

The End of the World (as we know it): Offensive Anthropology at the Imperial Center

by

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I am going to try and engage your conference theme, to “*inspire* and *encourage* students to become more *active* across the sub-fields of anthropology,” though I will focus on cultural anthropology. I am a big fan of being inspired and encouraged and active, if only because I am ever more plagued with physical and mental decomposition, with parts of me drooping and becoming uninspired, discouraged and inactive. I resent these bits of myself and as a form of therapy I will strive to deliver what you have asked for: a “positive approach to [your] role as the next generation of anthropology.” I do have to say that am not by nature a positive person (some of you know that) and as I’m from the Midwest, I not by *culture* a positive person either. In fact my grandfather’s standard response to “it’s a nice day” is “it will probably rain later.” To the comment, “you look good today, grandpa,” he’s likely say “I feel like I’m going to die.” So, you’ll excuse me if I start with bad news, move to a depressing contextualization of the bad news, and then finally and somewhat reluctantly launch a discussion of what we might be able to do about it, particularly what you fresh-faced and energetic anthro-aspires might do about it. I will try to speedily move through my monologue on gloom and leave as much time as possible for us to talk together about contingency plans for the wretched and depressing world my generation is leaving to yours.

The End of the World (As We Know It): The Gloom

Let me start my Review of the Gloom with the first part of my title: I have always loved “the end of the world / as we know it,” partially because it was the only REM lyric I could confidently understand, and partially because statements that are both stupidly obvious and mildly profound make me giddy. It’s *always* the end of the world *as we know it*, both because the world is always changing and because our knowledge of this change is so dismally and inevitably incomplete. It is the *as we know it* that intrigues me, the idea that our knowledge is continuously left behind by the inexorable flux and flow of reality. I noticed in a recent article on string theory in physics that there are supposed to be nine dimensions of space (that’s at least six dimensions that I have yet to explore while sober), but still only one dimension of time. Now, granted, I thought quantum mechanics was supposed to unify all these spaces with time, and so I don’t really know what difference it makes, but it is still comforting to have very smart physicists tell me that time, at least, remains something like what I think it is: a seamless, indistinguishable slipping from will be to is to was.

This brings up the question of what we mean by “being,” of course, both in terms of our own biological bodies and the cultural frameworks through which we understand things. It seems to me that bodies and ideas change at different rates, and that regeneration and reproduction is the key to the illusion of stability that sustains us. The novelist Lawrence Durrell has one of his characters contemplate this, a man obsessed with the memory of his One Great Love. This man sits on an island. He is old, thinking back, and writes, “what if, as biology tells us, every single cell in our bodies is replaced every seven years by another? At the most I hold

