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Book Review

Susan McHugh, *Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories Against Genocide and Extinction* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2019), 240pp., $32.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9780271083704.

It is fair to say that the recent 'relational turn' in Animal Studies has been a mixed blessing. While relationality has chipped away at human exceptionalism in favour of a flatter ontology that rethinks beings as interdependent and enmeshed, the mesmeric pull of multispecies interfaces has tended to obscure the violence that still permeates these all-but-equal relationships. Towards the end of *Love in a Time of Slaughters*, Susan McHugh quotes Indigenous scholar Daniel Heath Justice, who argues that '"it's only shallow understanding that assumes all relations with the other-than-human are necessarily benevolent"' (p. 188). Throughout, McHugh's book returns to Justice's point that 'relationality is always vexed if it is genuine' (p. 188). But the book's titular slaughters are ones that threaten to destroy relationality altogether: settler colonialism's twin assaults of genocide and ecocide that link the fates of indigenous people, animals, and the environments in which both live.

Love in a Time of Slaughters confronts the forces of anthropogenic destruction that lay waste to indigenous and nonhuman life (and are increasingly eroding it in the so-called global North). At stake is not the vulnerability that humans and nonhumans universally share, but the historically specific fragilities induced by colonialism. Each of the narratives discussed explores 'how genocides of tribal peoples connect with decimations of native species… to pave the way for settler-colonial states' (p. 23), and how, in turn, these sites of eradication generate narratives that resist such violences. McHugh's point is not simply that human and nonhuman lives are jointly impacted by the advent of Eurowestern expansion, but that Animal Studies (or, as is McHugh's preference, Human-Animal studies) which since its inception has been heavily tilted towards the Western critical canon, is not always on the side of the colonizer. In this respect, McHugh mounts a staunch defence of the discipline to 'refute claims that human-animal studies is limited from the outset by racist, speciesist, neocolonialist, or environmentally shortsighted prejudices' (p. 16).

Another aspect of the book is its commitment to fiction as 'a tool of intervention' (p. 90). Narrative agility, the ability to shift perspective, manoeuvre between the living and the dead, render the specificities of place and time while also transcending them makes narrative an ingenious forger (in the double sense of the word) of diverse forms of kinship. McHugh's attention to narrative technique and representational tactics is inseparable from her conviction that stories matter, even and perhaps all the more so in this deathly age. The book's linking of storyworlds and indigenous lifeways recasts literature as a collective endeavour, 'the growing awareness of the power of storytelling to not just relate but also instill a community's values, shaping perspectives on history' (p. 187).

At its broadest, however, this is a study against purism that scopes out the different constellations 'between living and dead, across species, and other states of being' (p. 191) that emerge under the conditions of endangerment. Informed by Anglo-European relational theory (Donna Haraway, Vinciane Despret, Rosi Braidotti, as well as Gilles Deleuze), it is indigenous scholarship (including Kim TallBear, Harry Garuba, Vine Deloria Jr.) that completes the book's relational model. Indigenous metaphysics and animist materialism do not just uphold relationality as a fundamental structure but attend to the lived relations among people, animals, and the supernatural. If the book targets what McHugh implies is an ill-conceived purism on the part of animal abolitionism, it also acts as a corrective to new materialist theorizing unmoored from worldly relations.

Chapter 1 introduces the trope of angry animal gods as witnesses to (and victims of) colonial devastation. In Hayao Miyazaki's celebrated animation *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and Linda Hogan's novel *Power* (1998), animal gods provide a different perspective on human history. As Hogan puts it, in the eyes of the animal gods '"humans have broken their covenant with the animals, their original word, their own sacred law"' (Hogan qtd. in McHugh p. 37). The betrayal, says McHugh, 'dooms everyone' (p. 37). In the second chapter, fictional taxidermy functions as a mediator between the past and the present and between species. For McHugh, fictional taxidermy is 'a site of convergence for multiple lives and deaths and of longing for the kinds of "visceral knowledge" that only comes through contact with animals' (p. 49). Just as animal gods are not simply reifications of animal absence but point to the real destruction of biological and cultural habitats, so fictional taxidermy is not simply dead matter but shows 'how lifeless, butchered, and metamorphosing bodies anchor life in death' (p. 26).

Robert Barclay's novel *Meḷaḷ* (2002) and Hogan's *People of the Whale* (2008), discussed in Chapter 3, take place in a post-colonial, post-nuclear, post-traumatic world with no easy reclamation of traditional lifeways. Following botched attempts at traditional hunts, Hogan and Barclay's characters realise that 'the same forces endangering their own cultures threaten members of other species where together they once flourished' (pp. 77–78). In keeping with McHugh's insistence on complex, not-always-benign interspecies relations, these novels do not advance a blanket opposition to hunting but practice a thinking together of 'hunters, hunted, and other creatures as native to particular shores' (p. 78). Not accidentally, such thinking is facilitated by dead relatives whose 'flickering perspectives' inform and guide the living (p. 72).

Chapter 4 explores the 'cross-species codependence in extremity' between the Saharan Tuareg tribespeople, their camels and other desert animals in the novels of Ibrahim al-Koni (p. 108). The chapter mobilizes an 'Indigenous desert metaphysics' that sustains local people even as they and their animals are decimated by colonial violence (p. 98). Here, again, love endures in the midst of slaughter: '[e]ven as they spell out many horrific ways to die, these stories also explain how the lives of desert dwellers persist, perhaps most surprisingly, with love shared across species lines' (p. 108). For McHugh, desert metaphysics redefines death itself against the management of life (biopolitics) and politics of death (thanatopolitics). Al-Koni subverts the very premise of western rationalism by articulating a 'competing approach to death as nonexistence, a generative sense of the extremities of desert space that is profoundly disruptive to the settler-colonialist mind-set' (p. 109). This echoes the book as a whole, in which the human and nonhuman dead intervene as resistance and love.

Genocide and ecocide overlap once more in Chapter 5 on the 'Mountie Sled Dog Massacre'. Between 1950 and 1970, the Canadian state carried out a violent campaign against the semi-nomadic Inuit tribes and their indigenous sled dogs on whom they depended for survival. Like the Tuareg, the Inuits and their dogs formed 'an irreducible team', so that the destruction of one entailed the destruction of the other (p. 132). Decades later, the indigenous-run Qikiqtani Truth Commission (QTC) investigated the killings, collecting testimonies from Inuits who witnessed the killings first hand. The killings and the QTC are the subject of the 2010 Inuit documentary *Qimmit: A Clash of Two Truths* (2010). The commission and the film become sites 'of endangered knowledges and cultural resurgence' (p. 132).

Chapter 6 asks what can be done with the 'dead metaphor' of 'the birds and the bees' (p. 156). No longer a cheeky euphemism, the birds and the bees have become 'a genteelism for extinction' (p. 156). By revitalizing the metaphor beyond sex and death McHugh shows pollinators as exemplars of collective living that can teach us to become 'proactively creative in engagements with the sentiences of others' (p. 158). The repurposed trope of the birds and the bees as something other to, or beyond, the sex acts of humans signals a different 'concern the management of life as a more-than-human set of responses and responsibilities' (p. 158). Here, a specifically queer communitarian ethics becomes more explicit, completing the book's articulations of resistance to settler colonialism.

In the Conclusion, McHugh movingly links the loss of her parents, her dog, and her experience with cancer to the life-affirming telling of stories. The strength of stories is also their weakness: their tentativeness, their ordinariness. It is significant that the book ends with the death of Sabine, a real dog, not a metaphor, who, as a 'storied' being, acts as a conduit between the living and the dead.

For me, the book's most original contribution is its triangulation of humans, animals, and gods. Although McHugh's interest is not religious per se, her insistence on indigenous metaphysics that subverts western dualism and rationalism is refreshing and important. Against forms of facile spirituality, McHugh's indigenous epistemologies assert that the physical realm calls for reverence because it is always already in relation with the divine, '[s]ustaining a sense of continuity beyond the ordinary limits of life' (p. 72). Resisting the kind of transcendentalism that eschews 'the immanence of shared human and animal lives', animist materialism offers an expansive, reparative understanding of history (p. 104). I take all this to mean that the possibility of devising ways of living and flourishing that resist the politics of endless extraction relies on a sense of the divine (in nature) as a mitigating, mediating force. Since utilitarianism and humanism have arguably failed to curtail or even properly account for the biological and cultural ravages of colonialism, revivifying a sense of the sacred as inextricably present in material relations emerges as a surprisingly *practical* option in the struggle to preserve life. It is in this sense that indigenous epistemologies can be a bulwark against the death cults of colonialism and extractivism.

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