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## Loss<sup>i</sup>

Fiona Miller<sup>ii</sup>

Many of us are learning to live with loss. For some this is not new, yet for others the experience of loss is novel and unfamiliar. Loss associated with the multiple and interconnected crises of late capitalism, climate breakdown and colonialism, has long been felt by those excluded from the project of modernity.<sup>1</sup> As Ghosh writes “those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us.”<sup>2</sup> In this brief essay, I wish to discuss certain qualities that characterise the geographies of loss associated with climate breakdown and begin to trace some of the processes that contribute to loss.

Beyond the limits of adaptation and mitigation lies loss. This geography of loss strongly mirrors the contours of the map of global inequality that characterises climate injustice. Loss of connections to place, humans and other living things due to the slow violence of climate change<sup>3</sup> sets in train uneven geographies of harm and opportunity, reshaping where and how people live their lives as well as how they perceive themselves and their relations with the world.



Figure 1. Smoke filled summer sky, Sydney, Australia, December 2019

There is considerable effort currently focused on assessing, documenting and quantifying ‘loss and damage’ associated with climate change.<sup>4</sup> Work in the environmental humanities and human geography offers more situated, storied and nuanced understandings of loss compared with attempts to capture loss through commensurate units and indices. Barnett et

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<sup>1</sup> Ghosh, *Hope and Grief*; Whyte, “Indigenous science (fiction).”

<sup>2</sup> Ghosh, *Hope and Grief*, 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed reviews see McNamara and Jackson, “Loss and damage”; Mechler et al., “Science for loss and damage.”

al. and Tschakert et al. highlight that to appreciate the significance of loss for particular people and places requires an understanding of what people value - what gives their lives meaning.<sup>5</sup> This resonates with Plumwood's call for an engagement with a storied sense of a place in helping to guide an appreciation of culturally situated understandings of harm and loss.<sup>6</sup>

Loss is felt profoundly on an emotional level. Grief, anxiety and despair can be triggered by the loss of a loved one, a treasured (human or non-human) companion, a sense of identity and purpose and the loss of certainty for an imagined future.<sup>7</sup> Loss is also experienced materially in terms of loss of a livelihood, a home and one's possessions or in a bodily sense through the loss of one's health or freedom of movement. The loss of connections to valued places, landscapes and living things, the disruption of social relations that sustain livelihoods and provide care, the rupture of cultural connections embedded in particular ecological, economic and social entanglements are the kinds of changes that people find profoundly difficult to recover from.

Whilst there are many ways in which we can seek to understand loss, there are four qualities that I wish to touch on that evoke a relational and emplaced understanding of loss: *diminishment, absence, surprise and substitution.*

With the loss of the diversity that both sustains and enriches our lives comes a sense of *diminishment*. The living world around us is becoming more simplified as we become increasingly reliant on a narrower set of relations. A particular set of economic relations and economic world view have contributed to complex agro-ecological systems being replaced by mono-crops, forests by plantations, aquatic systems by shrimp farms, creeks by concrete channels. Climate change, a consequence of this particularly rapacious form of capitalism premised on the hyper-separation of humans and non-humans, undermines locally-oriented knowledge systems tied to maintaining and conserving diversity in human-environment relations.



Figure 2. Sea dragon

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<sup>5</sup> Barnett et al., "A science of loss"; Tschakert et al., "Climate change and loss."

<sup>6</sup> Plumwood, "Shadow Places."

<sup>7</sup> Head, *Hope and Grief*.

Another quality of loss is that of *absence* and the associated sense of the uncanny. It is hard to describe the strangeness and unfamiliarity of absence – the feeling it will never rain again, the silence of a dawn without birdsong, the slow creeping fear that the bushfire smoke will never subside, the vain search for a critter long gone. This sense of the uncanny can be invoked through encounters with a burnt hillside devoid of forest, the void left following extraction of a valued mineral deposit, the lacklustre appearance of a bleached reef and the low flow of a river that once could be assured upon to inundate its floodplain. The human and non-human consequences of these absences exacerbate and reinforce other losses, both proximate and distant. What remains is something strange requiring new understandings and rearranging of relations.

Loss may also entail an element of *surprise*. Although we have been forewarned by communities on the frontline of climate change<sup>8</sup> and in meticulous, peer-reviewed and rigorous detail,<sup>9</sup> the manifestation of loss is nonetheless somewhat surprising. For some. The certainty and hubris associated with Western science, and faith in the lie of unlimited growth, has left little room for surprise. Yet, for those who have failed to listen to the stories, observe the discernible changes and acknowledge the patterns in the data, the loss now being experienced (or observed from afar) is a shock. With the unravelling and reconfiguration of human-environment relations novel changes and niches emerge that can create opportunities for new species to adapt and colonise, as witnessed in the spread of jellyfish into warmer waters<sup>10</sup> and water hyacinth throughout the polluted, slow-flowing waterways of the Mekong Delta.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Mekong Delta, the increased presence of water hyacinth has provided meagre livelihood opportunities for those who are able to harvest and weave the plant into products for trade. People now engaged in this new activity are otherwise excluded from more profitable farming and fishing due to a lack of access to land and boats. So, surprises can bring challenges but also opportunities.

Loss of relations with places and particular species may result in efforts at *substitution*. One of the more pernicious effects of loss, particularly the loss of natural commons including wetlands, wild capture fisheries, mangroves and other collectively managed systems, is that this can result in efforts to substitute these commons with human-made capital. For example, people rely on wild-capture fisheries as a source of protein and livelihood. In the Lower Mekong Region, as wild-capture fisheries rapidly decline, industrial scale and intensive aquaculture increases. This process of substitution brings with it increased pollution as well as new patterns of enclosure and accumulation.

These qualities reveal the uneven nature of loss. Yet in seeking to trace a geography of loss more than just bearing witness to places of harm is required. It is also necessary to hold the processes and actors complicit in constructing this harm responsible. Plumwood's concept of 'shadow places' is a powerful way of thinking about the connections between places and the multiple unacknowledged, disregarded places of material and ecological support. Plumwood calls for us to discern "patterns of sacrificial and shadow places, based on [...] power and privilege."<sup>12</sup> Reflecting this power and privilege, the processes that drive climate-related loss are not necessarily proximate to where harm is experienced. The fossil fuel companies focused on extracting the last of the coal of the Hunter and La Trobe Valleys and the Galilee Basin, tapping the gas lying beneath the Browse Basin or the rich food bowl of the Liverpool

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<sup>8</sup> Nakashima, Krupnik and Rubis, *Indigenous knowledge*.

<sup>9</sup> Masson-Delmotte et al., "Global Warming of 1.5°C."

<sup>10</sup> Climate Council, "News."

<sup>11</sup> Thanh Mai, "Water hyacinth."

<sup>12</sup> Plumwood, "Shadow Places," 141.

Plains, and drilling the oil reserves trapped deep below the Timor and North Seas produce the greenhouse gas emissions required to fuel the carbon intensive economies of the Global North.



Figure 3. Silo, Liverpool Plains, NSW

In conclusion, it is through carefully listening to, documenting and sharing stories of loss, that ethical connections can be forged, understandings deepened, and responsible actions taken to avoid, or at least minimise, future harm – this is the promise of climate justice storytelling. Yet, this needs to be coupled with a politics of responsibility for the processes that are driving loss. Loss can prompt fear and despair, which can easily morph into an ugly politics of blame and defeat. Yet, in learning to live with loss a determination to not just go on but to also heal, repair and transform can also potentially emerge. So, rather than loss being a “narrative endpoint”, as Heise argues with reference to cultures of extinction, it can potentially open up the “possibility of new beginnings” – new geographies and new connections.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Miller, Fiona. “Loss.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

<sup>ii</sup> Fiona Miller is an associate professor of human geography in the Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia <[fiona.miller@mq.edu.au](mailto:fiona.miller@mq.edu.au)>