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Research Article

Extinction: Stories of Unravelling and Reworlding

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We live in a time of almost unfathomable loss, and we are called to respond.¹

Extinction challenges our thinking and writing. Such overwhelming disappearance of ways of being, experiencing and making meaning in the world disrupts familiar categories and demands new modes of response. It requires that we trace multiple forms of both countable and intangible loss, the unravelling of social and ecological communities as a result of colonialism and capture, development and defaunation and other destructive processes. It brings forth new modes of commemoration and mourning, and new practices of archiving and survival. It calls for action in the absence of hope, and for the recognition and nourishment of new generativities: new modes of assemblage and attachment, resurgence and reworlding, commoning, composting and caring for country .

These opening thoughts were composed, and this collection conceived, under the influence of our generous collaborators in the Extinction Studies Working Group. The interdisciplinary scholarship collected here from both established and emerging scholars responds to the challenges of thinking and writing extinction. In a time where the mediated image of human disappearance obsesses us almost to the same degree as our species' uniquely Earth-changing power, we seek to place front and centre the accelerating loss of forms of nonhuman life. The idea of extinction itself is a relatively recent marker of modern scientific understandings of time and becoming, with ontological implications that are still being worked through.² The sixth mass extinction event—one of the starkest and most troubling markers of the so-called Anthropocene—is for its part a singularly complex and conjectural epistemic apparition with dizzyingly unprecedented ethical implications. It affects not only charismatic megafauna but other forms of life from plants to arthropods to others of which we have no knowledge. It encompasses not only the disappearance of species but also the radical decimation of animal

numbers, the enclosure and management of wild behaviour, and the loss of animal knowledges and cultures, of ways of living and being in the world. It differs from the previous, evolutionary mass extinctions in being caused by human activities and economies rather than ‘natural’ events. Yet the agency and responsibility for this ‘anthropogenic’ destruction is unequally distributed, its political, economic, racialised and other causes and impacts uneven and highly contested.

Countering the reductive and universalising stories of human destructiveness told by biologists, economists and many others demands cultural analysis of the narratives and practices surrounding extinction and its entanglement in knotty histories and categories. To this end, the humanities and social sciences have begun to thematise extinction in divergent, creative and generative ways, in anthropology, literary and cultural studies, critical theory and elsewhere.³ Ursula Heise, for example, has analysed the ways in which discourses, laws and narratives around extinction and conservation tie in with logics of cultural identity: ‘the valuation of biodiversity and efforts to protect it are profoundly cultural ventures, embedded in historical traditions and value frameworks that condition which lives are appreciated and conserved and which ones are disregarded, left to die out, or actively exterminated’.⁴ Conservation here is not just a scientific practice but a social one, articulated through a particular historical discourse and expressed and contested through distinct forms and genres from encyclopaedia to science fiction to comedy.

Yet the analysis of the cultures of extinction remains incomplete—and, indeed, encumbered by its own dualism of nature and culture—if it does not widen its view to also take as a problem the animal cultures that are disrupted and endangered. The goal of *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*—the first collaborative output of the Extinction Studies Working Group, which this collection follows and extends—was, through detailed case studies drawing from the emerging fields of environmental humanities and multispecies studies, to model an interdisciplinary, biocultural approach that can attend to the plural phenomena and entangled significance of extinction.⁵ This requires attention to the *cultures of extinction* in two senses: ‘both the human cultures that produce, understand, articulate and resist it, and the often objectified animal cultures that are so crucially threatened and trickily secured’.⁶ What is often paved over in redlists and databases is that what is vanishing are not just biological species but unique perspectives, distinctive forms of life and phenomenal worlds, precarious multispecies communities.⁷ Eileen Crist makes this clear with characteristic vigour:

*alongside destroying biological kinds, natural habitats, and populations of animals, we are deleting the Earth’s noumenal dimensions, elaborated through emotion, intention, understanding, perception, experience—in other words, through varieties of aware beings shaping and adorning the world-as-home. Animals are not ‘world-poor,’ but both the world and our own being are rendered poor without them.*⁸

This is one of the tragic ironies of the Anthropocene: our growing awareness and documentation of this mass extinction event coincides with a dawning recognition of animals’ own cognitive and cultural abilities. Indeed, it is practices built on the historical, institutional denial of this profusion of meaningful lives that have largely enabled their destruction. At the same time as we are nauseated by the modern production of mass slaughter and defaunation, we are thrilled by discoveries of new species, drawn into new ways of being with animals, troubled by new forms of hybrid being, and dizzyed by the proliferation of animal cultures and technologies, the social behaviours and cognitive achievements of marine mammals, birds and

apes, the great variety of animal emotions and forms of intelligence that surround us—and that are disappearing.

It is now a vital and opportune time to explore the significance of extinction and the cultural practices that surround and counter it: the salvific and often sacrificial practices of conservation, the memory and mourning practices of memorials, the regenerative practices of rewilding and renewal. In these complex, multivalent rituals and mediations, death remains interwoven with life, violence with care, silence with significance, memory with forgetting. As relationships and dependencies unravel, and scientific interventions cascade into further disruptions, through what means can generativity be reforged? The concretely researched and deeply theorised stories relayed here—from coral reefs to replanted forests, inundated lakes to sacrificed birds, from memorials to liturgies, archiving to translocation—explore the difficulties and promises of extinction and counter-extinction, seeking new ways to tell the stories of unravelling and reworlding that spiral out from extinction events.

The opening essay by Hugo Reinert considers the measures taken to conserve nonhuman life in the face of extinction. The lives of endangered Lesser White-fronted Geese mean different things to the various groups trying to save them. Teasing out notions of species purity and wildness, Reinert explores the flux in efforts to prolong life in the absence of hope. A focus on the life of one bird provides evidence of a persistent, inescapable stratum of violence present in conservation management practices.

In carefully narrating and reflecting on the moving of two small populations of Nihoa millerbirds from their original home to the island of Laysan, Thom van Dooren presents us with a dilemma regarding conservation practices, in particular assisted colonisations, undertaken in the midst of a period of countless extinctions, extreme weather events, and the increasing appearance of invasive species. Even when and where these practices meet with some success, they still beg the question of how and for whom conservation occurs in colonised spaces. In considering the long-term threats to the millerbird's temporary refuge, van Dooren identifies an insidious process of ecological unravelling analogous to, as well as implicating, the practices of colonisation that mark the history of Hawai'i.

Anna-Katharina Laboissière reflects on the relationship between biodiversity archives and the living things they purport to represent and conserve, critically examining these repositories' orientation toward the past and the future. She questions exactly what it is that conservationists and archivists believe they are saving and precisely how they function as a bulwark against mass extinction. Laboissière argues that while these archives seek to extend human nature back into interspecies pasts in their effort to preserve at least the abstract possibility of extinct species, they also exacerbate its relational dependency on future species-to-come. Consequently, further attention is required in considering how ex-situ conservation shapes these interspecies entanglements.

Joshua Schuster considers coral—those charismatic and finely-tuned marine invertebrates whose vulnerability has become of increasing concern in recent decades—as beings with multiple temporalities, building communities on the remains of their ancestors and forging relationships of many thousands of years with their oceanic habitat and fellow creatures. While their lives bring together complex cultural and scientific meanings to all who interact with them, it is their imminent and actual deaths that have come to shape the way we think of them and the way we conceive of the Anthropocene as threatening, challenging, and ending connected ways of living.

Rick De Vos explores the extinctions of a flatworm, an earthworm and a fish considered to have occurred as a result of the 1972 flooding of Lake Pedder—an infamous event in the history of Australian environmentalism, and one that still resonates at a time when extractive economic development remains a key priority, with little regard for ecological or social cost. Analysing the operations of (in)visibility and (dis)appearance in the scientific and governmental discourse surrounding this inundation, De Vos draws our attention to the ways narratives of sacrifice and redemption give value and voice to certain lives while eliminating it from others. How might we imagine, know about, and otherwise engage with unloved others such as these?

Mick Smith reiterates the profound affects and effects of extinction in responding to environmental theorists who argue for an acceptance of species dying out as part of the formation of a new, resilient 'nature'. He draws on Camus' existentialism in reflecting on our witness to extinction, a process that renders worldly concerns senseless and absurd. Smith argues that the novel ecosystems celebrated by many contemporary writers who reformulate nature as a capitalist economy only work to distance humanity from the deaths of species with whom they are implicated, and to deny our responsibilities for those with whom we share our lives.

Laura MacLauchlan identifies a major limitation in the way that the framing of conservation and anti-extinction efforts within heroic parameters builds expectations of salvific victories and permanent solutions. Through an engaged exploration of the work of the environmentalist Errol Greaves, MacLauchlan offers an account of working with native birds, fungi, bacteria, other humans and other entities in the re-establishing of a forest and the building of an ecological community. She suggests that we need narratives that accommodate this multispecies communal caring, recognise it as tending to our own lives as much as others', and accept impermanence as part of this work.

Kelly Enright looks at the way extinction monuments invoke the loss of landscapes as shared spaces of experience. She considers the loss of seasonal changes on the Wisconsin landscape after the disappearance of passenger pigeons, changes that included their tumultuous arrivals and departures, and the stories that accompanied that experience of the natural world, themselves now dying out with the generation who knew the sights and sounds of massive pigeon flocks. The invocation of imagination at such monuments, entangled with national and natural heritage, allows visitors to place themselves in the story before the demise, to imagine an alternative way of being in nature. The contrast between traditional taxidermy exhibits and in situ monuments points to the question of whether our principal engagements with extinction are about the loss of fellow beings or the loss of memories.

In critically surveying the Great Plains region of Northern Montana, and specifically that area known as Buffalo Country, James Hatley examines the way this space is narrated and contained within a history of settlement. Such a history consigns both the near-extirpation of bison as species and, more profoundly, the violent imposition of a new environment precluding the return of the Buffalo to their home, to a past that is severed from the present. Hatley argues that despite official attempts to deny and conceal the shame of the past, Buffalo Ecocide persists as an inescapable constituent of the process of settlement.

Hatley's writing has an extraordinary capacity to apprehend and think together events of destruction and disappearance without reduction or conflation, to search for appropriate modes of response all while acknowledging their unbearable inadequacies. Our dear colleague and teacher Deborah Bird Rose drew particularly on Hatley's prior work in her own passionate

writings against extinction as the dire outcome of intertwined processes of genocide and ecocide.⁹ We dedicate these essays to Debbie, whose insight and example we miss so dearly.¹⁰

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Endnotes

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2. Joshua Schuster, 'Life After Extinction', *Parrhesia*, vol. 27, 2017, pp. 88-115.
3. See, for example, Rick De Vos, 'Extinction Stories: Performing Absence(s)', in Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong (eds), *Knowing Animals*, Brill, Leiden, 2007, pp. 183-195; Stephanie Turner, 'Open-Ended Stories: Extinction Narratives in Genome Time', *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2007, pp. 55-82; Genese Marie Sodikoff (ed), *The Anthropology of Extinction: Essays on Culture and Species Death*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2012; Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1*, Open Humanities Press, 2014; Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2016; Dolly Jørgenson, 'Endling, the Mystique of the Last in an Extinction-Prone World', *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 119-38; Richard Grusin (ed), *After Extinction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2018; Hannah Stark, 'The Cultural Politics of Mourning in the Era of Mass Extinction: Thylacine Specimen P762', *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 63, 2018, pp. 65-79.
4. Heise, p. 202.
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10. This special issue emerged from the Second Workshop of the Extinction Studies Working Group <extinctionstudies.org>, held in Margaret River, Australia, 4-8 December 2016, which was supported by small grant funding from Curtin University's School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, and two Australian Research Council projects, DE160101531 and DP150103232.