

Epochs of Loss: Toward a Proposal for a Website, a Course, and a Book

(Friday discussion)

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Introduction

The invitation to present our work on the *Epoch of Loss* in this forum has given us the occasion to reflect on next steps and new directions. At a brainstorming session over beers in Bloomfield in early August, we discussed two related projects that felt appropriate to us: a website and a book of essays (on which we elaborate below); a third, a course, emerged in our subsequent discussions. Our idea is to encourage a diaristic sensibility that we hope will enable people to ruminate and reflect on the themes that continue to interest us in ways different from familiar academic and professional modalities of engagement with climate change, ways appropriate to its status as what Tim Morton calls a *hyperobject*--something “of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions” that it defies “traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place.” The Appendix to this document models this approach in part by providing something like an actual (though retrospectively created and curated) diary of our work to date.

We are aware of the irony in our continual striving toward outputs that will have some kind of permanence and intellectual legibility despite our relentless questioning of their utility. Whether this striving reflects the extent of our subjectivization *as academics*, or perhaps some deeper longing for control or coherence or simply a voice amid the irresolvable uncertainty of climate change, isn't fully clear to us. We have both been moved by Roy Scranton's reflections in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, despite our shared and personal reservations about the book. For Scranton, *learning to die* is a metaphor for letting go, a necessary precursor to the sober work of re-evaluating, and then curating, what we value. While letting go seems appropriate and necessary, it also feels like a kind of defeat. But how can we hang on and move ahead? How can hanging on militate toward the future rather than the past? In part, the answer lies in the work we need to do in repairing damaged relationships with fellow humans and other species and with the ecosystems that sustain us. Repair (in the sense of the Jewish concept of [Tikkun Olam](#), repairing the world through contemplative and affirmative activity, reassembling the shards of shattered vessels that once held divine light) is both backward- and forward-looking. It requires thoughtful consideration of the causes of breakdown and of the ways of mending what has broken and mourning what is lost, while simultaneously recreating something new and usable, not just instrumentally but also spiritually. Like the environmental philosopher Thom Van Dooren, in *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, we recognize that an entire world ends each time a precarious life form disappears, but that new modes of concern and accountability ripple out from instances of extinction as well.

Our Intellectual Trajectory

This struggle to evaluate the appropriate modes and temporalities of our personal and political engagement with climate change is a thread running throughout this collaboration, yet it also stands in counterpoint with some of our earliest thinking about it. Four years ago we were influenced by Van Dooren's *Flight Ways*, Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, the writing of the [Dark Mountain Collective](#), and articles like [this one](#). When we proposed a Sawyer Seminar on the theme of "Theory, History, and Culture in an Epoch of Loss," we were thinking about questions like these:

How should we begin to think about the imminent disappearance of massive numbers of species and our role in precipitating it? How can we appropriately record and collectively acknowledge these losses? How have people in the past dealt with climate change and environmental catastrophe? How can we take responsibility for and bear witness to the profound human suffering that will ensue? What modes of cultural expression befit such a time of loss, and what role can the arts play in helping us to acknowledge, mourn, and survive this loss? Can we afford the time to grieve our collective losses when there is so much practical work to be done?

We still take inspiration from some of these books as signposts for the near future and turning toward the inevitability of loss and its philosophical implications, but we have learned to read them in a new way and to turn toward ways of doing both less (less anguish and less solipsism) and more (more activity, more work for solidarity, more hope for justice) than some of these authors and our questions suggest.

Over the course of this work, we have become uneasy about terms like anthropocene and loss. Many peoples' worlds have ended, in different times and places, in different ways, and for different reasons. Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* and writing by NRDC Publications Director and climate justice essayist Mary Annaïse Heglar have helped us gain clarity on these points, as has the moving meditation by Jonathan Lear on the Crow chief Plenty Coups' narrative of his people's history and its end in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Attending to the work of Native scholar-activists like Nick Estes, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Deondre Smiles, Kim TallBear, and Kyle Whyte, we have come to recognize the urgency of centering Indigenous voices, science, and history in environmental politics.

Ruth has been influenced by Rebecca Solnit's work in *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, and by a whole range of work by historians and archaeologists who understand that collapse does not mean collapse for everybody and does not mean the collapse of everything. Collapse means that some people lose everything, but for others, collapse reveals the human propensity for community, joy, purpose, and altruism. Frequently in history, collapse has meant only the collapse of elite power. For everyone else, it has offered opportunities for new kinds of creativity, community, and control of resources. In Spring 2018, Ruth prompted the graduate students in her Cultural Studies seminar to think about Roy Scranton's urge toward curation by asking metaphorically, "what do you take with you when you discover that your house is on fire?" In response they chided her to think not

about things, but about solidarity. In the face of disaster, we need to start by making sure that people are okay, not by curating objects.

As Anna Tsing points out in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, delectable fungi may blossom in clearcuts and burn scars, and they may be harvested from there by foragers living outside the imperatives of capitalist labor discipline. David Graber and David Wengrow's forthcoming book, *The Dawn of Everything: A History of Humanity*, is the latest work to emphasize these points.

Michael has been affected by his study of the work of environmental justice and anti-climate change activists, whose struggles are, to a surprising degree, struggles over the meaning of the past, over the right to narrate and assign responsibility for injustice and collapse as a way of taking responsibility for the future. The example of the Water Protectors at Standing Rock suggests a politics of reflection and repair that manages to inhabit the past and the future simultaneously, moving dialectically between them in an effort to create the basis for the kind of solidarity we will need to survive and flourish in a broken world (see [Goodhart and Morefield 2017](#)).

He has also spent a lot of time reflecting on why [the climate change message isn't working](#). People can't or don't relate to messaging focused on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and their effects. Charles Eisenstein calls for a shift away from such abstract framing toward messages that value what is local, immediate, living, and beautiful. This approach, he insists, will still show people the need "to change nearly everything that the GHG narrative names as dangerous" – tar sands oil extraction, mountaintop removal, hydraulic fracturing (fracking), offshore drilling, road building – "but for different reasons and with different eyes." This narrative shift also decouples environmentalism from Big Science and institutional authority, ensuring that it doesn't become just another narrative of development; as Eisenstein writes, "protecting and healing local ecosystems around the world is much more disruptive to civilization as we know it than weaning ourselves off of fossil fuels."

The insight that inspired our early explorations of these topics was that there was much to be gained by sitting with loss rather than busily solving things with sustainability, innovation, "geoengineering," and so on. (The very term "geo-engineering," Holly Jean Buck has observed, suggests a level of accuracy, precision, and predictability for climate interventions that obfuscates, by design, the fact that we are essentially grasping at straws.) But this idea of foregrounding grief and loss went from seeming like it was ahead of its time to seeming like it was behind its time without ever having had its time. As numerous climate scientists have pointed out, there is a big difference between the five degrees of warming associated with doing nothing, and the two degrees of warming that may still be within reach. Any amount of warming that we can prevent makes a difference.

In thinking about this now, we attribute some of that "skip" to our own growing awareness and experience of the critique of reflection as a privileged stance and to well-founded worries about "[Apocalypse Chic](#)" as the latest academic fashion. But that isn't all: as we began to experience, with others, the collective traumas of the past several years -- the Trump (Bolsnaro, Johnson,

Duterte, Orban, Modi...), era, the Covid pandemic, the renewed activism for Black Lives that followed the murder of George Floyd -- and the mounting urgency of climate disasters -- the fires in Australia and California, floods across Europe and East Asia, the accelerating pace of desertification in the Sahel and Eurasia, relentless *melting* -- we realized, with others, that chaos and unpredictability belonged to the present, not to some abstract future, and that taking action was critically important. Yet we remain haunted, or perhaps spellbound, by the timeless wisdom epitomized on the Buddhist bumper sticker: "Don't Just Do Something: Sit There!"

What we are Proposing: Doing as Sitting

What follows is a set of notes toward a proposal (or proposals) for the next phases of this work. We seek and welcome your feedback! Some of these ideas are more "cv-able" than others; with each project we seek to subvert conventions even as we work within, and work our way out of, them. While each idea is free-standing, in the sense that any of the three ideas can be implemented on its own, they share a diaristic quality and a desire to combine (or blur the distinction between) academic/intellectual and personal/spiritual registers of contemplation. They also reveal our ongoing effort to reconcile our twin impulses to engagement and reflection.

I. Website

We propose a website organized around a collection of linked timelines with the capacity to accordion in and out of temporal scales and to shift back and forth between individual events and personal stories on the one hand, and eons of time on the other. We are inspired by projects like [this timeline](#) and [this website](#). We like the capacities of interactive web-based tools because they are so effective in permitting users to move seamlessly among temporal and spatial scales, from one place to another, between anecdote and data, and between individuals and vast populations. In short, the native language of the internet is a partial solution to the problem of the hyperobject, and in turn to the challenge of making space for compassion and action in the face of impossibly large problems. The idea is that hyperobjects require hyperlinks. A socially authored website with many links and many embedded feeds also allows the voices of many authors to coexist with one another and with snapshots of knowledge and feeling linked to specific calendar dates and events. The web environment makes it possible to incorporate graphics, images, sound, and video rather than relying on words to do all the work. The web epistemology of the network (by this we mean both social networks of people and linked networks of distributed content) creates virtual environments that are in some ways ecological, organic, and self-organizing, just like the world itself; and that, unlike books and conferences, remain constantly in flux and never "finished." Specifically, we envision a website that has at its core a set of six temporally-referenced facets that are intended to be linked to one another and to scroll together. Registered contributors will be permitted to add timelines of their own, while visitors can search and explore multiple linked timelines, build collections of timelines, and make comments.

When	Activity	Unanswerable Questions	The Wider World	Tickers	Books and Links
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- *When* is a chronological scroll through a calendar: of minutes or of eons.
- *Activity* is an authored, personal and potentially diaristic timeline of activity; or an annalistic chronicle of events in the past. It might be a timeline of an author's activism or an artist's process; or it might be information collected by an ecologist or an archaeologist.
- *Unanswerable Questions* prompts the contributor to track what they were thinking about during the same time that they were engaging in actions, or what they think about those events in the past. When did the contributor feel anxious or hopeful, overwhelmed or furious?
- *The Wider World* may be authored narratives of historical context about eras in the past, or it may be RSS feeds that aggregate posts from particular websites, or news items that contain particular keywords. The point is to recognize that activities and questions always exist in multiple larger contexts.
- *Tickers* are continuously updated feeds from sensors or recorded datasets. As time moves forward -- with its activities, questions, and context - other things change too: the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere, the amount of acidity in the oceans, the number of species that have become extinct, and the price of gasoline. The Tickers remind us of the consequences of collective action and inaction and they aggregate information that is beyond our control.
- *Books and Links* are curated bibliographies of further information or authored essays that group together periods of time for reflections which, while organized around the chronological logic of this site, may aggregate longer time periods for diaristic reflection or scholarly analysis: "The Summers of My Youth," or "Chinese Climate Policy during the Xi Jinping Era."

II. Book

The second dimension of this project will be a book in which we invite very numerous, diverse, and disparate reflections on our unanswerable questions. The idea for the book is as follows:

- We write an introduction or framing chapter that draws on and develops the ideas that we introduced in our "Unanswerable Questions" document.
- We share this document with colleagues, collaborators, contacts, and others, soliciting brief (less than a thousand words) contributions from a wide range of people who are

diverse across multiple dimensions (scholars, spiritual practitioners, activists, artists, , students, from around the world, occupying different social positions).

- We collect and lightly edit those responses, perhaps grouping them according to which questions they engage or to themes that we identify in reviewing them.
- We write a conclusion that reflects on what the contributors have written. Perhaps we also invite several contributors to do the same.
- A model (of form; the topic is entirely different) is *Should I Go to Grad School? 41 Answers to an Impossible Question*.

III. Course

While preparing for these two presentations, we received notice of an opportunity to develop a proposal for a team-taught course through Pitt's Humanities Center. After initially leaping at this chance (as we do!), we realized that our proposed course would not meet two of the key requirements for the proposal, namely, those related to disciplinary and pedagogical diversity. We decided not to apply for that opportunity, but instead to develop a proposal for an Honors College (or similarly serious) course that would put several dimensions of our work and reflection into pedagogical practice.

Specifically, we want to develop a course for undergraduates that has an architecture that incorporates contemplative practices. We want to employ drifting and gathering, listening and touching, thinking and making. We want to spend time outdoors, both at sites of great beauty and tranquility and in some of our region's "[sacrifice zones](#)." We may [ingest plastic nurdles](#) into our own bodies, as members of the Ohio Valley Environmental Resistance (OVER) group have just done. We want to incorporate regular and sustained meditational practice and reflection as part of our instruction and in the creation of the course environment.

We will ask students to read on and grapple with some of our unanswerable questions and to ponder their own. They will do a lot of diaristic writing of the type modeled in our website and in the edited book project outlined above. Working in small groups, students will engage in peer writing support and editing and also in frank discussion of their own hopes and fears related to climate change and to life in the near future.

Engaging with the Appendix

Along with this document, we have included an Appendix, which we have titled "A Chronicle of the Epoch of Loss." It is, literally, a chronicle of our collaboration from its first moments to the present moment. It is told through a reconstruction of email correspondence between Ruth Mostern and Michael Goodhart (and others), beginning on Saturday 30 September 2017, one day following a lovely coffee we shared in Schenley Plaza on a beautiful autumn day. Ruth was newly arrived at Pitt, and though we had met, we were only just getting acquainted. There are other artifacts included in the document as well, such as funding proposals, photos, and flyers

The document is not a complete archive. The correspondence has been selected to focus primarily on the Epoch of Loss work. It has also been lightly edited to correct obvious and egregious typos that impact comprehension and to omit names of those who have not voluntarily and publicly identified with this project. In addition, we mostly omit (after giving a flavor of) the many many messages that ask “where are we meeting today?” or “could we push back to 10:30?” or “this is the wrong document/attachment.” Even for people as curious about their own process as we are, these things lose interest quickly.

The emails are also - rather capriciously -- curated. Presenting a story through email is hard: some threads address numerous topics, as do some messages. The threads overlap, interweave, fall off and pick up; they go missing surprisingly often (Michael’s habit of switching email services doesn’t help). The story is told chronologically, except where it isn’t. In presenting it in this way, we’ve tried to capture a sense of the ebb and flow of the work (and the ideas), its serendipitous quality, and its banality -- even in its self-conscious intentionality.

Why did such an exercise of looking back seem like a thing worth doing? Our intellectual trajectory is visible here - in the emails and also in the grant applications. The Appendix is a manufactured palimpsest of our collaboration. It also reveals, sometimes surprisingly, the ways in which doing intellectual work is a material act (making time, finding places to meet, producing flyers) -- as well as an act of friendship and comradeship. We want to demystify, for ourselves as much as for you, what it has taken to get to where we are, , step by step (both forwards and backwards), email by email, coffee by coffee, insight by insight, deadline by deadline, while the wider world and the rest of our academic lives happen within and around our work on these topics. We’re curious to know what you think.