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EXTINCTION AFFECT AND THE CASE OF THE POLAR BEAR

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Abstract: The paper connects affect studies with Indigenous Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and the emergent field called extinction studies or climate change studies. Claire Colebrook's two 2014 Deleuzean books on extinction argue for a "theory beyond theory," where affect would have no place: theory would think beyond human extinction. The paper examines two important categories of discourse around the polar bear, that poster creature for climate change, those of Inuit hunters and elders and those of scientists. The Inuit freely express emotions, the scientists do not. The Inuit see themselves and the polar bear as kin; the scientists' concern for the bears is not articulated. Nonetheless, for both of them, the bears are what the science and technology studies scholar, Bruno Latour, calls a "matter of concern." Non-Inuit artistic responses to the possible extinction of the polar bear reveal a strong affective response, unlike the scientific accounts. Perhaps Latour's suggestion for a "parliament of things" where non-human entities that have become "matter of concern" are represented might help connect these disparate discourses. Although Latour may be too optimistic, Colebrook's stance seems require an impossible denial of human affect. Even the rational scientific accounts evidence concern based on affect, however buried. One approach that seems useful is that of Theo van Dooren, who looks at how threatened species and humans are connected in an account that examines affect as part of a study that also draws on science.

Keywords: polar bears, Inuit culture, extinction affect, posthumanism, climate change, indigenous people

I want to focus my general topic 'Extinction Affect,' on a case study about the relations between Western scientists and Inuit people with respect to polar bears. Polar bears have become poster creatures for global warming, and so discussions of their fate provide a

useful source for considering how the discourses around them carry affective intensities as well as facts and figures.

I confess I am not capable of wading into definitional controversies over the meaning of affect. However, I do view affect as entangled with cognition and emotion, and here focus on its *relational* qualities, as 'intensities pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise' (Siegworth and Gregg, 2010: 1). Carolyn Pedwell suggests that 'emotions – such as "empathy", "shame", or "happiness" – are the names that we have come to identify with certain (momentarily stable, though highly variable) collections of thoughts, feelings, affective intensities and physiological responses' (Pedwell 43). The affects and emotions connected to polar bears are not the same for all cultures. Examining the differences between an (admittedly over-generalized) Western scientific viewpoint and that of the Inuit in northern Canada as expressed in oral accounts and stories makes this point quite clearly.

I am working on orienting my ideas derived from Indigenous studies and Science and Technology Studies not only to affect studies, but also to an emerging field variously named extinction studies (as in the name of the Australian Extinction Studies Working Group, extinctionstudies.org) or critical climate change studies (the name of a series edited for Open Humanities Press by Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook). This series contains twenty-four books, all open access, which focus on rethinking life in the face of impending and possibly already inevitable mass species death on earth. As the publisher's description of one of these books points out, 'today the future of a viable biosphere, and thus the purpose of our present activities, is put into question. A disappearing future leads to a broken present, a strange incoherence in the feel of everyday life' (Open Humanities Press, 2015). This incoherence is not just rational, but, as the reference to the 'feel' of everyday life suggests, affective.

How do these fields intersect then? Deborah Bird Rose, a member of the Australian Extinction Studies working group, suggests that a change of emotions from fear of nature to love of it might be a way to counter the current planetary extinction disaster that has been called the Anthropocene (Rose 2). Carolyn Pedwell further suggests that engagement with the empirical and the affective can provide 'flash points for social change' (Pedwell 150), despite her caution that affects often are co-opted for a variety of state and commercial purposes. Indeed, one might imagine that if slowing climate change becomes a serious economic or political project, affects tied to new ideals of sustainability, say, might be deployed to engage citizens.

Humans have long known that all of us, both good and bad, will die. The end of the world features in many religions. It was, perhaps, for some a relief to hear from scientists that the sun will not blink out for around five billion years. To be forced to return to a millenarian sense of impending catastrophies unsettling, to be sure. This revised timeline brings a renewed urgency to thinking how we might change a species that devotes a great deal of its time to killing other human beings, destroying plant and animal life, and contaminating the land and waters on which all organisms depend for life. Bird proposes not simply a shift from fear to love, but also an epistemological shift from an anthropocentric worldview to a non-anthropocentric one similar to those widespread among Indigenous cultures world-wide. This epistemology is variable in that it is grounded locally in a particular ecosystem, but at a general level embeds humans in a web of relationships, relationships that include all organic and inorganic life, and that includes the dead and a host of supernatural beings. This relationality carries not only obligations, but affect, I would argue.

Bird's proposal leaves aside the question of how those without her privileged long-term access to Aboriginal Australian elders might shift their thinking. The history of colonization shows us that dominant societies become so by appropriating – stealing, if you will – Indigenous land and cultures, material and immaterial. Colonial development first depletes a resource, often recruiting Indigenous hunters, fishers, and resource workers and then turns to regulate the resource for 'the general economic good' in ways that limit or exclude Indigenous people. Thus conflicts break out over preservation of habitat or a species and the continuation of key traditional practices: a famous example is the controversy in the US over the successful application of the Makah, a north-west-coast whaling culture, to assert their treaty rights by killing one grey whale in 1999. They had discontinued whaling after the settler whaling industry had drastically reduced their numbers, but were frequently condemned nonetheless for killing one whale (Ellingson, 2001).Whales, like polar bears, as so-called charismatic megafauna, have become loci for strong affects in the dominant society connected to animal rights and conservation movements.

In Canada, alliances between wilderness advocates and Indigenous people are often fragile, because wilderness advocates often see nature as separate from human activity, while Indigenous people do not (Braun, 2002; Tsing, 2005). Often, ideals of animal protection or the preservation of pristine wilderness clash with Indigenous struggles to claim their land and the rights to live on it by hunting, fishing and gathering. That said, of course Indigenous

cultures do not remain in a time warp; conflicts over how to deal with issues related to development, the hunting and trapping of animals, and resource use more generally also break out *within* Indigenous communities.

Such clashes are legal, political or economic; a more interesting question is what it would mean in affective terms to shift away from an anthropocentric view of the universe. To make this shift will not be easy if we follow the Deleuzean arguments of Claire Colebrook's two 2014 volumes on extinction, *Death of the Posthuman* and *Sex after Life*. How can we think about a world in which humans are not the arbiters of final value or indeed, not even present? And more specifically for this paper, what kind of affective relationship can those of us who live far away from the Arctic have with polar bears or those others who live in the North?

Colebrook suggests that we need to imagine how to think otherwise than from a human or even an organic perspective. This situates her argument beyond posthumanism – to *after* the posthuman. She points to the paradox that human beings have been consistently destructive while managing to maintain a vision of humanity as the highest form of life. Our lack of control over the large systems that threaten to destroy the planet, including global capitalism, global nuclear terror, epidemics, and climate change coupled with the impossibility of allocating blame for the creation of these systems further complicates the issue (Latour, 2011). Apart from denial or melancholic fatalism, one common response constructs a discourse of sustainability, focused on the idea of a planetary ecosystem named for a Roman goddess, Gaia (Lovelock and Marguilis, 1974). The ideas of sustainability and the Gaia hypothesis, according to Colebrook, return us to a human perspective where we believe we can manage the planet and live on in a human-centred cosmos. Colebrook remarks that 'If our only value and horizon is that of life, then only one path is permitted: that which saves and survives' (*Sex*, 2014:19).

The word 'sustainability,' Colebrook argues, implies that we can impose a regime of bourgeois common sense through technological change, thereby circumventing climate change, 'living on' rationally through this and other disasters. For her, this is a kind of futurist mass hallucination. To what degree would changing this discourse by invoking multiple discourses of failure work to improve ethical relations in the now, rather than pushing them on to the (possibly foreclosed) future? Colebrook would argue that instead of the humanities, we need a shift of discipline to the 'inhumanities' that will allow us to squarely consider the viral and the malevolent, forces that cannot simply be wished away

(Colebrook 177). She writes, 'Let us accept that humanity is and must be parasitic: it lives only in its robbing and destruction of a life that is not its own' (Colebrook 178).

This notion may have some parallels in Inuit culture, albeit without the connotations of the word 'parasite.' An Inuit man, Ivaluardjuk, explained to the part-Inuit explorer Knut Rasmussen in the early 1920s that 'The greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls' (qtd. 1929: 56). Despite their ability to survive in one of the world's most inhospitable environments, this man's brother, Aua, said 'We fear what we see about us and we fear all the invisible things that are likewise about us, all we have heard of in our forefather's stories and myths. Therefore we have our customs, which are not those of the white men, the white men who live in another land and have need of other ways' (Rasmussen, 1929: 55-56). Aua's warning of incommensurability should be kept in mind: the relations between the land and the people is central in Indigenous cultures and those epistemologies that derive from it are not necessarily comprehensible to those who do not live there (see Armstrong, 1999). Further, there is a difference between cultures that consume to destruction and cultures that consider future generations of both humans and animals, and thus promote an ethic of preservation.

To the extent that Inuit world-views can be seen simply as 'anti- Cartesian' they fail for Colebrook: 'As we, today, are confronted by more and more of the sense of our utter contingency – that there might have been a world without humans and there might soon be a world without humans again – perhaps being shrilly anti-Cartesian and insisting on the intimate bond between mind and world is a profoundly rigid instance of self-important subjectivism' (Colebrook 64). We also need to be wary that a turn to looking at Indigenous epistemologies may risk nostalgic romanticisation or colonial appropriation.

Here I want to move from theory to my case study. Like Colebrook, another member of the Extinction Studies group, Thom Van Dooren, argues that 'The brand of holistic ecological philosophy that emphasizes that "everything is connected to everything" will not help us here' (Van Dooren 60). He continues, 'Rather, everything is connected to *something*, which is connected to something else. While we may *ultimately* be connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matter – *who we are bound up with and in what ways*' (Van Dooren 60). Interestingly, given the site of the workshop, he makes this point in the context of a study of the Indian vulture. This species has been inadvertently decimated since 2000 because the vultures were feeding on the bodies of animals treated by a new veterinary drug, diclofinac. The resulting near-extinction of the vultures, for whom the drug is a poison, has left a space open for wild

dogs to feed on these same bodies, but this has led to a corresponding increase in rabies in humans, particularly those who cannot access medical treatment. To reverse this situation sometimes requires expensive choices. The banning of diclofinac requires enforcement and rearing vultures in captivity for later release requires the assurance that this same problem will not recur. Van Dooren's careful study of specific human-animal interactions and their economic, social and affective consequences might be a way to illuminate my topic.

Indigenous affects with respect to animals do not follow mainstream categorizations. Many Indigenous cultures see animals as superior to humans because they can survive unaided (Laugrand, 2015: 9). A Dene man comments that 'Animals have special abilities which they depend upon to live, giving us only the powers which they no longer need . . . An animal chooses someone to receive these leftover powers, a person who has treated the animals with respect' (Moore and Wheelock, 1990: 7). The Inuit believe that they cannot remain Inuit without eating animals; Peter Okpik commented in 1975: 'A person is born with animals. He has to eat animals. That is why animals and a person are just like one' (qtd. Laugrand and Oosten, 2015: 34). Some animals are more human than others; polar bears have '*isuma*, the capacity to think like humans' (Laugrand 184). Indeed, Keavy Martin's analysis of a story where a man marries a polar bear suggests that he both demonstrates and advances his *isuma* in a contest with the largest polar bear in the community of his new parents-in-law (Martin 47-58). The Inuit say that polar bears taught them to hunt seals, for example by attracting the seals to their breathing holes in the ice by scratching on it and by using a screen behind which to hide while waiting for the seal to surface (Laugrand and Oosten, 2015: 184-85). As in many other Indigenous stories about animals, polar bears transform into humans, marry humans, adopt humans and provide humans with the food they need. The reverse is also true. These transformations mark the dependency of the people on the animals to survive; although the hunted animals might not agree, this relationship between hunter and prey is represented as affective, familial and profoundly reciprocal.

Polar bears are not a major prey for Inuit hunters, who live off caribou, seals, walruses, musk oxen and whales. However, Inuit have hunted the bears for a long time, and polar bears have long had commercial value in the fur trade. It is estimated that 60,000 bears were taken by white whalers and white and Inuit hunters between 1890 and 1930 (Crockford, 2015). An accelerated decline in the population after World War Two led to the 1973 International Agreement on the conservation of polar bears signed by five circumpolar nations, Canada, the US, Norway-Svalbard, Greenland, and the Soviet Union. This agreement provided a foundation for scientific studies of polar bears.

A primary difference between scientists and Indigenous hunting cultures is that Indigenous people believe that humans do not control the hunt, animals do (Berkes, 2012: 98). Further, the Inuit believe (as we saw above) that animals have souls and provided their bodies are properly treated in ritually respectful ways, they are an infinitely renewable resource (Laugrand and Oosten, 2015: 9). Obviously, scientists do not agree; for them, animals can and should be managed by humans. To facilitate this management, polar bears are marked with paint, tracked by radio collars, filmed by robot cameras, tranquillized for study purposes, and airlifted to new locations when they intrude on settlements.

In a recent documentary film directed by Zacharias Kunak, an Inuit whose feature film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* received widespread acclaim, Inuit men and women discuss the changes they have observed in recent years in the north. Inuit have consistently faced the mysterious absence of regularity in the seasonal return of animals like caribou. However in this film they remark on the failure of a larger regularity, that of the climate and weather system itself, which they are no longer able to read as they once could. Some of their comments are clearly a response to suggestions that their traditional knowledge is inaccurate or that they are interested only in killing polar bears rather than preserving them. They argue that scientific interference with bears has made the bears more aggressive towards humans and that radio collars have caused the bears to starve. Scientists have persistently accused the Inuit and other Indigenous hunters of over-harvesting (Lemelin *et al*., 2010: 805-06). Ian Stirling, often described as the doyen of Canadian polar bear scientists, comments that "Inuit hunters in the areas of four polar bear populations in the eastern Canadian Arctic . . . have reported seeing more bears near settlements during the open-water period in recent years. . . . These observations, interpreted as evidence of increasing population size, have resulted in increases in hunting quotas" (Stirling and Parkinson, 2005: 1). Despite the provisional nature of his finding (signalled in the title, 'Some *Possible* Effects of Climate Change') and the advice to limit hunting as 'precautionary', Stirling figures the Inuit as antagonists whose traditional knowledge is deficient in comparison to his own. Further, his concern for the polar bears does not include concern for the Inuit, who, as we have seen above, see polar bears as close relatives. Unlike Stirling in his publications, the Inuit in the documentary speak often of their feelings. They say 'Wildlife biologists make hunters unhappy,' 'We treasure our environment,' 'We feel powerless to stop climate change,' 'Inuit do not mistreat animals,' and 'We love our animals' (*Qupirangajuq,* 2010). The scientists, although they take climate change as a given and clearly see polar bears as threatened, don't talk about their feelings.

Even I can quickly find scientific accounts that counter Stirling's argument. His is based on examining how long the bears must wait on land for the ice to form, when they typically go out on the ice edge to hunt seals. The assumption is that they do not eat during this period,[1] and are therefore endangered by the failure of ice to form at around the same time of year. However, Cree hunters point out to scientists in one paper that does investigate traditional knowledge that polar bears do not necessarily sit idly around waiting for the ice to form, but eat a wide variety of plants and prey on fish, birds and animals, including beavers (qtd. in Lemelin *et al*., 2010: 808). Susan Crockford, another scientist, argues that the investments of fellow scientists like Stirling in a certain model of climate change has meant they have ignored or understated evidence about ice formation and have exaggerated the threat to polar bears as a consequence. For her, tying large arguments about climate change tightly to the fate of polar bears is perhaps intended to involve a popular audience that finds polar bears more interesting than many other entities, like ice, studied for signs of climate change. Although she does not deny climate change, she refuses to make predictions or recommendations about polar bears. She writes on October 13, 2015, that 'the latest study on Western Hudson Bay polar bears reveal the population has been stable since 2004 and there has been no significant trend in either breakup or freeze-up dates since 2001'(2015) countering Stirling's prediction of decline and recommendations against hunting made in the 2005 paper that I cite above.

To follow these scientific arguments is tempting, but this debate doesn't deal with the issue of affect or the feelings of the Inuit, who see the treatment of the polar bears as disrespectful and physically and psychologically harmful to the bears. In stories, such disrespectful treatment leads to the refusal of the animals to give themselves to be hunted (Laugrand and Oosten, 2015: 9). Crockford notes that the Inuit-dominated government of Nunavut, a northern territory of Canada, refuses to grant field research permits for the typically invasive research of scientists that involves 'chasing bears with helicopters, drugging them, extracting a tooth, tattoo[ing], and attaching satellite radio collars or ear tags'(2015). That the Nunavut government felt this act was necessary proves that few polar bear scientists have not made the leap into an anti-Cartesian epistemological position despite their inevitable contact with Inuit people.

To focus on scientific studies alone would be to continue to track the bears as objects or, as the professor in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* outlines the mission of science, to continue 'to penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places' (Mary Shelley, 1818). This pursuit, as Shelley suggests, takes us away from familial

affections and ethical obligations into a flight across the ice after a creature representing the scientific desire to both create and control life itself. Such flights are the result, Bruno Latour suggests, of reducing the world to an object. Unsurprising in a science studies scholar, he suggests that empiricism is not the problem, but that we need a renewed empiricism (Latour 231). He points out that one of the problems with the climate change debate is that waiting for scientists to decide implies that they can know the truth and ignores the fact that scientists also disagree, that they are situated in a tangle of interests and relationships as much as all of us. Science has rendered the polar bear an object – Latour would argue we have to turn it back into what it always has been, a thing, that is (after the Icelandic word for parliament), a gathering of all those whose relationships and affects hold it in the world as a 'matter of concern,' that is, a matter of affect as well as reason (Latour 1993: 144-45). Thus, we connect disputes over how many polar bears there are or how much they weigh to studies of their relationships and how these relationships – including affective relationships – should concern the Inuit, the polar bears, and us.

It is safe to say that despite their differences the Inuit and the scientists, not to mention the wider public, want polar bears to survive. Indeed, one could argue that the accusations that fly between them measure the strength of this desire. But Colebrook suggests we ask at least two questions: does our desire to see polar bears survive construct a fantasy that somehow we can save them and us without a radical shift in how humanity itself is theorized? Secondly, are we denying the reality that ultimately, the majority of human beings would prefer polar bears to go extinct to facing up to the possibility of human extinction? After all we have managed to get along without dodos for quite some time.

Colebrook argues for 'theory after theory.' She says that 'This would not be a return of theory to life, and certainly not a return of theory to the body, to affects, to living systems, living labor or praxis' (Colebrook, 2014: 36). One of the problems with her interesting analysis, as it goes beyond the human, beyond bare life, past extinction and on to thinking with the inorganic forces of the cosmos, is that it does not take into account that life struggles to survive. Organic life is, it seems to me, affectively tied to living on, and the notion that we can think beyond that may well also be a denial of human affect itself. Although I suspect her position is not as far from Latour's as this quotation suggests, I prefer his and Van Dooren's emphasis on the specific, the local and the contextualized, a contextualization that includes a decolonized notion of how affect affects us.

Well, what now? you might be asking. Obviously, I think the perspectives of Colebrook, the Inuit, and the scientists are all worth canvassing. I tend towards Latour's idea of a

'parliament of things' – an idea that is not purely theoretical. The Inuit have their Circumpolar Council, the polar bears their NGOs, and even rivers, valleys, mountains and ecosystems their heritage designations and human champions. That said, Sandra Harding has pointed out in her *Sciences from Below* that Latour's suggestion overlooks the 'difference which the absence or presence of women and other "minorities" does and could make in the production of scientific [or other] knowledge' (Latour, 2008: 45). And both Harding and Latour also ignore the ways in which art might provide insight into the ways in which extinction might affect us. Polar bears figure largely in Inuit art, including the sculptures of the 'dancing bear' that reference shamanism and the Cape Dorset prints that show bears in both naturalistic and human forms. Two recent British art projects highlight the threat, not just to the polar bear, but to the planet and of course, to the human beings living on it. *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome* recounts how two artists found, catalogued and photographed thirty- four taxidermied polar bears in the UK and then exhibited ten of them in glass cases without labels in a white gallery (Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, 2006). These bears, life-like but dead, were collected in a range of colonial ventures and then displayed in museums and stately homes. Another project, a film titled "It's the Skin You're Living In" (dir. David Harradine, 2012), shows a bear on the ice that transforms as the camera moves closer into a man in a bear costume. He takes off his headpiece and his paws exposing his naked head, arms and torso to the bitter cold. He becomes a hybrid creature, walking first in the Arctic, and then along the verge of highways, his costume becoming ever more bedraggled and dirty. Finally, he is shown at home, making a cup of tea. Both pieces convey an uncanny realization of the mix of violence, sentimentality, and wonder involved in human-animal relations and the quandary that we, and they, are in.

NOTES

1 They have the ability to fast for very long periods (Derocher, 2012: 174). However, the length of time they fast does affect their reproduction rate, and no bear can fast forever.

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