

PREFACE



This book is the first of several experiments in ethnographic research and writing about a near-future world beyond catastrophic climate ruin, set in a make-believe, ecotourist community and its offshore coral reefs, evoked by Belize imaginings. This still-too-close-to-the-present, yet “beyond-ruin” climate hovers around the edges of ruin, between the present and an (im)possible future as it echoes between revitalization efforts and prospects, national objectives, group conflicts, individual fears and desires, and experiences of constantly growing and shrinking worlds. By drawing a series of scenes and stories through such an entangled and out-of-time space, the intention of this work is to explore new ways to engage with climate change in Belize and beyond. It is an ongoing project, and as such, this work presents initial and still-developing explorations of experimental writing in the field of climate crisis in anthropology today.

“Beyond ruin” is, in the context of climate crisis today, a felt fluidity, something always moving from the depths of climate ruin. It emerges among things lost or ruined in the course of environmental destruction or deemed too insignificant, inactive, useless, or even too wishful to keep in the face of crisis and emergency, yet still there and leaking beyond any one environmental context in sensations, chats, nostalgic longings, arbitrary memories, dashed plans, small irritations and wonders, sightings, images, and discarded or forgotten objects, trinkets or trash left dangling in history. These are the things that make up the felt losses of climate crisis. When felt as something “lingering” (see Ochoa 2007), and growing with their persistence, however, these things become more than lost. Instead, they move toward curious and lively, as forces reaching toward new relations and potential connections.

“Beyond ruin,” thus, becomes excitement and movement in the depths of loss and refusal. It takes bodies and objects someplace else—to another experience, other possibilities, connections, and worlds that draw the historical

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materiality of ruin into “worlding refrains” (Stewart 2010, also 2007), and potential “global coalescences” (Tsing 2005) that are neither here nor there, yet constantly moving and spilling over. Moving toward what Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers (2012) call “affective ecologies,” attending to such movement and liveliness in the depths of loss is to attend to the involvement of difference and various lives in the invention of different ways of living. This work is a modest experiment with such ecologies, as it attempts to reach toward difference in the excesses of ruins in a fictionalized ecotourist, coastal community and its underwater environment, one which moves in and beyond Belize.

This book offers a series of lingering and open-ended fictional scenes and stories that emerge from a process of writing that experiments with unexplored possibilities and impossible connections between worlds and across geographic regions, produced by that which is felt along the edges of ruin as something interesting, uncanny, just plain wrong, silly, or seductive. Such a project is thus interested in future worlds, (im)possible ones potentializing from various experiences with refuse and ruin, that is of loss, across many places and contexts. To take up this task, this book weaves across developmental and environmental issues occurring in two different regions today—that is, I write stories that circle around the touristification of the coral reefs in Belize, while simultaneously being enmeshed in experiences of urban sprawl at the edges of the city of Toronto, and its greater area, Ontario, Canada. The setting, in other words, is thoroughly informed by forces of environmental crisis across regions, as well as images and details of ruin that compound, blend, and diverge into new images and scenes that always remain open. In the process, this book becomes so emmeshed cross-regionally that it is no longer just in Belize or Ontario. It emerges between one place and time and another, while drawing on past experiences of climatic ruin and its capacity to keep going, experiences that are themselves as socially and politically entangled in Belize as they are with global markets and global crises experienced elsewhere. Given this cross-regional approach to ethnographic writing, in which forces of crisis reach across the globe, the following stories take place in a future, in-between place, that is, a make-believe coastal community referred to as “C-Town,” in the nation of “Ricuesta,” in the year 2040.

By writing with the “beyond” of environmental loss across regions, this work explores and attempts to leave itself open to new thoughts, questions, and connections, which might be made “for better or worse” (Tsing 2005: 267), by engaging with a world beyond what was or is right now—a world in which new entanglements between things wasted, too often forgotten, disposed of, rejected, or deemed too far gone, shocking, or unrelated build onto current, situated climate issues. In so doing, the hope—and it is a hope—

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is that the following experimental stories and scenes are different enough from the contexts from which they emerge, while still resonating between regional environmental crises, that they might provoke explorations of potential connections, thoughts, questions, critiques, and problems. As oddly reminiscent, awkward, silly, strange, hairy, problematic, gap-ridden acts of imaginative coalescences and experimental thought, it is hoped that the stories and scenes in this book resonate across places and different groups, environmental groups or otherwise.

The goal of this book has been to explore ways in which experimental, ethnographic work can pick up on moments of “connectability” (Massumi 2002) within climatic despair as “something more” (see Little 2020; Stewart 1996) than just ruin, or what is possible in the present. It is already the case that coastal communities and environmental workers operating off the coast of Belize rely on creative and oftentimes troubling connections and partnerships locally, regionally, and across the planet as they piece their way through the fluctuating deterioration of coral reef systems, as well as the ebbs and flows of tourism. As much as their active world-making works to preserve the reefs and offer prospects of a more sustainable future for sea life, their many entanglements also intensify uncertainty and rupture as environmental actions merge with, shape, and are shaped by the still-changing reefs, development initiatives, community needs and desires, tourist desires, individual desires, intergroup conflicts, and national objectives. As uncertainty and crisis intensify, working “beyond ruin” becomes a continuous effort of picking up the pieces, whether these be environmental, national, animal, material, or social. Yet as a haunting lifeline within growing disaster (Benjamin 1968; Buck-Morss 1991, 1992; Ivy 1995; Little 2020; Ochoa 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2017; Piot 2010; Stewart 1996; Tsing 2005, 2015), something flows over things ruined as a site of possibility as well as danger, as experiences with them repeatedly spark potential new avenues, connections, and coalescences (Tsing 2005, 2015), new areas of inquiry and concern, as well as desire, which entangle various groups, individuals, projects, and life-forms in new ways. This is already happening. When working “beyond ruin” spans regions, histories, and happenings so different that they can only connect in the imagination, “beyond ruin” may be all the more unsettling, ghostly, and curious as a resonating force with others and difference.

In this book, readers will encounter a series of experimental scenes and descriptions of entangled experiences and speculative connections across two regions, which may emerge as bewildering, curious, confusing, and inconclusive. The work begins from the perspective of an environmental worker in a coastal Caribbean town, one who is also trained as an anthropologist, but diverges into scenes that move beyond any one frame. The scenes have been written with images of things lost, discarded, waning, insignificant,

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threatened, or threatening due to ongoing environmental issues—yet also reappearing. Although research for this project has also attended to major environmental crises, the focus in the following is on moments and details where the tactility of loss and trouble is most insidious. These moments are the “little things,” those small, often mundane experiences, efforts, or things that are cast aside, so common or well known that they become monotonous, but also build in intensity over time (see Cvetkovich 2003; Manning 2016; Tsing 2005). These include moments of longing, ongoing efforts to preserve life amid destructive forces, small disruptions, plans left unfulfilled, passing glances, moments of shock, alliances left corrupted or unrequited, encounters with things forgotten, or too small to remember, and wasted objects, wasted spaces, and even moments where relationships break or threaten to disappear.

By picking up on these moments—moments that are never really lost but always building in intensity within a world of ongoing climatic issues—this work picks up on their liveliness, their capacity to connect, and tries to push what they already are even further by reencountering them in a fictional place. And although writing about such experiences begins with and repeats encounters with loss, the details also reconnect in experimental stories about a place called C-Town. In so doing, the writing becomes an explorative exercise in “Creative contagion,” (Massumi 2002: 19), and “speculative pragmatism” (Manning 2016: 2) with climatic ruins in relation to ecotourism in Belize and urban sprawl in Ontario. This work holds close and is inspired by what Kathryn Yusoff (2013) refers to as a “politics of sense,” as sensing the “not-yet” of “knotted relations” and worlds as a “transindividual” project (see Manning 2016) that blurs distinctions between here and there, past, present, and future, humans and nonhumans, one experience and another, land and sea, liveliness and wastefulness, loss and production, and development and destruction. By keeping with the many leakages through which “climate” crisis crosses environmental, national, human, animal, material, social, and cultural contexts, the writing for this book blends experiences of loss from one moment to another, to another place or context, on another plane, or in another troubled frame, in scenes that compose creative and experimental entanglements somewhere between a Belizean coastline and the edges of Toronto.

This work thus keeps with forces that whirl up with environmental contexts, as well as the social-political and economic struggles with which environmental issues always entangle. At the same time, writing across regions may bring renewed attention to situated climate issues as the materiality of events and happenings in particular places entwines in fictional ways. In this way, the goal is for the following stories to become something to think about, perhaps laugh about, question, or explore further. Through them I

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ask: what else might emerge from experiences of crisis, with what is still there, even if degrading, and which time and again constitutes new ways through decline as humans and nonhumans continuously connect, struggle, and take up always changing efforts, actions, desires, or denials in response to climate crisis? Put another way: What new ways can anthropologists write about climate crisis?

More precisely, the capacity to move beyond worlds framed as in crisis or threatened with ruin is explored through creative efforts of engagement with forces and impacts that are felt within them, and which always already set off capacities to move and be moved anew (see Massumi 2002: 15–16). This research attends to such energy, especially where it threatens to break down and yet continually emerges anew in endless struggles faced by humans and nonhumans. The research for this project has focused on encounters in which environmental crisis is prominent, especially notes taken from academic studies, news and magazine articles, films, public documents, or plans that have documented life circumstances and experiences of environmental issues, tourism, and development issues in relation to transformations on land and in the sea in Belize. This research also turns to the context of residential and urban sprawl at the edges of Toronto, and around the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada. To this, I also add collections of other materials, including notes, journal entries, memories, photos, images, souvenirs, and other objects, which were gathered while traveling through crisis and ruins, wherever these arose, including on tours, nature walks, and city walks, in dumps that are spontaneous or planned, conservation areas, or other public places, and on leisurely drives in Ontario. By encountering these collected materials and images and allowing them to take the writing in this book through interesting and questionable coalescences, experiences of loss are necessarily reencountered, but it is hoped that so too are connections, incipient thought, or just something other within stories about an ecotourist community and its coral reef system, somewhere between the coast of Belize and the outskirts of Toronto.

This book is, therefore, a “speculative” ethnographic experiment about a fictionalized coastal community aligned with a “make-believe” Belize (see Little 2020) and its nearby reef system; and it is an ethnographic form of inquiry into worlds and connections between worlds, not as they exist except in imaginative ways. In other words, the stories do not offer connections already there or waiting to be realized; rather, the hope is to provoke frustrations, questions, or moments of potential connection, no matter how distant or unrelated they may be. As such, all relations and elements that make up the following stories are less organizational components than they are partial encounters with experiences of loss, and in this way, no character, event, group, or even place in the following stories is representative of anything

or anyone. Even the endnotes and images are intended to be additions or resonations with the text. The following is, ultimately, a fiction story and an experiment concerned with the beyond and the liveliness of climate crisis and ruin.

Many ethnographers and feminist, post-humanist thinkers have delved into efforts to explore and engage the politics of potential as attending to future-oriented and oftentimes troubling possibilities (see Biehl and Locke 2017; Barad 2003, 2007; Cvetkovich 2003; Gordon 1997; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Haraway 2008, 2016; Hustak and Myers 2012; Little 2020; Hayward 2010; McLean 2011, 2017; Ochoa 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Pandian 2019; Pandian and McLean 2017; Pine 2019; Piot 2010; Raffles 2010; Stewart 1996, 2007; Tsing 2005, 2015; Yusoff 2013). By taking up a “fictionalizing enterprise” (McLean 2017: 158) in anthropology through storytelling, this work aims to align with these scholars’ and ethnographers’ efforts by approaching ethnographic research and writing as speculations with the not-yet of environmental crisis and its global reach. As a “mode of active inquiry” (Manning 2016: 10), this work experiments with research and writing as an effort of continuously “adding to” (Massumi 2002: 12–13) emergent reef-tourist worlds from within crisis. As is the case for the contemporary unfolding of environmental disaster, for instance the bleaching of coral reefs, there emerge—within the space of active ruins—seductions left unfinished (Little 2020; Biehl and Locke 2017) that flow across multiple contexts, which time and again bring very different life-forms, and their various needs, desires, and actions, into milieus of new, complex reconstitutions and directions that always move beyond any one reef or shoreline, crisis, or region. Such unfinishedness and possibility emerges in moments that are incomplete and seemingly unreal, but felt. It is hoped that the following, very experimental stories, which echo across regions, contribute in some way to the unfinished possibilities already unfolding within environmental crisis.

Although the research for this project examined studies of social and material entanglements with environmental issues in Belize as they once existed (see, for example, Medina 2010, 2015; Stinson 2014; see also Brondo 2013; Fairhead and Leach 2003 for a small example of related works in the region), the focus of this project is not to help readers sort out such entanglements, nor to analyze the successes and failures faced by certain groups or in specific partnerships. Rather, this book attends to potential connections and entanglements that always (presently, and historically) contribute to the constitution of threatened ecosystems and ecotourist worlds of Belize and beyond it. I thus write in relation to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) refer to as “multiplicities” in stories that entwine without capturing experiences of climate crises. By taking this approach, this project becomes a method of research and writing toward what Anand Pandian (2019) calls a “possible an-

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thropology” of “fabulation” within anthropology (McLean 2017), and what Donna Haraway (2016) refers to as “speculative fabulation.” At the same time, it includes a continuous exploration toward more within the ruins of climate crisis, without suppressing sensations of them.

As anthropologists, especially those concerned with climate crisis, continue to take up potentializing forces and felt movement as that which always contributes something to the world “for better or worse,” this work begins with sensations of loss, and their capacities to break relations, as the very forces of potential to activate new connections and problems (see Tsing 2005). The focus of this work, in other words, turns to the generation and intensification of crisis—the very thing being experienced today as global climate crisis and its capacities to change social and cultural conditions in ways not yet known. It is a short work, and what is hoped for is a starting point to explore ways that climate ruins leak, leach, and return. As an open work, this is an exploration of an inventive process in ways that might contribute to ethnographic writing about climate change—one that is, to repeat, not comprehensive or always sensical, and at times disagreeable, but one that might, however small it is, offer further flows for more thought on experimental writing in anthropology today.