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Griefⁱ

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Five years ago I wrote about grief as loss.¹ Grief for beloved places, for disappearing plants and animals, and for the demise of the conditions underpinning life as we² know it. I talked about grief for the loss of a future characterised by hope, one of the defining features of the modern self. I argued that an under-acknowledged process of grieving — with all its complexity, diversity and contradiction — is part of the cultural politics of responding to climate change and associated environmental challenges in the affluent West. Grieving helps explain the denial we face and experience in accepting the scale of the changes required in ways of living.

How to connect the intense sorrow of grief with Plumwood's concept of shadow places? In this piece I want to connect our grieving process to "the many unrecognised, shadow places that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility".³ I also want to suggest that the COVID-19 moment challenges us to extend the idea to shadow temporalities.

Plumwood's perspective challenges us to go beyond grief for loss, and consider more carefully grief for and as presence. How do we grieve with and for the wheatfield, the coal mine, the factory floor in global capital's latest human strip mine? Distant communities experiencing drought, flood and cyclones on top of already precarious livelihoods?

I argued that grief is a companion that will increasingly be with us. It is not something we can deal with and move on from, but rather something we must acknowledge and hold if we are to enact any kind of effective politics. Or, to put it differently, it needs to become an explicit part of our politics.

Five years on, emotions around climate change, including grief, are a much more explicit part of the public conversation. There has been an outpouring of emotions around climate change, including from scientists themselves, who previously reported having to downplay their emotional responses in order to maintain the persona required of dispassionate scientists.⁴ (Plumwood and other scholars' ecofeminist challenges to the binary between emotion and reason is relevant here.)

Consider the Australian bushfires of the summer of 2019-20. Anxiety, dread and anger around climate change were expressed, as the culturally important relationship with summer was reconfigured from a season of leisure and refreshment to one of vigilance and grief. There was widespread distress at the deaths of more than a billion native animals. We

¹ Head, *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene*.

² The "we" in this discussion bears examination. See Head, *Hope and Grief*, Chapter 1.

³ Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," 139.

⁴ Head and Harada, "Keeping the Heart a Long Way from the Brain."

witnessed grief, existential dread, ecological anxiety and white-hot anger, in both public and private spheres.

These emotions are opening up new spaces and forms of conversation about climate change, and constraints on such conversation appear to be shifting. Masculine norms of “positive talk”⁵ increasingly look out of touch, and cultural pressure to be optimistic with children⁶ has been shifted by kids themselves, taking to the streets to demand action on climate change. Or they did, until a microscopic virus rearranged social life as we know it.

Grief and presence, and the presence of grief, have tinged the long grey winter, extending into the shiny spring (I am writing this at the end of Melbourne’s second lockdown). Those of us who have been safe, warm and employed are conscious of our privilege and so downplay our own grieving. My stoic elderly relatives remind us, as they did when we were children, how there are many people worse off than us and we should be thankful for our many blessings.

But I do feel that I/we have experienced more deeply than before how uncertainty unmoors that modern self, challenging our assumptions of agency, of being able to enact hope. Historian Clare Wright, writing during Victoria’s second-wave lockdown through the winter of 2020, put her finger on it:

“Gratitude for all I have. Longing for all I want and will never have. There is no After. Just a great yawning existential Now. And a realisation of just how much our present action is fuelled by the momentum of striving, of becoming, of consequence, where Lockdown 2.0 feels like a time without consequence. Whatever the cause, there will be no effect. There is both a weird liberation and a great gulping loss in that state of being. Suddenly, nothing matters, and everything matters.

It’s what we all fear, isn’t it? Not death itself but living a life that resembles death. Immutable, unchanging, with no future possibility of growth or transcendence.”⁷

Here, our shadow places are also temporalities, and disrupted ones at that; the rhythms of everyday life become an endless cycle unless tied into the directional, intentional living of modernity. If we can extend Plumwood’s shadow places to also become shadow times, we might be able to recognise more clearly the way in which such temporalities have provided support and underpinnings to modern life. We grieve for the loss of past certainties and normalities (that were never in fact certain, and only normal for some). We grieve for a forward-looking future, and the ability to plan. Such recognition helps imagine things otherwise, including by learning from societies that already draw on different shadow times. Acknowledging the temporalities of grieving might also force us to further examine our temporalities of hope.

⁵ Rickards, Wiseman and Kashima, “Barriers to Effective Climate Change Mitigation.”

⁶ Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*.

⁷ Wright, “How the Dark Gets In.”

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ⁱ Head, Lesley. "Grief." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2021).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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