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Killableⁱ

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Let me begin with two brief anecdotes. In a first year Biology lab I had to dissect a frog. I applied my scalpel as best I could before coming to a still beating heart. Despite being told the frog could feel no pain I was horrified. The laboratory space, the demonstrator, the scalpel, the lab coat, and the science rendered the frog killable. For the university, the discipline, the staff and students, it was unexceptional. On a different occasion, when I was much younger, my family took me fishing and I hooked a fish. When I pulled it up the fish bled from the mouth as it flung itself around the small dinghy, fighting for life. I was assured this was okay, fish can't feel pain, that there was nothing wrong with killing fish. The boat, rods, lines, hooks, sinkers, bait, beliefs and customs made the fish killable. But not the frogs in the lake. Only some frogs are killable.

Humans too, are generally not killable. I can be killed but I am not killable. If you met me you would not describe me as killable, nor me you. My death will come as a shock, despite it being the only thing I can really depend upon. It will be shocking because my likely killer, a car, an illness, or (admittedly much less likely) one of the venomous spiders that hide in holes in my backyard, will not render me killable before it kills me. One moment I will be alive and then I will not. As a privileged white male it is unlikely I will ever be made killable, not unless I choose to. I could enlist in the army and enter a conflict zone. Or if I become gravely ill I could apply to be made legally killable. I am fortunate. Many are not. Most countries have in the past, and many in the present, make some people, mostly from poor and mostly minority backgrounds, killable when they are convicted of crimes perpetrated in social and legal systems that have been prejudiced against them from birth. They become killable humans, just as all countries make non-humans killable for the crime of being non-human.

Donna Haraway argues that the moral dictum 'thou shalt not kill' should be replaced by "thou shalt not make killable."¹ The original is impractical – all humans kill, directly or indirectly, as do many non-human animals, including frogs and fish, and some plants. Everything is killed, or as Val Plumwood² acknowledged, we are all prey to something, from crocodiles to viruses, bacteria, parasites and many other beings that feed on the multispecies collectives that comprise bodies. To situate human life in ecological terms is to recognize and respect killing, and work through the ethical and emotional trouble it brings. To not recognize this is to reify human-nature dualisms, to reinforce human exceptionalism and to suggest we are something other than ecological beings.³

Only humans though, and only some humans, make things killable. To make something killable is a strategy to resolve the trouble of killing – the ethical quagmires and visceral

¹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

² Plumwood, "Meeting the Predator."

³ Plumwood, "Animals and Ecology."

reactions many people experience when faced with killing. To make a thing killable legitimates killing, while also somehow hiding it, detaching killers from the immediate embodied violence of their actions. Killing is rationalized and professionalized while the killed are objectified and de-individualized. Making things killable depoliticizes killing and in doing so enables killing to be massified. Humans today, and particularly wealthy humans, are killing more killable things than at any other time in history.

Take chickens. Sixty-five billion chickens are killed every year – over a billion a week⁴. Most experience short wretched lives in the shadow places of society – hidden away in increasingly inaccessible chicken factories and slaughterhouses. They are made killable by labelling them livestock, a designation meaning not-quite-animal and not-quite-human, and afforded the moral, emotional and legal considerations of neither.⁵ Instead they are commodities - literally *live stock* whose bodies are steered from pre-conception to post-death according to logics of capital accumulation. Life and death is professionalized, mechanized, massified, automated, mundane, uncontroversial. They have become nothing more than ‘living meat’⁶ being killed at such volumes that chicken bones will be identifiable in the geological record of the earth and act as a key marker of the so-called Anthropocene – the human-induced geological epoch the planet has recently entered.⁷ This is described as a scientific curiosity rather than as evidence that too many things are being made killable, that humans are engaging in systematic violence at unimaginable scales.

Or think animals and plants labelled pests, weeds, exotics or invasives. Living out of their imagined place they are made killable by science and law, premised on questionable concepts like ecological harmony or balance; or colonial logics that legislate what does or doesn’t belong; or the threat they pose to agricultural economies. As Tim Morton⁸ observes, outsiders are treated as “accidents” threatening the flourishing of competing ecologies, where Ginn and colleagues argue “flourishing involves many species knotted together ... working with and against other multispecies assemblies [making] some assemblies ‘the enemy’ and some not.”⁹ Enemies are shot, trapped, weeded, poisoned, infected in ever increasing numbers – as if they can simply be “scraped off”¹⁰ more “pure” landscapes.¹¹ Thom van Dooren argues pests have become too killable, it is too readily accepted, as “though any dead fox is a good thing.”¹²

It doesn’t have to be this way. Many Indigenous ways of being in the world do not make things killable prior to being killed. Instead acknowledging and taking responsibility for killing is core to ethical relationships. In Deborah Bird Rose’s powerful critique of mass donkey culls she describes how Aboriginal Australians oppose the practice as they value all animals and plants as part of Country, as Countrymen, irrespective of their ancestry¹³. This does not mean donkeys are not killed, but they are selectively killed with respect and with consideration of Country. Outsiders are also insiders; they are entangled in multispecies webs that are not going away. Non-Indigenous strategies to make them killable deflects the more difficult work of how to become with these diverse others as ‘culling’ and ‘controlling’

⁴ Bennet et al., “The Broiler Chicken.”

⁵ Narayanan, “Where are the Animals in Sustainable Development?”

⁶ Plumwood, “Animals and Ecology.”

⁷ Bennet et al., “The Broiler Chicken.”

⁸ Morton, *Dark Ecology*.

⁹ Ginn et al., “Flourishing with Awkward creatures,” 115.

¹⁰ van Dooren, “Invasive Species in Penguin Worlds,” 290.

¹¹ Raffles, “Against Purity.”

¹² van Dooren, “Invasive Species in Penguin Worlds,” 290.

¹³ Rose, “Judas work.”

becomes more professionalized, mechanized, routinized and expansive, but no closer to realizing unrealizable purity.

To make killable is to legitimize killing. Critters labelled as such eek out existences in the shadows of society, in the casual violence of livestock industries and laboratories, or carefully, in the dark, hiding in cities, farms, bush and waterways, away from killing eyes. And yet the ongoing liveliness of living things refutes their labelling. They are recalcitrant: they resist, fight, scream, suffer, hide, evade, eat, photosynthesize, love, care, procreate and reproduce. Learning to be affected by this liveliness and all the emotions, from wonder to horror, it elicits inside us is a first step in moving from killable societies in which humans, and only some humans, matter, to multispecies societies based on kinship and care. This is as much about unlearning as it is about learning, to listen and engage with the world with the openness of childhood, before the sado-dispassionate modes of being,¹⁴ encouraged by biology labs and fishing trips, repress inherent multi-species solidarities and emotions. Humans, too, are recalcitrant. As earthly beings, humans instinctively know, despite efforts to unknow, that chickens, foxes, fish, and frogs, as well as humans on death row, are, like you and me, much more than killable.

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¹⁴ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 22.

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ⁱ McGregor, Andrew. "Killable." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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