Multispecies Mourning: Thom van Dooren's Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction.

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> 'If this period of incredible loss cannot rouse in us an awareness of our place in, and our responsibility for, a shared world, then I am not sure what can' (Thom van Dooren, 147)

Thom van Dooren's new book focuses on the precarious lives of five bird species (Albatross, Little Penguin, Indian Vulture, Whooping Crane and Hawaiian Crow), and the conditions (both material and ethical) under which each one is heading towards, or being saved from, extinction. Van Dooren's case studies of 'avian-entanglements' are fascinating, inspiring and also sad, symptomatic of the *animaladies*[1] we humans and non-humans currently face. Each chapter is motivated by a need to look squarely at the damage constituted by extinctions. The work presents overarching ethical questions about human complicity in that damage and questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of strategies of repair. Van Dooren is concerned that extinction is 'not a topic that generates a great deal of popular interest at the present moment' (5), despite the fact that it is bound to become a 'central, perhaps even definitional' theme of 'our time' (5). He relates this lack of interest to the failure to appreciate the connections between us (human and animal), a separation sustained by human exceptionalism, as explored by Val Plumwood. Along with Plumwood and Derrida, van Dooren insists that extinctions need to be actively mourned and understood, because 'learning to mourn extinctions may also be essential to our and many other species' long term survival' (143).

Flight Ways frames extinctions in material cultural terms by telling the stories of the birds and the human communities that destroy, care for, rely on, and mourn their predicament. Much of this storytelling occurs in what van Dooren calls the 'dull edge of extinction' where

'flight ways' are potentially being lost. These two concepts of the 'dull edge of extinction' and 'flight ways' are van Dooren's, and are useful devices to think more clearly about what is being lost and how. The 'dull edge of extinction' refers to the fact that extinctions are prolonged processes rather than monumental events. The 'dull edge' cannot be pinpointed, so extinctions involve processes 'of change and loss that occurs across multiple registers and in multiple forms both long before and well after this final death' (58). The 'final death' referred to here is the classic 'last of its kind', the *one* whose passing registers the moment of extinction of the *many*. For van Dooren, such an emphasis, monumentalised in the death of an individual, is the wrong way to look at extinction. Extinctions cannot be tied to individuals alone, nor to specific times and dates. An extinction of an individual has to be tied to *generations* before and generations *not* to come, as well as to the very idea of the 'generative'. The 'dull edge' of extinction is a phrase deployed in more detail in chapter two on Indian vultures (Genus *Gyps*), a bird 'closely associated with death … itself on the way to extinction' (47).

Vultures in India are vulnerable to the life-prolonging uses of diclofenac (pain killer and anti-inflammatory) in cattle, and in humans, on whose carcasses the vultures feed. Van Dooren discusses how vultures have, through their consumption of the dead, held an important role in keeping diseases such as anthrax at bay, and thus their extinction poses a whole series of threats to the human community that lives with them and indeed relies on them. Without the vultures feeding on corpses, anthrax will become more common. This is part of the 'dull edge of extinction', the ways in which the death of one species impacts upon the lives of others, creating new life and new deaths in their decline. This is where the second term 'flight ways' becomes important.

Van Dooren refers to species as 'flight ways' in order to argue that species are 'life forms with a form or way of life' (9), that are not located solely in the 'fleeting and fragile individual birds' but also in the 'vast evolutionary lineages stretched across millions of years' (22). The birds are understood as 'embodied intergenerational achievements' and individuals are not 'members' of a defined 'end point', but are '"participants" in an ongoing and evolving way of life' (27). Van Dooren's definition brings biological understandings of species as 'generations' into dialogue with a *cultural* understanding of 'forms of life': 'generations that do not just happen, but *must be achieved*' (27). So the loss of a generation is not just the loss of

'specimens', but also all those 'achievements' that maintain each generation and the *act of generation* itself. In relation to albatrosses, van Dooren describes these achievements as:

> months and years spent cementing pair bonds; the countless trips and thousands of miles flown by parents to provide for their chicks; the huge quantities of fish eggs, squid, and other foods that must be collected and carried back – this is the work that knots one generation to the next, that constitutes and preserves a species. What is tied together is not 'the past' or 'the future' as abstract temporal horizons, but real embodied generations – ancestors and descendants – in rich but imperfect relationships of inheritance, nourishment, and care. (29)

Van Dooren's view of species would not be unwelcome amongst the twenty seven concepts[2] of species explored by John Wilkins in *Species: A History of the Idea* (2009), including the logic of generation and 'achievement' that van Dooren stresses. In much the same way that, according to Judith Butler, gender is a precarious achievement, so too species generation and species 'identity' is precarious, particularly at the 'dull edge of extinction'. Butler's emphasis on identity as an 'achievement' is meant to get away from essentialist givens, to try and explain how these identities change and are subverted, and why they are subject to such violent enforcement and regulation. The anxiety that accompanies doing gender 'properly' finds resonance in the worry that animals in captivity do not do their species identity properly: *One is not born a Whooping Crane, one must become a Whooping Crane; but how to become a convincing Whooping Crane?* At the 'dull edge' of extinction, a whooping crane who prefers humans, or sandhill cranes, has in a sense 'failed'; is no longer part of the 'generative-ness' that marks his *species* value (and is therefore a different sort of 'loss'). Here we can see how the 'dull edge of extinction' can heighten the anxiety about what *it* is that is being conserved and/or mourned. It raises the question of the 'proper' in a way that helps to explain the violence of captive/forced breeding.

If species are 'flight ways' then those individual birds that van Dooren observes and writes about in each chapter are 'a single knot in an emergent lineage: a vital point of connection between generations.' The photograph of the individual albatrosses on page 20 and 24 are a 'single knot' in a flight way, at once bigger and also smaller than the 'individual' presented. This is slightly different from, for example, a photograph of a bird in a bird book to aid species recognition and identification. The photographs in *Flight Ways* are also there to aid recognition of the achievement of being alive *as an albatross, in her 'albatrossness'*. These 'single knots'

therefore bear a huge symbolic burden. Taken as 'single knots' in a flight way, they remind me of war photography where the de-individuated soldier on the front line of battle is made bigger (and yet also smaller, undifferentiated) by becoming emblematic of a broader human or national struggle against organised killing. What is lost is always more than 'just' or only the individual, as van Dooren explains:

> I am interested in how rethinking albatrosses as beings that emerge from and live and die within dense webs of overlapping temporalities and inheritances remakes our understanding of the immensity of what is lost in extinction, while drawing us into new and deeper responsibilities. (34)

These new and deeper responsibilities include the following elements: an awareness that humans (and our lineage) represent the greatest threat to the albatross; that the 'individual bird' is to be considered 'in tension with the life of their larger species'; that the work of the individuals to care for the next generation attests to their interest in survival; that what is lost in extinction is not only the current population but also its future manifestations. This, van Dooren argues, is what makes an ethical claim on us to 'hold open space for the continuity of this ancient and evolving form of life' (39).

Van Dooren is aware that the emphasis on 'dense webs', 'immensity', depth and 'overlapping temporalities' risks obscuring the 'daily struggles of individual birds' (33) because they involve such 'huge time frames'. The bigness of it all also risks pitting complexity up against comprehension, making things too complex, the scale too massive for understanding, empathy or action. The word 'proportion' is perhaps what I am getting at. There are moments when the proportion seems biblical, as in: 'And so we are now ourselves placed under the weight of a collective ethical claim made on us by *all* these generations, by all the living things that have populated this planet over the past many millions of years, as well as all those that might yet come' (43). I get disoriented being 'called to account by nothing less than the entirety of life on this planet, for all the ways in which, during our own brief lives, we help to shelter or destroy the entangled diversity of forms through which life makes itself at home in our world' (43). But perhaps that disorientation is the point: it highlights the difficulty in taking responsibility at a time when response-ability also becomes distributed as a sort of 'flight way',

which can also diminish (by infinite expansion) a sense of responsibility across human generations.

Van Dooren switches between scales and proportions throughout the book, with Chapter 4 being more closely attentive to the needs of individual birds, and where and when those needs are sacrificed for the 'greater' species good. Chapter 4: 'Breeding Cranes: The Violent-Care of Captive Life' highlights van Dooren's discomfort with thinking only of 'the species' because doing so enables the violence of conservation practices to be ignored. The chapter follows the operations of a captive breeding program for Whooping Cranes in Maryland, USA, where the carers breed and release whooping cranes into protected areas. The centre is 'dedicated to their individual flourishing and that of their species' and yet is a 'strange space of captivity' where humans dress as cranes (to avoid imprinting), and where 'hope' seems 'grounded in unavoidable and ongoing practices of violence' (92). This theatre that prolongs the 'dull edge of extinction' is something that many birds suffer through in the name of conservation of their species, the good of the one sacrificed for the intergenerational species life that conservation biologists focus on. The discussion of Lorenz and his responsibilities towards the birds he sought to have imprint on him (and other inanimate objects) is important here, van Dooren noting how the lives of individual birds were made vulnerable, sacrificed for the sake of scientific curiosity (105). Van Dooren usefully encapsulates the tension at this site as caught between 'the violence of conservation, with its various forms of sacrificial and captive life, and the violence of extinction' (116). Referring to Haraway and Chrulew (2011), van Dooren posits that the violence in the 'violent care' 'will not and cannot be erased or "justified away"', although it may also 'be necessary, indeed good' (Haraway 2008,72, qtd in Van Dooren 117). The Haraway quotation seems to argue that violence can be legitimate as long as it is engaged with affectively, that the animal dead is not merely sacrificed but also mourned. I'm not so sure that it would make much difference to those being killed if they were coldly sacrificed or warmly mourned, or if they were violated with warm regret or with cold indifference. The violence/care paradigm that marks these spaces (and this chapter) runs the risk of confusing effects with intentions; of prioritising human interests in *being affected* above the interests of animals in not being killed.

Chapter 3 highlights the ways that human activities, house building, wall building, gardening, pet owning, produce disastrous consequences for animal cohabitants. The chapter concerns a small, protected but threatened colony of Little Penguins who live on the crowded shoreline of Manly, Sydney Harbour, 'fatally tied to disappearing or lost places' (66). Van Dooren describes the site fidelity of Little Penguins, who return to breed at the same spot every year, even though the humans who live at their site continue to build their seawalls that make access impossible for the Little Penguins. What fascinates van Dooren is the ways in which the human communities present the penguins as the 'guests' of those who retain the privilege to determine who belongs and who is temporary (78). Van Dooren suggests that penguin fidelity to these burrows makes this shoreline a 'storied place' for Little Penguins, an 'inter-generationally gifted place' (83), full of stories and 'place making practices' which we humans need to become more sensitive to (85).

Van Dooren's work emphasises storytelling in a couple of senses. Firstly, the act of storytelling is one of attentiveness to the lives and traditions of others, in this case, avian others. This has long been an important method within animal studies and ecofeminism (see Cuomo and Gruen 1998), because the idea that *they have stories* complements the idea that *they have subjectivities* (see Deborah Slicer's discussion of this, 2014, 61). Towards the end of the book van Dooren calls on readers to 'learn a genuine appreciation for other forms of life, including the countless "animal subjects" (Noske 1989), with whom we share this planet, each with its own unique ways of inhabiting richly storied worlds' (147). Thus he links the subjectivity of animals to their capacity to make storied relationships to place and each other, and also to have those stories told. The emphasis on stories allows animal studies to wrestle back some discursive authority from the 'hard' sciences, whose way of speaking about animals is traditionally resistant to the sort of anecdotal, individual, empathetic, affected and imaginative play (or method) of the social sciences. Telling 'stories' of animals and telling animals' stories turns 'behaviour' and/or 'instinct' into culture, or, as van Dooren puts it, 'ways of life'. The Little Penguins' creation of a 'storied place' in the Manly foreshore is one example, and a particularly effective one because it references indigeneity and the injustice of being displaced, of being treated as a 'guest' by the invaders, and the importance of listening to alternative stories of belonging.

Stories are not the preserve of the wild and endangered only, but would also apply to the domesticated. In the case of livestock, their stories of place attachment would be quite different and might involve breaking free of places that 'story' them as 'meat', as occurs for instance in the story of *Babe*, or *Charlotte's Web*, and countless other imaginative and also factual stories of animal resistance and animal escape. Can these stories change the world of industrialised factory farming? This brings us to the other sense in which storytelling is invoked in the book, which is in the narrative structure and style of the book itself: 'I came to appreciate the ethical work that these stories may do in the simple act of making disappearing others thick on the page, exposing readers to their lives and deaths in a way that might give rise to genuine care and concern' (9); 'we live by stories, and so they are inevitably powerful contributors to the shaping of our shared world' (10). Van Dooren's emphasis on storytelling also highlights his skill in moving the reader between sites, from bird to biologist, from the past to the immediacy of locations/places. The narrative voice has to sustain these shifts in perspective and place, and it does: Van Dooren is an excellent and engaging writer, and the effectiveness of his prose means that he is able to do what he says storying should do: 'telling stories has consequences: one of which is that we will inevitably be drawn into new connections, and with them new accountabilities and obligations' (10). Such stories would, ideally, open up new *political* spaces for animals, as well as narrative ones.

There are two other 'new connections' going on in this book which I think also deserve comment. One connection is announced early on in the claim that the book is 'situated within ongoing discussions in two emerging fields of scholarship: animal studies and environmental humanities' (13). These two emergent fields are not necessarily at ease with one another, though they do have much in common, and I agree with van Dooren about the importance of 'deepening the dialogue between them' (13). There is much to be gained by bringing the two together, even if only because people are probably more motivated to care for the 'environment' than for animals: is this because we are more accustomed to seeing ourselves *in the environment* than seeing ourselves as *other animals*? Is it because concerns for 'the environment' can align more easily with human self-interest while concern for the rights of animals are sometimes taken as crazily bypassing human self-interest altogether?

In *Zoopolis* (2011), co-authors Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka note that there is much to be learnt from a dialogue between *animal rights* approaches and what they call ecological approaches. Their work reminds us that ecological approaches tend to reduce animals to one cog within a larger system. They observe that when a conflict between ecological 'systems' and individual animals arise, the 'ecological view' generally comes 'down on the side of favouring the protection, conservation, and/or restoration of ecosystems over saving the lives of individual animals of non-endangered species' (3). In their view, and I think Van Dooren would agree with them to a point[3] (see van Dooren 2011), a lot of violence against animals can be 'justified' (or un-mourned, as it were) in the name of ecological conservation. The vastness of that term 'environment' can serve to obscure the specific needs of animals; all pieces in a broader ecological state in which, as Van Dooren notes, a lot of 'trumping' of one interest over another goes unacknowledged and un-mourned.

It is true, I think, that animal studies takes an interest in individual animals more seriously than perhaps environmental philosophy/humanities does. Both environmental philosophy/humanities and animal studies approaches highlight the importance of the attempt to de-privilege human standpoints, by way of invoking response-ability and forms of empathy, much of which is actually inspired by thinking in terms of species (what is said about the 'group' of animals called this or that), and through direct engagements with individual animals (what they might also tell us, in different ways, about themselves). In this way, both are also characterised by an interest in the shapes and forms of cultural value: what is it, exactly, that makes us care about this and not that, her but not *her*, ours but not theirs, theirs but not ours, them but not these?

The tendency towards celebrating connectivity and continuum with other ecological beings is not as readily embraced by animal studies approaches which would emphasise the specific needs of animals and the differences (sentience, moral interests, subjectivities) between trees and tree kangaroos, to take one example. Animal studies approaches should also be stressing the fraught interrelationship of different, and sometimes competing, animal spheres: the wild, but also the domesticated, feral and 'pest'. Since the publication of Donaldson and Kymlicka's *Zoopolis*, the different animal spheres (the domestic, the 'wild', the liminal) and the different *relational duties* and dynamics they present us with, are now higher on the agenda. It is

not unheard of to attend an environmental humanities conference full of fabulous papers about the rare and endangered only to break for lunch and be presented with the factory farmed (the link between habitat loss and animal agriculture forgotten at lunchtime). Examining our relational duties towards different kinds of animals, in different contexts, is another way of prompting us to think more about what we mean when we use the term 'animal' – which one, which kind, where and how (see Lunney, 2014).

Flights Ways offers a way of thinking about the differences between animal studies and environmental humanities and it shows what can be done when the two fields are placed in dialogue. Perhaps the awkwardness of the dialogue between environmental humanities and animal studies approaches is indicated at some points by references to Haraway's work, especially early on, in key phrases that are so general that they seem to obscure rather than assist with understanding of the human/animal entanglements that the rest of the book explores. Phrases such as 'becoming together' and 'becoming with' (48) are now, I think, so overused that they seem to have lost political purchase – too often these phrases *brochure*[4] thinking: *we're all connected* (oooh!), rather than inviting us to think about the specific dimensions of that connection. I find that such phrases leave me waiting for more – and so? And then? Thankfully, van Dooren uses them sparingly and mostly attributes them to other authors (very wise!) and is also careful to add that 'the specificity and proximity of connections matter' (60). Overall, the book also demonstrates that 'becoming with' and 'becoming together' involve forms of violence. In a very interesting part of the book, van Dooren observes along with Barad: 'And so we are required to make a stand for some possible worlds and not others; we are required to begin to take responsibility for the ways in which we help to tie and retie our knotted multispecies worlds (Barad 2007, 353–96)'.

A term like 'multispecies' is also, I think, in danger of becoming another 'becoming with' sort of phrase, with potential to *not mean anything at all* if it is used to describe every space/place and condition of human animal connection. The term seems to have arrived late and somehow by-passed critiques made of its cousin, 'multiculturalism'. In the 1990s, Australian critics Ghassan Hage and Ien Ang both pointed out that 'multiculturalism' was a doubled-edged term. Its celebration of cultural diversity masked the privileges of whiteness, the privilege of those able to manage the diversity that they 'tolerated' (as long as it was useful to do so, not too

threatening, not too spicy). In *White Nation* (1998), Ghassan Hage writes that if 'the nationalist practices of exclusion emphasise a capacity to remove the other from national space, the nationalist practices of tolerance emphasise a capacity to position them in specific places so that they can be valued and tolerated' (94–95). We might think of this in animal terms too: an emphasis on the 'multispecies' might be an exercise in privileged admission of animality/animals, but only in specific ways that don't displace human privilege *too much*. The term 'multispecies' is mostly used in a way that hopes to displace human exceptionalism, but for me, questions remain about the way that the term (like multiculturalism) can be used as if announcing a 'job done' – and in doing so presents an impossibly flattened out political terrain. An industrial factory farm is a multispecies community, as is the Royal Botanic Gardens, National Parks, a zoo, a traffic island in Petersham, but there are wildly different connections going on in them. The wild and liminal animals for instance, may not wish to celebrate those connections with humans that involve habitat loss, roads, captive breeding programs and limited release programs, as van Dooren's work shows. The concept could do with a bit of a shake up along the lines of answering the question of *who*, exactly, celebrates, manages, and fails to live up to and in, for that matter – the *connectedness* of our *relationality* in these times of *entanglement and becoming*!? A community may be 'multispecies' without ever becoming a *zoopolis*, for instance. Thankfully, van Dooren again uses the term 'multispecies' sparingly and usually only in contexts where it refers to specific parties, where the differences are likely to act as restraint on celebratory blurriness. *Flight Ways* puts the word to work and as such, 'multispecies' comes out the other end with more humility before the complexity it sometimes appear to own.

The book ends with a reflection on the act of mourning as a shared skill: 'perhaps the ability to live in a way that references and interacts with the dead is not uniquely human as such, but rather is a way of life that we are increasingly denying to a host of other animals' (133). The final chapter concerns the Hawaiian Crow, extinct in the wild but with some individuals in a captive breeding program. Van Dooren notes that the crows are considered highly intelligent and lead complex social and emotional lives, such that they can, like humans, elephants, foxes and dogs, 'know death' and mourn the absence of their familiars. As such, Van Dooren thinks about death as something which 'entangles us in multispecies worlds' (133), because we all have to 'relearn' and 'translate' a 'changed reality' in the event of death (139). This chapter is itself

presented as an 'act of mourning' because 'mourning undoes any pretense towards [human] exceptionalism, instead drawing us into an awareness of the multispecies continuities and connectivities that make life possible for everyone' (126). For me, this is a particularly interesting and significant argument. But whether mourning can deliver the urgent social change the book asks for remains a question, because while mourning can clearly provoke sympathy (feeling bad for someone's suffering) and also, more importantly, empathy (feeling *with* someone's suffering), neither of these lead *necessarily* to the sorts of social change that van Dooren's work calls for. Lori Gruen's concept of 'entangled empathy' is a useful way of thinking about the limitations associated with the current emphasis on empathy, which arguably underlies van Dooren's vision of what mourning can do. Gruen argues that empathy always needs adding to, that what is required is that there be 'room to correct empathetic responses' which may, after all, be ignored, or remain human–centred projections. Gruen argues that '*entangled* empathy requires gaining wisdom and perspective and, importantly, motivates the empathizer to *act* ethically' (emphasis added). In other words, as van Dooren is aware, an awful lot of action has occurred, and is still necessary, even before the act of mourning becomes vital.

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Notes

[1] I use this term 'animaladies' to gesture at a state of profound dis-ease in the face of destructive human/animal relationships but with the view that such dis-orders can provoke positive transformations.

[2] Species remains a useful term for me (despite its 27 variations) mostly because it makes it possible to use the term 'speciesism'. Todorov once said the same thing about 'race' – itself a highly contentious 'biological' term whose usefulness resides ultimately in the ability to name 'racism'.

[3] *Flight Ways* does not discuss the possibility of an animal rights approach to extinctions, though it asks a series of questions about sacrifice, animal interests and violence, these are situated within the landscape of environmental ethics/histories, rather than the field of animal studies.

[4] Forgive my use of 'brochure' as a verb. I know it's wrong, but somehow it works here…