



Memory

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

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I turn to the human concept of memory and to our public repositories of human and non-human memories to invoke the idea of the archive, by which I mean the total sum of our libraries, museums, collecting institutions and online databases. These instruments are viewed as sites of power at once structuring our thoughts on a subject, and censoring and indexing an approach to a topic. I also speak of history and memory, both individual and collective, and how our collecting institutions are uniquely located to bridge these two forms.

Today we are required to consider long-term historical structures in preference to events that operate and register on a human scale; one example might be the Aral sea, as figured below. The priority given to long-term structures over historical events in the approach known as the *longue durée*, changes the flavour of history by pushing it closer to memory, something that is associated with the continuity between past and present. History is a discipline that is often associated with revelations about the differences between past and present; it considers change over time, looking at similarities while marking distinct differences. Memory, in contradistinction to history, is marked by irregular and uncertain boundaries. Furthermore, memory and emotions are linked; events are not disconnected from feelings.¹ With a view to unpacking these distinctions, we might revisit the multifarious links between memory, thinking and affect.

Variouly conceived, our environments “are encountered as sources of distress, pleasure and commemoration, sometimes intensifying exclusion and sometimes fostering well-being.”² How can we attend to the sources, registers, tones and mechanisms of those feelings; within a curatorial context, how might we think of their storage and their retrieval? How might our new archives more explicitly embody and invoke culturally specific emotions, constituted within and

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¹ For Gibbs, emotional memory constitutes the largest part of our memory; it is encoded in our being.

Anna Gibbs, “After Affect: Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press 2010), 186-205.

² Dionne Brand, *What We All Long For* (Toronto: Vintage, 2005), 8.

by particular cultures vis-à-vis their environments? And how might we rethink the value of oral traditions and oral history in this context?



Figure 1 *The Aral sea, once the fourth largest lake in the world, has shrunk by 90% and is now a graveyard of ships. Photograph "The Aral Sea Loses Its Eastern Lobe." NASA Earth Observatory, September 26, 2014.*

I break memory up into a few elements to offer a poetics of memory for environmental humanities scholars, which could be used to engage new publics. I have chosen to do this with a mnemonic device. Working with the letters that constitute the word 'memory,' I elect six elements to structure my essay—four of which come from an understanding of the catharsis of the emotions (particularly pity and terror)—as outlined in Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

Mimesis or "imitation," "representation"

Ethos or "character"

Mythos or "plot"

Opsis or "spectacle"

peripeteia or "Reversal"

Melos, or "melodY"

'M'imesis – imitation / representation

Mimesis is an entirely holistic, analogue mode of communication in which “the world is apprehended as variation on continuous dimensions, rather than generated from discrete elements.”³ It would be valuable for our natural history collections and cultural archives (owned, indexed and maintained by humans for humans) to sustain such an understanding and feeling of variation. Doing so would help us to recognize the complex ways in which human organisms and their environments are “mutually unfolded and enfolded structures”⁴ and are each recomposed in and through their exchanges. Moreover, our collecting institutions’ interpretative grids could be calibrated to the ways that “evolution demonstrates the mutability and malleability of biology as against its permanence.”⁵ This approach would trigger environmental emotions, which could be harnessed by sensitive curation of the visitor experience.

'E'thos – character

Our inner eye can relate to the past and present; human animals have a mechanism which can turn equally well outward to the senses, to our physical world of existence, and inward to memory and thought, to personal symbolism and pre-symbolic emotions.⁶ Our museums, for example, might exploit this capacity; we could draw from individual visitors’ personal experience and from their private symbolism (memory) while developing a shared public experience (thinking). This might yield new affective geographies: emotional relationships and responses to scientific data within the public space.⁷

'M'ythos – plot

It is hard to know exactly how we live and die together, and it is difficult to be clear about the degrees to which we impact upon other species with which we share our planet. And it is in this space that the purpose of much environmentalism, like Athenian tragedy, is the arousal of pity and fear. If our museums structured the incidents or actions of their visitors (i.e. ‘plots’) to

³ Gibbs, “After Affect,” 199.

⁴ Francisco Varela, Evan T. Thomson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 199.

⁵ Gibbs, “After Affect,” 190.

⁶ Silvan S. Tomkins, “Simulation of Personality: The Interrelationships between Affect, Memory, Thinking, Perception, and Action,” in *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 453-4.

⁷ Interestingly, human memory is organised to minimize class membership—we create unique objects (with a name) in our minds—meaningful to us or perhaps a few people; while thinking is the opposite, as we construct concepts with symbols to broaden class membership, to be with others. See Tomkins “Simulation of personality,” 452, 462.

bridge the gap between the intellectual realm of historicised scientific information and “the innate, the biological, the instinctual and the affective,” then we might see whether pity or fear remains relevant to environmental literacy in our century.⁸

‘O’psis – spectacle

Pierre Bourdieu argues that:

One has to situate oneself within ‘real activity’ as such, that is in the practical relation to the world, the preoccupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be said and done, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as spectacle.⁹

While we are gaining more extreme weather, higher sea levels and new species, one spectacle of the Anthropocene is loss: loss of biodiversity, species, scientific literacy; and we are losing the protection once offered by the nation state as many local ecological problems are part of an intractable global tapestry, which requires international law and trans-continental diplomacy, heightened bioregional imaginations and a new ecocosmopolitan ethics.

Peripetia – ‘r’eversal

This poetics of memory fails; it is western, linear, diachronic. Deborah Rose said that it feels that the Anthropocene is hailing us from the future into our ‘now.’¹⁰ What would it take to set up a gallery using the animist framework of mythology, for example the Australian aboriginal alternate universe of Dreamtime where past, present and future are one? How might we be affected if we were to imagine, just for one moment, that the past is before us? With structured affective registers programmed into the visitor experience, our institutions might become active processes by which meaning is created. New installations and galleries could be designed to affectively disclose a political tension between the idea of memory as recollection or witness of a forgotten past *and* memory being used to imagine or to create a present or future community.¹¹

⁸ Elspeth Probyn, “Shame in the Habitus,” in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, ed. Lisa Adkins and Beverley Skeggs, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 224-248; 235. Heather Kerr informs me that Hume’s analysis of sympathy confirms that the experience of another’s passion may give rise to pity. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 369.

⁹ Probyn, “Shame in the Habitus,” 229.

¹⁰ HfE Australia Pacific Observatory, “Deborah Bird Rose: ‘Country and the Gift,’” accessed 22 October 2014, <http://hfeobservatory.com.au/media-channel/deborah-bird-rose-country-and-the-gift/>. Conversely, Libby Robin keeps with the logic of linear models of time to clarify the Anthropocene as an epoch that ‘spans the past and future’ (331); and one ‘that is not so much back-dated as forecast’ (334), “Histories for Changing Times: Entering the Anthropocene?,” *Australian Historical Studies* 44, no.3 (2013): 329-340.

¹¹ One example of this would be the consolidation of community experiences of the Derbarl Yerrigan and Djarlgarro Beelie rivers (Swan and Canning rivers) in Western Australia. Oral history was recorded and mobilised to inform an interpretation plan for riverside heritage trails, coordinated by Susan Broomhall and Gina Pickering as part of the Australian Research Council’s Centre of Excellence

'M'elody – melos

What might a rhythm analysis of the Environmental Humanities look like? What pitch and tonal colours might we elect from or add to our memories? Surprisingly we might go back to an idea of total history. Much of this essay has drawn from the analysis of Elspeth Probyn, and it is vital to turn to her research with the idea of history in mind. Probyn on Marcel Mauss: "Habitus is an important tenet in Mauss' striving to comprehend 'l'homme total,' a vision of a sociological accounting for the totality that joins 'the local connectedness of form and content ... the tangible aspect of human life ... in relation to the body and its material experience, the techniques of work, and the rhythmic enactment of ritual and symbolic performance.'"¹²

Might we offer something similar in our *environmental* accounting? Might this move require the coexistence of the empirical and the poetic, the recorded and the oral, the symbolic and subsymbolic—informing and challenging each other? This type of outreach might set the stage for an aesthetic committed to observation and thus dedicated to motion, invention.

We might return to dynamic fields of experience.

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¹² Probyn, "Shame in the Habitus," 233.