



Book Review

Hot Mess: Mothering Through a Code Red Climate Emergency

Wiebe, S. M. (2024). Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 978-1773635668 (paper) CAD25.00; ISBN 978-1773637129 (e-book) CAD24.99. 196 pages.

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Numerous extreme weather events in recent years demonstrate that our economic and political systems must shift to prioritize care if we hope to weather the climate crisis and its cascading impacts on public health. Sarah Marie Wiebe (2024) places this argument at the centre of her recent book *Hot Mess: Mothering Through a Code Red Climate Emergency*. The term “hot mess” describes both Wiebe’s embodied experience as a new mother attempting to keep herself and her baby cool during a record-breaking heat wave, and our collective vulnerability to the many disasters, slow and fast, of the climate crisis (p. 20). As Wiebe stresses throughout the book, extreme weather events are connected not only to the global climate crisis as it intersects with public institutions, industry, and state policy, but also to our everyday, embodied reality as we feel climate change “in and through physical bodies” and intimate relationships (p. 134). Wiebe frequently deploys personal anecdotes to emphasize how, while the climate crisis is global in scope, lived experience provides critical knowledge for just how vulnerable institutions and people are to extreme weather events. The climate crisis is a crisis of social justice, and Wiebe is critical of how state of emergency declarations highlight power relations and inequalities in whose lives are prioritized and which crises are named as such. Indeed, *Hot Mess* uncovers how, under the threat of climate catastrophe, the personal is political at all scales of analysis.

Care as an ethical and methodological approach is paramount for Wiebe, who argues we must “reframe the relationship to our environment from one of crisis to one of care,” to address the many entangled impacts of the climate crisis (p. 23). Writing as a new mother, an accomplished eco-feminist scholar, and co-founder of the *Feminist Environmental Research Network* (FERN),

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Wiebe is well positioned to connect institutional failures of care with extractive capitalism and its deleterious impacts on the environment. As Wiebe writes, “the climate emergency is a public health emergency,” necessitating socially just policy that centres marginalized voices and prioritizes care-based relations with human and more-than-human others (p. 35). Climate emergencies expose the inadequacies of our current political and economic systems to address the multilayered crises before us. Even as a middle-class academic, Wiebe’s experience seeking care during multiple climate emergencies reveals our collective vulnerability to the harms of anthropogenic climate change. Building from this embodied understanding, Wiebe follows other critical feminist scholars in calling for a reworking of our political and economic system to prioritize care, while connecting human wellbeing to the environment.

Wiebe begins with her experience as a first-time mother during the global COVID-19 pandemic and extreme heat wave that took hold of the United States and Canada’s Pacific Northwest in the summer of 2021. This extreme heat event included some of the hottest temperatures ever recorded in Canada at the time, exceeding seasonal averages by up to 25°C above normal temperatures (p. 6). Hundreds of forest fires raged, forcing the government to declare a State of Emergency on July 20. In British Columbia alone, 619 people and an estimated one billion marine creatures died from health impacts caused by extreme heat (p. 6, 68). Later that year, on November 17, another State of Emergency was declared after record-breaking rainfall induced flooding and landslides across southern British Columbia. These interrelated emergencies set the stage for Wiebe’s interrogation of the hot mess of our climate crisis as it intersects with public health, state policy, and extractive capitalism.

Wiebe organizes her book through a series of vignettes using the hospital emergency colour codes system to further elaborate the entanglement of individual experience, public health, and extreme weather events. Wiebe’s commitment to decolonial scholarship is evident throughout the text as she foregrounds place-based connections to land and Indigenous knowledge. The first vignette, Code Red, opens with Wiebe’s struggle to avoid both wildfire smoke and the coronavirus while pregnant in the fall of 2020. A code red in the hospital emergency system denotes the threat of fire, and here it is expanded to connect the multiple states of emergency Wiebe experienced in 2021 with the Code Red climate emergency, formally identified by the United Nations that same year (p. 33). While climate change poses an existential threat to humanity, some bodies are more vulnerable to extreme weather events than others, necessitating the prioritization of marginalized voices in public health and climate policy.

Code Orange, which signifies mass casualties or a natural disaster, traces Wiebe’s time living on the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. Situated next to Sarnia’s Chemical Valley, one of the largest collections of petrochemical refineries in Canada, citizens of Aamjiwnaang First Nation are frequently exposed to an excess of carcinogens and pollutants. Wiebe draws on Rob Nixon’s (2011) concept of slow violence to posit prolonged toxic exposure,

seen in Aamjiwnaang, as a “slow disaster” that defies an understanding of disasters as quick and spectacular. Instead, slow disasters like the pollution of Aamjiwnaang First Nations highlight the ineffectiveness of colonial governance to address the environmental crisis as an ongoing, embodied reality. Used for pediatric and obstetrical emergencies, Code Pink focuses on Wiebe’s emergency “splash and dash” or crisis caesarean birth, where a medical emergency forces emergency caesarean surgery. Extreme heat, forest fire smoke, and exposure to toxic chemicals all impact maternal and fetal health. In Aamjiwnaang, citizens have sought to uncover the relationship between their toxic chemical exposure and impacts on reproductive and fetal health for decades. Wiebe connects her own traumatic birth experience with these ongoing environmental disasters to articulate the need for greater attention to the ways pregnant people are intimately vulnerable to environmental disasters that both unfold slowly over time or flash into being. In both Code Orange and Code Pink, Wiebe calls for an ethic of care within research and healthcare policy that prioritizes a more holistic approach to human health and wellbeing.

Code Blue (cardiac arrest) and Code Green (evacuation) critique colonial governance practices over water and land, and call for centering “care, justice, and community” as critical ecofeminist principles for addressing the climate crisis (p. 86). Wiebe argues we must “evacuate” from the current extractive, capitalist economy and move towards circular economies of care. Invoking Nancy Fraser, Wiebe understands the climate crisis as entwined with the ongoing crisis of care, as the work of social reproduction is devalued and relegated to underpaid and unpaid roles. Premilla Nadasen (2023) highlights how the care needs of the middle class are increasingly met through the exploitation of the social reproductive labour of the poor and working class through the care economy. Access to necessary care labour under capitalism inevitably leads to the exploitation of the most marginalized, as Canada’s Live-in Caregiver and Temporary Foreign Worker programs, rife with accusations of abuse and exploitation, demonstrate. For Wiebe, it is not enough to implement more governmental policies that, as Nadasen’s work shows, privilege the middle class at the expense of poor and working-class people. Instead, Wiebe calls for transforming our political and economic systems to prioritize care as the solution to the twinned environmental and care crises.

Code Black positions care as a necessary ethic for social transformation. Wiebe, drawing on Ingrid Waldron’s (2018) work on environmental racism against Black and Indigenous communities in Nova Scotia, highlights the role of militarism and police violence in perpetuating environmental racism against Indigenous and Black communities. For Waldron, environmental racism “operates as a form of racial and gendered violence that is produced and sustained by the state,” and is found within all institutions and levels of governance (2018, p. 5). Meaningfully addressing violence, environmental or otherwise, requires what bell hooks (2018) calls a “love ethic,” wherein the prioritizing of love and care reshape how we exist and move through the world

(hooks, p. 87, cited by Wiebe, p. 117). For hooks and Wiebe, this form of care foregrounds justice and community, antithetical to the dominant Western worldview. Code Grey, as a sign for system failure, argues that the current rush to transition towards clean, green infrastructures further entrenches violent, global, and extractive economic systems. So-called “green” energy requires the extraction of tremendous amounts of rare earth minerals, often found on Indigenous lands. Even further, the extraction, processing, and waste of such materials occurs disproportionately nearby to Black and Indigenous communities, overburdening them with exposure to chemical pollution. Wiebe argues that prioritizing care and community within our current extractive economy will mean prioritizing Indigenous self-determination coupled with a reduction in consumption. Wiebe’s suggestion of individual actions like “monitoring energy consumption” feels underwhelming given her insistence that we must urgently and collectively transform how we live (p.132). We should be skeptical that individual actions can be truly transformative given capitalism’s resiliency. Nonetheless, such actions might reflect a break with the dominant order and open possibilities for more radical ways of being.

The final chapter, Prismatic Reflections, returns to how emergencies reveal injustice, highlighting gaps within public policy that protect and value some lives – and ways of living – over others. The climate and care crises are not separate, but overlap and intersect, revealing how climate change, public health, and social justice are inherently intertwined. As Pérez Orozco and Mason-Deese (2022) argue, it is only by centering life and the conditions that enable it to flourish that we can decentre destructive capitalism and transition towards alternative modes of being in the world. Climate change, slow disasters, colonialism, extractive capitalism, militarization, inadequate public health; such entwined crises make precarity the condition of living. As Wiebe articulates throughout *Hot Mess*, relations of caring toward each other and our environment are necessary for a socially just world, but increasingly critical as the climate crisis intensifies. While some scholars will certainly want a more in-depth exploration of the various threads Wiebe touches on, she has nonetheless written an engaging and accessible book, foregrounding care as a vital practice for sustaining life under shifting climatic conditions.

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