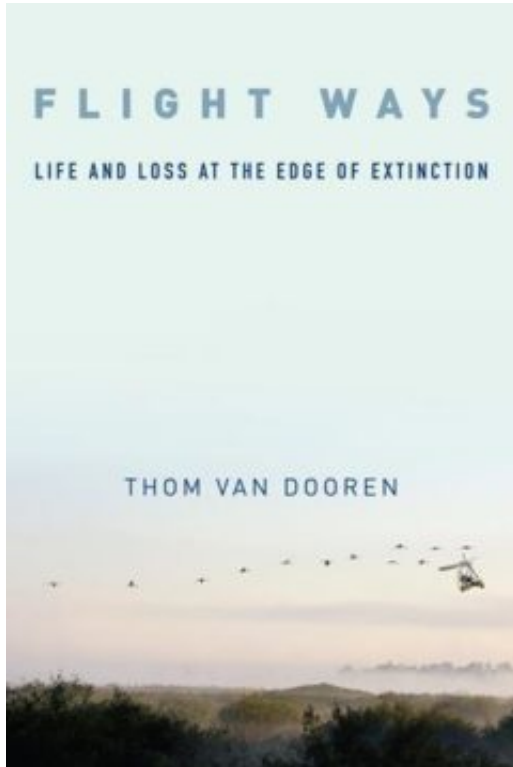


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Thom van Dooren's Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the End of Extinction

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By Eva Giraud and Gregory Hollin



[Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the End of Extinction](#)

by [Thom van Dooren](#)

Columbia University Press, 2014. 208 pages.

Flight Ways begins with a question: at what moment should a species be categorized as extinct? The extinction of Passenger Pigeons, for instance, could – in the most technical terms – be marked with the passing of the final bird, Martha. Little connection seems to exist, however, between the pigeons as they moved ‘through the sky in flocks of hundreds of millions of birds that blocked out the sun’ (11) and Martha’s isolated death in 1914. This prolonged period, between endangerment and the death of the last member of a species, is described by van Dooren as the ‘dull edge of extinction’: a period of time that sees, even as individual life forms exist, a break-down in the distinct form of life that characterises what it meant to

be a particular species (11). *Flight Ways* engages in an 'ethics of storytelling' (9) which seeks to make the lives of five species of bird who currently live on this 'dull edge' visible: Albatrosses in the North Pacific, Vultures in India, a pocket of Little Penguins inhabiting Sydney harbour, Whooping Cranes in a U.S. breeding programme and, finally, Hawaiian Crows.

What needs to be emphasised is that this book has resonance far beyond its subject matter and – though it will clearly be of interest to those working within the Environmental Humanities or Animal Studies – *Flight Ways* is an important book that deserves a far wider audience. At the same time as presenting the stories of its birds in an evocative and politically urgent way, van Dooren manages to strike a delicate balance between theoretical innovation and accessibility. The book makes an incisive conceptual intervention into prominent cultural theories (vital materialist approaches, cosmopolitics, companion species) in a way that has broader resonance; it also engages with these theories in a lively way that would make them accessible to new audiences. Though perhaps not as explicitly ambitious as other contemporary texts that share the aim of crafting an entirely new ethics for the Anthropocene (e.g. Lorimer, 2015; Tsing, 2015), where *Flight Ways* stands out is in presenting its arguments in a way that *enacts* the ethics that it does put forward. The level of detail in van Dooren's stories, moreover, give weight to his attempts to advance this body of theoretical work by asking how – once the entanglement between human and non-human is acknowledged – a meaningful politics can emerge. While we felt certain claims made in the book could use further interrogation, our overwhelming response is positive; here, therefore, we focus on *Flight Ways*' strengths in terms of how it elaborates upon and extends existing work.

Theoretical elaborations: Entangled flight ways

Building on recent scholarship that has drawn vital materialism together with a focus on temporality (e.g. Bastian, 2013), *Flight Ways* foregrounds the need to develop a richer account of extinction, which takes into account the longer histories and future potentials of species, as well as their co-constitutive entanglement with their environment. The concept of the flight way itself helps to advance this body of theory through articulating the complex relationship between a species' unique form of life, and the life forms who are members of that species. Through his detailed account of the precarious lives of albatrosses, for instance, van Dooren makes explicit how individual birds embody the immense amount of 'intergenerational work: the skill, commitment, cooperation and hard work, alongside serendipity, that are required in each generation to carry the species through' (27). The flight way, by extension, conveys what is lost when human activity – in this instance the plastics that converge in the

'North Pacific Garbage Patch' and 'find their ways into albatross bellies' (30) – disrupts both the lives of specific creatures and millennia of inter-generational learning.

Narratives about the entanglement of birds, humans, ecological contexts and temporalities are made still more explicit in van Dooren's focus on vultures. The notion of entanglement derived from Barad (2007) has been engaged with by a large and ever-expanding number of texts across the environmental humanities and beyond; van Dooren's story of vultures, however, does not just apply entanglement as a conceptual framework but gives this framework material weight. The story of *Gyps* Vultures in India makes explicit how the cultural and biological co-produce one another to forge complex lived ecologies. 'Puller' varieties of vulture, for instance, have historically thrived in India due to cattle from particular communities being left rather than consumed, and their bodies processed in ways that lent themselves to the birds' particular needs (50). The use of the agricultural drug diclofenac, however, has led to an almost total extinction of the vultures. Given to cattle to overcome a number of issues like 'lameness, mastitis, difficult birthing' (53), the widespread use of the drug is tightly bound with high levels of poverty and the need to 'keep animals working even when they are old and sick' (53). The widespread loss of vultures due to diclofenac poisoning has, in turn, had stark implications for the flourishing of the human communities whose everyday life was entangled with vulture flight ways (although other communities, such as wild dogs, rats, and potentially even anthrax microbes, have been able to thrive in this new environment).

It is in this chapter in particular that *Flight Ways* displays its distinct capacity to both further conceptual debates, whilst acting as an accessible introduction to contemporary cultural theory. The chapter would be highly valuable to anyone seeking to grasp how Baradian notions of intra-action work in practice, or what it really means to claim that epistemologies, ontologies and ethics are irreducibly entangled. More than this, the chapter moves beyond the – now almost mundane – assertion that 'everything is entangled' to look at the specific, local forms of knotting and unknotting that are bound up with a species' flight way.

Theoretical interventions: Theorising the violence of care

Perhaps the most decisive conceptual intervention is made, however, in van Dooren's work on Whooping Cranes: a striking ethnographic case in itself, but one that also has implications for contemporary work about the politics of care in more-than-human worlds (e.g. Despret, 2004, 2013; Haraway, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). The cover of *Flight Ways* depicts a scene from this chapter, a biplane flying through the air teaching juvenile whooping cranes their traditional migration routes. The lengths

that those engaged with this conservation project go to in order to save these endangered birds are extraordinary and frequently moving. What van Dooren also foregrounds, however, is the violence that is intrinsic to the care-work of conservation; indeed perhaps the most radical part of the book is the hyphen with which he links violence and care, in making clear that these processes – like the vultures and humans in chapter 2 – are irrevocably entangled.

At the core of this chapter is the assertion that: 'Intimate care for some feathered bodies, some species, sits alongside the domination, coercion, and abandonment of others...' (92). Care for the endurance of the species is clearly at the forefront of conservation work, with certain birds receiving incredibly patient care and attention to ensure they can not only survive but inherit the intergenerational flight ways of their predecessors. To facilitate this care, however, other species face more violent consequences: other – less endangered – crane species are used to incubate Whooping Crane eggs; quails serve as tasters to ensure the safety of crane food; geese and swans are used to see whether aircraft led migration is safe or feasible (114-5). Even particular whooping cranes adopt a 'sacrificial' role for the sake of their species and effectively become sperm banks for artificial insemination programmes, with these birds often being made to imprint on human handlers to make them less distressed about their physical manipulation for this end (111).

This conceptualisation of violent-care unsettles some of the pre-existing theoretical claims that have been made about the value of affective encounters in generating care and ethical responsibility towards individual animals (for an overview and related argument see Giraud and Hollin, 2016). Van Dooren elucidates how relationships between carers and birds – which have been praised in influential theoretical work (e.g. Despret, 2004) – is often the result of imprinting, 'in which one partner knowingly manipulated the delicate developmental stages of the other to produce a lifelong attachment: a *captive* form of life' (103, emphasis in original). This rich ethnographic material offers insights that go beyond being striking to verge on shocking; understanding imprinting as being part of a 'regime of violent care' offers a radical challenge, in particular, to Despret's reading of Konrad Lorenz's relationships with his animals as being co-shaping and convivial. This chapter is thus at the forefront of an emerging body of work that seeks to explore the 'darker' (Martin, Myers and Viseu, 2015) and more instrumental (Giraud and Hollin, 2016) side of care.

A final story

If it hasn't already been made explicit, we felt this was a very valuable book that makes an important (and affective) intervention in existing conceptual debates. It is also, however, one that has potential to act in the

way that van Dooren hopes, through enriching understandings of extinction and loss. This is perhaps reflected by a story we were told when reading van Dooren's text. A work colleague spotted *Flight Ways* and took particular interest in the second chapter, describing how vultures were very much part of his own childhood in India as he played cricket under the watchful eye of the birds as they perched on the roof of his friend's house. Whilst the children sometimes felt daunted by these large creatures, as they grew up and these striking companion species gradually vanished from sight, the vultures' loss was felt and its cultural ramifications understood. *Flight Ways'* strength is in its capacity to draw out the conceptual and environmental significance of moments such as this, in ways that hold the lives and temporalities of both individual birds and the intergenerational work of the species in view.

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