

Goodbye Holocene

Description

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News of disasters and tragedies amplify collective loss and grief. Mass media and their online surrogates render tangible human tragedies due to error, injustice and war. Nature also delivers disaster. But we modern humans also grieve over nature. Those critics who identify the influence of human habitation on Planet Earth focus on the latter kind of grief.

Officially, we homo sapiens and our forebears occupy the Holocene, spanning the last 11,700 years. But over the past few centuries human industry has dominated over changes in climate, oceans, land and organic life.

According to an article in *Nature* on defining the Anthropocene, â??The impacts of human activity will probably be observable in the geological stratigraphic record for millions of years into the future, which suggests that a new epoch has begunâ?• (171).

The Anthropocene is characterised by human impact, alteration, and climate change. Itâ??s also a period identified by geographer Lesley Head as one of loss and grief.

Grief in the Anthropocene

Concepts of the Anthropocene gained currency around 2000, though the geological epoch doesnâ??t yet appear as an official geological period as successor to the Holocene. (See Google ngram for an indication of word frequency.)

What have we lost? The question assumes a certain privilege to the agent asking the question. Who are â??weâ?•? According to Head, â??The divide between anthropos and other (usually thought of as humans and nature) is one of the many connected dualisms that must be undone and rethoughtâ?• (10). To assume itâ??s all about *us* is part of the problem.

Though itâ??s human beings who reflect, articulate and worry through the Anthropocene, thereâ??s a case for solidarity with the rest of existence. Grief provides a common anchor point for communities and cultures. As far as we know, other species display what we think of as grief. Itâ??s obvious in elephants

and crows for example (25). (Head doesnâ??t put it like this, but thereâ??s a sense in which â??the whole creation groans and suffers,â?• according to the Apostle Paul.) So the feeling of loss in the Anthropocene extends beyond the human species.

I think that this focus on grief attempts to unseat the Enlightenment definitions of rationality that partition and then exclude those facets of being we commonly associate with the *emotions*. Studies in human geography, environment and the arts are undergoing an â??affective turnâ?• â?? a reintegration of affect, emotion and mood into considerations of human being, place, environment, nature and technology â?? and in my own studies into digital technologies.

In the face of the increasing incidence of catastrophic bushfires in Australia, Head is concerned in particular about â??the emotional dimensions of climate changeâ?• (22).



The losses she refers to are for *loved places*, particularly homes and homelands, due to environmental change. Then thereâ??s *non-human loss*, of species and the relationships between them. *Extreme events* such as earthquakes and bushfires cause intense, sudden and high profile loss and trauma.

But the most significant and enduring loss is of modernity itself. In the company of other commentators Head says, â??I am however grieving for modernity, for a future that was always foggy but was presumed to contain the seeds of positive possibilityâ?• (22). Thereâ??s a link here with Jonathan Flatleyâ??s identification of the current period of melancholy, lament over losing the innocence of modernity â?? the naive belief in progress.

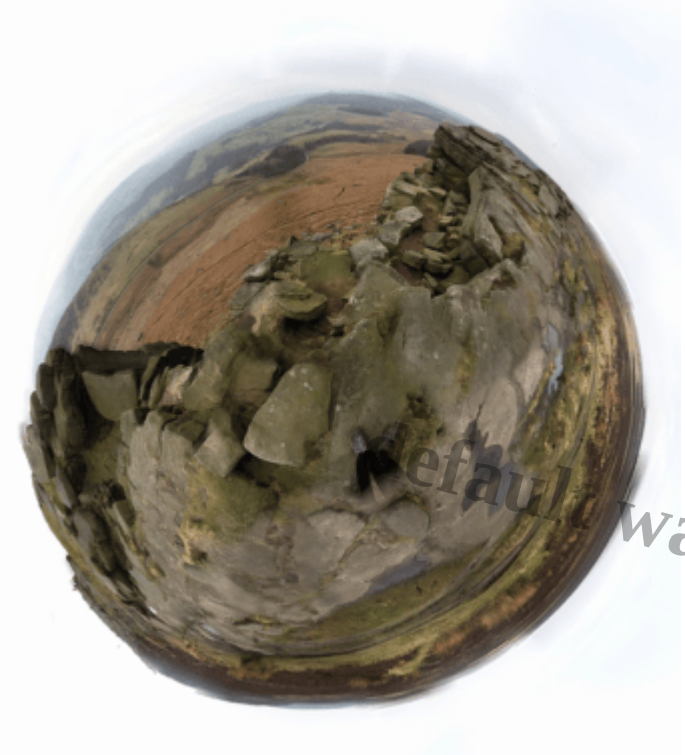
The therapeutic turn

In this loss thereâ??s the inevitable denial, acting as if nothing is changing, a position brought into prominence through the so-called climate change â??deniers.â?• For Head the focus on grief shifts the problem of climate change into the realms of therapeutic discourse.

In her influential book *On Death and Dying* Elizabeth KÃ¼bler-Ross outlines five stages of transition in the context of loss: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and eventual acceptance. Though recognising that the condition in the Anthropocene is less about finality, Head commends the need to come to terms with loss â?? to get past the stage of denial.

> â??In keeping with the overall argument of this book, it is important to find ways to carry our grief into hopeful environmental engagements. This means probing exactly what we are grieving forâ?• (41).

She says that simply looking to the past is not the answer: â??Against such an ideal, the present can hardly be understood in any other terms than lossâ?• (41). Head advocates a response to loss that moves beyond the linearity of time. She draws on the writing of my colleague Michel Bastian and others to affirm the importance of multiple temporalities â?? a discussion for next time.



References

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- KÃ¼bler-Ross, Elizabeth. 2014. *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*. New York: Scribner
- Lewis, Simon L., and Mark A. Maslin. 2015. Defining the Anthropocene. *Nature*, (519)170-180.

Notes

- The first image above is of Jerrawangala National Park, NSW, Australia taken on 24 July 2013 and showing regeneration after severe bush fires. The second is Stanage Edge, Derbyshire, taken as a 360 degree image.
- See the BBC site History of Life on Earth for an explanation of the geological periods, including the Holocene.
- The biblical quote above about creation groaning recontextualises the Apostle Paulâ??s assertion in Romans 8:22.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. melancholy
2. mood
3. nature
4. post-digital

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