

PROJECT TITLE: “After it Almost Unmade: Action in Failing Systems”

Please note this is a preliminary draft description, not for citation or publication.

The cataclysmic fact of anthropogenic climate change has challenged humanists to account for the systemic interconnection, diffused agency, and planetary timescales implied by the “Anthropocene”: the proposed new geological epoch in which our species has forever altered what was once the natural world. The British nineteenth century plays a special role in the history of our present unwinding. Known best for its commitment to the category of the individual and its conviction that nature exists as raw material for man’s use, the nineteenth century invented parliamentary liberalism, the steam engine, and the self-help book. Inventing and sustaining the first fossil-fueled economy in the history of the world required physical infrastructure, yes, but mental infrastructure too. New research has begun to show how Victorians developed the philosophical tools and ideological forms that made carbon-based capitalism come to feel natural.

“After it Almost Unmade” develops out of and departs from this work on the ideological origins of fossil capitalism. Rather than focusing on the cognitive training that made possessive individualism seem inevitable, I show that the bourgeois century also generated tools for understanding mutual imbrication at global scale. Newly consolidating fields like evolutionary biology, thermodynamics, geology, weather science, and economics all turned systems-thinking into method. History, demography, and the emergent social sciences added further languages for understanding how individual action might be constrained and even perhaps determined by systems beyond the conscious apprehension of the individuals comprising them. Such weblike forms of mutual involvement were construed alternately as a (negative) constraint on freedom and a (positive) opportunity for supraindividual collaboration. Like the ambitious doctor Lydgate in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872), Victorians became newly conscious of “the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity.” But they also saw how “unhistoric acts” (in Eliot’s phrase) might aggregate into something even more durable than older models of heroic agency could conceive. Of course, the nineteenth century’s models of entangled causation and compromised voluntarism unfurled alongside what Karl Marx called the “subjection of Nature’s forces to man” under an industrial capitalism unthinkable without a fossil energy source, coal, that itself convened into a single black lump untold eons of time and instances of nonhuman life.

My book reverses scholarly focus on the bourgeois individualism long associated with the Victorian period to show how writers from the century of coal translated the problem of interconnection into form. More than this, they began to conceptualize modes of mutual action and entangled volition that redefined categories like will and personhood at a moment when the fantasy of human autonomy began to be revealed as just that. The multiplot novel, the epic poem, the lyric fragment, and the sonnet: these and other literary technologies, I suggest, constitute scale models for imagining how the philosophical and, I argue, literary category of *agency* might unfold in a world no longer responsive to the modern presumption that (in J.S. Mill’s words) “over himself, over his own mind and body, the individual is sovereign.” The authors I study here used aesthetic techniques to imagine, instead, what I call nonsovereign action: improvised, elaborative models of collaborative making and doing, often at minor scales, that become available only when illusions of personal autonomy are abandoned. In the place of such fantasies I describe models of ensemble-based effectivity that run aslant from the logics of self-mastery that continue to animate the tradition of political thought following from Mill. In drawing out these nineteenth-century theories of entangled personhood and common action, I develop a method for showing not just how one individual might link to another, or how those aggregations might connect with other ensembles across time, forming vast systems of mutual agency structurally unavailable to human perception. (Darwin proved as much in *The Origin of Species* [1859].) I also work to understand how the systems that we coproduce –

what Darwin called “the mutual relations of all organic beings”-- might tend not toward perfection or equilibrium but ruin.

The moment of climatological unmaking we inhabit today was set into motion in the nineteenth century. In order to attend to this uncanny intimacy between then and now, I develop a period model that puts us in imperial England’s wake, in critic Christina Sharpe’s sense of wake as an ongoing, unresolved aftermath, born in violence and tinged with loss. In keeping with this, the book’s **introduction** opens with an account of the toxic air and chromium-infused groundwater of Fresno, California-- my hometown. This sets the book’s framework of consequence in our present moment and shows how *I* am not separate from the historical story I unfold but uncannily bound up with it. Describing the poetics of wreckage and redemption invented by Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, I then introduce the method of *salvage aesthetics* that governs the book’s own argumentative strategy. This term names the recuperative relation to past cultural forms that the book itself adopts, an approach that sees the Victorian archive not only as a cognitive prehistory of our present predicament, but also –and in diametric opposition to this-- as a repertoire of future possibility. (The book’s title, “After it Almost Unmade,” comes from Hopkins’ 1876 *The Wreck of the Deutschland*.)

Chapter one turns to visual art, to show how the extractive logic of the early fossil-fuel era touched every aspect of aesthetic production. J.M.W. Turner’s still-astonishing paintings of Victorian ecocide capture in snapshot a society’s coming to terms with its energy regime. My chapter twists the common understanding of Turner’s ‘atmospheric’ approach to consider the material composition of the paintings themselves: these used the products of extraction, heavy metals and rare earth minerals like chromium and cobalt, to physically enact the extractive logic they also depict. From this account emerges a story of Turner as a theorist of immanence or involvement with ruin, a collapse of the subject-object relation that will guide the following chapters. **Chapter two** turns to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s frantic and strange poem *Maud; or the Madness* (1855) to show how Victorian authors used literary forms to imagine what it feels like to inhabit a world that is falling apart. Where Alice toggles between two separate but internally coherent generic worlds, above ground and below, *Maud* depicts a veering, unwinding lifeworld where no single genre is able to stabilize readers’ or characters’ expectations. This unraveling of *regimes of expectation* helps model a scenario, also our own, in which “climatological stable states,” as scientists call them, no longer exist. **Chapter three** focuses on networks, and treats the densely interlinked character-systems of multiplot novels by George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Dickens’ gothic descriptions, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), of rearticulated skeletons and bodies salvaged from water trouble the ontological and grammatical boundary between subject and object, the actor and the acted upon. Eliot’s *Middlemarch* takes this model of entanglement even further, evoking the “particular webs” that knit humans and nonhumans together into thickly intertwined systems where intentions “tremble off and are dispersed” and grand action comes to seem impossible. In response Eliot develops a theory of minor action or minimal agency, where “unhistoric acts” (as she calls them) accumulate over time into something like change. **Chapter four** develops this theory of minoritized action through tiny, fragmentary poem-objects composed on torn paper by Emily Brontë. In this context Brontë’s half-lyrics and dreamlike fragments read as broken hymns to freedom: they rethink the logics of personhood and liberty in a world no longer responsive to the post-Enlightenment assumption that individual will can result in decisive action. Brontë’s minor experiments thus model a way of thinking human possibility —as slantwise agency, mutualized action, and rewired voluntarism—after the bourgeois world has eaten itself alive.