the homeless, starving and persecuted as our own persecution” (2016, p. 126). Orange says that “radical ethics means we cannot go on as we did yesterday, self-satisfied we are doing our best, shifting our personal responsibility onto the system... their faces forbid me to sleep comfortably and command me to respond” (p. 128).

To come out of this death wish, double-minded “bubble” thinking and become single-minded, we need to think and act for others all the time as though we owe them, let alone that we actually do owe reparations. You can’t be bystanders if you believe you are obligated to suffering people. Neville Symington (2008) talked about following a generous impulse as a way of forming a more creative self. If we had creative selves, we would not be in a state of shame, shame anxiety, and envy, gnawing the earth for coal and lithium, because shame and envy are held intersubjectively, individual acts of care and generosity to people who are suffering will help unravel the whole system.

If we used radical ethics, which just sounds like manaakitanga, psychotherapists would be compelled to contribute to the fight against the death of our ecosystems. Currently the urgency of the crisis is not being expressed publicly by most psychotherapists and psychoanalysts. An exception in Aotearoa is psychotherapist Rick Williment who held a hunger strike at Parliament in 2021. What is missing from the climate movement are communications that cut through and reach the public consciousness about the seriousness of what is to come. In our clinical work, it is stepping back and thinking that moves the work along rather than only listening to content. At the moment the world is only listening to content and not enough is changing in time, so I encourage you to become hybrid psychotherapists and opinion piece writers, using the taonga of psychotherapy to analyse this human impasse that imperils earth and all its creatures, even if you are not high ranking stars like yesterday’s Adam Phillips and Patricia Gherovici!

We could form relationships with artistic organisations to collaborate in storytelling, music and drama. Perhaps this would end up on Netflix and be watched by audiences currently glued to their devices, cosily avoiding climate reality. Did you know Jane Campion used a Jungian dream analyst in creating the film, *Power of the Dog?* (Monks Kaufman, 2021). The film explores power abuse, shame and envy.

Groups are a way out of lonely shame and envy. Donna Orange says about envy, “[i]f I felt that I fully belonged in the human community, I would not be interested in what you have, except to rejoice with you” (2016, p. 77). Robert Romanyshyn (2021) poetically described that there is a community of belonging in our profound climate grief. Another important role for psychotherapists is supporting activists, scientists and media people by conducting groups for them to help hold the immense fear and grief they are feeling. We can lend our weight and leadership to them, like Virginia Edmond has done by coming to every *Te Ipu Taiao Hui*.

I imagine we could help get other psychotherapists into the profession. Trainees could have placements working at our offices when we have left for the day, especially helping find placements for Māori psychotherapists. There are one hundred first year students this year at AUT. Could we help them get the experience they need? Could we increase our use of group supervision, even perhaps including less experienced people in our own supervision sessions to show them how we work? Because politics is such a numbers game, the activist in me wants to double or triple our numbers and gaining members through generous

sharing of knowledge and resources would generate the same generosity in them. All these things could continue to happen outside the economic system, the paradigm that truly matters.

You can join *Te Ipu Taiao Hui* on the first Monday of the month, online from 7-8pm.<sup>1</sup>

## References

- Bush, G. W. (2022, May 20). *George Bush confuses Iraq with Ukraine in gaffe* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eH3QqcUJnBY>
- Davies, L. (2022, May 12). Hunger crisis grips Horn of Africa — but 80% of Britons unaware, poll shows. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/12/hunger-crisis-drought-grips-horn-of-africa-but-80-of-britons-unaware-poll-shows>
- Monks Kaufman, S. (2021, November 22). How a dream coach helped Benedict Cumberbatch and Jane Campion put the unconscious on screen. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/nov/22/dream-coach-benedict-cumberbatch-jane-campion-unconscious-on-screen-the-power-of-the-dog>
- Orange, D. (2016). *Climate crisis, psychoanalysis, and radical ethics*. Taylor & Francis.
- Romanyshyn, R. (2021, March 27). *Psychotherapy for end times* [Paper presentation]. Te Ipu Taiao — The Climate Crucible webinar series 2021, NZAP, New Zealand.
- Symington, N. (2008). Generosity of the heart: Source of sanity. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 24(4), November.
- Weintrobe, S. (2021). *Psychological roots of the climate crisis: Neoliberal exceptionalism and the culture of uncare*. Bloomsbury Academic
- Wilkins B. (2022, March 20). 'Unthinkable': Scientists shocked as polar temperatures soar 50 to 90 degrees above normal. Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2022/03/20/unthinkable-scientists-shocked-polar-temperatures-soar-50-90-degrees-above-normal>



**Claire Miranda** is a Pākehā psychotherapist who has been working in private practice in Whanganui-a-Tara since 2011. Initially trained in Hakomi in Sydney, she returned to New Zealand and did further training through AUT and completed the NZAP Advanced Clinical Practice qualification. Currently, Claire is training as a group therapist, partly as an exploration of how psychotherapy could adapt to the climate crisis and mitigate it. She is interested in how psychotherapy and psychotherapists can help end the Age of Oil.

<sup>1</sup> If you are interested in joining the Te Ipu Taiao Hui contact Claire Miranda at [clairedasilvimiranda@gmail.com](mailto:clairedasilvimiranda@gmail.com)