



Everyday Ecocide, Toxic Dwelling, and the Inability to Mourn

A Response to Geographies of Extinction

OWAIN JONES

Research Centre for Environmental Humanities, Bath Spa University, UK

KATE RIGBY

Research Centre for Environmental Humanities, Bath Spa University, UK

School of Languages, Cultures, and Linguistics, Monash University, Australia

LINDA WILLIAMS

Department of Art, RMIT University, Australia

Abstract In responding to the spatiotemporally specific geographies of extinction charted in the articles in this special section, this article reflects on the sociocultural factors that inform the ways in which extinction is framed and impede recognition of the enormity of the anthropogenic extinction event in which we are all bound. This article argues that we are living in an era of ecocide, where the degradation of biodiversity and eradication of species go hand-in-hand with the degradation and eradication of nonmodern culture and identity, and it explores some possible reasons why modern society is failing to respond to impending crisis. Fine-grained stories of spatiotemporally specific geographies of extinction can help to counter the logic of colonization and bring everyday ecocide into view. For the particular multispecies communities they concern, they can also feed into the creation of ritual practices of penitential mourning in ways that enable a collective grieving process poised to activate an ecosocial transformation. The authors consider the implications of grief and mourning—and of not mourning—in what can be seen as not only a terrible time but also the end of (lived) time. They conclude with some reflections of local acts of resistance, witnessing, and narrative.

Keywords extinction, ecocide, toxic dwelling, deep time, mourning

We do not want to be here. That is the first thing to say. It is with the deepest sadness, anger, and bewilderment that we find ourselves, with others, in this position: thinking and writing about—and otherwise simply witnessing, and, increasingly, actively protesting—the global species extinction crisis in which we are

immersed.¹ Departing from the rest of our history as a species, we find ourselves living in the unique human condition of what Stengers terms catastrophic times on a global scale.²

Stengers begins her narrative of ecosocial betrayal with the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans, and climate change more broadly, rather than addressing species extinction as such. The causes of the current wave of anthropogenic biodiversity loss are multiple and complex, and include changes in land and sea use, overexploitation of particular species, various forms of pollution, and invasive species. According to the most recent global assessment conducted by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity, however, climate change is now up there among the three greatest drivers of the worldwide decline in abundance and diversity of free-living species. As the popular natural historian Sir David Attenborough put it in his recent public address to the United Nations climate talks in Katowice, Poland: “Right now, we are facing a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years. Climate change. If we don’t take action the collapse of our civilizations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon.”³

Environmental crisis is calibrated by a set of catastrophes, some slow, others sudden, in which climate change and species extinction are becoming ever more finely interwoven. Among the more sudden of these catastrophes are instances of mass mortality as a consequence of the increasing frequency and intensity of extremes, such as the heat wave that killed some 23,000 spectacled flying foxes, representing almost a third of the remaining population of this species, over a deadly two-day period in Queensland in November 2018.⁴ Their numbers had already been halved over the previous decade, largely as a consequence of the “slow violence”⁵ of habitat loss and, in some cases, direct persecution. Yet to contemplate the desperate struggle of the individuals comprising this colony to cool themselves down before falling dead out of their arboreal roosting places is to be confronted by the ways in which global heating is now amplifying the dreadful suffering lying behind the grim statistics of population decline and extinction.⁶ As the IBBES report also acknowledges, lying behind the direct drivers of biodiversity loss are a host of indirect drivers “underpinned by societal values and

1. The proposition that we have entered Earth’s sixth extinction event was popularized by Kolbert in *The Sixth Extinction* and now appears to have been confirmed by the 2019 global assessment conducted by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity. See Diaz, “Summary for Policymakers.”

2. Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*.

3. Attenborough, “Transcript of the Speech.”

4. Mao, “How One Heatwave Killed ‘a Third’ of a Bat Species.”

5. *Slow violence* is the term coined by Rob Nixon in his book of that name to refer to the socially unjust distribution of environmental harms arising from the toxic impacts of turbo-charged capitalist industrial expansion. In using this term here, we intend to highlight questions of trans- or multispecies justice.

6. As she revealed in her final blog post, Deborah Bird Rose features flying foxes, about whom she has also written previously, in her last book, *Shimmer*, to be published posthumously. “Flying-Foxes on My Mind, Love at the Edge of Extinction,” 23 November 2018. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/tep/177305>.

behaviours.”⁷ The investigation of these geo-historically contingent and socioculturally variable values and behaviors has long been the business of the environmental humanities. As Ursula Heise has shown, they also shape how extinction is investigated, communicated, and the meanings through which it is framed.⁸ It is with the question of framing that we begin our speculative response to this special issue exploring particular geographies of extinction.

Endings and Framings

We are already deep into the era of anthropogenically driven species extinctions, and population decimations, and associated loss of genetic diversity, the latter being an often under-considered corollary of extinction.⁹ So where to start? Where do we begin on such final endings? And in what ways might we actually convey the meaning of such endings?

All the articles in this special section turn in one form or another to *narratives* of particular forms of extinction and to how such narratives are always specific in their material-political-cultural-ecological unfolding and are also temporally and materially more complex and contingent than a simple sense of inevitability would suggest. And despite the consistent presence of the meta-narrative of global extinction, it is in the flourishing of quite particular forms of life that their eventual demise is most keenly felt.

In one way, extinctions, such as the demise of the passenger pigeon (to take one of the most commonly referred to examples with a direct anthropogenic cause), is a final ending of a unique form of life manifest in genetics, bodies, behaviors, ecologies, landscape, beauty, and culture. In this sense, the fate of the passenger pigeon is one example of the specific entanglements, spatiotemporalities, and nonhuman agencies that Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew¹⁰ and Ben Garlick and Kate Symons in this issue seek to identify in their fine-grained reading of specific extinctions, which surpass “understandings of extinction in terms of final, singular death.”¹¹

At the same time, extinction can never simply be an end because, as Adam Searle argues in this issue, history, narrative, and memory endure just as absence, nostalgia, and lament persist and even as speculative resurrection appears possible through genetic technologies. Human nostalgia for lost species can live on within the displays of natural history museums. Ghost species can live on, even if, as in certain stranger episodes of science and myth, they might never have even existed to begin with, as Zachary Baynham-Herd shows in his account of the search for the Loch Ness Monster, also in this issue.

7. Diaz, “Summary for Policymakers,” 12.

8. Heise, *Imagining Extinction*.

9. Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Dirzo, “Biological Annihilation in the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signalled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines.”

10. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, “Introduction.”

11. Garlick and Symons, “The Geographies of Extinction,” in this issue.

Notwithstanding how life processes are reduced to distant echoes or spectral forms of speculative futurities, however, the death of the processual currents of the *longue durée* and deep biological rivers that constitute a species is imbued with finality. Sometimes, however, as Charlotte Wrigley's article in this issue on the seemingly inevitable extinction of Scottish wildcats shows, even that human sense of finality is rendered uncertain, since through ongoing feral crossbreeding, the genetic legacies of the wildcats have entered and hybridized the genetic matrix of domestic cat populations and thus live on in some way. As a distinct ecological vector, though, and as a wild animal, Scottish wildcats have all but gone (as the passenger pigeon went), and Wrigley suggests that conservation efforts as practiced by modern Western societies are a form of haunting or human longing for the reality of a wildness, a form of life, which for all intents and purposes is already lost.

Yet if we pan out from such spatiotemporally specific instances of extinction to assume the "deep-time" perspective often invoked in discussions of the so-called Anthropocene,¹² it could appear that loss is the name of the game. To go back to very deepest notions of time, if current cosmological models are accepted as roughly accurate, what we know of, what we see as, this particular universe appears to start from nothing and could quite possibly end as nothing. Between such cosmic framings, life and matter and energy are apparently a mere shimmer through a vast dark universe. As far as we can tell all possible life, and all life on earth, lives within these vast universal frameworks, and as a spatiotemporal event, as this middle-aged planet and the wider solar system reaches its end, all life on earth will be long gone. The earth will become a barren, rocky and gassy orb, such as most of our neighboring planets appear to be, a place where all surface water and organic life will be burned and blown by a swelling, brightening sun. Life, as an enduring ecological meshwork of interacting species, will finally be extinguished when the very last extinction takes place. In this distant scenario the status of individual species may be rendered flat ontologically but only in ways that we feel highlight human ethical imperatives.

As the deep ecologists argue, there is no possibility of life that is not in the living body of plant, animal, or fungi in all their ecological and elemental entanglements with soil, fire, wind, and water. Life in all is living diversity, is the locus of all value. The deep ecology movement (although challenged by ecofeminists, ecosocialists, and postcolonial critics for effacing socioeconomic differences)¹³ posits the rich biodiversity of earthly life as the fundamental ground for a new ethics and politics of modern society. From our perspective too biodiversity is both the foundation of life, the body of life, and its ultimate source of meaning. The extinction of a species is a diminution of life itself.

12. The questionable nature of this coinage is noted by Garlick and Symons, "The Geographies of Extinction," in this issue.

13. For example, Plumwood incorporates feminist, postcolonial, and socialist objections to some aspects of deep ecology in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 165–89. See also, Cudworth, *Developing Ecofeminist Theory*, 16–41.

A second deep-time perspective nonetheless needs to be considered here, as it complicates that fundamental claim to some extent. Past periods of rapid extinctions, however caused (geo-transformations, climate shifts, large asteroid strikes on earth, or single species hyper-proliferation), could be laying the ground for future eras of unfolding species proliferations. Our own era of Gaia, our biosphere as home with its amazingly abundant and varied web of life, is the result of the catastrophic climatic events that marked the transition from the Cretaceous to Paleogene periods. The devastating events that caused mass extinctions, possibly over a very short period of time, left whole habitats and landscapes radically reduced in life, and new species then flourished to fill these ecological voids. This led to what might well be peak biodiversity (an idea we return to in the conclusion), where the most ecologically rich habitats such as rain forests and deltas have astonishingly rich levels of diversity, with thousands of species sharing even small areas of habitat.

Such deep-time speculations and perspectives are, we feel, an important context for thinking about current events. Yet this offers no respite from our sense of ethical responsibility toward those species whose extinction we are hastening: humans, after all, are geological agents of a rather different sort from volcanoes or asteroids, capable of recognizing the damage they are doing, making ethical choices about how they might act differently, and finding more just and sustainable ways of doing so. The overall level of biodiversity in the biosphere is, and always has been, in flux. But from the perspective we are advancing here, the loss of any species or subset thereof is to be regarded as a subtraction from the sum of life. The extinction of a species is a *diminution of life* as a collective force and a loss of a specific articulation of life, while mass extinctions mean a radical diminution of life itself—life that, in our current awareness at least, is the only known life within the two trillion galaxies now estimated to exist, thanks to imaging from the Hubble telescope and related deep-space observations.

The *longue durée* of the planetary (geological and astrophysical) perspective also fails to address the trauma particular human communities might face due to the loss of familiar species, or the wider human tragedy of losing our sense of being at *home* in a multispecies earthly *oikos*. To acknowledge the word *home* is to turn to spatial, temporal, and material scales that are distinguished from deep-time or primordial sources. And it is life on this scale that, as biological and cultural beings, we perceive as most meaningful—where death is an inevitable and a key part of life but one that must be distinguished from the untimely obliteration of entire living kinds. This, Rose has termed “double death,” the cutting off of the capacity for regeneration, such that individual death is no longer folded back into ongoing life.¹⁴

The Untimely

As individual life is inevitably enabled by individual death, so species flourishing in the evolutionary mesh can be enabled by species death. Yet as in individual life it is

14. Rose, “Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time.”

untimely deaths that are tragic, especially in their potential to trigger wider erosions of biodiversity. The untimely mortalities of life-forms extinguished by modern human practices could well have been avoided had we followed other socioeconomic, ideological, technological, and cultural paths. As the field of extinction studies¹⁵ shows, the choices of how modern societies develop, especially how they are situated in the cultural, ideological, and geographical fields, can still be different. Extinctions of specific species did not, and do not, have to be so starkly untimely. In certain instances, the eradication of species occurs alongside the loss of specific, situated more-than-human cultural practices, such as the increasing absence of vultures from traditional Indian burial sites and their “towers of silence.”¹⁶ Here then is evidence of the ecocide of the three ecologies as set out by Felix Guattari, in which the untimely eradication of species and decimation of nonhuman populations goes hand in hand with that of non-modern cultures.¹⁷

It could be argued that biological and cultural extinction goes hand in hand with the extinction of hope: the hope of recovery, or reflowering (genetic resurrection or cultural reconstruction notwithstanding). The mass extinction of specific species—and specific elements of cultural ecology—is the mass extinction of specific elements of hope. But hope, biodiversity loss, extinction, and grieving are complexly intertwined through topological, temporal flows. This can be illustrated with a contemporary example in the UK.

At the time of this writing, the tree disease ash dieback is becoming firmly and irrevocably established in one of the most culturally and ecologically significant trees in the UK. It has already killed whole woodlands of ash in the southeast of the country. The death of these trees has a marked impact on many other species of flora and fauna associated with them. It is estimated that there are 150 million ash trees in the UK, making up 12 percent of the total tree population, and 98 percent of these will die in the coming decades. This is not extinction, insofar as the ash, as a tree species, will survive in vastly reduced numbers, and over centuries will probably recover with new strains resistant to the fungal pathogen. But it is cultural and ecological devastation and diminution on a vast and tragic scale. It is biodiversity loss that sits alongside extinction. In centuries to come the landscapes of the UK might well be rich again with new generations of ash trees and associated species. That is a form of hope stemming from the fact that complete extinction of the species will not happen. That is why preventing extinction is so important. It keeps possibility alive. But returning to the opening point about climate change, that hope is called into question as radical climatic changes threaten the evolution of generations of disease-resistant trees. A key concern for future imaginaries is that climate change might not usher in the flourishing of newly evolved biodiversity, as

15. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulaw, “Introduction.”

16. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*.

17. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*. The term *ecocide* is introduced in the translator’s introduction.

in previous great flourishings, but could render large areas of the world, not lifeless, as bacteria and some other organisms can survive in extreme conditions, but vastly reduced in life through extreme temperatures and related hostile conditions.

Responding (or Not) to the Crisis

Will we develop the capacity to stem and then reverse the unfolding destruction of our earthly home, the untimely death of evolutionary kin, and the gradual erasure of a beauty so intrinsic to our sense of the world that its replacement by barrenness and ugliness seems inconceivable? In response to this question it is difficult to avoid a cognate question raised by Jo Confino: “Why aren’t we on the floor doubled up in pain at our capacity for industrial scale genocide of the world’s species?”¹⁸

In fact it is clear that many people are highly traumatized and grief-stricken by the situation as they see it and are seeking to respond in some way. In the context of what has been termed “ecological grief” some are moved to acts of protest, resistance, and lament, notably, at the time of writing, the Extinction Rebellion protests. However, as we discuss further below, there are significant impediments to mourning extinction. This means that there is not yet a commensurate relationship between the severity of the crisis we are facing and the collective (societal) anger and grief being expressed. And furthermore the anger and grief that is arising in response to this has not yet led to significant political action or to the systematic behavioral change and socioeconomic structural change needed to reverse the impact of anthropogenic forcing.

The causes of this situation are, obviously, highly complex, contested, and uncertain. But it is possible to reflect on some likely reasons why modern society seems unable both to grieve for the ecological consequences of recent history and to make effective adjustments to culture, politics, and economy. As Robin Moore reflected in relation to his career in nature conservation politics in the UK in the twentieth century,¹⁹ our prevailing political cultures and the ideologies that dominate them formed in an era when there was very little hint of environmental crisis or finitude. Modern politics, formed in the fulcrums of contested human values and human conflicts, have largely marginalized matters of nature and ecology, at least beyond questions of human utility or profit. Up until the last few decades, modern politics, particularly, has been largely inarticulate on matters of ecology. There have, of course, been many ecological voices through that period. But they have struggled to gain significant political purchase.

Since the advent of the industrial revolution from the late eighteenth century, population growth, globally scaled production, consumption, resource extraction, and pollution have accelerated exponentially. This has led to an environmental crisis of such scale, reach, and complexity that its consequences are difficult to grasp, not only conceptually but also, as Morton and others have pointed out, perceptually and

18. Confino, “Grieving Could Offer a Pathway Out of a Destructive Economic System.”

19. Moore, *The Bird of Time*, introduction.

emotionally.²⁰ For a modern citizen to become an ecological citizen or even confront the ecological implications of the everyday urban life of consumption is highly challenging and implies new forms of disengagement from the complex, sophisticated web of economic, political, social, and cultural systems in which most of us are formed.

The hidden processes and gradual accretion of environmental crises make them hard to grasp and respond to, especially where impacts occur at a vast spatial or temporal distance from their locus of causation. The inexorable attrition of biodiversity, as in the case of the slow decline of many bird populations, for example, implies a commensurate human acclimatization to loss, which essentially hinders intergenerational recognition of the problem.²¹ As such, the slow violence of the modern era makes the politics of recognition and response difficult, or perhaps denial easy, for those protecting vested political and economic power.

The intricate weave, or ecology, of narratives that make up modern human culture and identities is very narrowly anthropocentric and steeped in human exceptionalism to the extent that the values and dramas of nonhuman stories are marginalized or trivialized. Furthermore, the socioeconomic structures of modern/Western subjectivity evident in ideas of the individual, family, and nation-state are contingent on narratives of self-fulfillment and material success cut away the capacity to admit to ecological failure, to engage in social action, or even to recognize the concomitant grief of ecological degradation.

Toxic Dwelling and Ecocide

Prevalent narratives of competitive personal gain and success have the propensity to disconnect modern, individualized citizen-consumers from the ecological matrix of becoming in ways that render us insensible of, and insensitive to, the ecological consequences of our common everyday practices of consumption. Not only do most modern humans live in an ecology of narratives that is grossly distorted by anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, but they also are exposed to manipulated information and emotional and affective overload. Modern becomings are colonized by powerful and carefully generated narratives that shape how we feel, what we desire, how we grieve, and our capacity to act. Here we turn to the idea of toxic dwelling in an effort to explain why modern society seems trapped in its current trajectory of development that is a major indirect driver of ecocide.

The idea of toxic dwelling is an attempt to consider the conditions of contemporary globalized consumer culture (GCC) and its consequences. It focuses on affective dimensions of globalized capitalist consumer culture and the extent to which very powerful messages and images generate the desires and habits necessary to drive processes of consumption that build affective relations in ways that are recognizably toxic. It is

20. Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

21. Mitchell, "Beyond Biodiversity and Species."

important to stress here that toxic is not being used as a metaphor but as a literal description of the material impact that consumer culture can have on human mental and physical health. The impact of consumer capitalism and its waste products on ecosystems is also toxic, as suggested by Guattari when defining the ecocide of the three ecologies interlinking psychic, cultural, and biospheric diversity.

The condition of human life (and very likely of many other animals) is to dwell, that is, to be in the world as an embodied experience of rich relational exchanges within known spaces and times. The practice of dwelling calibrates the subjective experiences of embodied becoming, much of which stems from evolutionary development and cultural formations, and all manner of complex intercorporeality and intermateriality. Heidegger, who famously developed the concept of dwelling,²² described how the processes of industrial production and consumption are eroding, or corrupting, humans' true dwelling—a co-flourishing of person, nature, and material culture in space and time. Accelerating processes of GCC do not simply erode dwelling, however, but actively exploit our propensity to dwell, impeding our capacity to conceive alternative forms of becoming. And it is this last condition especially that is becoming a powerfully pervasive harbinger of ecocide on a devastating scale. GCC manufactures worlds for dwelling in which identity becomes synonymous with consumption and immediate individual fulfilment. The power (political, ideological, and economic) invested in driving this system means that we are in very deep trouble as a global society. Though millions of people appear to dwell beyond the worlds of high consumption generated by GCC, many remain within the system as producers, where they are even more vulnerable to its biologically toxic fallout.

Guattari's model of ecocide is instructive when considering extinctions because it shows how the interrelated historical processes that erode biodiversity and the natural world so terribly also erode individual and collective psychological as well as social capacities not only to respond to this situation but also to even realize what is at the root of the problem. To grieve is one thing, but to grieve as one kills off what is to be grieved is quite another. Nowhere is this more visible than in the complex economy of affects in which advertising and consumer culture are inextricably enmeshed. This is the everyday spectacle of screen culture and glossy prints where a verdant imagery of the nonhuman world that shows so clearly what we are in danger of losing is just as effectively colonized to serve the manufacturing of human desires for commodity consumption. This pervasive regime of images consistently arouses deep currents of nostalgia for human imaginaries of nature-as-paradise that are powerful agents in how cultures of consumption are promoted. As Williams argues, nostalgia for an imaginary, unsullied golden age represents a very deep current of human desire in Western culture that is now leveraged toward the products with which it has become associated, such as water from the purest mountain streams, travel to tropical paradise, and the freedom

22. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

to explore “wilderness” in four-wheel drives.²³ One of the more violent casual ironies of the world of product placement or promotion is the appropriation of animals to effectively serve as double agents: both as actors of human desires and as envoys for the extinction of their own species. Marketers recognize the effectiveness of animals in eliciting emotional responses from consumers;²⁴ hence it is unsurprising that anthropomorphized images of polar bears have been used consistently to promote Coca-Cola as a product with the icy freshness of the arctic regions. Yet at the same time it is also unsurprising to read a report from Greenpeace estimating that in 2017 Coca-Cola produced over 110 billion single-use plastic bottles,²⁵ many of which end up as microplastic pollution of the marine food chain in the habitats of polar bears.

Ecocide, however, is not simply about how advertisers cynically cash in on affluent consumers’ nostalgia for disappearing wild landscapes and species. Instead, a more difficult challenge is presented by how the nostalgic fantasy of a world uncompromised by a complex socioeconomic global system is sustained by a pernicious culture of the new, the next, and the best by which we are all constituted to one degree or another. This is the pivotal problem of toxic dwelling, which has effectively become a global condition.

Nonetheless, studying the current wave of anthropogenic mass extinction through a geo-historical prism gives the lie to popular accounts of biodiversity loss as the “responsibility of an amorphous ‘humanity,’” disclosing instead the socio-ecologically contingent “complexity and significance of specific sites of loss.”²⁶ Extinctions have long been coordinated with commercially motivated, racialized violence toward colonized peoples. As Deborah Bird Rose observed, “Settler societies are built on a dual war: a war against Nature and a war against the natives. Each has been devastating.” In Australia, the devastation “includes the loss of around 90 percent of the original Aboriginal population and involved the disappearance of all but a small number of Aboriginal languages along with a deep history of cultural coherence through Aboriginal networks of cultural exchange. It has also resulted in the loss of large numbers of plant and animal species, including the highest rate of mammalian extinctions in the contemporary world.”²⁷

As of May 11, 2018, when 41 new species were added (half of them identified as critically endangered), almost 2,000 plants and animals were on the Australian government’s official list of threatened species, making this once biologically rich continent a world leader in extinctions.²⁸ Among them are some considered by particular Indigenous

23. Williams, “The Anthropocene and the Long Seventeenth Century,” 89.

24. Lloyd and Woodside, “Animals, Archetypes, and Advertising”; Spears, Mowen, and Chakraborty, “Symbolic Role of Animals in Print Advertising.”

25. Laville, “Coca-Cola Increased Its Production of Plastic Bottles.”

26. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, “Introduction.”

27. Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 34–35.

28. Australian Government Department of Environment and Energy, “Amendments to the EPBC List of Threatened Species.”

communities to be ancestral kin, as is the mala, or rufous hare-wallaby, by the Anangu people of Central Australia.²⁹ For those who view particular endangered species not as part of an amorphous nature-over-yonder to be valued, if at all, as a source of aesthetic pleasure, commercial profit, or ecosystem services, but rather as fellow members of a multispecies collective (called “country” in Aboriginal English), kindred beings toward whom one is morally as well as materially beholden, their extinction, actual or threatened, deals a particularly cruel blow. Such cases entail an all-encompassing erosion of meaning and purpose. For the “hare-wallaby people,” the grief occasioned by the disappearance of the mala as a consequence of environmental changes beyond their control (notably, predators introduced by European settlers) is inflected by the devastating experience of being unable to ensure the continued flourishing of country, as required by Aboriginal law.

Ecocide and the Inability to Mourn

Such grief is of a different order from the inchoate sadness that arguably lies beneath the glitzy glamour of hyper-consumerist toxic dwelling, as can be glimpsed obliquely in the nostalgic advertising imagery discussed previously. Yet it is also quite possibly the failure to fully and consciously enter into the grief of extinction that itself contributes to the perpetuation of ecocidal practices. Social psychologist Margarete Mitscherlich-Neilson has observed that “the defence against shame, guilt and mourning leads to emotional emptiness in the individual and, in consequence, to psychological and political immobility.”³⁰ Together with Alexander Mitscherlich, Margarete Mitscherlich-Neilson is the author of an influential study that traces the failure of most Germans in the immediate postwar decades to come to terms with the Nazi past to what they diagnose as an almost pathological inability to mourn.³¹ Because it was not acceptable for the German people to admit that Hitler had been for millions an object of deep libidinal attachment, nor even to bewail the devastation of their own cities, they were unable to grieve for the ruination of the hopes and desires that many had invested in the Third Reich, too readily identifying themselves with the new regimes of East and West respectively, and throwing themselves into a forgetful frenzy of rebuilding. In their inability to mourn their own loss, moreover, they were rendered incapable of fully empathizing with the victims of the murderous regime, with which, all too often, they had been complicit. Such denial and repression, the authors warn, was not only psychologically crippling but also was politically dangerous, harboring a potential compulsion to repeat the past.

Clearly the complacency of many Germans (and other Europeans, for that matter) with respect to the systematic rounding up and deportation of their Jewish neighbors

29. Rose, “Love in the Time of Extinctions.”

30. Mitscherlich-Neilson, “The Inability to Mourn,” 407.

31. Mitscherlich-Neilson, “The Inability to Mourn.”

(along with homosexuals, trade unionists, Communists, and Roma) is a very different thing from consumerist complicity in the disappearance of other species, where this is occurring as an accidental by-product of fossil-fuelled, turbocharged industrial capitalist globalization. Nor is the current moment of unfolding disaster comparable with the post-Holocaust situation, to the extent that the ecocidal wrongs that we need to face up to now are ongoing, rather than in the past.³² As Christie has observed, however, an analogous inability to grieve appears to be impeding our ability to act with sufficient resolution to arrest the cascade of death.³³ In part, this has to do with the anthropocentric, or, more precisely “anthroparchal”³⁴ bias discussed previously, which effectively disqualifies nonhuman lives (with the exception of pets) from what Butler has termed “grievability”;³⁵ a disqualification that was also perpetrated against Jewish people in Nazi Germany (as also, in other contexts, against colonized people; racial, sexual, and religious minorities; and the economically disadvantaged, among others) often precisely by equating them with animals. This is not the whole story, though. For to open ourselves up to the enormity of the extinction event in which we find ourselves variously implicated would also necessitate confronting discomfiting feelings of shame and guilt, alongside sadness and grief.

Extending Butler’s argument about which bodies are, and are not, deemed grievable to (nonhuman) animals, Stanescu maintains that mourning is “always a political act . . . a way of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other”³⁶—and, implicitly, of oneself. Where sadness is complicated by shame, grief by guilt, the work of mourning entails also an element of what environmental philosopher James Hatley terms *penitential witness*. This he advances as a counterweight to the righteous anger of “indexical witness,” in which all the blame is projected onto others, arguing that in a “politics dominated by outrage, the possibilities of moving from retributive to restorative or recuperative justice . . . is undermined.”³⁷ Acknowledging shame, guilt, and remorse in a safe space that allows for acceptance and forgiveness, by contrast, can be liberating and even transformative, enabling radical change in one’s whole sense of self and way of being in the world. Incorporating penitential witness into public rituals of mourning for lost and endangered species, such as those undertaken in association with the Remembrance Day for Lost Species,³⁸ could therefore help to unblock the path to resolute action in solidarity with

32. Rigby, “Writing in the Anthropocene.”

33. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 84.

34. Cudworth defines *anthroparchy* as “a complex system of relations in which the non-human living environment [. . .] is dominated by human beings as a species.” *Developing Ecofeminist Theory*, 8.

35. Butler, *Precarious Life*.

36. Stanescu, “Species Trouble,” 568.

37. Hatley, “Blaspheming Humans,” 11–12.

38. “Remembrance Day for Lost Species.” www.losts-species-day.org/?page_id=25 (accessed November 12, 2018).

those whose survival currently hangs in the balance.³⁹ Mourning, in this context, becomes a form of resistance, protesting “the larger structures of injustice and oppression that trivialize and minimize the death and loss of some bodies.”⁴⁰ It also creates opportunities for atonement by participation in the defense and restoration of sites of multi-species flourishing, from the creation of urban pollinator habitats and the cleaning up of waterways and beaches, to volunteering with NGOs, such as the Rainforest Action Network, which works alongside indigenous peoples worldwide in the protection of their multispecies dwelling places and lifeways, and supporting political parties and initiatives that offer an alternative to the socioeconomics of everyday ecocide and toxic dwelling.

As Rose and van Dooren remark, mourning is our way of keeping faith with the dead.⁴¹ Mourning is never an end in itself; it is a process you undergo, a journey you undertake, in order to be able to bear a grief that would otherwise be overwhelming. Enabled to bear, and bear with grief, you are returned to the fullness of life with all its ongoing difficulties and unforeseen opportunities, empowered to reclaim whatever situated agency you might have to avert, or mitigate, further harm. In the midst of an unfolding ecocide that shows little sign of letting up, though, there is a risk of getting mired in mourning. Moreover, in the case of anticipatory grief for species that are endangered, perhaps critically so, but not yet extinct, there is a potentially irksome element in the prefiguration of their end. This is uncomfortably reminiscent of colonial gestures of “smoothing the pillow of a dying race” in late-nineteenth-century Australia, which made the demise of the continent’s First Nations a foregone conclusion, effacing their resistance and resilience, and forestalling concerted assistance and recovery efforts. With respect to other species, too, we should not let grief get in the way of recognizing their potentially resistant agency, as seen, for example, in the hybridizing strategies of many plants and some animals, including polar bears mating with grizzlies, and, as discussed in this special section, Scottish wildcats with domestic cats. Disavowing outdated notions of nature as static and of species as pure, we can rejoice in the fact that many embattled critters are outmaneuvering the anthropogenic forces stacked against them by becoming otherwise rather than disappearing entirely.

Concluding Thoughts

The socially, psychologically, and biologically toxic dimension of everyday ecocide, we argue, is veiled by ideologies that perpetuate, in Val Plumwood’s terms, the “logic of colonization,” whereby the backgrounding, homogenization, and instrumentalization of a

39. As Nancy Menning has shown, there are models for this in many religious traditions. Menning, “Environmental Mourning.”

40. Cunsolo and Landman, “Introduction,” 14. Cunsolo and Landman refer here to the concept of “resistant mourning” advanced by Clifton Spargo and Patricia Rae.

41. Rose and van Dooren, “Keeping Faith with the Dead: Mourning and De-extinction.”

“nature” deemed to lie somewhere “over yonder” has been intertwined historically with sundry forms of social domination, notably on the basis of gender, race, and class.⁴² These interconnections are especially stark in the case of those colonial historical geographies, where the disappearance of endemic species was (and sometimes remains) entangled with the dispossession of the peoples of First Nations. Fine-grained stories of spatiotemporally specific geographies of extinction, such as those told so effectively in this issue, can help to counter the logic of colonization and bring everyday ecocide into view. For the particular multispecies communities that they concern, they could potentially also feed into the creation of ritual practices of resistant and/or penitential mourning, enabling a collective grieving process oriented toward activating ecosocial transformation.

Having pondered extinction from a range of perspectives, including the very long-range view of deep time, we conclude by bringing things closer to home, so to speak, and to matters of countervailing action. New attitudes toward dietary consumption are clearly important in this context, along with small everyday gestures that bear signs of hope.

By some chance, two of the authors, Kate and Owain, live in the same small rural village in southwest England, while Linda resides in Australia. The village is set in a classic English farmed lowland landscape—which is alluringly beautiful and chimes perfectly with notions of rural idyll. But these landscapes are also landscapes of loss and rapid decline of biodiversity. The loss of traditional pastures, ancient woodlands, heathlands, species-rich hedgerows, ponds, and much more is related to industrial agriculture, development and generic, degrading pollution. One form of bio-decline has been marked in the populations of many farmland bird species (both resident and migratory), which are estimated to have declined by 56 percent between 1970 and 2015.⁴³ This is not simply a matter of statistics. It is a matter of specific sensory and cultural loss. For example, the village would once have rung with the summer calls of cuckoos. They have long gone.

All three authors are involved in very immediate local, personal practices for helping the wildlife around them. Like others in their village, Owain and Kate put out a lot of bird food in their gardens, encouraging the birdlife that remains to come to feed. Despite the declines, many bird species remain, and the main UK bird conservation agencies stress that the feeding of birds in the UK—and other care such as providing nesting boxes and undertaking wildlife gardening—does have a significant positive impact on bird populations. Owain has photographed and posted pictures of the very busy and colorful birdlife on view through the kitchen window.

Meanwhile, in Australia, Linda keeps beehives in an urban garden in an attempt to provide a small sanctuary for bees free of parasites and diseases. Like many other

42. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

43. McCarthy, “Britain Has Lost Half Its Wildlife.”

people in the city, she also fills bowls of water for the birds parched by unprecedentedly high temperatures in summer.

These modest gestures of care by the authors and many like them are small examples of a wider surge of responses to the global attrition of biodiversity that is gathering momentum internationally, and to which this special section makes a contribution. We are indeed in the midst of a great extinction crisis, but there is still an amazing diversity and richness of species. If the premodern era happened to be peak biodiversity, then much deep richness remains despite the ongoing onslaught of extinction. What remains is to be cherished, cared for, and defended as a baseline that needs to stop dropping and, hopefully, supported to flourish in new formations of ecosocial conviviality. Moreover, as the planet warms and weather patterns go awry, consideration of how land is managed for biodiversity futures will need to incorporate planning for new species migration routes connecting fragmented spaces of conservation.⁴⁴

There are too many examples across the world of local and larger-scale success stories in habitat recovery to mention here, along with the steady, if slow, growth in habitat preparedness for biodiversity flourishing in an era of climate change. Such measures are not at present robust enough to effectively offset the processes driving extinction, but the door has not yet closed on finding ways of resisting the allure of toxic dwelling, redressing ecocide and encouraging social-ecological systems to pivot back toward collective flourishing.

In honor of Deborah Bird Rose, who wrote compellingly of the challenges of the extinction crisis, even while facing her own untimely death (she died on December 21, 2018, in Sydney, Australia), we end with her words:

Multispecies genocide opens an entropic vortex into which we are pushing life, and into which we too are being drawn. Against this vortex, what does one have to offer? Writing is an act of witness; it is an effort not only to testify to the lives of others but also to do so in ways that bring into our ken the entanglements that hold the lives of all of us within the skein of life. If we wonder, as many of us often do, if there is any point in telling stories that awaken ethical sensibility in this time when so much is happening so rapidly and seemingly so unstoppably, there is a countervailing dread: if no stories are told, if all the violence goes unremarked, then we are thrust into the world of the doubly violated. Silence, however comfortable it seems at times, is a failure to acknowledge the gravity of violence.⁴⁵

OWAIN JONES is a cultural geographer who in 2014 became the first professor of environmental humanities in the UK at Bath Spa University. He is now emeritus professor of the newly formed Research Centre for the Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa. He has published more than

44. This is one of the key recommendations of Lawton's 2010 report to the UK government, *Making Space for Nature*.

45. Rose, "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time," 139.

eighty scholarly articles on various aspects of nature-society relations and is coeditor of *Visual Culture in the Northern British Archipelago: Imagining Islands* (2018); *Participatory Research in More-Than-Human Worlds* (2017); and *Geography and Memory: Identity, Place and Becoming* (2012); and coauthor of *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (2002).

KATE RIGBY is a fellow of the Australian Humanities Academy, a professor and director of the Research Centre for Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa University, and adjunct professor of literary studies at Monash University in Melbourne. Her research lies at the intersection of environmental literary, philosophical, historical, and religious studies, with a special interest in European Romanticism, ecopoetics, and multispecies studies. A founding coeditor of the journal *Philosophy Activism Nature*, she is currently coeditor of the University Press of Virginia series "Under the Sign of Nature" and the author of *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (2004); *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (2015); and *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization* (2020).

LINDA WILLIAMS is associate professor of cultural and environmental history at RMIT University, where she leads the AEGIS research network in the arts and environmental humanities. Information on her recent publications can be found at rmit.academia.edu/LindaWilliams.

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