

We Weave and Heft by the River

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We Weave and Heft by the River (WWHR) was an all-night, socially-engaged event facilitated by the Coastal Reading Group that explored ways to grieve for the tremendous loss of non-human species and their ecological habitats during this historic, geologic, cultural moment. We held this event at Landscape, Language and the Sublime symposium and creative gathering in Devon, England at the end of June 2016.

Introduction: Unraveling in Order to Weave

The Coastal Reading Group's work focuses on the elision of theory, text, and practice. We initially formed as a reading group interested in troubling the subjects of wilderness, speciation and humanness; over time, we began to pursue ways of knowing through diverse kinds of engagements with realms beyond the human as a way of troubling conventional definitions of nature and culture. We became interested in performing a fluidity between reading and practice. To us, performing this fluidity means a troubling of conventional definitions of nature and culture, thinking through what it means to relate to the non-human, and exploring how textual definitions might change based on how these relationships are constructed. In doing so we hope also to decenter an anthropocentric view, a vital move for troubling dualities such as human and other, nature and culture, civilization and savage, which often serve larger, colonial aims.¹

In order to deepen this work we want to confront ecological losses and consider very seriously what can and cannot be repaired or recuperated. We wanted to do this by giving space to the grief process in relation to what some have termed the Anthropocene, an epoch characterized by extreme loss of ecological biodiversity. We understand grieving to be best expressed and processed in an expanded definition of the social, through the telling of stories, shared silences and active listening.

We understand the social to include different non-human elements present in land: those belonging to the animal, bacteria and plant kingdoms — for instance the sheep, bats, insects, etc. and all the plants with which we engaged with while in Devon, and those typically referred to as 'inert' such as soil, rocks, wood, river, etc. For us all of these more-than-human elements, along with the human ones at all levels of participation, are active parts of the relationality we called forth during the all-night event and the week leading up to it — all vital factors of the particular 'social' we sat with and listened to. It is for this reason that we weave local plants, animals, fungi, lichens, etc. into our social practice of grief and foreground their importance below.

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports From a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonization* (Sidney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 19-20.

Because our work aims at de-centering the *anthropos* as vital for troubling the boundaries between binary understandings of human and Other, WWHR also asks if grief is a characteristic unique to humans. Perhaps other-than-human beings are also sensing exaggerated losses around them and finding ways to express their grief. What kinds of relationships emerge in grieving the non-human? What kinds of conditions for exchange emerge between 'us'? What disconnections become more pronounced? What are ways of sharing a sense of grief beyond language? How to explore non-human manifestations of its sensing of loss? What is the temporality of grief for non-human beings?

As early as 1949 Aldo Leopold, one of the fathers of Western environmental ethics, noted that 'For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun.' Later in the 1990s Phyllis Windle, today one of the most cited environmental scientists speaking about environmental grief, already recognized the difficulties of grieving within the onto-epistemic realm of science.² She observes that 'Our external, as well as our internal worlds, may make environmental losses difficult to grieve,' and "We have almost no social support for expressing this grief.' She goes on to add:

Environmental losses are intermittent, chronic, cumulative, and without obvious beginnings and endings. Thus, we may have to devise our own, unique customs [for grieving]. But they might be customs much needed by a society facing many kinds of transitions.

WWHR centralizes grief, generally understood to be a temporal process through which many different emotional and mental states are accessed, because we understand it to be a highly under-practiced condition in western cultures that are still founded on colonial worldviews. Grief itself can also be understood to reveal new realities. In her captivating memoir, *Nothing Was the Same: A Memoir*, Kay Redfield Jamison draws from a number of writers as well as her own experience to develop a working definition of grief. Drawing from C.S. Lewis, she observes that grief is 'a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape...The lessons that come from grief come from its unexpected moves, from its shifting views of what has gone before and what is yet to come.'³ For us, the new realities and new landscapes are recuperated/repaid ones that illuminate alternatives. And from Tennyson, Jamison finds unexpected aspects of grief that are about celebration, appreciation, beauty and honoring of lives that have passed -- an element that seems to us crucial to include in our definition and to bring into our practice. "He brought to his portrayal of grief lines of staggering beauty; he offered a solace that was not an easy solace.'⁴ During *We Weave and Heft by the River*, we too found a celebratory aspect of grief that was experienced in the form of unexpected, spontaneous revelations at various times during the all-night event.

² Phyllis Windle, "The Ecology of Grief," *BioScience* Vol. 42, No. 5 (May, 1992), 363-365.

³ Kay Redfield Jamison, *Nothing Was the Same: A Memoir* (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 211.

⁴ Jamison, *Nothing Was the Same: A Memoir*, 220.

Jamison also recognizes a temporal quality to grief that resonates with Peter Goldie's definition in his essay entitled *Grief: A Narrative Account*. Goldie first works with Wittgenstein to establish his definition:

*It is a kind of process, which, borrowing again from Wittgenstein, I will call a pattern; he said, 'Grief describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life'. The pattern has certain features. It includes characteristic thoughts, judgments, feelings, imaginings, actions, expressive actions, habitual actions, and much else besides, unfolding over time, but none of which is essential at any particular time.*⁵

Crucial to Goldie's definition is the temporal nature of grief, as well as the way in which the uniqueness of the temporal frame allows for 'characteristic thoughts, judgments, feelings, imaginings, actions, expressive actions, habitual actions, and much else besides.' Setting up a temporal structure -- the all-night event -- was an essential feature for how we proposed the participatory grieving process. We needed enough time for the pattern and weave of grief to emerge and be contemplated. We chose the nighttime because of its association with the natural death of daytime, mystery, hauntings, and also because it is a quieter time, where listening and silence have a stronger hold.

What follows is a poetic, theoretical, and experimental telling of the week leading up to our all-night event, the ways we gathered our materials, what we thought about as we gathered them, and how we tie this gathering process to grief. It was also a telling of the event itself -- an occasion that was co-created with symposium delegates, bats, birds, insects, squirrels, as well as many other forest and human ghosts.

Coming from Distances

A sense of precariousness is, should be, where to start and where to finish. A sense of awe because life and death are intimately related, never separate—when it is said something is alive it means a life force is touching a death force in a tenuously porous and playful embrace. Some cultures have managed to keep this relationship between life and death active, worshiping both sides, knowing that they feed and care for each other.

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⁵ Peter Goldie, "Grief: A Narrative Account," *Ratio*, XXIV (2011): 125.

We found ourselves wondering about distances and about how the colonial project maintains and conceals itself through these distances, preventing grief, even a recognition of loss. As we began to think about how to grieve the current moment, we found ourselves up against persistent forms of distancing that in their turn demanded address: how and where did these forms of distance emerge, and did they in fact mask earlier traumas and unexpressed grief that needed tending before we could even think about the present?⁶

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With this notion in sight (within this land-scape) one may come in contact with land at a different pace, with the grace of walking, of grazing, of gratitude; initiating the flirtatious processes that typically entail the exchange of sweat, of the wetness of life, of trust and respect for difference and what lies beyond our control.

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A week in advance of the symposium, we traveled to southern England from the Americas, and from Scotland in order to collect local materials to be used during *We Weave and Heft by the River*. We were interested in sourcing materials implicated in the major ecological shifts in England throughout its history, and in England's role in transforming the ecologies of its colonies. Here, we were thinking in terms of the adoption of sedentary and pastoral agriculture and resultant deforestation, in terms of the enclosure movement, and in terms of the settler colonization of North America and elsewhere. We were interested in the ways engagements with some species have facilitated certain extinctions for others, endangered species, or the recession of certain animals and plants from view, resulting in the transformation of landscapes. Our thesis was that through specific ecological transformations of the Western world, beginning with agricultural practice, and cemented by colonization, a kind of relationship with the non-human has become the norm, where distance, landscape and domesticity are prized; this distance effectively prevents an understanding of the value of the numinous relationships in our midst, and in turn prevents the grief process.

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To trouble this and explore other spatial and temporal causalities we proposed distance as relationality, as a moving between the proximal and the far, within space, within time, without pattern.

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⁶ Bird Rose, *Reports From a Wild Country*, 11-33.

Sheep

Sheep helped usher forth treeless pasture, new, less biodiverse plant life, and engagements with docile animals.

To us, as cultural outsiders, sheep seem inherent to the contemporary English landscape. Amongst the many we met across Devon was artist and shepherd Terri Howland in Bovey Tracey. She taught us how to spin wool by hand, a process where one takes a tuft of wool and twists it, attaching one end to a tool called a drop spindle. The other, twisted end is held in one hand while the drop spindle is rotated very quickly. At the end of the afternoon Terri gave a full, freshly sheared fleece to work with for our event.



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Distance is both a spatial and a temporal element. As such it may be taken as static, unilinear or to be approached by way of the shortest route possible between two points; or mobile, as an entanglement of temporalities that make a mesh out of memories, multiple presents and futures. The static, inert (point, object, moment) out there to be reached or approached by way of specific, contained encounters is what results in the concept of a possible sublime. The continuous, dynamic processes by which these elements get closer and also distance themselves from each other may enter into relations of different kinds,

come to compose new complexities, and are the kinds of processes better contained in practices such as grieving. Our explorations of grieving had to do with ways of bridging those distances — as ways to accommodate an Other within our selves — ways to celebrate difference.

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We collected wool as a way of considering how sheep have had a direct relationship to the deforestation and perhaps a resultant loss of biodiversity in rural England. Sheep also contribute to the production of landscape through grazing.

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This severance is distance in its most toxic form. If it happens to be noticed, it still leaves us disarmed of possibilities for change, immobilizing us with its vast and tight grip. Since it spreads both spatially and temporally, we are now experiencing the effects of its past manifestations whether knowingly or unknowingly.

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The fleece was not skirted and still had sticky, dank lanolin all over it. Handling this recently-sheared unprocessed, oily, fleece gave us the sense of being directly in touch with the sheep's body. Handling sheep's wool while working over stories, murmurings, and thoughts around the fire put us in touch with these contradictions of engagement and connection, and in turn facilitated a process of ongoing reckoning.

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Living, Once-Living, Yet-to-Live

To materialize as we moved along the night and to immaterialize that which retained form.

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In addition to considering how our materials were implicated in earlier histories of deforestation, colonization and enclosure, we were also interested in how our collected materials might dissolve divides between nature and culture, facilitate decolonization, and deepen inter-subjectivity. During our all-night conversation participants could conduct 'weaves' of our collected materials as a way of memorializing stories and sentiments shared throughout the night. It is with these living, once-living and yet-to-live materials that we made

our way into exploring what affective possibilities exist for us in connection to non-human species that are falling out of view, and what new kinds of engagements could be viable in the work of decolonization. Indeed, as discussed below, some of the materials we felt and thought-with, such as Hawthorn, may have a future role in practices of decolonization; this decolonization work is most valuable if we re-member, or 'recuperate', to use Deborah Bird Rose's term, species' oldest histories of use.⁷ Rather than restoring or returning to a false idea of a redemptive past or future, we work on recuperating existing conditions that need more attention to flourish.

Seed beads

We wanted to make pierced seedballs for those who attended WWHR to thread with yarn while telling stories: to weave seeds with stories and land, as a grieving practice.

We created a hanging structural piece (twigs, leaves, stones, sticks, flowers and yarn) as a place where stories could be folded into materiality.

We rolled soil, clay, compost and seeds into balls, and pierced them through the middle to make seed 'beads'.

We used three types of seed: Red Poppy, Blue Cornflower and Red Clover, each culturally and historically significant and found growing in fields around Cornwall and Devon.

Scarlet Corn Poppy: Scarlet corn poppies, *Papaver rhoeas*, flourish in disturbed soils in Europe. This habit of *Papaver rhoeas* was first noticed during the Napoleonic wars, where grassy fields turned into fields of blood red poppies, growing around the war dead. In the first World War, Scarlet Corn Poppies proliferated where bombs dove into the land. So *Papaver rhoeas* came to be regarded as flowers of remembrance, particularly for the war dead because Red Corn Poppies grow where the earth has been disturbed. Perhaps ironically, these plants seems to decrease the production of cereal grains when they grow nearby.

Blue Cornflower. *Centaurea cyanus* is native to continental Europe and traveled to England in the Iron Age. It has been found in ancient burial sites in Europe from the Neolithic period and it was in abundance all through Europe and England up until the 20th-century, when seed cleaning, pesticides and intensive tilling of land for arable agriculture made it an endangered species. With certain modern land use practices that sow monocrops, require repeated tilling, and the disinfection of seeds and soil in order to do so, species like *Centaurea cyanus* fall from view. Blue cornflower symbolizes to us the ritual honoring of those unseen species passing away on micro scales, and the passing of species symbiotically linked to those microorganisms. It also manifests here as a reminder of other

⁷ Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 24.

modes of cultivation that don't require intensive tilling and result in ownership regimes of property. That *Centaurea* had a resonance with ritual burial was significant to us. We wanted roll this seed back into the soils of England in some small way.

Red Clover: Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*, is used extensively in permaculture practice for bioremediation of soil. Small beads of mycorrhizae grow on the roots of this plant, operating symbiotically with it to fix nitrogen and other beneficial nutrients underground. Red clover is often used in seed balls in urban, guerrilla gardening practices to bio-remediate severely disturbed areas in order to lay the basic nutrients required for biodiverse plant life. Medicinally, *Trifolium* is used by women to block the absorption of harmful environmental xenoestrogens, to cleanse the lymph, and to control the growth of hormone sensitive tumors. In conjunction with Red Corn Poppy and Blue Cornflower, *Trifolium pratense* creates discursive living commentary between human engagement and kinds of human disturbances that produce aesthetic, medicinal, edible relationships beyond these direct relationships, and that are also symbolic of affective conditions relating to the passing of living things.

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And indeed it is thanks to, and because of, the River Dart, that today's landscape can be understood and regarded as the scenario in which the gaze of desire was placed as land ownership, developed into walled districts. Discipline is faster if the town is paved. Sheep are contained and herded more easily if enclosed. No longer is hefting necessary for sustaining the relationship herder~sheep~land. Such enclosure and cannibalistic behavior is transduced into law; thus the swift pass by which land is distributed to the lords. This is another historical instance in which speed, the speed of events as economic restructuring (just as is happening now with Brexit), plays the key role in how matters develop and envelop the future.

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Red Corn Poppy and Blue Cornflower have an interesting didactic relationship to us because of Red Corn Poppy's appearance after some disturbance, and Blue Cornflower's reticence at too much disturbance. The relationship between these flowers is turbulent and productive. *Centaurea cyanus*, *Papaver rhoeas* and *Trifolium pratense* bring up questions around human disturbance and indigeneity, often hot topics among environmentalists, permaculturists, gardeners and botanists in this era of globalisation where the rapid long distance transfer of seed not only happens through bird migrations, but also through the long-distance transportation of people, animals, plants, and other commodities around the world. Many native plant enthusiasts resist the presence of non-native plants that appear in areas severely disturbed by humans, disturbed often for purposes related to agriculture or construction. However, the first wave of non-natives to appear on damaged land often have bioremediating qualities for the depleted soil, seemingly laying the groundwork for future biodiversity. Perhaps more of a live issue in North America, these plants and their relationship to human disturbance beg the question of what constitutes an indigenous plant; for what qualifies as indigenous is often determined by what colonial botanists were seeing in the new worlds in the 18th and 19th-centuries. Perhaps we can come up with a different

classification of traveling species that allows for the possibility for new ecosystems to develop that establish matrices of cross-species support through beneficial, nutrients, structure, pheromone and essential oil production, and habitat.

Recipe for seed beads:

- 5 parts dry clay (red is ideal)
- 3 parts dry organic compost or soil
- 1 part seed
- 1-2 parts water

Mix ingredients and let them firm up.
Pierce balls with a barbecue skewer or pointy stick. Let dry.

We threaded wool through these seed beads, thin branches and pasture grass while we talked and listened throughout the night. Because Southern England is so damp, our seed beads never dried; with the dawn many of the seeds were beginning to sprout along the outside of the beads.

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Once the seeds sprout, the nourishing flowers whisper to the wind calling over to distant lands, into the future. WWHR revolved around a fire to keep us warm throughout the rainy night, local materials such as yarn and fleece, leaves and sticks, stones and cones and flowers, seedbeads and a hanging structure of twigs, all grounded in immaterial elements such as stories, trust, and silences. To listen and talk to (serve) the earth, to sow the seeds, to stop time in a structure to be buried, let to rot and grow, again.

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Plant Materials

We identified and collected many different plant materials throughout the week, plants that had a direct history with enclosure such as hawthorn and elder; sacred plants that are and were used in earth-based spiritual practices such as alder, mugwort and yarrow; medicinal plants such as magnolia and nettle seed. We also collected:

Hawthorn - English commons for food, medicine and fire; hedgerows during enclosure

Alder - magic, cleans rivers, water and lymphatic systems, medicine

Dogwood - mourning/ grief (associated with the death of Christ)

Elder - magic, hedgerows, medicine (anti-viral), food, Elder flowers are thought to help connect with ancestors

*Mugwort - magic, activates dreams
Oak - landscape (Capability Brown), tree magic
Ferns, magnolia, nettle seed, grasses, pine needles, yarrow*

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Our overnight grieving by a fire was meant as a container of capacities toward holding difference — within and amongst ourselves, within and amongst those beings who support life but whose threshold of existence may have been, or is soon to be, run over by humanity's inhumane practices.

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In a relational, all-night vigil conducted around an outdoor fire, we talked and listened and worked our hands around materials sourced from animals and plants nearby. Processes were tried, conversations and questions absorbed us.

There were many stories and memories of plants, insects, humans and animals from the different decades that participants lived through. There was what a participant in the event calls 'welling'; there was also anguish, appreciation, silence and reckoning — all threads to and from grief.

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What did it mean to explore grieving the more-than-human? How many possible ways could be put forth, and would we have a fair presentation of all possible encounters? How would we ever come to know if the land was indeed being open to all this? Should we expect a signal, a movement, a nod from elsewhere telling us this made any sense at all?

Against Landscape

I (and I am sure many others in similar situations) oscillate between the tendency to experience landscape through a language ossified as intellectual and a language experienced in the body; between a sublime that is left to grow beyond language and one that is struck by the limits of its understanding; between a need to communicate that sublimates as hierarchical and one that translates as reciprocal (albeit never symmetrically). This oscillation also goes between a need to transcend a heritage of modernist tropes, habits and systems and one where the need itself is nested in being in immanence, as a non-dual possibility where subject and object coalesce while also distinguishing intensities within pluralities, remaining fertile with the myriad questions in regard to methodology and different models of co-existence.

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Landscape is a product that denies the tending of the commoner. It is a product to be owned. Therefore, landscape hides the poor, erases conditions for the flourishing of multiple species, and builds itself from scarcity models.⁸ Landscape is a precondition for the inability to grieve because the construction of landscape required spatial and temporal closure, largely achieved through distance. The speeding up of processes is also entangled in these closures. If distance is to be engaged as a mode of observation, we must come and go from it. We must also immerse ourselves in land, and multispecies engagements as much as, if not more than, we observe. We actively took up this call for WWHR by touching, seeding, weaving, learning, foraging, eating and healing with local materials in Devon.

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Taken together, landscape, language and the sublime are a tantalizing triad whose access is never straightforward. Is it possible to disambiguate these terms? What landslide may fall upon us if we try? Whose shade may be the solace for such a long journey? For it seems that the 3 concepts are not level; we could just as easily use one to describe the other and yet always fall short of communicative potency. For together they may trick us into believing no such thing as global warming exists or that it is not dependent on our behaviors and material relationships to mother Earth. In fact, we may very well obsess with beauty, communication and awe while delusionally in denial.

In the face of all said, may we still use the word landscape to propose a different relationality, and thus transform it? How about saying land-scape is both mind and body + water and land, certainty and hesitation, materiality and ghosts? May we assure anyone that land-scape is conflict and resolution, stasis and relation, vertical and horizontal axes in causality and indeterminacy? Landscape is 'us' as a 'we' with specific histories and futures, a-universally simply in 'now,' yet always situated. Landscape is not a blue horizontal vector against a green horizontal track, however sinuous these may be. Landscape is the smells and the sounds and the wet grass under feet. It is layers of stone and dirt as life-matter in different decomposing stages. It is flowers and buzzing and also very much drones and a sense of loss. Landscape is also this italicized font on paper in contrast with the regular one that follows.

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As socially-engaged artists, we sought to complicate and question the value of grief in our historic moment of non-human loss, and the rapid transformation of landscape. What relationships have passed unnoticed? Is it possible to grieve these passings? Does the act

⁸Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*.

of grieving change spatial and temporal dynamics, and might they have an effect on ideologies of progress? Our answers were unexpected; we did not expect to collectively honor mosquitos. Our answers were partial; time slowed down and then sped up again. Our answers led to more questions -- about the role of reckoning, and about how to bring this practice into our everyday lives.

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The conventional notion of the sublime — the unbound as terrifying and untranslatable — rests on an oscillation between distance and melancholy, by which the other, the unbound, is kept as always separate, whether spatially or temporally; the detachment from the distant object is an operation that obscures through the (mis)perception that it allows clarity of vision. Grief, on the other hand, approaches the unbound via the relational. In this sense grief does not propose clarity or resolution but instead a messy intertwining of vectors, all forces put into play indeterminately. Distance and the melancholic are both of a relationality that attempts to divide.



Dawn

It is hard to talk about grief, to say what it is. It is easier to say what it is not. It is not despair, it is not sadness, not trauma, not bad (though one's affect can turn bad in its absence). Grief has a kind of honoring and appreciation embedded within it. It is slow, and is best done collectively. We can, sometimes, and in the right company, speak towards creating conditions for grief.

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At dawn, once all the 'things' hung from the structure, it was put over the remaining fleece and carried to its burial site, where it lays covered with the wet red soil of Devon.

