



## Cultural Studies Review

Vol. 25, No. 2  
December 2019



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**Citation:** Ravenscroft, A. 2019. Love in End Times. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 256-258. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6917>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

## CULTURE REVIEW

# Love in End Times

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**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6917>

**Article history:** Accepted 1/11/2019; Published 22/11/2019

When the editors of *Cultural Studies Review* named extinction and persistence as the themes of the final issues of their journal, they inscribed love's work at the heart of this pairing. They did so through their dedication to the late Deborah Bird Rose who insisted on love even at the edge of extinction—knowing as she did that her own end was imminent, and aware more than many of us how very close to end times are entire living worlds: for many, the edge of extinction has already been crossed. This idea of love speaks of the inextricable relation between all living things; it speaks for instance of what is at risk for humans when dingos' songlines are broken—'Dingo makes us human'—and it insists on a wider horizon of possibility for aliveness than many of us might have believed. When the rock formations known to the Kunapa people as Two Women Sitting Down were destroyed by mining operations in 2011, was this the desecration of nonliving matter as Australian law determined, or a killing, as the Kunapa spoke of it, an act that not only took the lives of the Two Women Sitting Down but put under pressure the lives of those Kunapa whose humanness is formed in relation to the lives of these two others?

*Speech trips up on itself when it comes to speaking about 'human', about 'you' and 'me', and about collectivity: the sum of 'us'. There is no 'I' that can be laid bare, exposed as an entity without its others, and at the same time there is no collectivity, no 'us', that is not made of the many ones, where no one is the same as another.*

In end times, the question insists itself: how to go on living? While some refuse to acknowledge the question and its urgency, others become hoarse from shouting into the storm of history. A young woman, only a girl really, crosses from Stockholm to New York under sail and cries out: 'You have stolen my dreams, you have stolen my future'. None of us yet knows

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

what is coming—how far extinction will go, what will persist—and although many attempt to imagine the apocalypse, we have already reached many end points. One end point is the limit of our capacities to know the devastation.

In the face of these limits, the imagination can do strange and desperate things. Some of us imagine that we will go on, one way or another—a disavowal of the kind: ‘I know very well that these are end times but nevertheless I believe that life can go on as before.’ Climate change deniers and survivalists share a version of this.

Some of us imagine the apocalypse as if there will be a position outside of end times from which we can bear witness, as if we can stand on the edge of the abyss, looking on. But surely it is what we cannot see of the future that truly horrifies, it is what we do not know that paralyzes. This is the true abyss that we busy ourselves with, stopping it up with our imaginings.

Some of us imagine end times within the reduced proportions of an individual’s life span. ‘Our individual time on this mortal coil is brief, we can face the end of Life by contracting its significance to that of a single life. Each of us must die sometime.’ To imagine the end in terms of an individual—to attempt to make end times bearable in this way—is to dispense with all the other lives—human and nonhuman—without whom there is no single life to speak of.

More disturbing still is the misanthropy that presents itself in the name of decentring the human. Humans are imagined as vermin, pestilence, ‘there are too many’. ‘The idea of the end of human life isn’t so bad; who’s to say it’s not okay if the seas teem only with jellyfish, and the land with cockroaches?’ We can turn that question on its head and ask: what does it mean to say that it *would* be okay, again taking seriously the idea that each life in its specificity is nevertheless always inextricably bound with another life, one form always entangled with another?

*Gertrude Stein counts to 100 in 1s, not as in 1,2, 3 where 2 and 3 are already sums, but as in 1 and 1 and 1 and 1... Typography fails us here because it makes each 1 identical to another whereas Stein is pointing to the many singular ones. The poet Anne Carson asks: ‘In the sum of the parts/where are the parts?’*

The edge of extinction pushes us beyond the limits of what we can imagine and the limits of our capacities to signify, and in the face of this we risk continuing to imagine the future in ways that reinscribe the solitary or individualised I—that very same human that the twinned logic of capital and colonialism has materialised in its deadly passage. We can go further: capital and colonialism are each driven by the desire *to have*—to possess, to take and to destroy.

Love, then? To an idea of love as entanglement can be added another theory of love that proposes that ‘Love is giving what you do not have’. There are many ways of interpreting Lacan’s enigmatic claim, and one is that love works across our incommensurable differences, it works with our limits, it works with what we do not have and what we might never have. We offer another no thing. In these times when we do not have the answers, when we do not know the future, and when our imaginings are erected to cover over what we lack, the question might not be ‘how to go on living?’ but ‘how to live...together?’, installing a collectivity that is conceived in the expansive and complex sense in which the Warlpiri and Kunapa and others live it, where each one is entwined and entangled with others. This is a collectivity not based in our sameness or identity, but in our difference— one and one and one...

## Debts

Deborah Bird Rose. Elizabeth Povinelli. Jacques Lacan. Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Irene Watson. Greta Thurnberg. Gertrude Stein. Anne Carson.