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Provocations from the Field - Derangement and Resistance: Reflections from Under the Glare of an Angry Emu

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Provocations from the Field - Derangement and Resistance: Reflections from Under the Glare of an Angry Emu

Abstract

The situations of emus may illuminate the maladies of human societies. From the colonialism that led Europeans to tamper with Australian ecosystems through the militarism that mandated the Great Emu War of 1932 to the consumer capitalism that sparked a global market for 'exotic' emus and their products, habits of belief and behaviour that hurt humans have wreaked havoc on emus. Literally de-ranged, emus abroad today endure all of the estrangements of émigrés in addition to the frustrations and sorrows of captivity. In Australia, free emus struggle to survive as climate change parches already diminished and polluted habitats. We have shot them with machine guns and ploughed them down with motor cars. We have parched and poisoned their landscapes. But still they stride. Queer in every sense of the word, emus can remind us of the resilience of Eros and instruct us on the praxis of resistance in catastrophic situations.

Keywords

Emus, queer, colonialism

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1. Under the Gaze of Emus

Five emus stalk the forested hills of VINE Sanctuary, an LGBTQ-led farmed animal refuge in the north-eastern United States. There used to be six. One, called Louise, died shortly after I began researching this piece. Like all sanctuary folks, I have witnessed many deaths. Few have felt to me as tragic. Before coming to the sanctuary, Louise and her companion Thelma had spent more than 20 years in a small enclosure in a petting zoo. Her time with us was too short to recover from that trauma, if such a recovery would even be possible, and emus don't belong in Vermont anyway. The best that we could do for her was not good enough, and it is within that understanding of potential futility that I write today.

In Australia and around the world, wildfires rage as the slow-rolling emergency of climate change becomes ever more urgent despite decades of environmental activism. At the same time, persistent catastrophes such as war and poverty continue despite centuries of struggle for peace and equality. As I have argued previously concerning pigeons and capitalism, trying to see problems from animal standpoints can '*change the question*' ('Property, Profit and (Re)production' 33) in ways that may lead to new insights. Bipeds who stand at about the height of humans, emus view the world from a vantage point that is simultaneously like and unlike our own. They have persisted for longer than humans have existed, and they continue to resist our hegemony while coping with the wreckage we've wreaked on their habitats. They may know us better than we know ourselves, and so it may be worthwhile to look at ourselves from their point of view.

I don't know whether you can imagine what it's like to walk along a wooded path with an emu on either side of you as you lug a jug of water down to the shelter that they refuse to use, no matter how cold or snowy it gets, except when the guys are sitting on eggs. They're about my height, so we are eye-to-eye, and I'm always aware that they could really hurt me if they wanted to. I'm pretty sure they're aware of that too.

The two who have walked side by side with me are called Tiki and Breeze, a father and son both born in captivity who came to the sanctuary in the wake of a tragedy. Along with Adele, who arrived some years later after being rescued from starvation at a roadside zoo, Tiki and Breeze conduct their affairs in what seems to be an approximation of the usual behaviour of

emus in their natural habitat. They have adapted themselves to the vagaries of their oddball environs ably, easily chasing off the sneaky sheep and rambunctious cows who like to steal snacks of emu food. (It's pretty funny to see thousand-pound cows chased by scrawny birds.) Overall, they have adjusted well to the social and environmental circumstances of the sanctuary, and this is reflected in their easy-going gaze as they walk alongside you on the path or approach you when you're filling water troughs on a hot day, indicating that they'd like a cooling shower from the hose you're holding.

That relaxed regard is very different than the angry glare of the emu in the title of this piece. Thelma arrived at the sanctuary a couple of years ago along with Louise. I feel fairly certain that Thelma is mad in both senses of the word. She has attacked both people and other emus. Her gaze is truly fearsome.

I try not to flinch from it. I agree with Lori Gruen that 'dignity is better understood as a relational concept' (232) that can be fostered, in a cross-species context, by being willing to be looked at by the animals upon whom one gazes. It can be difficult, though, to imagine what they think about what they see. When we think, our perceptions and ideas tend to be filtered and shaped by language, so much so that it can be hard to hang onto sensations and notions for which we don't have words. When we write, we arrange words into linear sentences and sentences into linear paragraphs, hoping that this process of compression and sequencing won't do too much damage to the holistic sense of what we are trying to say. This is always a fraught process, and becomes more so in this case, as emu perceptions do not necessarily conform to the boundaries of what human sound-signals can communicate, and emu cognition cannot be presumed to abide by our linear logics.

Thus, I find what I want to say, after spending some months imagining myself into an emu point of view, swirling in ways that resist efforts to conform to the confines of an academic paper. For example, above I struggled vainly to come up with adequate synonyms for madness and mad-ness. Mad-ness is anger, that's easy. But our conceptions of the other kind of madness are inflected by our over-valuation of rationality, by which we falsely define the human. In this foundational human error, we both falsely fail to recognize the cognitions of other animals but also trick ourselves into mistaking the narrow slice of our cognition that is conscious thought for

our very selves. Emus are not, so far as we know, deluded about themselves in that way. And so, when I speak of madness among emus, I am talking about something analogous to when your body is flooded with feeling in a way that interferes with however you would usually navigate the word. You're panicked or enraged or otherwise jangled so much so that your perceptions or behaviours or communications or thoughts – or all of the above! – go astray. Like emus, we exist today in a world gone mad, in which the very climate has gone awry. Our bodies must know this, even as we continue to go about everyday life. We will need more of ourselves than our conscious minds to cope with that chronic emergency.

Please bear with me or – even better – join me by deliberately loosening your own associations and entering into an imaginary where you are just another animal to an emu, hoping to learn something from what they see about you or the situations created by others of your kind. Even though it may be difficult and disorienting, let us ask: how do emus themselves see their circumstances? How do they see us? How have they coped with both madness and mad-ness? Let's learn what we can from the living dinosaurs who dodge bullets, jump fences, know very well how dangerous humans can be, and have not yet conceded defeat. Let's begin by learning their history.

2. Feathered Dinosaurs

Our knowledge of emus can only be fractional because the span of human interactions with emus constitutes such a short segment of their much longer history. Even the fact of their much longer tenure must be surmised from fossilized fragments, to which human scientists have applied ever-changing methods of dating and analysis. Those fossils date back to the Miocene epoch (which ended more than five million years ago), from which there are remains of birds who differ only slightly from present-day emus; fossilized remains from the Pliocene epoch (which ended more than two million years ago) are 'indistinguishable from the living emu' (Patterson and Rich, 85). By way of contrast, anatomically modern humans date back only about 160,000 years.

Therefore, emus knew each other, and other animals knew emus, long before any humans even existed to imagine the existence of such a bird. We can only dimly envisage the

hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of years in which these flightless birds established and maintained their communities, transmitting habits and knowledge from each generation to the next. Therefore, we must be modest in drawing conclusions based on our comparatively limited observations. We should also be aware that our perceptions may be skewed by biases. In the midst of the Great Emu war, discussed below, a soldier spoke respectfully of the enemy, thus:

> The emus have proved that they are not so stupid as they are usually considered to be. Each mob has its leader, always an enormous black-plumed bird standing fully six-feet high, who keeps watch while his fellows busy themselves with the wheat. At the first suspicious sign, he gives the signal, and dozens of heads stretch up out of the crop. A few birds will take fright, starting a headlong stampede for the scrub, the leader always remaining until his followers have reached safety. (Crew)

In point of fact, emu females tend to be larger than the males, so the enormous leaders seen by the soldier probably were female. And they probably weren't leaders or even designated lookouts. Like many birds who graze in flocks, emus collaboratively alternate between eating and keeping watch while others eat. Here we can see how human ideas about gender and hierarchy can lead to 'observations' that confirm stereotypes.

Here's a fun fact: for a long time, the *only* emu sex that people had witnessed and recorded was homosexual sex (Bagemihl 32), so there was a period of time when, if all we had to go by was the observations of people, we would have to presume that male emus were exclusively homosexual and female emus somehow fertilized their own eggs. Which brings us to emu queerness. We *can* say that emus are 'queer' both in the sense of confounding our categories and in the sense that they are among the hundreds of species in which same-sex affection, parenting, and sex are common. Emus are birds who run rather than fly. The females are the fighters. The males hatch eggs and raise chicks, as single parents or in co-parenting relationships with other males; some male emus enjoy sexual relations with other males, and those relations tend to be marked by more gestures of affection than heterosexual matings (Bagemihl 622-623).

In these ways, emus are similar to other ratites, and thus we may safely presume that this has been an abiding feature of emu society. But what of the attacks by female emus on

nesting males and unfledged juveniles that have sometimes been seen by people (Bagemihl 625)? It's certainly possible that this has always been the case for emus, but it is also conceivable that such violence is a reaction to the traumatic circumstances in which emus have found themselves ever since humans happened upon their territories. As Bradshaw has ably demonstrated concerning elephants, hunting and habitat destruction by humans can not only traumatize individual animals but also, over time, their cultures.

Everything changed for emus once they became the prey of mammals with weapons, and everything changed again when another wave of humans began clearing their habitat for farmland. As enduring as they have been, emus must be capable of changing their habits in response to changes in their environments. We cannot know which of their seemingly innate behaviours might be relatively recent responses to trauma. For example, here at the sanctuary as well as in the wild, emus tend to keep to themselves, mixing with other animals less often than many other birds like to do. Has it always been this way, or did they become more insular in response to either or both of their near-extinction experiences?

3. Near-Death Experiences

As a person of European descent, I need to note that what follows does not in any way excuse or mitigate the later depredations visited upon both emus and indigenous people by Europeans, but if I am to tell the story from the emu point of view, then I must report that the arrival of the first humans to occupy the lands now called Australia was a calamity that led directly to their first brush with extinction (Carroll and Martine 78). Sixty thousand years ago, after millions of years of relative peace as animals with few predators, emus encountered an existential threat when the first humans to populate their habitats arrived with weapons, a taste for animal flesh, and the ability to start fires. When those humans discovered that oil made from the layer of fat that allows emus to tolerate both heat and cold could be used to treat various human ailments, emus became an even more valuable target. We cannot imagine, although I think that we should at least try to imagine, what an earth-shattering surprise it must have been for individual emus to encounter beings unlike any they had seen before and to see their friends and family members ensnared or slain by objects they could not have imagined. Collectively, emus also faced an

increasingly difficult quest for food as fires reduced forests and grasslands to scrub (Miller et al. 287).

Since our interest is in the emus' experience of this cataclysm, the ideas of their hunters, while important in other contexts, need not be visited in detail here. What mattered to emus was what happened to emus, and what happened was a catastrophe beyond imagining. Some species of emu did not survive the encounter, and evidence suggests that the surviving species came close to extinction. The first peoples of what is now Australia hunted emus with spears as well as with poisoned water and other forms of trickery. That last leads me to wonder whether emus, who to this day sometimes approach some people trustingly, used to be more sociable with humans and other animals. Here is where indigenous ideas about emus may be relevant to their story. As many hunters of many cultures have done historically and continue to do today, the first people to fortify their own lives by killing emus developed admiring ideas about their prey. Let us presume that hunters who professed reverence for emus really did feel great respect when approaching with a gift of poisoned fruit or a spear behind their back. Detecting that reverent energy, a bird who would otherwise run away or attack might allow such a person to come near, with fatal results. Any animal observing such a turnabout would be wise to become more wary. Sixty thousand years of such betrayals by people who approached as friends would be more than enough time for emus' culture to adapt by adopting a less trusting attitude toward others.

That is speculation, but what is certainly true is that emus did not cede their inherent entitlement to peaceably occupy the lands in which they evolved. Again, caution is warranted. It's essential, when speaking of relations among humans, to recognize that the first humans to occupy these lands have not ceded their right – in the sense of agreements among humans about who will live where, how human relations within those territories will be governed, and how resources within those territories will be shared among humans – to those lands. But while speaking of nonhuman animals, and especially when trying to see things from their perspectives, then it is also important to remember that nonhuman animals have not consented to the conceptions of property implicit in human 'ownership' of any lands. Emus do not think of their homeland by any of the names that people call it, and they have not ceded to any humans the territory to which they are truly indigenous.

Perhaps through cultural changes such as becoming more wary, emus did adapt to the persistent threat of predation by humans, thereby surviving as a species even as individuals perished. I imagine that, if an emu historian were to divide time into epochs, there would be the multi-million year epoch of relative peace, a comparatively brief emergency period following the arrival of the first humans, a sixty thousand year era of vigilance following their adaptation to this new threat, and then another period of emergency beginning about 200 years upon the arrival of another group of humans. The emergency set off by that new wave of human immigration to emu lands led directly to their second near-extinction experience and continues to threaten their long-term survival even though emus are no longer considered at risk of immediate annihilation.

The new humans – who emus might or might not have noticed were different in coloration from the humans who came before – were much more numerous and much more lethal, sharply increasing the number of emus killed directly by humans while at the same time escalating the displacement of emus from their former lands and the despoliation of their remaining habitat. Again, this must have been such a surprise. By then, emus probably had an idea of the human based on the behaviour of the humans they had watched warily for the past sixty thousand years. That idea did not include firearms or indiscriminate mass killing. These new humans even went so far as to explicitly wage war on emus.

Consider these headlines from Australian newspapers:

ELUSIVE EMUS: Too Quick for Machine Guns NEW TACTICS TO BE TRIED (*Canberra Times*, 5 Nov 1932)

WAR ON EMUS: Machine Guns to be Withdrawn (*Melbourne Argus*, 10 Nov 1932)

REQUEST TO USE BOMBS TO KILL EMUS (*Adelaide Mail*, 3 Jul 1943)

New Strategy In a War On The Emu (*Sydney Sunday Herald*, 5 Jul 1953)

The term ‘Great Emu War’ refers to the battles of 1932-34 but, as the latter two headlines demonstrate, hostilities continued for decades. The battles of the 1930s began at the behest of farmers, many of whom were veterans of the first World War. Troops were sent out with machine guns, to mow down mobs of emus for the crime of refusing to recognise fields as

private property belonging to humans. But the emus proved to be more able adversaries than anticipated, watching out while grazing and fleeing at the first sign of an assault, sometimes literally dodging bullets as they escaped. Hundreds were killed but thousands remained. Eventually, the government withdrew the troops but provided local citizens with ammunition, which the soldier-farmers used to kill more than 57,000 emus in the latter half of 1934 (Crew).

Imagine the devastation, to individuals and to social groups, of such massacres. Notice that, nonetheless, emus did not concede defeat. At no point, then or since, did emus signal consent for their former stomping grounds to be occupied, fenced, and despoiled by people. To the contrary! While emus do, wisely, tend to approach human habitations warily, they continue to disregard boundaries established by people. In Australia and around the world, local newspapers and television news programs regularly feature stories of wild or escaped emus going where they want to go regardless of where we humans think they ought to be.

4. Globalization

Around the world? Yes, some decades after the Great Emu War, descendants of its survivors would be subjected to new indignities, courtesy of capitalism. As had been the case with colonialism, the malignant growth of consumer capitalism, with its incessant demand for new products and new markets, caused incalculable harm to emus and other nonhuman animals. Reduced to saleable objects to be literally broken up into saleable parts (flesh, feathers, eggs, skin), these formerly free birds now pace the confines of enclosures on every continent except Antarctica.

It's impossible to know whether this is something that emus have figured out about humans, but our own social nature makes us liable to fall for fads. Within capitalist cultures, 'get rich quick' schemes are particularly popular. Unfortunately for emus, they and their eggs have been shipped around the world to persons in search of easy profits. Most often, those dreams of riches have turned to ruin, with often gruesome outcomes for the unprofitable big birds. The only upside to this sad state of affairs is that it might, in the end, make it more likely for emus to survive the Anthropocene.

The San Diego Zoo in the United States boasts of breeding and selling more than one thousand emus to other zoos in the years between 1948 and 1976. Whatever their intentions, they proved that emus could be bred in captivity. In the 1970s, the government of Australia allowed 300 emus to be captured as 'a primary breeding stock for domestication' (Menon et al. 1). By the 1980s, the idea that emus could be easily and profitably farmed began to be advertised outside Australia. This set off an emu boom in the United States, at the apex of which would-be emu ranchers paid each other exorbitant sums for breeding pairs (*Dallas Morning News*). When the boom went bust in the 1990s due to consumer indifference to emu meat, hundreds of thousands of birds were at the mercy of captors who often had no money to feed them. Some were left to starve in their pens, others let loose to fend for themselves. Some suffered extreme violence, such as being beaten to death by a baseball bat, at the hands of their frustrated former caregivers.

A similar situation has arisen recently in India, and again captive emus have been freed by the thousands as a result of 'what began as a farming fad and turned into a Ponzi scheme' (Upton). As many as two million emus were concentrated on thousands of farms at the height of the craze just a few years ago. While some large-scale ranches remain, nobody knows how many emus were let loose to fend for themselves after it became clear that the supply far exceeded the demand for emu products. Since the characteristics that allowed emus to survive for millions of years in Australia include the ability to tolerate drought, eat a wide array of plants and insects, survive extreme temperature shifts, and camouflage themselves in forests, it's possible that colonies of discarded emus could establish themselves there and elsewhere even as their habitat in Australia is devastated by climate change.

While such 'rewilding' is devoutly to be wished, let us keep in mind the fact that more emus are currently held in captivity elsewhere than Australia than are free anywhere. While some 700,000 emus stalk the grounds of Australia (Birdlife International), this number is eclipsed by those held by hundreds of zoos (including both major zoological parks and roadside petting zoos) and thousands of ranches (ranging from industrial farms to small homesteads) around the world. Let us consider the impact of that captivity. Emus cannot be considered 'domesticated' birds. There have been no changes to their bodies or behaviour as a result of a few decades of breeding in captivity. Like many other unfortunate prisoners of zoos, emus are

wild animals who have not yet, if they ever would, evolved characteristics that might make captivity more tolerable to them. They are long-legged roamers whose bodies want to walk for most of every day. Hence, those who are not sunk into a state of depression tend to incessantly pace the perimeters of their enclosures.

Emus in captivity endure both invasions of privacy and interference with autonomy. On ranches, they are herded and handled in ways that assault both their dignity and their bodies. At zoos, they may be on display in ways that prevent them from disappearing into the foliage in the way that they usually would when confronted by humans who are strangers to them. At petting zoos, they may be held in tiny enclosures in order to make it possible for strangers to reach out and touch them. Whether on farms or at zoos, emus may be subject to forced breeding programs in which males are mauled for their sperm and then females held down and forcibly inseminated. The resulting eggs may be artificially incubated, so that hatchlings enter the world alone rather than under the feathers of their fathers.

All of these things are done to emus in places that must feel profoundly alien to them, where the weather, the flora, the terrain, and even the skies differ from the environment their bodies come into the world ready to roam. This is true, to a lesser degree, even for emus in Australia, where human development, pollution, and climate change have rapidly reshaped landscapes in only a few decades. This is why I say that emus are literally de-ranged.

5. Derangement

'They're like royalty from another planet… regal, but confused.' Thus said duck rescuer Sarahjane Blum upon encountering emus in the woods of VINE Sanctuary. She had a point. The ecologies in which they evolved have been disrupted and despoiled; they have been displaced within Australia and transported around the world; and now climate change makes even familiar places dangerously strange.

Imagine the psychological impact of this. If emu minds, like ours and those of other social animals, are moulded by interactions with conspecifics, what does it mean for them to grow up not within a small mob of other emus traversing forests filled with foraging opportunities but instead in unnaturally large and crowded aggregations on barren farms or, in

the alternative, alone or among too few others of their kind at a petting zoo or as 'pets'? And what of the material environmental elements that shaped emu bodies, including emu brains, but from which they are now estranged? We humans are only just beginning to understand the complex interactions implicit in ecologies. It's not at all certain that our own brains are capable of glimpsing all of the factors that might be meaningful to emus, much less grasping the ways that the absence of some of these might madden them.

Starting from this baseline derangement, emus must cope with multitudinous crises and traumas engendered by human behaviour. Imagine an escaped emu fleeing a California wildfire or a mob of Australian emus driven by thirst to approach a human settlement where water might be found. Or try, as I have done, to imagine the minds of a pair of emus confined for two decades in a small enclosure at a petting zoo until the facility downsizes and they are unceremoniously dumped in an unfamiliar place (which happens to be a sanctuary, but they cannot know this) where they suddenly encounter wide-open spaces and strangers of many species. Given all that we know about the fight-or-flight response to fright, it's no surprise that Louise sped off in a mad dash that ended in a snowdrift that first night nor that Thelma attacked sanctuary staff members so often over the next few months that we had to create a foraging yard for just the two of them, with a gate that could be closed when visitors were on site.

We can't know exactly what fear feels like to an emu, but birds and humans share the same basic limbic system responsible for emotion (as well as some of the same physical manifestations of fright, such as elevated heart rate and dilated pupils. I've spent enough time with roosters used in cockfighting to know that repeated extreme terror can lead to an avian equivalent of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, wherein a bird is more quick to feel fearful and more slow to return to a relaxed resting state than their peers (jones 'Roosters' 369-370; jones 'Harbingers' 205). Like songbirds, the ancestors of chickens evolved in ecological situations in which they were prey for many species. Perhaps as a consequence of this, such birds not only respond almost instantaneously to a threat such as a hawk or a fox but also seem able to calm down and return to normal foraging almost immediately. But emus evolved in different circumstances. Prior to the arrival of humans in their habitat, they had few predators. Perhaps this is why, at least in my observations, they remain on edge much longer than other birds after any sort of fright.

Both at liberty in Australia and in captivity abroad, emus today encounter far more frequent terrifying happenings than their bodies evolved to survive. At home, there are more wildfires, more motor cars, and more unpredictable human beings with their mystifying weapons. In captivity abroad, emus endure frights on top of the frustrations and indignities already discussed. To be herded and handled by mammals must be always alarming and even more terrifying when the handlers are deliberately hurtful or accidentally rough.

Breeze's mother, whose name we never knew, was one of those emus who turn up on the local news. She and Tiki had been purchased by a retired dairy farmer as pets for his grandchildren. They languished in a shockingly small yard for more than a decade, in the course of which Breeze was hatched and raised by Tiki. And then one day the female jumped the fence. For weeks, people called in sightings as she ambled from place to place, foraging and minding her own business. Then a would-be rescuer decided that she would be better off back in captivity and literally scared her to death (official cause of death: heart attack) while trying to capture her. That tragic turn of events motivated the retired farmer to allow the other two to be taken to a sanctuary. The people who transported them injured Breeze so badly that he couldn't stand, and it was only the extreme ingenuity of caregiver Cheryl Wylie, who devised a sling from old lawn furniture and then invented a physical therapy program for him, that he stalks the grounds of the sanctuary today.

It's a thin line between flight and fight, by which I mean fear and rage. Flight seems to be the default for most of us when faced with a dangerous situation. Only when escape seems impossible are animals likely to stand and fight. While they cannot fly, emus can run rapidly and – as evidenced during the Great Emu War, when they literally dodged bullets – seem to have excellent evasive reflexes. But they cannot run when they are confined in small enclosures, and they cannot run when they have been lassoed by human handlers, and they certainly cannot run when held down to be forcibly ejaculated or impregnated. At such time their bodies may be telling them to fight, fight, fight. But, since emus fight most effectively by means of flying kicks launched from a run, they cannot do that either. People are most likely to develop PTSD when they are unable to escape, fight back, or take any other effective action in response to a horrifying event, and it seems probable to me that this is true for emus too. Thus, it seems safe to conclude – even without also considering indignity, frustration, grief, boredom, and other

sorrows – that the preponderance of emus today exist within a perpetual state of derangement, the visceral experience of which we can only imagine. Nevertheless, they persist and resist, creating new pathways by walking.

6. Outlaws

Emus are outlaws on the planet of the apes, conducting their affairs without regard for regulations created by the hegemonic humans. Runaway emus hide themselves in forests, and mobs of emus descend on fields. As birds who have had war declared upon them by people and who continue to contest both captivity and human hegemony, emus illustrate the outlaw status of nonhuman animals, some of whom are protected by law from the most egregious abuses but none of whom are party to the agreements among humans that laws represent. While it can be easy for humans not to see the violence (armies, prisons, police) backing up even the most democratic of those agreements, emus are unlikely to forget that aggregations of humans always represent a threat.

From their vantage point, we may be the mob of deranged outlaws, endangering everybody by persistently flouting the rules of sensible behaviour that most other animals seem to follow. When a subset of people collectively eschews the norms that make peaceful coexistence among people possible, the rest of us have to decide what to do to bring those folks back into the fold or protect ourselves from them. Do emus see human beings as a subset of animals who have gone wrong? I sometimes think that if there were some sort of parliament of fowls debating what to do about humans, emus would be arguing for the death penalty. I don't think we have to suicidally adopt that particular point of view, but perhaps we could think about what being allies of animals who see us as the problem really might mean. To do that, we will need to consider what emus may have learned about humans in the course of sixty thousand years of eying us warily.

7. Emu Perspectives on the Human

What might emus as a collectivity know about humans, based on their accumulated experiences? First, more so than we are generally comfortable admitting, emus understand that human beings often are dangerous and untrustworthy, so much so that the safest wager would be to presume

danger and duplicity in the absence of other information. Emus know that humans are capable of the most depraved cruelty and cunning trickery. Emus probably don't know that the dishonesty goes as deep as it does, that we fool ourselves without knowing that we are doing so, but that may be what makes this exercise useful: emus know what we *do*, not what we claim to be doing or think we are doing.

Emus know that much of what we do is nonsensical. Watching us polluting our own water supplies, cutting down forests upon which everyone depends, or accumulating thousands of birds only to let them go again, emus would be unlikely to share the assessment of *homo sapiens* as especially wise or uniquely rational. Attuned to our gestures, energy, and tone of voice rather than to the semantics of our sound-symbols, emus may be more aware than we of the role that emotion plays in determining our behaviour.

Emus also know that humans are variable, capable not only of senseless violence but also of kindness. Despite all that humans have done to emus over the centuries, some emus still will initiate friendships with some humans. At times of crisis, such as droughts in Australia, some emus seek out humans who might share water with them. They do this because they know that it is at least possible that we will behave generously. They probably are also prepared to attack if we do not, but the fact that they tend to approach in peace suggests an awareness that some humans sometimes do the right thing.

What can we do with this information? First, focus more on what people do and less on what people say and think. While the causal connections between what we think and what we do may be circuitous or counter-intuitive, altering behaviour is sometimes as simple as making it easier to behave appropriately and harder to cause harm. If something as simple as large and visible recycling bins eclipsing tiny rubbish bins can change behaviour – and it can – there must be many more ways we can nudge ourselves and each other to behave more responsibly. At present, the people promoting such measures tend to be technocrats implementing top-down solutions to state-identified problems or 'conscious capitalists' seeking to create change via consumerism, but there's no reason we could not, working from within an ecofeminist ethos that recognizes the power of place, engender grassroots efforts wherein people collectively agree to create circumstances that foster better human behaviour. Or, taking a page from the

guerrilla emu handbook, direct action of various kinds might make it harder to behave harmfully or easier to behave kindly.

Some may balk at such behaviour-based approaches, which may seem to undermine human dignity. I wrestle as I write, wondering whether and how much we are obliged to honour a dignity that may be implicitly based in self-deceptive notions of the sagacity and rationality of humans. After nearly twenty years of trying to see situations from non-human points of view and more than forty years of trying, by various means, to stop humans from hurting each other, I have come to believe that speciesism contributes to our persistent inability to solve social problems. Speciesism confuses us not only about other animals but also about ourselves. Specifically, speciesism teaches us to vest our dignity in the ways that we allegedly differ from other animals, exaggerating the role that our vaunted reasoning actually plays in determining human behaviour.

Most of our cognition occurs outside of conscious awareness. Our bodies often make choices ahead of our conscious minds, which then scramble to come up with *ex post facto* explanations. Why, then, do we persist in trying to solve the most difficult problems mostly by means of changing what people consciously think, know, feel, or believe? Only because we have devalued our bodies, our emotions, our non-conscious cognition, and our nonverbal ways of communicating. As the word-based world of social media cracks the very foundations of consensus reality, paving the way for demagogues who do not hesitate to harmfully manipulate humans by means of emotion, perhaps it is time for those on the side of peace and equality to set aside Enlightenment ideals of human rationality in order to honestly and whole-heartedly engage people as they are rather than as they imagine themselves to be. For too long, we have imagined rationality as a kind of check on human animality that mitigates our dangerousness to each other. But surely the time has come to see that our frontal lobes, like our thumbs, are value-neutral body parts, equally able to solve problems or wreak havoc. Perhaps it is time to bring the rest of our bodies, which are as much *ourselves* as the narrow range of perception and cognition of which we are aware, into the struggle.

Emus have seen the worst of us and then worse than that. Nonetheless, to this day, emus sometimes approach people with what can be called hope. They may or may not be aware of the complex confluence of choice and circumstance that determine whether any given person

will behave kindly or cruelly on any given day, but they do know – and we should know too – that it is possible for us to behave less selfishly and violently than has been our unfortunate norm. It's up to us to adjust our own situations in order to enhance the likelihood of better behaviour and thereby improve the situations of emus.

8. Eros

Tiki, Breeze, and Adele seem as content as it is possible for emus to be in such strange surrounds as a sanctuary in the north-eastern United States. Louise did not attain that level of contentment before she died, and it seems unlikely that elderly Thelma will attain happiness before following her long-time companion into the grave. A more recent arrival, Earhart, spent we-don't-know-how-many years alone and has not yet figured out how to make friends with either the other emus or other sanctuary residents. He does seem to enjoy the woods, and perhaps he communes with wild birds in ways we don't recognize, but he may never enjoy the pleasure of communion with conspecifics and always will be far from his ancestral homelands.

The situation for emus seems unlikely to improve any time soon, and it seems unlikely that emus themselves feel anything resembling hope that human beings will collectively change our behaviour. But, they do wish for that. When a drought-parched emu in Australia approaches a human habitation in search of water, it is with the wish that the people inside will behave kindly, or at least non-violently. They know they are taking a risk, but deep desire for what they need drives them to try.

Emus know that they are at war. This conflict simmered for sixty thousand years and has been raging for the past two hundred. Emus today may be unable to imagine any other way of being in the world other than perpetual battle with human beings. Nor may they be able to guess what a life less stressed by all of the harms engendered by humans might feel like. And still they stride.

Emus know, whether they think of it in these terms or not, that the environment is increasingly less habitable. They feel thirst and see wildfires. They know. And still they stride.

This suggests to me that we may be asking the wrong question when we wonder whether hope is warranted in the Anthropocene. Emus walk and have kept on walking these

60,000 years since their first encounter with members of the species that would wreck their world again and again not because they have hope for a different future but because they have desire right now. That desire, which we might also call Eros, drives their persistence and their resistance.

Thus, the secret of emu survival isn't hope. It's desire. Emus *want* and so they act. They create paths by walking.

Relentless desire lives in us too. If we want is to be in better relationship to emus and other animals, then we will need to tap into that, resisting any urge to make it more rational or less queer because 'Eros can't be hurried, ordered around, or expected to march in anything like a straight line' (jones 'Eros' 91). If we can draw on our own deepest desires, maybe one day we will be able to stride alongside emus as trusted friends. It won't be easy, but wellsprings of emotion and imagination that have been dammed and diverted by the cults of rationality and consumption are there to help.

Stars in the sky have been burning since before there were people to see them. Among those stars are a cluster that the first people to see emus recognized as having the same shape as those big birds — the so-called Emu constellation (Bhathal and Mason 4.14). It is perhaps a measure of the human predilection for magical thinking that I find it soothing to imagine photons from those stars persistently finding their way to the feathers of emus as they persist despite what has now been a longer than sixty-thousand-year struggle to survive the human. I dare to dream that, whatever we do or don't do, they will continue to stride.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Louise, to the fighting spirit of Thelma, and to the trees among whom Earhart feels most safe.

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