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**Can you tell us about your latest research projects?**

[RM]: I have two projects that are at different stages right now. I am finishing up a book and accompanying website project that draws on 3,000 years of human-environment interaction on the Yellow River, which is moving into production and should be published within the year. That is the project that got me started thinking about environmental history and how to characterize a world where humans have such profound impact on the spaces that they inhabit, It combines historical texts, environmental science and data analysis to depict the whole history of the way that humans and the Yellow River in China have impacted one another. Another project, [*The World-Historical Gazetteer*](http://whgazetteer.org/), is an NEH-funded initiative centering on creating a linked collection of databases of historical place-names, which is a way to surface information about places that may be classified differently under various regimes or for different purposes, and helps to track how human occupation and meaning-making has changed over time. This project helps us to think about colonization and power discourse, among other topics, through the medium of a useful reference work about places that exist around the world.

**How would you characterize the link between environmental history and the Anthropocene? Can it help us understand our catastrophic and rapidly changing environment?**

[RM]: The Environmental History (EH) course that I'm teaching this semester is taught in a hundred thousand-year timeframe beginning with human’s evolution as a species. We study people as participants in shaping the environmental landscape. We know that even the earliest humans used fire to create landscapes that became habitats for the kind of species that people wanted to coexist with. History tells us that humans have always had a profound effect on the landscapes around them, as many other social species always have as well. And so, if there is an Anthropocene, which is to say an era where humans are the prime movers of change in the biosphere and biogeochemical processes, when that began is up for debate. That is something I inquire about through an [article](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/did-the-anthropocene-begin-in-1950-or-50-000-years-ago/) in my class—did the Anthropocene start fifty thousand years ago or 50 years ago? That article discusses several things that humans have done that have led to large-scale, global systemic environmental changes many times across centuries and millennia. One way to look at our present and future in a time of profound environmental change is to be able to put it within that framework. It is possible to use a large-scale environmental history approach to come to the conclusion that the Anthropocene began long ago, or, quite possibly, the opposite conclusion, depending on how you look at it. [McNeill and Engelke’s *The Great Acceleration*,](https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674545038) another book we read in my EH class, argues that while humans have long been driving change, that rate of change and the transformativity of those changes in the last 50 years has been unprecedented. I think it's possible from the perspective of EH to take either of those viewpoints and that makes it like any other approach in history.

Last week, my students read articles that critiqued the concept of the Anthropocene. I find myself becoming less persuaded that the term “Anthropocene” is necessarily useful. One argument is that it excessively centers on humans. Instead of being a critique of the power of humans over the earth, the term just reinforces that. Another is that the term assumes that all humans are equally complicit and will be equally affected, which is not true. [Jason Moore](https://jasonwmoore.com/) has been promoting the concept of the *Capitalocene*, which reflects the perspective that it is not humans in general who have an impact on the earth, but rather people acting within the context of capitalism. These critiques really double back to question: is this term Anthropocene actually a useful word?

**Given your expertise as a spatial historian, how has it informed your approaches in teaching?**

[RM]: I have been really excited to help pilot a project in the history department that offers students in my Environmental History class the opportunity to earn one additional credit by participating in a Digital Mapping Practicum. This allows them the opportunity to learn the basics of GIS and put together a final, original research project using ESRI [StoryMap](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/) based on their interests.

**You recently collaborated on an Anthropocene project with our Director, Dr. Michael Goodhart for the Provost’s Year of Creativity. Can you tell us about that initiative?**

[RM]: The idea for the [Mapping Loss in the Anthropocene](https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/global/mapping-loss-anthropocene-0) project was inspired in part by the work of Roy Scranton, author of the creative non-fiction book, [*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*](http://www.citylights.com/book/?GCOI=87286100064510). His book argues that some profound transformations in the world that we inhabit are inevitable—extinction of species, changes to ecosystems, social upheavals, and so on, and so we need to take some time to pause and think about those losses from an ethical and spiritual perspective, and about what it means to be living during a time of tumultuous changes and ecological collapse. This sets a particular challenge for the humanities as an interdisciplinary field that seeks to curate the past and to imagine the future.

This project sought to bring together spatial methods and the epoch of loss question. Participants were intended spend time getting to think through this question by engaging with artifacts, photographs and information about loss, all while experiencing the physical environment of spaces around Pitt’s campus and our community, and using those prompts to create maps using various techniques and media. The experience of mapmaking would permit participants to constructively reflect and express their insights. We are hoping to be able to bring the project back this Fall!

**Do you have any Anthropocene-related books you would recommend?**

[RM]: Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (2015) is a very short, beautiful book that has inspired some of the best class discussions I’ve had with my students about this issue. [*Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*](http://cup.columbia.edu/book/flight-ways/9780231166195)(2014) by Thom Van Dooren, a philosopher of the relationship between humans and other beings in the world, focuses on a series of species of birds on the brink of extinction and uses each species to prompt a conversation about one aspect of what extinction means. He recently wrote a [blog post](https://newmatilda.com/2020/03/22/pangolins-and-pandemics-the-real-source-of-this-crisis-is-human-not-animal/?fbclid=IwAR1_spxKjlTHckxSNoiDCbYhCIN8aCMtiPpFjmE5IIu07QP2GjrWwdjuNCA) about the coronavirus moment that is also a worthwhile read in thinking about the relationships between humans, wild species, and domesticated animals on factory farms.