



Care

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

Thom van Dooren

Environmental Humanities, University of New South Wales, Australia

I have often felt over the past seven years or so like I am on an extended journey along the edge of extinction. I have spent time sitting among albatrosses engaged in courtship and nesting; I have dressed up like a whooping crane to interact with young birds learning a lost migratory route; I have helped to provide enrichment for captive Hawaiian crows, hiding dead mice inside green rubber balls in their aviaries to challenge and stimulate them (figure 1).¹ All of these birds are members, more accurately *participants*, of species that are in decline or in serious trouble.² Spending time in these spaces has prompted me to think about ethics through concepts like witness, hope and inheritance (much of this work is a collaboration with Deborah Bird Rose). Through these experiences—and an ongoing engagement with, in particular, the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Donna Haraway—I have also begun to appreciate an important role for *care*, in all of its ambiguity and complexity. What does it mean to care for others at the edge of extinction? What forms might careful scholarship take at this time?

In Maria Puig's recent work, care emerges as a particularly profound engagement with the world, simultaneously "a vital affective state, an ethical obligation and a practical labour."³ Affective, ethical and practical; all of these facets matter. As an *affective* state, caring is an embodied phenomenon, the product of intellectual and emotional competencies: to care is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way. As an *ethical* obligation, to care is to become subject to another, to recognise an obligation to look after another. Finally, as a *practical* labour, caring requires more from us than abstract well wishing, it requires that we get involved in some concrete way, that we *do*

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¹ Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

² The term 'participants' is an effort to capture the dynamic, ongoing, nature of species. 'Membership' of a species seems too static, as though there is somehow a 'species' entity, essence, beyond the individuals that comprise it. See van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 27.

³ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes without Its World': Thinking with Care," *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 2 (2012): 197; "Ethical Doings in Naturecultures," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 13, no. 2 (2010).

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something (wherever possible) to take care of another. In short, in Puig's work, care is an entry point into a grounded form of embodied and practical ethics.



Figure 1 *Enrichment: A Hawaiian Crow (Corvus hawaiiensis), working to retrieve a dead mouse from a plastic ball. Photograph by the author.*

But Puig is also intensely mindful that caring is a complex and compromised practice. Time and again I have witnessed how care for some individuals and species translates into suffering and death for others, the 'violent-care' of conservation: predators and competitors are culled, expendable animals provide food or enrichment for the endangered, the list goes on.⁴ Beyond conservation worlds, caring is often similarly fraught. In short, care is grounded in all of the "inescapable troubles of interdependent existences," and can offer no guarantee of a "smooth harmonious world."⁵

What emerges from this complexity is the necessity that care involve an ongoing critical engagement with the terms of its own production and practice. As Donna Haraway notes, "caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning."⁶ The kind of curiosity that Haraway has in mind here is definitively expansive, perhaps even explosive, rippling out into the world. It is this kind of curiosity that prompts her to ask: "Whom and what do I touch when I touch

⁴ Thom van Dooren, "A Day with Crows: Rarity, Nativity and the Violent-Care of Conservation," in *Defining the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Sverker Sörlin, Steven Hartman, and Anna Storm (in process); van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; Deborah Bird Rose, "Death and Grief in a World of Kin," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

⁵ Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes without Its World': Thinking with Care," 197-9.

⁶ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 36.

my dog? How is 'becoming with' a practice of becoming worldly?"⁷ In Haraway's hands, the simple act of touching a dog—"touch" she reminds us "does not make one small; it peppers its partners with attachment sites for world making"⁸—draws us out into complex interwoven histories of co-evolution and broader patterns of co-becoming, of ranching and the emergence of agriculture, of animal testing, contemporary pet keeping and much more.⁹

Together, Puig and Haraway offer us the potential to understand care itself as a vital practice of *critique*. Care-full curiosity opens up an appreciation of historical contingency: that things might have been and so might yet still be, otherwise. This is critique in the sense that Foucault described: a kind of genealogical exploration of contingency, an "historical ontology of the present,"¹⁰ that refuses to take for granted assumed categories and frameworks and in so doing opens up new possibilities.¹¹

But in situating these kinds of critical interventions within a larger practice of care—which is something that both Haraway and Puig are already doing in their work—our critique is grounded in a new way in the *specificity* of real bodies and worlds in ongoing *relationship*.¹² Here, the obligation to 'know more' emerges as a demand for a kind of deep contextual and critical knowledge about the object of our care, a knowledge that simultaneously places us at stake in the world and demands that we be held accountable: what kinds of emotional, political and epistemic, frames orient our caring acts? What counts as care and why? How else might care be imagined and practiced?¹³ In short, *what* am I really caring for, *why*, and at *what cost* to whom?¹⁴

Understood in this way, care is a vital concept for an engaged environmental humanities. Much more needs to be done to articulate what different kinds of careful scholarship might look like in different contexts. Perhaps the first step is to begin to explicitly re-imagine our critical work as itself an act of care. Haraway has stated of her own work: "I will critically analyze ... only that which I love."¹⁵ Perhaps though, love and care *require* these acts of curious critique. Perhaps we *must* critique what we love. This would be a kind of affectively and ethically engaged scholarship; one that also works to position our writing, speaking and teaching—however modest their impacts—as *practical* acts of care that can draw

⁷ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); *When Species Meet*.

¹⁰ Paul Patton, "After Critique: Experimentation, Creation, Construction," in *Challenging (the) Humanities, Melbourne*, ed. Tony Bennett (Melbourne: Australian Academy of the Humanities in association with Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), 151.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997).

¹² Puig de la Bellacasa, "'Nothing Comes without Its World'."

¹³ Annemarie Mol, *The Logic of Care: Health and the Problem of Patient Choice* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁴ van Dooren, "A Day with Crows: Rarity, Nativity and the Violent-Care of Conservation." Foucault's notion of critique arguably also has a strong normative dimension, centred on the cultivation of a virtuous life. See Judith Butler, "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. D. Ingram (London: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.Femaleman©_Meets_Oncomouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 151.

others into a sense of curiosity and concern for our changing world.¹⁶ In this way, we are also called to re-imagine what care might yet become: how might we learn to *better* care for disappearing species, from re-working the daily practices of captive breeding¹⁷ to rethinking the broader frameworks of value that render unproblematic and commonsensical current approaches to 'killing for conservation.'¹⁸

In short, the question is how placing care at the centre of our critical work might remake ourselves, our practices and our world: what might it mean to be inquisitive about, at stake in and accountable for, the worlds that ground our care and those that are brought about by it; to engage in a scholarship that embraces the fact that caring is always a practice of worlding?

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¹⁶ Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren, "Lively Ethography: Storying Animist Worlds," (in process).

¹⁷ van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; "Authentic Crows: Identity, Captivity and Emergent Forms of Life," *Theory, Culture and Society* (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Thom van Dooren, "Invasive Species in Penguin Worlds: An Ethical Taxonomy of Killing for Conservation," *Conservation and Society* 9, no. 4 (2011); "A Day with Crows."