



LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Fossil

HUGO REINERT

University of Oslo, Norway

Ammonite

I carry a fossil in my pocket.¹ Once upon a time it was an ammonite. In death its body has crystallized beautifully, bands of translucent material shimmer in the light, and I have traveled with it for years, like a kind of friend—in a little box, in my wallet, in a sealed pocket in my rucksack, sometimes in my hand.² I call it Fossil. Fossil is not alive, of course—but it possesses a kind of aura, a “thing-power,” which is not that of the corpse but something else, some presence or relationship that demands to be acknowledged.³ It is not animate, at least not on my own timescale, although geochemical processes continue to unfold in the captured intricacy of its post-biological folds, in the luminous density of its no-longer flesh. Fossil is a thing that lived and was buried, and now it keeps a different time—a time that it helps me think, that it keeps open, that it helps me keep.⁴

The ammonite lineage emerged during the Devonian period, some 400 million years ago, and the last of them perished with the Chicxulub impact over 300 million years later, in the vast planetary extinction that marked the end of the Cretaceous.⁵ The time-depth that separates us transcends imagination—and yet here is Fossil, in my

1. Some parts of the following text were also included, in rewritten form, as part of my contribution to an experimental, collectively authored article by the Lifetimes Research Collective, a research group I belong to at the University of Oslo. See Lifetimes Research Collective, “Fossilization,” 16.

2. The stone in the hand, as one figure or iteration of a “lithic intimacy” (Cohen, *Stone*) that has been occupying me for some time now. See also Reinert, “About a Stone.”

3. “Aura” after Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 220: the aura of an art object as its “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” “Thing-power” is from Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

4. Bastian, “Fatally Confused.”

5. For example, McKeever, “What Are Ammonites.”

hand, like a concrete metaphor: metonymic proxy, image of time. In its bands and folds the flesh of me comes face to face with the immensity of the aftermath, the sheer time-depth of the no-longer-biological. “Remember, I was once like you,” it seems to say, speaking as one of the dead for whom time has *almost* ceased to pass, who are held now in the quiet, terrestrial hum of growing crystals and mineral precipitates that deposit themselves over the millennia, in the slow tectonic pulse of the Earth itself. Across the “dark abyss of time,” the echo of shared flesh provokes a leap of empathy—or does it?⁶

This is such an easy, convenient narrative: the fossil as memento mori, keepsake and reminder of finitude, index of transience, extinction, a higher order of death⁷—but death is an overworked analytic, these days: here and now, “in the Anthropocene.” Its discourse and affects are both exhausting: theorists elaborate a relentless succession of epochal neologisms while the “lullaby of finitude” drones on—banal, monotonous, incessant.⁸ Other registers, other modes of relation and engagement with deep time,⁹ are not just possible but urgently, desperately needed: care, affection, respect, obligation, awe. Wonder. Recognition. Coming home.

Fossil sits in my hand, absorbing my biological heat. More than an index, more than a reminder. “*All my relations*,” goes the Lakota prayer, and the phrase has haunted me for years, though I have no claim on it.¹⁰

Care for the Dead

A fossil is something that was buried, then found. In 2019, a writer for *Vice* described AirPods as “future fossils of capitalism.”¹¹ Would it be strange to read this projection as hopeful, as implying that there *will* be a future in which someone is there, still? Someone “separated from us by hundreds, even thousands of generations”¹²—someone to exhume the wreckage, to pull it into the light and air and name what was buried? Some observer or witness, left to puzzle through the garbage and the plastic trinkets in a future where capitalism is dead, legible only through its exhumed traces. What do you call the thing that inscribes itself into the archive in the exact gesture by which it also threatens to obliterate itself, the future, the possibility of a future reader? Human time has been childishly short—and yet, here we are.

6. Rossi, *Dark Abyss*.

7. Dibley, “Technofossil.”

8. The phrase “lullaby of finitude” I take from Povinelli, “On Biopolitics.”

9. Ginn et al., “Introduction.”

10. One of several possible translations into English of the Lakota phrase “mitakuye oyasin.” For a contemporary account, see the Sioux writer Ruth Hopkins, “Ties That Bind.” The current political context of the phrase is given in large part by the ongoing resistance of the Lakota and other Indigenous peoples against US resource colonialism, environmental racism, and genocidal white supremacist policies; see, for example, Estes, *Our History*.

11. Haskins, “AirPods.” See also, for example, Yusoff, “Geologic Life.”

12. Farrier, *Footprints*.

Years ago, at a protest in the Arctic, I sat down next to a Sámi woman I didn't know and we got talking about the project we were protesting against: a projected copper mine that would disrupt local livelihoods, environments, and the complex, fragile marine ecologies of the region to an immense degree.¹³ We talked about the land, memory, history, the extractive violence of mining, the “deposits” and landscape features that would be destroyed if the project went ahead. Why was the proposed destruction so offensive? “We care for the dead, here,” she answered, gesturing to the landscape.

We care for the dead. Her words rang in my head for days, echoing like the sound of a great bell. Who were the dead? The sweep of her hand invoked the human dead, not just those buried in the graveyards but those whose lives and tales and memories were embedded in a landscape that the dominant discourse insisted on treating as empty, worthless, available.¹⁴ To place the dead in the landscape this way was to enrich it, to populate it with a time-depth that was denied, erased in the ahistorical present of capital investment cycles—an unstable present, empty and forever tipping forward, crashing into future. The dead hold you quietly to account, is what she was saying. To recognize their presence, to live with them, in relation, was itself a form of resistance.

Fossil fuels are fossils too, transformed biological residue of long-dead beings: bodies of the ancient dead, plants, animals, biomass rendered as “combustible organic deposits,”¹⁵ a tar-like energetic surplus refined over millions of years as the Earth shifted and stirred, churning the bodies. “Fossil-kin,” the Métis scholar Zoe Todd calls them.¹⁶ Are they dead? Are they *the* dead? Do they hold us to account? Do they ask us, quietly, how to live with them? Smoke whirrs, spiraling from the chimneys with the force of a broken seal as the *combustible organic deposits* catch fire in the rolling wave of this planetary conflagration, this epochal rupture in which “even the dead will not be safe.”¹⁷ What remains? What of the trace, the accreting solidity, the mark that will not be erased? “All that is solid melts into air,” Marx and Engels wrote of an earlier conflagration, which may well also be the current one. “All that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his *relations with his kind*.”¹⁸

After Hope

June 2021: I've just finished drafting a first version of this text and I am on Zoom, talking to a Sámi climate activist. What sustains action after hope is gone? She is silent for a while. “My relations,” she says, finally. “You know that Lakota saying? *All my relations*.” I

13. Reinert, “Notes from a Projected Sacrifice Zone.”

14. Reinert, “Midwife”; “Emptiness.”

15. “Buried combustible geologic deposits of organic materials”; European Commission, Scientific Committees, Glossary, s.v. “fossil fuel(s),” https://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific_committees/opinions_layman/glossary/def/fossil-fuel.htm (accessed May 13, 2022).

16. Todd, “Fish, Kin, and Hope”; see also Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter*, and the video from Sonic Acts Academy, “Heather Davis: The Queer Futurity of Plastic,” Vimeo, February 28, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/158044006>.

17. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255.

18. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 54; emphasis added.

nod, thinking about the text you are reading. After all these years the phrase finally comes like a gift, no longer a ghost but a strange friend I have warmed in my hand.

Here is Fossil then, in my hand: distant cousin, no longer alive, gently radiating back to me the heat it has absorbed, like the light of some far-off world—a world built not with the bodies of the dead but in their presence, in abiding relation, in a care that acknowledges their deeper claim on time.

HUGO REINERT is an associate professor in the Cultural History of Nature at the University of Oslo.

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