Loss, Grief, and the Politics of Planetary Health

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Explorations

Cancer Alley: Looking across the Mississippi River from Norco, LA. Photo by Roy Luck on **Flickr**. **CC BY 2.0**.

by Dylan M. Harris

Grief is inherently political. Death has a way of laying bare the unequal conditions of life, the very basis of politics. The vacuum of loss creates solidarity among those left to make sense of what has happened and what remains.[1] Grief is necessarily relational, pulling together multiple lives and experiences, even if the subject of one's grief might be abstract and impersonal. It is possible to grieve the incalculable losses of our damaged planet, for example, even if it is impossible to name them all. Health, on the other hand, may seem relatively apolitical. Cancer is widely experienced across different contexts. Though, of course, the uneven conditions leading to cancer—like frontline communities' exposure to toxic chemicals—are the result of political choices, often favoring fossil-fuel companies, with dire consequences.

Planetary-health experts have articulated how human health is dependent upon healthy ecological systems. While I believe this is true in the abstract, I see the framework as potentially flattening the political—the messy, complicated, and nuanced elements of life—in favor of a novel, smooth paradigm for global environmental governance. I argue that it is imperative to continually interrogate "the human" in these paradigms, as indicated by the controversial naming the apparent Anthropocene, which scholars have critiqued because of its implicit assumption of shared blame. We know that not *all* humans are equally responsible for the planetary crisis. Similarly, it is important to approach planetary health from the perspective that health is differentially and unequally experienced across the world. Here, I am drawn to the role that grief may play in creating more political awareness within this paradigm. When someone or something is critically

unhealthy, they die. What then? How might grief—the shared, collective experience of dealing with loss—model an emerging sense of planetary solidarity?

Lately, I have been thinking deeply about the experience I shared with my mother last year when she spent three months in a palliative-care unit. She had bone cancer, caused by long-term exposure to toxic smoke from open-air burn pits, and after three months her fight came to an end. I was fortunate to be with her nearly every day during that time. We read books together. We talked openly about death and dying. And I saw the slow creep of cancer careen into her body's vital systems, catastrophically and quickly pulling them into a deadly knot. Too much protein. Kidneys shut down. Skin gets waxy. The mind goes, leaving behind the machine that held my mother. The body breathes until it doesn't.

To cope, I needed to make sense of what was happening. I needed to understand the "why" of cancer, to know why it was happening to my mother and what this experience could mean for others. I began thinking about the scales between my mother's body and the cancer inside of it, and how easing her suffering could relate to easing planetary suffering. The main goal of palliative care was to make what was left of my mother's life beautiful. When she died, I felt genuine solidarity as I was held by a community of strangers—nurses, doctors, and custodial staff. This experience has inspired my recent thinking about planetary health: How might cancer be a metaphor to better understand the politics of planetary health?

Looking at a region called Cancer Alley, a wide curve along the southern stretch of the Mississippi River where Black and poor communities experience disproportionately high rates of cancer, it is possible to see that cancer is anything but random or apolitical. This 85-mile corridor, which stretches from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, is home to more than 150 oil- and chemical-processing plants, each one spewing contaminants into the air and water.[2] These contaminants swirl and react with agricultural run-off—fertilizers, feces, and silt—drawn to the Gulf of Mexico by the Mississippi River.[3] The river widens as it reaches its terminus, creating a slow-moving noxious soup that metastasizes as cancer in the tissues of the vulnerable bodies living alongside it. Further, when you consider that these very same chemicals are contributing to the expanding dead zone where the Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico, where life, any at all, is becoming impossible due to eutrophication (an influx of pollutants starving the Gulf of oxygen) and

rapidly warming water, the politics of health—specifically questions of *whose* or *what's* health—become more pressing.[4]

The agricultural products grown with these chemicals are then exported around the world, contributing to an increasingly globalized diet.[5] In response to the global nature of food distribution and consumption, planetary-health experts have begun discussing ways to optimize global food systems in service of a healthier planet. The "planetary-health diet" is a scientifically backed plan designed to fulfill an adult's daily nutritional needs while also staying within planetary boundaries.[6] However, as Nina Mackert points out, what is considered a healthy diet for some may not work for others.[7] In fact, a healthy diet for some may come at the cost of someone else's health—as in the case of agricultural run-off and Cancer Alley. Is it possible to talk about planetary health without acknowledging the unhealthy? Is some cancer—in a body or in a population—okay?

The idea of thresholds, between healthy and unhealthy, reminds me of Max Liboiron's book *Pollution Is Colonialism.* Specifically, I'm thinking of their discussion of the Streeter-Phelps equation, which posits that some amount of pollution in a river, for example, is acceptable as long as the river is able to self-purify. They write: "State-based environmental regulations in most of the world since the 1930s are premised on the logic of assimilative capacity, in which a body—water, human, or otherwise—can handle a certain amount of contaminant before scientifically detectable harm occurs."[8] This, the fact that a universal scientific equation can determine "detectable" harm (for who?), is what they mean by pollution is colonialism. How many people must be harmed before harm is detected? Or, more bluntly, how many people must die from cancer so that others can eat healthy food?

The answers to these questions are inherently political. The topological relationship between environmental harm, human harm, and planetary health *is* political.[9] Richard Horton and Selina Lo argue, "the threats that our species faces are not abstract physical risks, such as disease, climate change, ocean acidification, or chemical pollution. The risks we face lie within ourselves and the societies we have created."[10] Liboiron reminds us that "we" is fraught and that specificity is critical. When planetary-health experts suggest that there is a safe operating space for humanity, I find it important to ask: *Safe for who?* Grief puts into stark perspective the fuzzy parameters of "detectable" harm. Grief can create space to collectively process, understand, and even assuage harm, even for those,

like my mother, who can't be healed. Turns out, even a little cancer is too much. How much harm is permittable in the pursuit of defining planetary safety? What lives are lost in the churn of the threshold?

Sarah Jaffe writes, "We are denied the particularities of our lives and deaths in a world that makes us interchangeable, but by making us interchangeable, capitalism has also made us dangerous. If we are so alike, why should we not band together?" There is solidarity in grief, which is "precisely why collective mourning is necessary."[11] Grief crystallizes the relationship between personal and planetary health, making known the lives that exist outside of planetary safety. They are not interchangeable. Identifying and responding to the scales between bodily health and planetary health, understanding who gets cancer and why, is necessary to develop a more equitable politics of planetary health. While there in the space beyond planetary boundaries, I feel it is our duty—as scholars, activists, humans—to grieve what we've lost, to grapple with what we can't fix, and to ease as much harm, detectable or not, as possible.

Planetary health has so far been predominantly studied by natural scientists and medical experts. Over the next few months we will publish a series of essays that illuminate different aspects of the planetary-health concept from a decidedly environmental-humanities perspective. The entries have their origin in the contributions of international scholars who attended the Rachel Carson Center workshop "Imagining Planetary Health, Well-Being, and Habitability," convened by Lijuan Klassen and Christof Mauch and sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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