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Ursula K. Heise, *IMAGINING EXTINCTION: THE CULTURAL MEANINGS OF ENDANGERED SPECIES*, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Imagining Extinction is the fourth monograph by Ursula K. Heise, the literary and cultural critic working in the fields of ecocriticism and environmental humanities, who is perhaps best known for her concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, developed in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008). In *Imagining Extinction* Heise argues that “biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science.”² The thesis that (conservation) science, or more precisely, its values and assumptions, are political and cultural is both thought-provoking and yet not entirely unsuspected to a humanities scholar well versed in the idea of discourse/language/representation being a productive agent of societal realities. If natural scientists needed some convincing though, Heise successfully delivers it in a clear, stylistically pleasurable, well-researched, erudite, and at times humorous writing.

The book proceeds in two parts. The first one, consisting of three chapters, presents close readings of specific cultural engagements with biodiversity/endangered species, including literary texts and cultural artefacts, biodiversity databases, and legal documents. Here, a cultural interpretation of the underlying assumptions, blind spots and epistemological effects of the natural sciences and legal praxis is given, with an in-depth analysis of the inscribed environmentalist narratives rhetorically read as elegy, tragedy, epic, and to a lesser extent, comedy. In Chapter 1, Heise warns that the “proxy logic” (synecdoche) of “charismatic megafauna” may make the conservation narratives fall flat in their desired functions, an idea which has taken root in animal studies and ecocriticism lately, as less charismatic insects, fungi, and amphibians are starting to gain more attention. The discussion of “ghost sightings” of the long vanished but culturally significant species, on the

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² Heise, 5.

other hand, illustrates the interrelation between values and identities in the perceptions of the natural world. Chapter 2 deals with biodiversity databases, posited as modern epics and analysed by focusing on their assembly modes, recognizing both centripetal (Enlightenment) and centrifugal (postmodern) tendencies in their assemblage. The chapter is enriched by insightful comments on the contemporary “Red list art” featuring the colour pictures of I. Kirkland, and J. Sartore’s art. In Chapter 3, the comparison of legal conceptualizations of biodiversity and conservation laws in the USA, Germany, European Union, and Bolivia is revealing, but also sets the comparative tone for the remainder of the book. For example, the Endangered Species Act focuses on species while other laws focus more on biodiversity at large; the American preference for “wilderness” stands against the German understanding of landscape as historically and traditionally shaped (*Landschaft*); while the Bolivian constitution recognizing the legal rights of the “Mother Earth” is radically different from both. Ultimately, the author concludes that the extent to which laws on biodiversity and endangered species are effective depends on how they interact with other laws which enhance or limit them, within a particular socio-economic context.

The second part of the book, which also comprises three chapters, synthetically broadens the research scope to include the political and philosophical underpinnings and tensions between environmentalism/conservation in relation to, in turn, animal rights advocacy, environmental justice, and debates on multispecies communities in the Anthropocene. Here, conservation efforts are discussed in the context of the social movements they are inextricably linked to, and through the philosophical traditions that seek to orient them politically and ethically: posthumanism, animal studies, multispecies ethnography. Chapter 4 is devoted to a dis/continuous and sometimes friction-filled relationship between animal rights advocacy, which focuses on individual and institutionalized animals (in zoos, laboratories, and especially factory farms), and the environmentalist movement, which focuses on (wild) species, habitats, and threats to biodiversity. Comparing the two, Heise inspects how each privileges certain values and cultural orientations more than others, being rooted in different perspectives on domestication as a process of modernization. Conservation is again in a comparative manner inspected against/alongside social justice issues and the rights of disempowered peoples (“environmentalism of the poor”) in Chapter 5. Here, Heise analyses three novels’ different stories of relationship between colonialism, oppression of humans, and endangerment of biodiversity (M. Montero’s *Tu, la oscuridad* (1995); *Virunga* (2009), edited by A. Johnson and T. Kealey; A. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005)). In her opinion, Ghosh’s novel best shows that conservation and social justice “are neither inherently at odds with each other nor

inherently synergistic.”³ In Chapters 5 and 6, traversing through diverse fiction and nonfiction from Derrida to SF, Heise builds up from the established concept of “multispecies ethnography” to argue for what she terms “multispecies justice”: a justice which privileges neither humans nor nonhumans, but puts the questions of justice for both at the centre. In what seems as a continuation on eco-cosmopolitanism, she also proposes that humans develop a narrative of themselves as a species (just as we have “learned” to experience ourselves as nations) by producing institutions, laws, symbols and rhetoric that establish such categories as liveable frameworks of experience.⁴ Both propositions could be useful to, and could in turn be further interrogated by, the growing scholarship in affective criticism, be it in the cultural studies or ecocriticism vein (e.g., in line with S. Ahmed or A. Weik von Mossner’s work), especially in relation to animal ethics. Together with de-centring humans in acknowledgment of the “multispecies communities” (an increasing research interest in environmental studies), Heise recognizes that the ethical questions in them will be posited and dealt with in culturally diverse ways, a point effectively made in the context of the Anthropocene in the last chapter. This notion is to be further explored in different socio-cultural contexts and non/fictional worlds.

Heise’s book does not tell poignant stories about specific species at risk (cf. T. van Dooren’s *Flight Ways*, 2016), analyse the onset and effects of anthropogenic biodiversity loss (cf. E. Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction*, 2014), or question the scale of human concern for nonhuman species. Rather, it analyses the ways in which we do care, and how those ways reflect who we are and what we might become in the inter-cultural and inter-species framework of being. *Imagining Extinction* re-frames the discussion between culture(s) and science(s), examining the intricate relationships between cultural values, identities, and narratives, and conservation institutions and practices. It is therefore a valuable book that is of interest to a wide range of environmental humanities, literary and cultural scholars and students, and natural scientists as well as activists dealing with conservation and biodiversity.

³ Heise, 194.

⁴ Heise, 224.