

Unloved Others:

Death of the Disregarded in the Time of Extinctions

Introduction

Deborah Bird Rose & Thom van Dooren

We were talking about animal charisma and extinctions. Our conversation turned this way and that as we considered what it takes to capture human imagination in this perilous era known as the Anthropocene, a time when much of the diversity of life on Earth is being lost through human action. Because of the pervasive impact of human agency, pathways toward life and death are formed or lost through calls that elicit, or do not elicit, human desire for another creature's continuing existence. Fur is not necessary, we realised, thinking of much of the world's relatively recent love affair with whales, but being a mammal certainly helps. We thought of the fetching, anthropomorphically cuddly images of pandas, and the elegant, dangerous glamour of tigers. We don't share our lives with these creatures day by day, but they capture our imagination. Our minds swim with Moby Dick and flare with tigers burning bright. We pay large sums to visit pandas and other others in zoos. Given that these creatures who are so vividly present in our imaginative lives are nonetheless on the edge of loss, what hope could there possibly be for the countless other creatures who are less visible, less beautiful, less a part of our cultural lives? What of the unloved others, the ones who are disregarded, or who may be lost through negligence? What of the actively vilified and disliked others, those who may be specifically targeted for death? Then, too, what of those whose lives become objects of control in the name of conservation, and those whose lives are caught in the cross-hairs of conflicting human desires?

This collection is one response to these questions. We invited scholars whose work has moved and influenced us to write on the topic of unloved others. It was an open brief, and the essays convey a depth and breadth of engagement that itself is testimony to the significance and urgency of the focal questions. Each essay takes up questions of love, and each focuses on the ‘arts of inclusion’ (Tsing) whereby life on Earth is cherished, or abandoned, in its own real vitality. Anna Tsing tells us that a new science studies is afoot – one whose key characteristic is multispecies love. She writes that “unlike earlier forms of science studies, its *raison d’être* is not, mainly, the critique of science, although it can be critical. Instead, it allows something new: passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied.” The determination to speak and live this love is a widespread, and yet still somewhat hidden, dimension of many branches of knowledge. Anthropologists, philosophers, geographers and many others are impelled to write and think about love in this time of extinction. As Chrulew puts it in his essay on the animals whose lives are coerced in the interests of the preservation of species, the gap “between the overloved and the unloved, between the politics of life and death, bios and thanatos, brings into stark relief one of the central ethical questions of our time: how should we love in a time of extinction?”

Each of the essays in this collection takes up one or more aspects of these key issues. Anna Tsing writes of the wild matsutake mushrooms and the loving science that surrounds them. She contrasts the coercive science of plantations where plants are forced to grow and produce, with the love of wild mushrooms and their indeterminate multispecies forest worlds. Her loving essay is a call for passionate immersion, and in the best essay tradition,

she performs her thesis as well as expounding it. No one who reads it will be able to think of mushrooms, or love, in the same ways as they did before.

Mick Smith challenges us to think about multispecies ethics when the others are unseen. In a beautiful weaving together of the philosophies of Scheler, Heidegger and Levinas, he articulates the necessary conditions of an *ecological* ethics that works with and from the ‘fellow feeling’ that arises in humans as members of multispecies communities of life, and that seeks to embrace that which is not seen as well as that which is seen. An ecology of ethics, he contends, rests “in appreciating the not entirely comprehensible ways in which ... individuals ... constitute a part of a community of myriad beings which appear to each other in all kinds of ways, as commensal, as mutualistic, as parasite, as prey, as resources, as co-evolved and evolving beings.” Ecological ethics, he suggests, may consist in humans’ unselfish ‘benevolence’ initiated through ‘fellow-feeling’ within the community of myriad beings.

And what about vultures – those scavengers of the dead? In modern western thought they symbolise awful deaths, but in India they are key members of multispecies communities, cleaning up the dead, both human and nonhuman. Or so they were until their numbers began to plummet in India in recent decades, leading to real fears that they may become extinct in the wild. Thom van Dooren examines the intimate entanglements of life and death in these multispecies communities and documents the cascade of impacts that will likely follow from the loss of vultures. In his analysis, the complex and shifting category of the ‘unloved’ is expanded to include the lives of some humans – alongside vultures and myriad

others – as beings that are necessarily caught up in the escalating death of species in our time.

Jim Hatley pushes against a widespread human aversion in his analysis of the tick. He takes up the question of biodicy – the biological equivalent of theodicy – and probes the question of how we may love that which causes us to suffer. Hatley’s subtle and challenging conclusion is that to keep faith with unloved others is, in its heart, to keep faith with life itself. The humble (horrible) tick, he reminds us, is one of our many co-evolved Earth others. An assent to the hunger that causes the tick to seek us out, is thus an assent to life, our own as well as others’.

The bogong moths have captured Kate Rigby’s imagination; in her early years they were objects of dread, and as she came to honour their migratory feats she came to cherish them in themselves. In her social and natural history of changing human/moth relationships, focussing on Canberra in the past century, she explores the instability of oppositions between migration and invasion, abjection and celebration. She returns us, though, to the fact that it is humans who will make the difference for moths, and she suggests that paradoxically it may be that moths will become more widely cherished when their tasty and nutritious little bodies become part of the family dinner.

Donna Haraway writes about the artist Patricia Piccinini – “a compelling story teller in the radical experimental lineage of feminist science fiction”. Amongst Piccinini’s figures is a group aptly labelled ‘Nature’s Little Helpers’ – fabulated protectors, surrogates, and more, for some of Australia’s most endangered species. Like so many of Piccinini’s progeny, these

critters are indescribably strange, transgenic, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman...

Haraway presses us to think with Piccinini about 'worlding', about "worlds at stake, worlds needy for care and response". Piccinini's sculptures are, for many of us, enormously disturbing, marvellously challenging, and somehow heartbreaking. Perhaps it is the tenderness of these creatures that calls to us, perhaps some magic of the artist: they bring the reader back to Smith's analysis of an ecology of ethics, forcing us to face again, in other, ambivalent ways, "living beings in knotted and dynamic ecologies".

Flying foxes, aka fruit bats or *Megachiroptera*, are Deborah Rose's focus. Moving across Indigenous knowledges, western science, and recent history, she tracks the use of terror and weapons of mass destruction in the effort to eradicate flying foxes in Australia. These efforts are countered by passionate attempts to preserve these species, several of which are endangered. In the end, she argues, harm comes full circle as flying foxes become urban refugees, harried and stressed even as they are protected; new zoonotic viruses erupt in stressed flying foxes and leap to humans. Like Hatley, she argues for an assent to life, explicated by Indigenous people and at the same time open to all of us as members of multispecies communities.

The biopolitics of zoos have captured Matt Chrulew's analytic attention. He explores the wounded lives of animals who have been "severed from the connectivities of emplaced kin and habitat". His analysis of coercive modes of care and reproduction resonates with Tsing's discussion of plantation science. Drawing on Foucault's biopolitics and a range of other sources in environmental and animal studies, Chrulew argues that the way in which protection and preservation get done inside modern zoos is deeply flawed. All too often,

the “managerial ignorance of the connectivities that sustain forms of life” enables terrible outcomes. Managers, he claims, “botch their goal of loving protection, producing creatures only to abandon them to injury and death”.

Freya Mathews’ study of colony collapse disorder, an affliction that is causing inexplicable but massive losses in bee populations, prompts her to probe the meaning of the grief she feels at the thought of a world without bees. She concludes that economistic and utilitarian explanations are wholly insufficient. Like Smith, she finds that assessments of moral considerability are deeply flawed. It would be unfair to pre-empt her beautiful conclusion, but in taking seriously her ‘fellow feeling’ (Smith’s term) for bees, she brings us into encounter with an assault on the very structure of the biosphere, an assault not just on the meaning of life on Earth but on the possibility of meaning.

What, in the end, can be said of the death of the disregarded? If there is one unified message in all of these essays, it is that no death is irrelevant. At the same time, passionate immersion in the lives of other members of multispecies communities brings us into communities that include the living as well as the dead (van Dooren), and thus that include death as well as life. An ecological ethics, in Smith’s term, is an ethics that practices the arts of inclusion (Tsing) with regard and benevolence. Such an ethics does not decry death, *per se*. Rather, it seeks to banish the mode of human thought that would hold that there is a category of others whose deaths can be ethically disregarded. At the same time, an ecological ethics will press us to consider creatures situated at the other extreme – those who are forced to live under any circumstance, coerced into reproducing for the human abstraction of the species, and those who are subsequently killed because they are ‘surplus

stock' (Chrulew). Within this frame of ethical thought there is no scope for either 'mere death' or for 'mere life'. There is, however, compelling scope for the arts of inclusion practiced through "passionate immersion in the lives of others".