

Classroom Connections — Stories for Change: Exploring Climate Death, Loss, and Remembrance Through Folklore

These activities can be adapted for a range of settings and participants, including elementary, secondary, post-secondary, and community learners. These activities are not designed to align directly with any specific national standards or learning outcomes; rather, they are designed from the perspective that engagement in personal-reflective, empathetic, and trauma-informed activities can holistically enhance and deepen learning in science, social studies, language arts, ethics, and other subject areas and topics of cultural concern. To extend and adapt this activity, facilitators may want to consider projects and ideas in the *Journal of Folklore and Education*'s 2018 [Common Ground: People and Our Places](#) issue.

Individual Exploration

As an initial activity, participants should be encouraged to seek out culturally relevant texts, artifacts, artworks, documents, and other existing expressions of folklore seeking to make sense of death and loss in the context of climate change* and its related consequences.

Example texts include artist Nina Elder's collective [Solastalgic Archive](#) (2019-2020) and her photo essay [Inspiration and Adaptation: Art in the Anthropocene \(2022\)](#); poet Amanda Gorman's ["Earthrise" \(2018\)](#); architect and designer Maya Lin's crowd-sourced memorial [What Is Missing \(2022\)](#); the social media and podcast work of [Intersectional Environmentalist](#); popular music grappling with climate and ecological crises (Petridis 2021, compilation from [The Guardian](#)); the essay [When Climate Change Comes for the Fairy Tale Forest \(Campbell 2017\)](#); and stories from *The New York Times Magazine*'s [The Decameron Project \(2020\)](#).

* Certainly climate change can be understood in the context of scientific evidence; it is also located within the political and moral complexities of climate change denial. Such complexities include challenges of cultural acceptance and/or rejection of causal attribution in cases of environmental injustice, corporate and governmental responsibility, and anthropogenic factors overall. In facilitating discussion in a classroom context, teachers may want to acknowledge the tension of belief and denial when it comes to climate change, as well as the role of denial in the context of western notions of grief.

Empathy, Discussion, and Collaboration

Part I. Discussion of Individual Exploration. Facilitators should develop questions to deepen participant engagement iteratively with the individual activity text(s) and support students in social-emotional learning experiences. Possible prompts include:

- What did you **notice** as you read/viewed the texts? Why?
- What did you **feel** as you read/viewed the texts? Why?
- What do you consider the **subject** of each text? Why/how do you know?
- How would you describe the **tone** of these texts? Why?

What do you think the creators/authors were **trying to say**?
What do the texts say about the **creators/authors**?

Part II. Additional Connections to the Central Topic. Transition from discussion of specific initial examples to other examples of focal topics (e.g., climate grief, solastalgia, and/or the loss of recognizable aspects of place and home). Consider the following questions:

What do these texts suggest about people and the places that matter to them?
What do these texts suggest about the more-than human world? What do they suggest about the “natural” worlds?
What kinds of literal and figurative “death” do you see in these texts?
Why do you think the authors/creators chose these media for their expression?

During this stage: With the help of an educator trained in trauma-informed learning, consider introducing a list (like the one provided in the Activity Companion below) that can help further extend participants’ recognition of climate change and loss. (The San Mateo County Environmental Literacy Initiative provides [an excellent overview of environmental literacy and trauma for educators.](#)) Alternately, engage participants in constructing their own lists of local climate impacts, documenting loss from their existing experiences or observations.

Part III. Connections to Participants’ Existing Knowledge/Experience. This step is designed to help participants connect potentially distant texts/examples to their lived experience to bring themes of *solastalgia* and climate grief into local consciousness. Facilitators might ask questions like these:

What kind of climate-related or environmental changes have you seen in your local environment or community?
Whom do you know personally whose life, home, goals, or career have been affected by climate change?
How have you noticed changes in a place that matters to you?
What possible changes to a place you care about would cause you concern?

Part IV. Re-Storying the Future: Engaging in the Symbiocene. This step invites participants into radical reimagining and action planning. Participants can be asked to describe an imagined future—what might be possible in a particular place—through drawing/sketching and free writing. Then participants might list three concrete, tangible actions they can take to begin to build toward that future. Examples include collective organizing, political engagement, fundraising for causes, participation in mutual aid organizations, sharing of creative and generative work, or collective celebration of symbiotic relationships in place.

Contributing to Folklore

Depending on how the facilitator defines folklore (see <https://whatisfolklore.org> for ideas), ask participants to engage in crafting, documenting, or making some other contribution to the folklore of climate grief. This may include story writing, drawing, mapping, dance, photography, audio recording, and other forms of permanent or transitory expression. Depending on a facilitator’s

theories of learning they may choose to be directive or open-ended about final product criteria. Examples of prompts and products are provided below.

Individually or in groups choose a specific type of climate death event to explore and represent through creating an altarpiece. Each participant collects artifacts, images, terms, and found objects to create a three-dimensional collage or offering that represents, memorializes, and/or celebrates the loss.

Choose a specific, local place to observe for 30 minutes each week for the next 10 weeks. Decide how to document that place over time (nature journal, sound mapping, audio recordings, photography, etc.). Create an archive of that place over time and provide your reflections on changes you observe and changes you anticipate.

Choose a place that is familiar and meaningful to you. Based on the communal readings/discussions we've had, imagine how that place might change—in big or small ways—within your lifetime. Create artwork or writing that engages with themes of death, grief, or destabilization in relationship to your familiar place.

Append or amend existing narratives. If discussion uncovers existing personal experience narratives and other representations of local change, update or extend those narratives. As one example, Old Crow Medicine Show's "[James River Blues](#)" captures a culture shift as river-based transportation gave way to railroad shipping. How might additional verses of this song further capture more recent, climate-based shifts in the area?

Editors' note: Another folklife resource to consider is [Louisiana Voices' "Sense of Place" unit](#). Two handouts from this unit can especially help students consider their sense of place and its relationship to culture and their folklife:

- [Cultural Perspectives on Place or Event worksheet](#)
- [Spirit of Place Worksheet](#)

Activity Companion: Climate Facts for Discussion

The list below can help participants visualize, imagine, and confront diverse forms of death and loss that comprise climate change on a global scale. Asking participants to connect these examples to art, literature, policy, ritual, and other forms of expression may help them recognize existing folklore that addresses, responds to, or memorializes previous moments of local or more broad-spread climate-related change.

Vidal (2010) reported that the planet has entered a new period of mass extinction, with scientists estimating that 150-200 species of plant, insect, bird, and mammal become extinct every 24 hours. An International Union for Conservation of Nature report (2019) notes the impacts of warmer temperatures on endangered green sea turtles; because warmer temperatures during egg incubation determine the sex of the newly hatched turtles, females have accounted for 99% of hatchlings on some nesting beaches. This imbalance will affect population growth and survival in the future, since it means fewer male mating partners for this species.

Cressey (2016) described a massive 2016 coral bleaching event across the Great Barrier Reef, including a substantially impacted 1,100-km stretch; he projects up to 50% mortality on the most severely bleached reefs, with follow-on effects to fish and other sea animals that depend on these reefs for food and habitat. Such events result in the death of millions of individual corals (Hughes et al. 2018).

Regarding total global impacts of climate change on plant communities, one study (Worland 2015) suggests that overall growing days could decrease by 11% by the end of the century; the areas predicted to be worst impacted are already hot regions, where up to 2 billion people in low-income countries might be displaced. Alternately, reporting by Leahy (2019) suggests that a hotter, more carbon-rich climate will lead to dramatic plant growth in many areas—with the carry-over effect of leaving less water for humans, especially those living in mid-latitude regions including North America, Europe, and central Asia.

If climate change leads to the death of forests, dead trees will become sources of carbon being released back into the air; as the Canadian Invasive Species Centre (2021) notes, warming temperatures have contributed to the spread of mountain pine beetle beyond its normal range, leading to pine tree mortality on unprecedented scale in some areas.

Globally, nearly 15 million excess deaths have been attributed to Covid-19 between January 2020 to December 2021 (World Health Organization 2022). While the coronavirus pandemic is not often described in terms of climate change, Aaron Bernstein (Director of Harvard's Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment) explains that key climate change triggers also contribute to increased risk of pandemics: "Deforestation, which occurs mostly for agricultural purposes, is the largest cause of habitat loss worldwide. Loss of habitat forces animals to migrate and potentially contact other animals or people and share germs. Large livestock farms can also serve as a source for spillover of infections from animals to people" (Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment 2020).

Bernstein (Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment 2020) also explains that, as species move toward the poles to find more temperate climates, increased interaction among species brings a higher likelihood of zoonotic spillovers. Lustgarten (2020) further warns that a changing climate “is even bringing old viruses back from the dead, thawing zombie contagions like the anthrax released from a frozen reindeer in 2016, which can come down from the arctic and haunt us from the past.”

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