Diaries of the Epoch of Loss, or Introducing Some Unanswerable Questions
(background to Thursday conversation)

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This document is intended to frame a conversation, structured but unscripted, that moves within a constellation of questions that we've engaged during the course of several years of discussions, experiments, and explorations. In advance of this conversation, we want to foreground some of the key ideas and practices that have influenced us.

We are experienced social scientists who have garnered the rewards that academia offers to scholars who can demonstrate accomplishment in research and teaching in an empiricist mode. We have had decades of expertise in how to complete works of scholarship by articulating questions, formulating hypotheses, designing research activities to investigate those hypotheses, and finally producing assertive expository written documents that argue the facts we have discovered. In our Epoch of Loss collaboration, for the first time in either of our professional lives, we have failed to gain traction in those activities, and this document is in part a reflection about why that is the case.

One reason is that we have recognized climate disaster as the signal example of what the literary critic Tim Morton calls *hyperobjects*, entities "of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place." The hyperobjective character of climate change resists apprehension through traditional social scientific methods and epistemologies; it calls for new approaches, especially in the context of the social and political disruptions and movements for justice of the last few years that have further unmoored our certainties. Our uncertainty and our deep-felt intellectual and emotional and psychic need to find or create space for hope has led us to try to articulate <u>unanswerable questions</u> and to propose the development of platforms that permit people with many different perspectives to explore them without feeling compelled to try to resolve them. Put differently, we want to lean into our sense that the tools of our scholarly training are failing us here--and that that is okay.

When we talk about questions being "unanswerable," we don't mean that we can't give answers to them. We have lots to say! Rather, it's that our answers don't have the same valence as the conclusions that we typically reach in our scholarly work. Our allegiance to them is variable and contingent. The answers--the attempts at answering--are always somehow unstable, incomplete, frustrating, like what Patrick Porter has called (in a very different context) [wrestling with fog](). Here are some of our "unanswerable questions":
- Is "the Anthropocene" a useful or productive framework for characterizing our era?
- What about the concept of "loss"?
- When we speak about ends of worlds, whose are we talking about?
- Might ends also be beginnings, ruptures that offer opportunities and chances for rebuilding?
- What can we do with the problem of "apocalypse chic," the aestheticization of climate calamity as an inevitable future and an excuse for withdrawal and misanthropy?

- How does Covid affect the valence of these questions?
- What do we do with the false pressure of urgency and the false passivity of self-reflection while recognizing that some kind of work still needs to be done?
- What are a couple of people as assertively secular as the two of us doing talking about Buddhists and Jews and spirituality?
- How have dramatic (and mundane) events in the wider world affected our thinking about these questions? We're thinking, for instance, about Trump's election and the subsequent escalation of racial justice movements, and about other events such as IPCC reports, COP meetings, California wildfires, and more.
- What about events in our own lives that have shaped our thinking? How do we wrestle with our own positions of privilege in this work?
- Our frameworks have tended to toggle between the emotions of sadness and hope. What are some other productive emotional stances? In particular, where is the space for getting angry?
- What do we make of the anti-Goldilocks problem: that the time was never "just right" for focusing on loss in the Anthropocene, a topic that went from cutting edge to outmoded without ever having a moment?

The failure of our social science approaches and frameworks and our previously successful grant writing art left us with this list of questions and forced us to thematize our scholarly practices. In response, we have developed what has proved to be a welcome intentionality around experimental modes of engagement and reflection, ones that we hope will be apt to the interlocking calamities with which we are living.

Nearly from the beginning, we envisioned (or realized?) that the Epoch of Loss initiative would be (was?) an instance of "slow academia" We wanted to eschew the cult of productivity, not to worry about whether the work generated "cv-able" outputs like articles, grants, or conferences. Indeed, to date, nothing born of this initiative has matured past infancy--despite a couple of grant applications having been written. Over the course of several unsuccessful applications for funding, we realized that we were increasingly oriented toward our own interests, convictions, and pleasures rather than toward the calls for proposals to which we were responding. We are trusting in a process that has not as yet led to the launch of any concerted and ongoing program of activity that would justify, in conventional terms, the degree of effort and resources invested. We are inspired by the slow movement itself, by the politics of degrowth, and by mindfulness meditation practices such as those of local Buddhist-activists like Adam Lobel, Kirsi Jansa, and Michelle King and by Buddhist climate activists like Joanna Macy.

That said, since initially writing this paragraph, we've pored back through our email correspondence and were surprised at how many messages we found obsessing over grant deadlines, budgets, room reservations, speaker logistics, flyers for events; we were also bemused by the frequency of phrases like "drowning," "swamped," "my day is collapsing," and "the day is slipping through my fingers" as we struggled to make headway often from different time zones and continents [see the Appendix for a chronicle of the Epoch of Loss reconstructed from email]. So much for "slow academia"!

For us, invoking the ideal of the slow was not simply a way of resisting the work-speed-up of the neoliberal university, though it was that (though again, see the Appendix!). It was an

epistemological imperative. How could we think and theorize--how could we feel--loss if we didn't make room for it in our approach to these questions and in our own lives. So from the beginning, we incorporated a meditative sensibility and a meditational practice in the work. We tried to hold our "meetings" in gardens or on walks. We tried to envision retreats, events on boats, artistic practices: projects that would invite people into the space of reflection we were striving to create. We were inspired by the concept of "drifting" that the 3Cs (Counter-Cartography Collective) introduced to us. We have meditated on (and at) toxic industrial sites; we have collected things from the ground and made things with our hands; we have visited with and reflected with mollusks, reptiles, and amphibians; and we have done so gathering with academics and non-academics alike.

We wanted and needed to create a process that was "organic" in all of its meanings, and we recognized that the training and reward structures of academia would not make that easy. Our unsuccessful application to the Mascaro Center (see Appendix) called for camping trips and unconferences. The challenges went beyond those typical of interdisciplinary scholarly engagement, since they also related to working with artists, activists, and spiritual practitioners. Our own work and these initiatives are braided together, sometimes intersecting and other times diverging, as were our various pieces of community engagement, some thwarted, as mapping yielded to Covid.

We recognize that we have been privileged to be able to woolgather and meander throughout this process. We are tenured faculty at a research university, and we have both been directing Centers throughout this process, which provided us access to staff and resources. Our social positioning is obviously relevant: we are healthy, white, bourgeois holders of American passports. We have not experienced any world-ending traumas prior to the still-abstract ones associated with climate change. We have been spared the disruptions of war, racial violence, and other collective existential losses in our own lifetimes. We are not survivors of intergenerational traumas of expropriation, genocide, enslavement, or mass dispossession. We have never had to flee a [home](). Our activities have been exercises of the privilege of open-ended discussion and scholasticism over good food; exercises of the privilege of time and patience and distance.

Indeed, one critique of slow academia is that it is not merely privileged but conservative. Heather Mendick writes, in [Is #Slow Academia Conservative?](),

...*I have begun to feel that Slow academia is becoming a conservative movement – harking back to a 'golden age' of higher education that never was.*

The past privileged space of academia was premised on the exclusion of others…. Spending time in the ethereal domains of the Slow university, requires the unpaid and unacknowledged material labour of others, be they cooking and cleaning for us, caring for our children, or otherwise servicing our needs. We need to interrogate slow, by asking: Who can go slow? And, what difference does it make which university you're at, which contract you're on and what other responsibilities you have? Perhaps there are better metaphors than slow for provoking change.

Yet as Inger Newburn has written at *[The Thesis Whisperer](),* the critique of slow academia as a form of privilege applies equally well to *normal-speed academia* (though with gradations).

While some have argued that slow academia relies on others, usually more junior or casual, to pick up the slack, it's equally true that unless those with privilege exercise some of it in disruptive ways, the work speed-up and the ratcheting expectations that fall most heavily on junior, contingent, and casual workers in our industry are likely to continue and even to accelerate. (Indeed, the logic of the neoliberal university is ultimately to abolish tenure in favor of contracts encouraging flexibility and productivity in the name of better teaching -- the impact of which would be to make us all casual and contingent workers.)

As we continue to reflect on these problems in the light of this larger work, we find ourselves again in one of the circles of logic (what in German is called a *teufelskreis* or "devil's circle") that brings us back to unanswerability, since our own experience is that it's precisely these privileged forms of discourse and inquiry that seem essential to us if we are to engage effectively with climate change, both as a social injustice and as an existential challenge. Privilege in this academic sense feels vital, at the same time that it feels indefensible and unsustainable. The *hyperobjectivity* of climate disaster is manifest in its intersection with myriad other forms of exploitation and inequality close at hand in our society and our institutions. With Raj Patel and Jason Moore, we see climate disaster not as *sui generis* but rather as the culmination of the half-millennium of cascading injustices unleashed by racial capitalism. With Kathryn Yussoff, we believe that there have already been "a billion" Anthropocenes for Black and Indigenous people who have been dispossessed from ancestral lands for hundreds of years and forced to labor at extracting the earth's resources on behalf of other people. We believe that there is no climate justice without social justice, that there is no climate justice separate from social justice, and that the best way to work toward climate justice is by creating a just society. But we also believe that conventional thinking about justice won't be adequate to the challenges of loss and grief that motivated us to engage this work at the outset. So we continue...