



Extinction, Encountering and the Exigencies of Forgetting

Rick De Vos

Curtin University

Abstract: *Stories of species extinction interpellate and legitimate each other, accumulating, in a discrete and synchronous order, a coherent history of extinction that allows them to be utilised in scientific and historical discourses as authoritative signs. These stories also translate and inscribe social and cultural encounters, however, where groups of different human and nonhuman animals interacted and made sense of these interactions. Great auks, for example, possess stories that exceed the overdetermining official account of their extinction, having endured for at least one hundred thousand years learning and passing on the skills to live and flourish in the North Atlantic, co-existing with and surviving the actions of diverse groups of humans and other predators, and countless changes to the environment around them. Encountering extinction, that is, taking the deaths of entire groups of animals and their future generations back to those moments of encounter and contact, and those spaces of translation and interpretation, opens these times and spaces up to the possibilities of other relationships and perspectives, and other subjectivities and interpretations, including those of animals connected to a past preceding and far exceeding that of the dominant narrative.*

Forgetting is difficult

As simple and unproblematic as it sounds, forgetting is not always an easy act. Not only does it often require effort, but effort sustained over time, iterative work that must be accomplished in order to seal the smooth surface of the present from past and future questions and doubts. The process of forgetting is interdictory, involving a commitment to disavowal. Just as an oppressive political regime might be seen to close its eyes and ears to evidence questioning its actions, motives and authority, belligerently repeating its claims to legitimacy and veracity, so too must a shared or communal view of our own story emphasise its own beginnings, its own time and its own space by forgetting times and spaces before that story, and the attendant possibilities of other co-existent and future stories. Our own story, whether it be personal testimony, family history or national writ, shapes and re-orders times, spaces and life in such a way that it is not only coherent, but also situated beyond question, through a process of repetition, reiteration and strategic commemoration.

A challenge for animal studies is to foreground nonhuman animal personhood and animal perspectives, resisting that comfortable distance from which animals are conventionally viewed. In terms of animals that have disappeared, it is easier for humans to view a space of absence than to occupy it and acknowledge its absences. To do so is to confront it as a space of contact and engagement, connecting the extinction of another animal with our own actions, and our own extant and proliferating state. While making such connections might elicit gratitude or sorrow, remembering also becomes an act tied up with guilt. Forgetting means actively and methodically separating the history of another species and its extinction from our own history, anticipating and denying any connection.

The current time of mass killings and species loss is commonly described as the first conclusively anthropogenic extinction event. Extinction in its officially articulated context affords us the opportunity to take a step back from a space of absence and loss, and view it through the protective lens of science and history, separating our bodies from those with whom we once shared space and time and who have now been killed or killed off, their deaths incorporated with those of animals who died before humans lived. Where and when we purport to know animals and enunciate their extinction, however, we are also implicated in the ending

of their lives and in their ways of life. We have benefited from the killing and the eradication of nonhuman animals from specific spaces at specific times whether or not we appreciate, agree with or accept these acts of death-dealing. Rather than an absolute state existing *a priori*, however, the notion of extinction that we live with and use generatively is the product of socio-political and cultural work that re-presents it as discrete, finite and beyond question. It is a version of extinction in which humans are both the pedagogical objects and the performative subjects. Extinction is a process, a set of specific acts and acquiescences, which we have politically and economically profited from, to which we owe our particular existence today, which reinforces our privilege, and yet erases our culpability. The killing has already occurred, the tale has been told, the violence consigned to the past. The imperative is to move on, not without some measure of sorrow, but to move on nonetheless. Moving on, however, requires discretion.

Zoological Museum, University of Copenhagen, 8th May 2011

I am taken by surprise by the sight of a stuffed and mounted great auk, placed on a grey mount resembling rocky ground, encased in glass. I have never seen a specimen of one before today. The glass case is positioned at a height that allows the glass eyes of the auk, a male bird in summer plumage with his black head displaying a white patch above each eye, to meet those of an average adult human observer. I have read every account and description of great auks I could access since I was nine years of age, imagining their remarkable size and their remote windswept habitats, and trying to comprehend that no matter how real they felt to me, they no longer existed. If I was ever to travel to the islands off the Icelandic coast, I would find a space bereft of great auks. This singular specimen, separated from me physically, spatially and temporally, nonetheless manages to arrest me, and I am struck by the urge to photograph him and be photographed with him, attempting to hold on to this moment and to retrieve it later. For now, I just stand and stare.

Encountering extinction

Great auks were large, flightless seabirds that once lived over a wide area of the North Atlantic along the North American and northern European coastlines. They were sociable birds, swimming powerfully in small groups and cooperating in the catching and consuming of fish. They spent almost all of their lives at sea, only aggregating and coming ashore to breed in vast nesting colonies on rocky, unpopulated islands (Bourne 260). Native American and Inuit people hunted great auks for their meat and eggs, and the birds feature in indigenous stories and practices. Beothuk people, who lived on Newfoundland at least until the early nineteenth century, made hunting trips to Funk Island, 37 miles off the Newfoundland coast, to kill great auks and gather their eggs for food. As well as a food source, Beothuk people saw great auks and other seabirds as spiritual messengers guiding their dead to the afterlife, and so buried their dead close to the birds' breeding sites (Kristensen and Holly 50).

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, great auks were killed in unprecedented numbers as part of European colonial ventures in the North Atlantic, quite literally fuelling marine voyages, the birds being viewed by European sailors as an almost inexhaustible source of meat, eggs and oil (Seymour 226; Serjeantson 44). They also came to be seen as a valuable source of feathers and down in the mid-eighteenth century by Icelandic, Norwegian and Russian feather traders. The ensuing plundering of auk nests and breeding sites for feathers, down and eggs had a devastating effect on great auk numbers, one from which the birds could not recover. Although great auks had been found widely in the North Atlantic until the seventeenth century, only the islands off the Iceland coast appeared to be visited by great auks by the start of the nineteenth century, and they had disappeared from the western half of the North Atlantic. While an anecdote narrating the killing of two birds and the crushing of an egg on Eldey Island in 1844 is widely quoted as marking their extinction, a last confirmed sighting of a single great auk took place in 1852 (Fuller 30; Bengtson 1).

This brief, conventional summary of the great auk and its demise provides an indication of the bird's historical significance to us. Great auks are shaped by their absence and their extirpation, by stories of human agency, exploitation and violence rather than those of avian survival and endurance. Stories of extinction interpellate and legitimate each other,

accumulating in a discrete, synchronous, resolved order. This cultural legitimacy is particularly important for accounts of extinct species, where in most cases a lack of ecological and ethological knowledge is not only symptomatic but also consequential. Great auks were never studied while extant, with descriptions of their life-cycle, behaviour and relationships garnered from sailors and hunters, most notably by the English naturalists Alfred Newton and John Wolley. The temporal and spatial conventions that allow the disappearance of whole species to be integrated into a coherent history of extinction shape these narratives by undercoding and over-determining last sightings and last specimens, moments and bodies once present but already absent. The presence of extinct animals, marked by material or anecdotal evidence, is framed within a colonial frontier far removed from the space of the narrator and narratee. Their deaths, while recorded in modern time, are narrated in a time of empire and colony which we no longer relate to or celebrate. The power expressed in narrating the story of the extinction of the great auk overcodes the context of colonial violence in which it occurred, separating this extirpation from the widespread dispossession and killing of Beothuk people by British and French soldiers and settlers on Newfoundland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Colonial encounters and colonial ways of making meaning are presented as historical encounters imbued with and shaping a wider social meaning. The recognition by European sailors that great auks constituted a source of meat and eggs was not an innocent discovery but knowledge gained in the context of colonial encounters, a violent process of power and knowledge, exploiting indigenous skills and experience and transforming great auks into resources. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, however, historical encounters are enunciative and cultural. There is a spatial and temporal gap between an enunciated historical event's actual occurrence and its discursive appearance as a sign of authority (Bhabha 246). The 1844 Eldey Island anecdote carries weight over and above that of the 1852 sighting, not just because it was collected from locals and published, but because it is a story couched in human agency, a narrative that more definitively melds death with extinction, and more recognisably invokes historicity. It also reminds us that research into extinction must always negotiate the conflating of occurrences of extinction, the deaths of complete groups of living things, with the enunciations, images, presentations and re-presentations of extinction, the culturally worked-

over signs deployed in motivating us to respond in particular ways. It is difficult, for example, to distinguish the disappearance of thylacines and quaggas, two species exterminated in the course of European colonial regimes, from the paintings, diary entries and anecdotes, literary depictions, photographs of isolated individuals in zoos, and stuffed museum specimens, that preserve and shape a specific set of memories and meanings anchored in antiquity and imagination.

Encountering in a passive sense may suggest being confronted or perhaps being taken by surprise. When addressing extinction I would argue that encountering requires a more active strategy: revisiting or re-placing the colonial and cultural context in which knowledge about the disappearance of species is enunciated. This becomes a challenge for cultural and historical research, particularly taking into account the colonial history and heritage to which the academy is beneficiary, a disturbing legacy calling for active acknowledgement and conscious resistance, even while drawing upon this privilege to enunciate divergent positions and provocations. Encounters exceed historical and cultural accounts: they are events involving, experienced by, interpreted by and shaped by other participants, who made meaning of these encounters outside a colonial temporality. In the case of great auks, animals who had lived for over one hundred thousand years, learning and passing on the skills to live and flourish in the North Atlantic, co-existing with and surviving the actions of diverse groups of humans as well as other predators and other coeval species, and enduring countless changes to the environment around them, what was significant about these encounters exceeded colonial subjectivity and historical incorporation.

Zoological Museum, University of Copenhagen, 8th May 2011

My recognition of the great auk specimen and my surprise belie the purpose the specimen serves. His morphology and taxonomy are foregrounded: he is there to teach me what a great auk looks like in relation to the other specimens exhibited in the museum. He draws my attention to the knowledge and authority possessed by and exercised by the museum and by the university in carrying out scientific and historical research. The glass cabinet and the space in

which it is placed indicate that this is a rare and prized specimen and possession. I may not touch this fragile and vulnerable bird. I am physically, spatially and temporally separated from him. He is wondrous, intangible, simultaneously present and absent. He provides evidence of the passing of time, of possession and loss, and of a real and violent encounter from which I have both benefited and lost. As a representative of a disappeared, irreplaceable species and a different and unique set of experiences and knowledges, he challenges my objectivity and distance. I am implicated. While I attempt to make sense of his death, I also acknowledge it as senseless, literally a loss of sense. I walk away, regretfully, respectfully and discreetly.

Discretion, discreteness and difference

We move on. Extinction does not stop us in our tracks. It does not slow our progress, nor does it force us to retrace the mistakes we have made. The impacts of extinction are too easily buffered, too easily raised to global issues beyond individual or community actions.

Our perceptions and conceptions of extinction are too readily framed and mitigated by familiar statistics:

Ninety-nine percent of all animals and plants that have lived on the earth are now extinct.

At least one hundred out of every million species disappears each year, at a rate up to a thousand times higher than natural background rates of extinction.

We currently find ourselves in the midst of the sixth mass extinction event, the first principally attributed to human activity.

Scientists estimate that half the animal and plant species currently extant will be extinct by the start of the next century.

The statistics often quoted in relation to extinction and extinction levels are all too familiar and all too occlusive, ending more conversations than they generate and silencing further inquiry. Their repetition mitigates the effect extinction has on us, normalising a crisis of killing and extermination and placing it beyond our ability to apprehend it and connect it with

our everyday lives. Historically, the threat of nonhuman animal species disappearing has led scientific and cultural institutions to hunt down remaining animals as rare and valuable specimens. In the case of great auks, historians have argued that the birds' increasing rarity and attendant collectability hastened its extinction, as museums commissioned collectors to seek out any remaining birds for their collections (Fuller 93). More recently it has led to national institutions shoring up their territories and increasing surveillance in order to protect what is perceived as national property. Despite this, a tension persists over what exactly has been lost. A common thread linking most stories of extinction is a lack of human knowledge about endangered and threatened species. Species were extirpated before important information was known about them. A preoccupation with taxonomy and anatomy at the expense of behaviour and relationships forestalled any opportunity to learn more about their ways of living and enduring as well as what threatened their existence. Colonial and modern regimes and enterprises were more interested in articulating, giving meaning to, and subjectifying these animal bodies in order to foreground their economic and political value, or lack of such value, than in being open to learning how they made their own meaning and their own place in the world.

Narratives of extinction perform significant cultural work in reinforcing extinctions as comparable, ordered, resolved, and able to be easily incorporated into the narrative of modernity. To narrate these stories as signs of authority and official knowledge, however, requires discretion and discreteness. Eldey Island, the reported space of the last interaction between great auks and humans, is depicted as an isolated, discrete space, a frontier removed from the metropolitan, commercial centres to which it is connected, and the killing of the last birds takes place in a discrete, specifically defined time. The great auk is not afforded the agency to resist extirpation. Its fate is what drives the narrative, a story that we inherit and repeat without professing a part in it. The practice of recounting stories of extinction establishes spatial and temporal distance – a gap that shields the narratee from the extinct animal and the act of killing. Each story must be kept separate from each other, from the narrator, and from us narratees, in order to be placed beyond question.

When brought into closer critical contact with each other, however, connections and contradictions begin to emerge. Closer scrutiny reveals more than tales of ruthless greed in the pursuit of colonial and commercial interests, the vicissitudes of advanced capitalism, and stories of deliberate and concerted extermination in order to protect agriculture, and more than stories of incarceration, habitat destruction and segregation. In arguing for a posthumanist conception of ecological community Mick Smith argues that beings of all kinds need to be considered in the act of making and unmaking relationships and social formations:

We are touched by each other in myriad ways. Beings appear to us, but they never just appear and they never appear just to us humans. Beings have (sensed and un-sensed) effects on us, but they never just have effects on us. Similarly, the meanings things have for one species may be radically different for others, the phenomenology of their sensing the world is unimaginably varied. This biodiversity matters in all manner of ways to all manner of creatures. (Smith 34)

Encountering the extinction of the great auk means being open to the heterogeneous perspectives of birds who spent most of their lives at sea, in a space where they were far more able to evade human hunters than on the rocky islands they visited to breed. Unlike their marine environments where they lived in small and more familial groups, the islands, even without human or other predators, constituted a space where difference had to be negotiated in order to mate and make new social connections. Just as colonial ventures brought together diverse groups of people, redefining, redeploying and subjectifying them in the pursuit of new enterprises, the vast nesting colonies of great auks periodically forming on remote islands in the North Atlantic were also marked by difference, an unstable, temporally and spatially contingent mixture of subjectivities, perspectives and stories. The encounters between humans and great auks on Funk, Eldey and other islands are not so easy to reduce to a clash between two homogeneous groups. Different groups of great auks, humans and other forms of life were inextricably linked in forming and interpreting these indeterminate events.

Audra Mitchell argues that extinction and absence produce a proliferation of subjects and subjective positions, each of which invokes different responses and different types of responsiveness (25). We respond to extinct animals and relate to them discursively even as we

erase them. Remembering and forgetting are inextricably linked here in imagining and realising our connections to nonhuman lives with whom we no longer share physical time and space but with whom we remain connected. Extinction is an inscription we read and respond to after the fact, a historical sign produced not just by a physically violent encounter occurring over a relatively short duration, but also by a cultural encounter lasting a more indeterminate length of time. Extinction is the trace that is presented as bodies are erased. We do not realise it at the time. We are in the midst of experiencing it, putting it into effect, carrying it out, performing it. Science and history do not provide a way to encounter extinction *in medias res*. Genes, populations and species do not bear witness to the countless interactions and intertwined experiences that haunt spaces marked as absent as a result of human actions.

Counter-extinction practices forget encounters and disconnect bodies, spaces and times in the process of reifying an authorised version of extinction, fixing knowledge of extinct species and re-placing absent nature. Identifying discretion and discreteness in the recording and recounting of extinctions, however, provides a first task in encountering extinction, in taking the deaths of entire groups of animals and their future generations back to those moments of encounter and contact, and those spaces of translation and interpretation, where stories of extinction became historical enunciations and signs of authority. Opening these times and spaces to the possibilities of other relationships and other perspectives reveals received stories of extinction as gestural, as performative, as marked by difference. The question of other subjective positions and interpretations is raised, including those of animals connected to a past preceding and far exceeding that of the dominant narrative. Telling our own communal, human stories becomes more fraught as we struggle to maintain coherence, discreteness and discretion in the face of those connections and memories, those knowledges and experiences of survival and endurance, those remnants of intangible, intergenerational inheritance, that extinction asks us to disregard even as they encroach upon our present and our presence. Forgetting, after all, is not always an easy act.

Works Cited

- Bengtson, Sven-Axel. 'Breeding Ecology and Extinction of the Great Auk (*Pinguinus Impennis*): Anecdotal Evidence and Conjectures.' *The Auk: A Quarterly Journal of Ornithology*, vol. 101, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1-12.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bourne, W. R. P. 'The Story of the Great Auk *Pinguinis Impennis*.' *Archives of Natural History*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 257-78.
- Fuller, Errol. *The Great Auk: The Extinction of the Original Penguin*. Bunker Hill, 2003.
- Kristensen, Todd J., and Donald H. Holly Jr. 'Birds, Burials and Sacred Cosmology of the Indigenous Beothuk of Newfoundland, Canada.' *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2013, pp. 41-53.
- Mitchell, Audra. 'Beyond Biodiversity and Species: Problematizing Extinction.' *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2016, pp. 23-42.
- Newton, Alfred. 'Abstract of Mr. J. Wolley's *Researches in Iceland Respecting the Gare-Fowl or Great Auk (Alea Impennis, Linn.)*.' *Ibis*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1861, pp. 374-99.
- Serjeantson, Dale. 'The Great Auk and the Gannet: A Prehistoric Perspective on the Extinction of the Great Auk.' *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology*, vol 11, nos. 1-2, 2001, pp. 43-55.
- Seymour, Michael J. *The Transformation of the North Atlantic World 1492-1763: An Introduction*. Praeger Publishers, 2004.
- Smith, Mick. 'Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction.' *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 2, 2013, pp. 21-41.