

Field Guide to Lost Futures

A Collaborative Engagement with the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The Field Guide to Lost Futures is a collaborative digital humanities assignment created for an upper-year English and cultural studies seminar. The course engaged with the expansive and complex topic of the Anthropocene, from a humanities and specifically cultural studies perspective. To focus students' engagements with the many catastrophes associated with the Anthropocene, the assignment asked them to profile a single, concrete example of loss related to ongoing environmental crises in a brief contribution to the Field Guide website. Designed with the isolation and dispersal of students due to COVID-19 virtual learning, the Field Guide assignment brought students together in a collective project without the pressures of group work. The assignment was organized as a portfolio of four low-stakes activities that led to the final Field Guide entry. The scaffolded design and experiential nature of the assignment emphasized the multi-stage nature of writing and revision, as well as editorial considerations unique to writing for a digital audience.

Course Context

The Field Guide to Lost Futures assignment was created in response to the distinct challenge of teaching about the catastrophic losses associated with the Anthropocene in the context of the radical losses of the COVID-19 pandemic. The course, "Literature, Culture, and the Anthropocene," was a seminar for upper-year students, which I designed and taught as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. McMaster is a public research university in Ontario, Canada. The course was a 13-week seminar that consisted of weekly meetings held synchronously over zoom.

As I planned the course in Fall 2020, I was aware of the isolation, burnout, and stress students were experiencing due to abrupt pivot to virtual learning. Alongside this strained learning context was the difficult content of the course itself: the critical assessment of the Anthropocene and the unequal and inequitable distribution of its catastrophic effects. With this context in mind, I re-imagined the 2,500 to 3,000-word final papers typical of my department's seminar courses as a series of scaffolded assignments that built towards a final 1,000-word entry written for a collaborative digital humanities project: The [Field Guide to Lost Futures](#). The Field Guide to Lost Futures is a collection of brief essays that identify beings, places, relations, and phenomena that may be lost due to the radical changes some humans have inflicted on the planet. Flexibility, revision, and a pedagogy of kindness were at the heart of this loss-driven writing (Denial, 2019).

Together, my students and I engaged with the radically divergent causes and experiences of loss from a range of perspectives, locations, and scales in weekly seminar meetings. Our work clustered around loss in three key sites: land, species, and futures. We approached loss as active processes—wherein lands, species, and futures are made lost by activities such as extractive capitalism, colonial dispossession, ecofascism, and environmental racism. We also examined a range of responses to loss, including affective (grief, hope, and rage), narrative and arts-based (elegy, monuments), and policy (platforms, reparations).

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Concise Writing Amid Expansive Crises

The Anthropocene is a term that describes the current geological age, characterized by the dominance of human influence on the planet's systems, including climate change, deforestation, proliferation of toxic wastes, and mass extinctions. Much writing and thinking around the Anthropocene projects into a future radically remade by loss. Losses of ecosystems, relationships, lifeways, and stories have been unequally created and are inequitably distributed, yet the Anthropocene is often discussed in academic and popular media in universalizing ways.¹

A fundamental challenge to grappling with the Anthropocene is the geological scale. Following the research of Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (2017), my students and I approached the Anthropocene as a phenomenon that emerged at 1610, or “from the beginning of the colonial period, [thus naming] the problem of colonialism as responsible for contemporary environmental crisis” (p. 763). The immense scale, yet spatially and temporally diffused impacts, of the Anthropocene poses an incredible challenge to identifying and reflecting on events or phenomena that are often experienced as unreal, such as flash floods, superstorms, and species extinctions. Amitav Ghosh (2016) has described this as a “crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (p. 9). To intervene in the universalizing tendencies of many prominent analyses of the Anthropocene, our syllabus centred readings from scholars working in Indigenous studies, Black studies, critical animal studies, and settler colonial studies.

How does an instructor ask students to meaningfully engage with the monumental scale of the Anthropocene and the expansive and more minute ways environmental catastrophe impacts different lives, places, and experiences? My answer for this seminar course was to get students to think through a specific example of loss in the wake of environmental change and to work contextually through questions of location, relations, and power. I designed the Field Guide to Lost Futures to assist students with thinking about these massive changes from local and specific perspectives. Rather than trying to think about all the ongoing and looming destructions bundled into the concept of the Anthropocene at once, I wanted students to think about the impact of loss in a specific case study. What are the possible impacts of the loss of a particular being? Of a particular component in an ecosystem?

In the Field Guide assignment, I asked students to pick one thing (e.g., a species, a place, a practice) that might be lost due to human-induced changes to the planet's systems and to think about how the effects of this loss might be felt. The assignment was straightforward: tell the story of loss with as much specific detail as you can and make clear the stakes of that loss to a general reader. Each of their Field Guide entries would be added to a website and shared with our department at a launch party at the end of term. Students were invited to include illustrative elements, such as photography, film, maps, alt-text, and hyperlinks, to build additional context for their written work and situate their research within a broader online environment. As we worked through our course readings that addressed the Anthropocene from critical perspectives, I regularly invited students to try and connect what we were reading to the case study they selected through free writing activities and reflective, small group discussions.

The Field Guide to Lost Futures was envisioned as part time capsule, part memorial, and part speculative experiment. By projecting into the future, I invited students to think about how the Anthropocene and the many losses in the wake of its catastrophes might be remembered. The assignment asked students to craft an entry that identified something they imagined will be lost due to the Anthropocene's wide-ranging yet localized effects. The Field Guide is open-ended. I encouraged students to think about a range of losses, from species and land or water bodies to cultural practices and relationships. My intention was that each entry would contribute to looking forward and backward, to document worlds that were and worlds that are becoming. In an effort to prompt their curiosity, I proposed that these losses may be things we long for

and wish would return, but they might also be phenomena from which we are glad to be free. As a critical digital humanities project, the Field Guide to Lost Futures was created for a broad audience of non-experts. Rather than solely sharing their research and analysis with me, this modest digital publication created the opportunity for students to share their work with a wider group.

Developing the Assignment

One impetus for the Field Guide to Lost Futures came from an experience with writing for online publication and my desire for students to create something together while being physically distanced during stay-at-home orders. As I designed the course, I had the opportunity to write for *The Conversation*—a platform that publishes academic research in brief journalistic articles. The constraints of writing this way and the opportunities for sharing research with a wider audience left me feeling energized. Similarly, the challenge of writing for online readers struck me as an experiential learning opportunity that might benefit students beyond the context of our seminar. Finally, pandemic isolation has thrown into relief the value of community and collaboration. While I suspected that group projects would bring additional challenges, such as students coordinating schedules and the difficulty of cultivating trust online, I hoped that individually crafted contributions to a collective publication would create community without added strain.

When I was developing “Literature, Culture, and the Anthropocene” in Fall 2020, I returned to the idea of the field guide. The field guide is a mode of writing connected to a desire of knowing the world through rigid classifications and, historically, a tool designed to aid colonial acquisition. But perhaps the format of the field guide could still be useful in a course designed around anticolonial perspectives on the Anthropocene? The core function of a field guide—to identify through careful distinctions and provide guidance in contexts where its readers might be uncertain—struck me as a still useful form for structuring an assignment in a course about something as immense as global environmental change.

The final product of the Field Guide to Lost Futures assignment was simple enough: a 1,000 word entry that profiled an impending or imagined future loss, written with a broad audience in mind. I had learned from an earlier attempt at a field guides assignment, as well as previous courses where I asked students to write op-ed columns or review art exhibitions, that writing in a different genre or for an audience beyond the instructor can be a challenge. With this in mind, I developed the assignment as a series of five activities that emphasized research, writing, and revision as a multi-step and often cyclical process. This scaffolded approach also meant that I introduced the concept of a field guide in the first week of the course, and we discussed it as a form repeatedly. Over the course of six weeks, students completed a research memo, a contributor bio post on the Field Guide website, an analysis of their two illustrative elements, a draft of their entry, and their final Field Guide entry. Given the constraints students (and I) were working in, I wanted the assignment to truly be about the process. To this end, four of the five activities were bundled together as a portfolio. I used a specification grading system, where I assessed submitted work as meeting or not meeting specified expectations (Bayraktar, 2020). Ultimately, this helped keep the activities low-stakes, and the students and I were able to focus on feedback oriented towards building the final entry.

I designed the series of assignments by working backwards from the final entries that would appear on the website. The Field Guide website was a WordPress blog, which I set up in Fall 2020 with the assistance of a postdoctoral fellow at McMaster’s Centre for Digital Scholarship, and was hosted by the McMaster Library. Students would need ample opportunity for feedback on drafts in order to create a tightly focused and clearly written entry. That entry would also

need illustrations and would require much more background research than would ultimately appear in such a brief piece of writing. Since the final entries would be submitted as website posts with hyperlinks and embedded illustrations, students would also need an opportunity to practice using the WordPress block editor, as well as properly categorizing and publishing their posts. Students submitted their draft entries three weeks before the final version was due, which allowed for three stages of feedback: self-assessment in an in-class writing workshop, a peer review, and feedback from me. For the final version of their entries, students created a blog post on the website and formatted it with hyperlinks to citations, inserted captioned images with alt text, and saved it as a draft, which I then graded and published.

Throughout the portfolio of assignments, I emphasized that in contributing to the Field Guide, the students were writing for an audience larger than just me. To redirect some of the anxiety that started to bubble up when they began to realize that their work would be online and available to an unknown audience, I encouraged students to think about how they would explain the topics of their entries to a friend or roommate. We discussed the value of narrative writing and balanced the judicious use of direct quotation against the constraints of the very brief word limit. Narrowing focus to a concrete being, location, or issue was a challenge for almost every student. Given the geological scale of the Anthropocene and the complex environmental crises we studied throughout the course, the struggle with limiting scope was not surprising. By working from research memo to draft to final entry, I was able to indicate places where more specific examples were needed. To my pleasant surprise, this challenge was something the students productively identified in their peer reviews.

Ultimately, having a project that we were all working on together brought a special energy to a small seminar of students scattered throughout the province due to pandemic lockdown measures. It took a bit of convincing, but many students expressed enthusiasm about producing work that would have a life beyond our class. In all of our discussions of the assignment, I emphasized my hope that the project would be something the students would be proud of and able to share with friends and family, link to in their portfolios, or use as a writing sample. With each student's permission, the Field Guide will remain active.

I hope to grow the Field Guide to Lost Futures in subsequent iterations of this course. However, it is my sense that this kind of scaffolded, collaborative assignment can be adapted to many other contexts. The core of the assignment—short, focused pieces of writing contributing to an overarching question or theme—can be used in a wide range of courses, particularly those organized around exploring big, thorny topics with high stakes or expansive questions that can be asked from different perspectives. By breaking big questions or themes into digestible pieces, assignments modeled on the Field Guide let students take responsibility for one piece that connects to a whole or a broader undertaking. Similarly, I think this heavily scaffolded approach, particularly with the attention to visual elements included in the final entries, would be useful in courses that seek to include elements of media studies or multi-media skills alongside writing skills. I foresee incorporating many of these elements into future writing assignments, as well as adapting a field guide approach to an array of courses. I will be using the scaffolded approach to field guides in my next iteration of “Alternative Media,” and I foresee adapting the assignment for a course I am developing about Art and Politics, where students will create entries to a field guide to the political uses of visual art in Canada.

Student Experience Outcomes

The Field Guide to Lost Futures documents an array of losses. It includes entries examining how species and languages are at risk of extinction due to the combined forces of capitalist extraction and ecological damage; how the loss of controlled burns in the boreal forest is also a

loss of Indigenous knowledge; the ongoing losses of neighbourhoods due to the dual disasters of gentrification and flooding; and much more. Each of these entries highlights only a small example of the radical impacts of the Anthropocene. But through this range of topics, students helped one another deepen their appreciation for just how expansive these impacts will be—and in many cases, already are.

I had proposed to students that they could think speculatively about future losses and encouraged them to think about losses we might grieve, but also those we might welcome. In suggesting a speculative approach, I had hoped that students might consider seemingly fixed social and political phenomena (like fossil fuel dependency, the commodity status of water, or capitalism) as things we might one day be without. In the end, all of the students' entries were about losses happening right now. My sense is that the immensity of loss in the immediate past and present moment provided students with more than enough examples to delve into and that speculating further was a step beyond what they had the capacity for at the time of our course. Given the challenge of imagining the near-future during the uncertainty of living through a global pandemic, this probably should not have come as a surprise. Similarly, I had also invited students to consider engaging in place-based research and examining environmental change and loss in their immediate surroundings. However, we did not have the opportunity to meet in person to practice this mode of inquiry together. As a result, the entries did not take up this suggestion either—perhaps not surprising during a period where no one was leaving home with much frequency.

As they completed the portfolio of assignments, all students struggled to some degree with identifying a concrete example and with the brevity of the paper. As one student told me in a meeting, she was used to writing 1,000 words on a single sentence of a literary work in some of her past English assignments, so figuring out how to present the content of her entry in a substantive way felt impossible. Peer reviews, as well as some free writing prompts we did in class and out of class, helped students clarify their topic and their approach. I have included these prompts in the assignment overview below. Several students reported that the feedback they received from the peer reviews and their self-assessments in our writing workshop were what made the assignment feel possible. In particular, I had given them ten minutes to write in response to a prompt: “what I really mean is...”² After the activity, several students commented that they felt much more confident in narrowing the focus of their entries and had clearer senses of where to add details and, crucially, where to cut.

The success of the Field Guide confirmed for me the importance of integrating the research, writing, and revision process into assignments. Having multiple points of feedback—such as proposal comments and peer reviews—and practicing revision strategies such as reverse outlining during our in-class writing workshop helped students connect experientially with the cyclical process of writing. The digital and multimodal context of the assignment asked students to consider questions of intertextual meaning between their written texts and the illustrations they selected. Because their entries were published online, students also had to learn about copyright, fair use, and how to seek permissions from image creators. It is my sense that knowing their work would be published online helped students appreciate that they were writing for an audience—beyond their instructor. At the end of the course, we invited members of our department to a launch party where my students gave brief presentations about their entries. The launch was a true celebration of the Field Guide as a collective and collaborative effort.

ASSIGNMENT

Field Guide to Lost Futures Assignment Overview

The Field Guide to Lost Futures project is a collective and collaborative digital humanities project at the heart of our course. The Field Guide is addressed to audiences a few decades from now who will have endured much more of the catastrophic effects of the Anthropocene than we already have. Each entry in the Field Guide identifies something we imagine will be lost due to the Anthropocene's wide-ranging yet localized effects. From species and land or water bodies to practices and relationships, each entry contributes to a vision that looks forward and back to document worlds that were and worlds that are becoming. These losses may be things we long for and wish would return, but they may also be phenomena from which we are glad to be free.

Entries will contextualize the lost phenomena, with careful attention to locatedness and relationality. To build the Field Guide to Lost Futures, entries will combine a variety of critical theory approaches with the imaginative power of speculative thought. Unlike a traditional essay, the Field Guide is a digital project that is designed to be engaged with as a visual, web-based object. Entries will be written with both the screen and wider audiences in mind, will use hyperlinks for citation, and will be accompanied by three illustrative elements, such as photography, film, or maps.

We will develop our Field Guide entries through a portfolio of four short assignments: a research memo, a practice contributor post, a visual analysis, and a draft entry with peer review. Through these assignments, you will conduct research and analysis necessary for a compelling Field Guide entry, as well as develop required technical skills. For each of these assignments, you will receive a guide that lays out specific expectations. Assignments will be graded as "meeting expectations" or "not meeting expectations." In all cases, students will receive feedback from me and your peers that will help you develop and refine your Field Guide entry. Together, these four assignments will be bundled as 30% of your class mark. This grade will be calculated by how many of your assignments meet expectations: 4 assignments meeting expectations = A, 3 = B, 2 = C, 1 or fewer = D.

Field Guide Portfolio Assignments

Research Memo: Due Week Seven

The research memo is the starting point for your Field Guide entry and will be due on Week Seven. It is meant to: a) get you thinking about your case study early; and b) to maximize the time we have to develop your project together. Here, you will gather the material, from which you will develop your entry and its analytical argument. To create the memo, assemble as much information as you can find about your entry's topic: the who, what, when, why, and how your selected entry topic was lost. This is the info gathering stage, not the analysis stage. Try to stick to facts, description, and examples. You will use the information you gather here to develop the next steps in the Field Guide assignment. The completed memo should be 3-4 pages and should include a bibliography.

Contributor Bio Post: Due Week Eight

This short assignment will give you the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the process of creating and publishing a post on the Field Guide website. By Week Eight, you will login to the Field Guide wordpress site and create a draft post to the Contributors page. The post will include your name and a brief bio. If you like, you can include a photo or illustration. A list of expectations will be provided in advance. Before the due date, I will demonstrate how to create a post and you will have access to video tutorials. I will review the draft posts and will publish

those that meet expectations.

Visual Analysis: Due Week Nine

Your Field Guide entry will feature two illustrations. These can be photographs, maps, video, audio, archival images, or drawings/paintings. You can make your own illustrative content, or you can find them elsewhere. An important aspect of digital publishing is ensuring *you have permission* for using media created by other people. There are several good options for free stock photography and many museums and archives allow the fair use of their materials. All of this requires proper captioning and attribution. To ensure the Field Guide is inclusive, we will also provide alt text so users with screen readers are able to access the visual information included in our entries. For the visual analysis, you will identify the two illustrative elements your entry will include, as well as the appropriate captions, attributions, and alt text. A list of assignment expectations and specifications will be provided in advance. The visual analysis is due on Week Nine and should be two pages long.

Field Guide Entry Draft: Due Week Ten

A full draft of your Field Guide entry will be submitted on Week Ten, for in-class peer review on Week Ten. In the draft, you will build on the information you gathered for your research memo by integrating your observational and descriptive information with analytical frames drawn from critical perspectives engaged throughout the course. The Field Guide to Lost Futures is speculative in nature. For speculations to be compelling, they must be nuanced and attentive to power structures. The draft should contain the text of your entry, as well as two illustrative elements. Images must be properly captioned and accompanied by alternative text (alt text) descriptions. The draft must include proper citations, which will be hyperlinked in the final entry. To give you the opportunity to learn from one another, we will do peer review of our entry drafts. This will give you the chance to consider the ideas and approaches of your peers and to practice giving constructive feedback on the content, style, and illustration of your entry.

Questions and Prompts for Writing

When you are working on your entry, here are a few questions to ask yourself:

- What can you notice?
- What have you been expected NOT to notice?
- What kinds of things feel “normal”? Why?
- What or who is at risk in a situation of loss?
- How can we talk about loss and what is on the line in ways that don’t only revolve around humans?

If you get stuck, here are a few prompts to help you think about your entry in different ways. I recommend picking one and writing a response by hand. Set a timer for 5-7 minutes and write what comes to mind, without stopping.

- Where are you? Describe the *place* of your entry in sensory detail. Work with one sense at a time.
- What is most important? Why?
- What is least important? Why?
- Stories can be told from many perspectives. Who (or what) could be telling the story of your entry? If you switch perspectives, what becomes more or less important?

- Step away from your notes, you research, your drafts and finish this sentence:
What I really mean is.....

Final Field Guide Entry: Due Week Thirteen

The final Field Guide entry is due Week Thirteen. You will create a post on the Field Guide for Lost Futures website and leave it as a draft post. I will review and publish each final post. Each entry will be 800-1000 words and will introduce, contextualize, and analyze a lost phenomenon in relation to a specific theoretical lens drawn from the course, such as: race, gender, sexuality, class, species, etc. Contextualization should attend to the specificities of location and relationships. I will assess your entry based on its written content (well-researched context, critical analysis, compelling speculative thought) as well as on illustrations and style.

Additional Notes

The *Field Guide to Lost Futures* continues to live online. I have further reflected on this course in the *Journal of Environmental Media* (Taschereau Mamers, 2021) and in a hand-drawn zine, both titled “Living in Lost Futures.” The zine is available on [my website](#).

Notes

¹The term Anthropocene was coined by white male chemist, Paul Crutzen, and Veerabhadran Ramanathan in 2000, but they are not the first and far from the only persons to theorize, grasp, and mourn the losses mounting from human-changed ecosystems.

²I learned this prompt from a Public Writing Workshop, led by Irina Dumitrescu and hosted by the University of Toronto’s Jackman Humanities Institute in March 2021.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v7i1.117>.

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