

Environmental Heritage and the Ruins of the Future¹

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Abstract: We now have good reason to believe that many coastal cities will be flooded by the end of the century. How should we confront this possibility (or inevitability)? What attitudes should we adopt to impending inundation of such magnitude? In the case of place-loss due to anthropogenic climate change, I argue that there may ultimately be something fitting about letting go, both thinking prospectively, when the likelihood of preservation is bleak, and retrospectively, when we reflect on our inability to prevent destruction. I then explore some of the ethical complications of this response.

1. Introduction

This is an essay about letting go.

The predicted rise in global sea levels threatens to make substantial parts of coastal metropolitan areas uninhabitable in the next century or two, and the United States will be no exception. Glimpses of this future, which we have seen in hurricanes Katrina, Irene, Sandy, Harvey and Michael, have prompted some to rebuild bigger and stronger, to preserve existing urban centers against the impending threat. As flooding events have increased, we have witnessed a parallel deluge of proposals to increase the production of sea walls along major coastal cities. Proponents of this approach labor under a certain utopian vision of New York City and Miami comfortably bulwarked against a rising sea. The debate between “hard” and “soft” approaches to shoreline preservation offers some more qualified versions of these goals: revitalized coastal marshes and dune networks that could help prevent catastrophic inundation without the detrimental environmental and distributive effects of sea walls (which redirect the force of waves to less well-protected neighbors). But the goal of either approach remains the same: preserving coastal communities *in situ*, despite the encroaching ocean.

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The aim of this essay is not to adjudicate among these various approaches to coastal preservation, or even to offer a particular policy proposal. I also want to leave outside the frame the question of how best to protect against loss of life from extreme weather events, though this is certainly a question of the utmost importance. Rather, I will confine this discussion to the preservation of places, in particular the built environment and sites of historical and cultural significance, those places often categorized as *heritage* sites (a concept I will return to presently). Even when we confine our attention to place preservation, how best to guard against sea level rise will be a highly complex and contextual debate that will need to play out carefully across coastal communities, involving participants from local stakeholders to scientific experts (which of course need not be mutually exclusive categories). Here, though, I want to focus on articulating some conceptual tools for thinking about a different possibility, one that I fear is inevitable—that some places, perhaps many, will be beyond saving. Even if we were to keep global mean temperature increase to two degrees Celsius by 2100 (a prospect that is looking impossible right now) the East Coast of the United States (where I live) will be radically changed. Reporting from the 2016 Rising Seas Summit in Boston, Elizabeth Rush writes: “I see that no matter what we do, many of the landmarks we have long navigated by are going to disappear. *It is not a question of if but when*” (Rush 2018: 13). How should we approach the prospect of valuable places that we cannot preserve? Is this pure tragedy, or are there further facets to this outcome that offer the glimmer of something more?

In this essay, I suggest that a revised understanding of heritage and ruin offer the promise of an evaluative shift in which we can reconcile ourselves to the effects of climate change and the role we have played in bringing it about. As I will explain, resisting the impulse to preserve is difficult: it is deeply embedded in our evaluative and practical thinking. As Caitlin DeSilvey puts it: “It goes against the grain of human nature to step back and allow things to collapse; the urge to step in at the last minute to avert material disintegration is a powerful one” (DeSilvey 2017: 15). But alternative

ways of thinking about the relationship between value and preservation might allow us to approach our inevitable failure to save everything with a degree of optimism and humility, rather than despair.

2. *Value and Preservation*

Whether the focus is on historically significant buildings, endangered environments, exemplary artworks, political principles, or our very lives, preservationist attitudes represent a fundamental pattern of human concern. This has led many philosophers to posit a tight conceptual connection between the nature of value and what G. A. Cohen calls the “conservative disposition” (Cohen 2011). According to these influential moral philosophers, some kind of conservative disposition is part and parcel of being valuing creatures. As Samuel Scheffler puts it: “It is difficult to understand how human beings could have values at all if they did not have conservative impulses. What would it mean to value things, but in general, to see no reason of any kind to sustain them or retain them or preserve them or extend them into the future” (Scheffler 2007: 106)? In Cohen’s words: “The conservative propensity that I defend...is to preserve particular intrinsically valuable things, as such...[I] think this disposition of mine is not an eccentric one: I think that everyone who is sane has *something* of this disposition” (Cohen 2011: 210, 204). T. M. Scanlon writes: “When we speak of recognizing the value of some objects, such as the Grand Canyon, or Picasso’s *Guernica*, or the great whales, what we seem to have in mind is that there is reason to preserve and protect these things...” (Scanlon 1998: 169) and Joseph Raz agrees “there is a general reason to preserve what is of value” (Raz 2001: 162).

If these reflections about the relationship between value and preservation are accurate, then it’s no wonder that we have difficulty reconciling the verdict that a place is valuable with the idea of not preserving it. To be sure, the philosophers surveyed above are committed first and foremost to the idea that valuing entails recognizing *reasons* to preserve valued things, and that leaves open the possibility that such reasons will be outweighed by competing considerations. The idea that value

and preservation are intimately connected should not have the implausible implication that we always have *decisive* reason to preserve valuable things come what may. Nevertheless, the idea that reasons for preservation are part and parcel of what it is to value something can make the failure to respond to such reasons seem like a failure to value it appropriately. I suspect that the very intimacy of the value-preservation relationship can have this implication even when preservation is practically (or ultimately) impossible, adding a sense of guilt to the other felt experiences of loss.

However, there are cases in which a decision not to preserve is justified not only because reasons for preservation are swamped by countervailing considerations, but more positively, because there is something fitting about letting go. For example, according to the U.S. Flag Code: “The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning.” Certain kinds of artwork, such as Buddhist sand mandalas, require ritual destruction. Even in the case of persons, preservation is not always appropriate. As Elizabeth Anderson writes: “It may make sense for me to love a person, but this does not imply that I must want that person to continue living. If he is gravely ill, it may be the best expression of my love for him to wish that he die quickly and mercifully” (Anderson 1995: 26). In the case of place-loss due to anthropogenic climate change, I will argue that there may ultimately be something fitting about letting go, both thinking prospectively, when the likelihood of preservation is bleak, and retrospectively, when we reflect on our inability to prevent destruction.

3. *Rethinking Heritage*

Many of the coastal places threatened by climate change are plausibly construed as part of our *heritage*. If they were *merely* sites of shelter or commerce we would have reason to preserve them as well, but read any op-ed, interview, or report about a recent flood and you will find particular concern expressed about places as sites of collective culture and memory with rich histories. The idea that heritage sites and historically significant objects in particular demand preservation (perhaps

above and beyond other valuable things) is a common assumption of both academic heritage discourse and commonplace thinking (Lowenthal 1985).²

Heritage is a commonly invoked concept, but one that is also difficult to pin down. Broadly speaking, and not uncontroversially, it concerns an inheritance from the past that is used for present and future purposes (Harrison 2013: 14). However, even within the range of views that exist, whether heritage is identified primarily with the monumental material past or regarded as a more subtle and participatory tool of the politics of recognition (Smith 2010), heritage is commonly construed as having a positive valence, as being a good thing, especially within popular thinking (Macdonald 2009).³ The idea of environmental heritage specifically is also often evoked in this positive sense, used to ground arguments in favor of stewarding environmental goods for the sake of future generations (Thompson 2000; Heyd 2005).⁴ Elsewhere, I have argued that this positive view of heritage results in at least two morally significant problems (Matthes 2018b). First, it can lead to *disowning injustice*: if we construe heritage as necessarily positive, then negative aspects of the past, such as historical injustice, will be excluded from counting as part of one's heritage. This promotes the notion that historical injustices are "in the past," or "just history" and not worthy of the same contemporary concern as what is properly identified as our heritage. Second, it can lead to *embracing injustice*. On this view, because heritage is construed positively, the fact that something is identified as heritage entails that it must be good. Those who defend flying the Confederate Battle Flag with the slogan "Heritage, not hate" epitomize this problem.

² Though there have also been many criticisms of the emphasis on preservation, for a variety of reasons, some of which will be discussed below. Examples include Smith (2006); DeSilvey (2017); Holtorf (2006, 2015).

³ Theoretical work about "negative heritage" includes Meskell (2002); Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996); Macdonald (2009, 2016).

⁴ The more common term is "natural heritage," but I employ "environmental heritage" here so as to avoid embracing a false dichotomy between nature and culture (Harrison 2015). That being said, I am also hesitant about simply collapsing these categories, and do think that referring to the environment, broadly construed, as a useful way of describing certain kinds of heritage.

Likewise, the emphasis on the positive aspects of environmental heritage arbitrarily excludes the detrimental effects that humans have had on the environment, and encourages us to disown histories of injustice that have been couched in pursuit of this very environmental stewardship. So, for instance, to embrace the U.S. National Park System (which Wallace Stegner famously called “the best idea we ever had”) as part of our environmental heritage without acknowledging that the displacement of indigenous people was a necessary precondition of their creation is a mistake, and moreover, a failure of how we understand the concept of heritage (Cronon 1995; O’Neill 2002). Indeed, the emotional attachment and identification that the concept of heritage invites has tremendous potential, provided it is marshaled in a manner that does not focus on the triumphal to the exclusion of the unjust. Thus, in contrast with the positive view of heritage criticized above, I’ve argued in favor of what I call the *ownership* view of heritage, which includes cognitive, evaluative, and affective dimensions. Essential to this view of heritage is that it makes room for the recognition of both positive and negative aspects of the past as part of our heritage, and thus offers conceptual tools for reconciling the valued aspects of our heritage with the sometimes unjust process on which they are predicated. Proper recognition of the Parks System as part of U.S. national heritage requires an emotional identification with the injustices that produced it, and a correlative openness to actions that accord with that recognition (e.g. memorials, reparations, use-rights for indigenous peoples, etc.).

We are now in a position to see that while climate change is presented (accurately) as the major environmental problem of our time, it is *also* part of our heritage. Not only is climate change anthropogenic, but it is directly tied to the capitalist-industrial engine that gave birth to our coastal cities and their rich cultures (as well as being predicated on the colonial displacement of indigenous communities (Whyte 2016)). Rising sea levels are not simply threatening our heritage—they are part of our environmental heritage as well—the inheritance of generations of industrial activity fueling anthropogenic climate change. We are endeavoring to save the coast from ourselves. This

observation aligns with other related tensions between our preservationist dispositions and our destructive behavior. As Cornelius Holtorf observes in an archaeological context: “No other age has, to the same extent as our own age, been transforming the surface of the earth and, at the same time, been valuing and seeking to preserve so many remains of the past” (Holtorf 2006: 102). Though he is referring in this passage specifically to large-scale building and agricultural process that have unearthed troves of material artifacts, the point has a particular poignancy when read in the context of coastal loss from sea level rise.

To be clear, I am not endorsing a kind of fatalistic surrender to climate change (cf. DeSilvey 2017: 17). We can and we should do everything that we can to mitigate and adapt to climate change, in particular for the sake of relieving suffering and protecting human and animal lives. But in cases where preservation is impossible or unlikely, I think that recognizing the loss as part of our heritage offers a perspective that grants us a sense of ownership and agency over the loss, as opposed to construing ourselves merely as victims of a tragedy. To borrow a metaphor from Epictetus, it offers us a “handle by which to carry it” (Epictetus: 43).⁵ To help see this more clearly, we can find aid in our complex evaluative relationship to ruins, a physical manifestation of the ambivalence of heritage.

4. *Ruins*

“Ruin” is a normatively laden, Janus-faced concept. On the one hand, the valence that it wears on its sleeve is negative. It’s bad when things are ruined: they are destroyed, decaying, useless, abandoned. On the other hand, this negative dimension is at odds with the positive evaluation often granted to ruins in aesthetic contexts, where they are viewed as grand, poignant, evocative, nostalgic (Korsmeyer et al. 2014).

In her recent monograph *Curated Decay*, which explores themes surrounding alternatives to heritage preservation, Caitlin DeSilvey writes that she avoids referring to the sites she focuses on “as

⁵ I explore this metaphor at greater length in Matthes (2018b).

ruins, partly because this label would fix their identity, and what I am most interested in is how these identities can remain unfixed yet still productive” (DeSilvey 2017: 18). In contrast, I favor the language of ruin for the opposite reason: I want something fixed for people to hold onto. I don’t want to deny the possibility that we might need radically novel ways of thinking about ruin and loss. But in a time of dramatic material upheaval, I am inclined to think that the relative durability of ideas and concepts is a feature we should capitalize on rather than discard.

It is the very fact that ruins have a complex valence that makes them such appropriate vehicles for the correlative complexity of heritage. The evocative appeal of ruins can serve as a conduit for reflecting on the consequences of our past, not just in a celebratory sense, but also in a critical, reflexive mode (Matthes 2018a). Ruins are both evidence and reminder of what we have wrought. Carolyn Korsmeyer describes the possibility of ruins functioning as “huge and immobile witnesses to the past” (Korsmeyer 2014: 432). Even where physical remnants of the built environment might not remain, there is potential to apply this ruin-thinking to co-located features of the natural environment that could function in similar ways. For instance, Shannon Lee Dawdy attributes a similar role to trees, writing: “There is something about the longevity of trees on the landscape as witnesses (and sometimes victims) to events over and beyond the human life span...” (Dawdy 2016: 99). Elizabeth Scarbrough bridges these two reflections, noting that in ruins “we value the interesting interplay between nature and artifact, site and structure. In a ruin, the interaction between the natural and artifactual becomes pronounced and thus becomes more of the focus of our aesthetic attention” (Scarbrough 2014: 446-447). The coastal ruins of climate change draw our attention to the relationship between nature and artifact in multiple ways. On the one hand, they involve the familiar ruin-thinking of nature reclaiming space. On the other hand, this is a nature that itself has been manipulated and driven by human action, the other face of the very processes that created our coastal cities. This position is evocative of Tim Ingold’s suggestion that buildings, like people, are best viewed as a process rather than a product (Cf. Holtorf 2015: 410; Ingold 2010). The

tensions inherent in ruins, the “interplay” of forces, thus also invite frank reflection on the false dichotomy of nature and culture. When we view the consequences of anthropogenic climate change as part of the inheritance of our cultural history, part of our heritage, we can come to see the future ruin of coastal cities not as an onslaught from an invading nature, but as the continuation of a process for which we ourselves are responsible.

This perspective could reshape not only how we view coastal ruins retrospectively, but also inform our prospective thinking about threatened coastal sites now. As Jeanette Bicknell asks: “How might our aesthetic practices change if we rejected the dichotomy between stable and ephemeral and strove to appreciate and enjoy even the most solid structures as if it were to disappear in a short time” (Bicknell 2014: 438)? But we can broaden this question beyond the aesthetic frame, and begin to think about how our engagement with coastal places now might be affected by the recognition of their inevitable ruin. Bicknell rightly notes that the “psychic strain of treating everything as potentially ephemeral [might be] too much to bear” (Bicknell 2014: 438). But the recognition of that ephemerality as our own responsibility offers the prospect of accepting Bicknell’s question as a challenge to take up rather than just a tragedy to weather.

What might the engagement with “future ruins” look like? Rethinking our evaluative understanding of heritage and its manifestation in ruin could open the door to an alternative vision for the future of current coastal places. Instead of laboring toward the fantasy of being walled-in against a rising tide, we could envision a slow transformation of space. This need not entail outright abandonment, but rather a shift in use and meaning, promoting agricultural innovation, and cultural and natural programming, even if this is accompanied by the ruin of current uses and infrastructure. Ultimately, some of the ruins of our low-lying cities could become like national monuments and memorials, sublime and poignant emblems of our environmental heritage.

In her recent book *Patina: a profane archaeology*, anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy concludes that patina, the appearance of age, “does two powerful things. It critiques and it bonds” (Dawdy

2016: 143). It draws people together through the evocation of sentimentality and common experience, whether real or imaginary, but it simultaneously operates as a critical check on contemporary socio-economic forces, (most saliently for Dawdy in the disregard for old things represented by commodity fetishism). We can extend Dawdy's reflections on the work done by patina to the way in which ruination specifically can function as a manifestation of our environmental heritage. The ruins of coastal places operate as a devastating criticism of the capitalist-industrial forces that have driven anthropogenic climate change. But they also offer the promise of finding new meanings in these altered spaces, sites that might bring us together in opposition to the forces that engendered them, and inspire novel visions of a different future.

5. Complications:

The way of thinking that I describe above needs to be carefully distanced from alternatives in the near vicinity that present a series of moral problems. For interest, consider the early plans, endorsed by members of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, to turn over a number of neighborhoods, including the Lower 9th Ward, to green space following Hurricane Katrina. This was a top-down proposal that would have unilaterally and abruptly displaced residents from some of New Orleans's most socio-economically disadvantaged and predominantly Black neighborhoods. The racist and classist overtones of the proposal, which in some ways evoke the similar displacement of indigenous peoples in the creation of the U.S. National Park System, were apparent, and it luckily never came to pass.

But the problems with the green space proposal in New Orleans are illustrative of the features that our thinking about future ruins must have in order to be viable. Reconceiving coastal places must be a grassroots endeavor that is embraced by those who live there and who would ultimately need to relocate. Locals would have a special role to play in shaping and presenting the cultural significance of these places (i.e. not simply erasing the built environment and the history of

human occupation, another parallel with the indigenous displacement in national parks). And displacement would need to be tied to a future plan for resettlement that would provide resource for relocated citizens to thrive, both economically and culturally. In his work on indigenous communities and climate injustice, Kyle Powys Whyte describes the idea of *collective continuance*: a group's ability to adapt their systems of responsibility in response to external forces without being subject to preventable harms (Whyte 2016: 166). We can employ this concept to set the limits and aims of how coastal places are reimagined: our rethinking of coastal places should aim to promote the collective continuance of local communities, minimizing harms and charting pathways that will allow the adaptation of socio-ecological traditions and systems to alternative ways of engaging with important places, and ultimately novel spaces as well. Recent philosophical work on displacement (both climate-induced and otherwise) has emphasized the importance of "located life-plans," the ways in which our comprehensive intentions for the future are tied to place (Stilz 2013) and the particular threat to autonomy posed by coercive displacement from the home (Nine 2016). Treating collective continuance as both a goal and constraint on rethinking future ruins offers the promise of avoiding these moral hazards, though they are without doubt pitfalls about which we should remain wary.

A cruel irony of the perspective on place loss that I describe here is that it is less applicable to those who bear little or no responsibility for the ills of anthropogenic climate change. It can come as little comfort to the residents of Small Island States, for example, whose territories are in the process of being inundated, that climate change is also part of "our" environmental heritage (Risse 2009). Indeed, this adds a further layer to objections to thinking about heritage in universal terms, as a heritage of all humankind. Even when limited to cultural achievements, critics have raised reasonable worries about the way that a universal heritage discourse can operate as a veneer for the colonial practices of universal museums, seeming to license claims to ownership and control of art and artifacts (Matthes 2017; Smith 2006). But once we expand our thinking about heritage to include

negative legacies as well, construing heritage in universal terms presents a new burden, seeming to saddle everyone with ownership for the misdeeds of some.

As a more general instance of the worry about cold comfort for certain communities described in the previous paragraph, my greatest fear about the idea presented here is that it is just so many words. Often the ability of philosophy to provide novel evaluative and interpretive frameworks can seem liberating, but I struggle to reassure myself that these tools are adequate in the face of such substantial loss. In this I share in the strikingly honest self-reflection expressed by DeSilvey in her writing about Mullion Cove, a harbor community in England in the process of being erased by sea level rise. Having written what she calls an “anticipatory history” that brings this threatened heritage site into a longer narrative meant to emphasize its already transitory nature, she is struck by the inadequacy of her approach once the site truly begins to succumb to storm damage: “I had spent years thinking about change and transience in this place, about how it could be navigated and negotiated. I had offered up a story as an antidote to loss. But now that the unraveling had begun, the story seemed starkly irrelevant to the lives of the people who lived in the place, and who were now watching it fall apart” (DeSilvey 2017: 59-60).

I believe that part of the work of philosophy, and the humanities generally, is imaging possible futures and their moral contours. The loss of important coastal places is a significant possibility for our future—some would say an inevitability. We can ignore that possibility, but that too is a kind of mental palliative, and it won’t make that possibility go away. However inadequate it may feel to prescribe a conceptual shift or evaluative lens as a way of grappling with the pain of tremendous loss, it offers more than the ocean will. As Michele Moody-Adams puts it, “adequate moral inquiry is always a species of self-reflection” (Moody-Adams 1997: 140). We need to present ourselves with possibilities for being differently, thinking differently, acting differently in the face of radically different futures. It will be up to the reader to judge whether the possibilities offered here are live or not.

In the conclusion to *Patina*, Dawdy cautions that: “The antique fetish often fails to realize its utopian potential to transform relations” (Dawdy 2016: 152). Dawdy has in mind the transformation of market relations in particular, but the spirit of her point has broader application. My aim in this essay has been to indicate how recognizing the consequences of our environmental heritage and the ruin that it will wreak might indeed realize a certain potential for transforming relations, if not quite a utopian one—relations between people and place, between a profligate past and the redrawn map of the future.

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