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eXtinctionⁱ

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Locating shadow species in shadow places

In the final pages of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), lawyer-turned-explorer Adam Ewing remarks:

“In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction.”¹

Linking human self-interest with our own extinction is far from a novel idea. Writers have theorised the same through dystopian hypotheticals and apocalyptic imaginaries, and many have long followed the assumption that the human species, as we know it today, has an expiration date, and our own egocentrism is often cited as the primary cause. Of course, in the era of anthropogenic climate change it is not solely the human species that feels the consequences of this selfishness. In Australia, there are those other animals, those furry, wide-eyed and nationally iconic ones, that are affected as well: those species perhaps not dissimilar to our domestic pets, or to ourselves. But there are also shadow species facing a similar fate, those nonhumans that aren't plastered across tourism ads, that aren't on the colonisers' coat of arms. These species don't inhabit those aesthetically pleasing and culturally significant places that are part of our nation's identity. Selfishness is also key here, for it is an arguably selfish endeavour to assist only those species on which human – in particular, settler-coloniser – identities rely.

Taking stock of species extinction also means taking stock of shadow place extinction. As Val Plumwood states, “other places' includes other human places, but also other species' places.”² This means that the way we talk about species extinction matters. In 1993, Robert Michael Pyle coined the term “the extinction of experience”, linking declining opportunities for people, especially children, to directly interact with the natural world with the increasing inability to form deep emotional connections with it.³ This extinction of experience, he argued, is tied directly to the actual extinction of species – the less biodiversity we encounter in urban areas, the less opportunities there are for people to understand and interact with the more-than-human world. But what kind of experiences was Pyle pining for? Can the experiences some people have in shadow places – many of which may be devoid of biodiversity in its most attractive sense – result in a more positive understanding of nature and the nonhuman? There is much more to be said about how we prevent these shadow places and the shadow species that inhabit them from becoming extinct. Extending human modes of self-identity and personal experience to include shadow species may be the

¹ Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 528.

² Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 147

³ Pyle, *The Thunder Tree*.

solution. This means understanding the multiplicity of extinction. Comprehending this multiplicity involves thinking about species extinction as a long, drawn-out process, one that is often preventable and predicated by a lack of public awareness.

Extinctions are rarely a sudden, uncontrollable event, but are rather defined by declines. This may be the decline of the species in question, but also the decline of its resources, its habitat, its sense of surrounding place. Reflecting on the work of conservation scientist John Woinarski, ecologist Graham R. Fulton describes the relationship between decline and extinction: “When a species is in decline the end point will, sooner or later, be extinction.”⁴ These declines are something that scientists within ecology and conservation are usually aware of, but whether these declines are acted on is dependent on financial allocation and public (and therefore political) perception. Like those special places of dwelling which Plumwood describes as “a One True Place” – often settler-colonial flagship places that are “elevated above all others”⁵ – there are those special species, those flagship species, whose endangerment and extinction mean far more to the national imaginary than our shadow species. In Australia, the Koala and the extinct Thylacine spring to mind, both of which play significant roles in larger national identities invested in natural heritage.

The Koala in particular has played a notable role in Australia’s devastating 2019/2020 bushfire disaster, becoming the mascot for bushfire relief for both humans and nonhuman animals. While the Koala is an important symbol, it is also a convenient one. It is truly frightening to consider the impact to our shadow species (a huge variety of invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, fishes, birds, mammals and plants), whose populations have dwindled in the wake of bushfire, the tragedy of which has been incidentally masked by the plight of the much-loved Koala. Ecologist Chris Dickman estimated in January 2020 that more than one billion animals had been killed in the bushfires, including mammals, birds and reptiles, but not amphibians and invertebrates.⁶ Many of these animals – both those counted and those not – may be considered shadow species, largely flying under the radar of public perception due to the emphasis on the internationally iconic Koala. Affected species whose habitats had already been decimated due to decades of land-clearing for settler-colonial agriculture and extractivism occupy this shadow niche particularly prominently.

External to the bushfires is the Bramble Cay Melomys, a native Australian rodent that was recently classified as the first mammal species to become extinct due to anthropogenic climate change – seawater inundation is believed to have caused significant habitat loss on this animal’s small island home, or cay.⁷ Fulton believes that this rodent’s extinction was potentially avoidable had it been considered akin to those flagship species whose endangerment receives attention from the popular press. Alas, the Bramble Cay Melomys was “allowed to become extinct” because it was not “cute and cuddly” and not a flagship species.⁸ It is (was) one of Australia’s shadow species, inhabiting a tiny, forgotten cay in the midst of coral reef; a place that many people might find unfamiliar and uninspiring – a shadow place.

However, it is not just the species inhabiting shadow places that we must pay attention to, but also those that function as shadows within our One True Places – the plants, fungi, invertebrates and other nonhumans that make both shadow and One True Places viable.

⁴ Fulton, “The Bramble Cay Melomys,” 2.

⁵ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 144.

⁶ The University of Sydney, “More than One Billion Animals.”

⁷ Waller et al., “The Bramble Cay Melomys”, 16.

⁸ Fulton, “The Bramble Cay Melomys,” 2.

People might appreciate the natural places with which they most identify, but still fail to properly value the shadow species that inhabit them. The native species of Australia's High Country are one example of this. The shadow status of the native animals and plants found in these areas is intensified by the cultural emphasis placed on the Brumby: an introduced wild horse whose celebrated symbology within Australian settler-colonial culture has for years been prioritised over the survival of native species who are just as culturally significant.⁹

With these shadow species in mind, how do we begin to tackle their extinction, especially if the identities of, in this case, Australian settler-colonisers precludes them? Arne Naess's concept of ecological self may not be a silver bullet, but it provides a means by which some might more deeply grasp the devastating impact of the extinction crisis on the human and nonhuman alike. When species are lost or, sometimes, wilfully misplaced, what do we misplace within ourselves as a result? How is human identity affected? As Thom van Dooren argues, understanding stories about extinction and the species at risk is an important part of understanding "what is lost when a species, an evolutionary lineage, a way of life, passes from the world."¹⁰ The positions of conservationists and climate activists may be strengthened if, as Naess contends, more of us recognise that "the destruction of Nature... threatens us in our innermost self."¹¹

One issue with Naess's concept, though, and the reason that I include it here, is that it neglects the places that are often not aligned with self. While we might spend time enhancing our self-identity through a deeper understanding of those places close to what Plumwood describes as our "ideals of dwelling,"¹² what of those places that don't assist in this endeavour, at least not in an obvious sense? What happens to the shadow places and shadow species when we begin to invoke this idea of the ecological self? In what might be considered a response to this, Plumwood explores the role of a critical bioregionalism in making "shadow or denied places"¹³ more visible, asking how people might direct their "honouring of place"¹⁴ towards something more than that special place with which they identify. While bioregionalism generally seeks to "make our ecological relationships more accountable," Plumwood asserts that in the West a more critical approach is needed whereby economic production no longer "take[s] the form of a place-degrading process, but requires a philosophy and economy of mutual recognition."¹⁵ In the context of shadow species, this would mean taking note of those species that, as Plumwood says about shadow places, "produce or are affected by the commodities you consume."¹⁶ Those animals and plants, both native and non-native, that are harmed by Australia's settler-colonial farming practices are, for example, just some of these shadow species that consumers "don't know about, don't want to know about."¹⁷ Plumwood's critical bioregionalism and the lessons she draws from Indigenous examples of place relationships would allow for new "forms of life and production where the land of the economy... and the land of attachment, including care and responsibility, are one and the same."¹⁸ Using this notion, people would be made accountable

⁹ For a summary of Australian attitudes toward the Brumby, see Nimmo and Miller, "Ecological and Human Dimensions," 411.

¹⁰ van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 4.

¹¹ Naess, "Self-Realization," 232.

¹² Plumwood, "Shadow Places," 139.

¹³ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 146

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 146-147.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 148.

for both their “One True Place” with which they most identify *and* the shadow places, and their shadow species, with which they are (often unknowably) connected to.

Bringing together Naess’s ecological self and Plumwood’s critical bioregionalism may be a step forward here, allowing for an honouring of place, species, endangerment and extinction that considers how people identify with our flagship places and species, whilst also accounting for the places and species that are difficult to identify with. In the Anthropocene, extinction is a part of life, but applying this collaborative model to shadow species in particular may provide a more nuanced understanding of how this extinction impacts not just the nonhuman, but the human as well.

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ⁱ Fetherston, Rachel. "Extinction." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

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

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