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[Review] Susan McHugh. Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories Against Genocide and Extinction. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 228 pp

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Abstract

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Susan McHugh. *Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories Against Genocide and Extinction*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 228 pp.

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Susan McHugh begins her new book on animal eradications and genocide, *Love in a Time of Slaughters* (2019), with the observation that biodiversity is highest where Indigenous people retain occupation and/sovereignty over country. This fact alone should inspire a form of ‘epistemological humility’ in westerners committed to the ‘long-standing colonial narrative ... that Western cultures are superior when it comes to animal treatment’ (Deckha, 288). And it should inspire westerners to rethink extractive practices that take from the country as if it was an endless resource, free to use in perpetuity without consequence. In Australia, Tony Birch observes that there are multiple ways in which Aboriginal practices of being in country can speak back to this cycle of destruction that comes with colonization. He writes: ‘we must listen to those who have lived with country for thousands of years without killing it’. McHugh’s study highlights how settler colonial practices kill country and people in interconnected practices of domination. Each chapter of *Love in the Time of Slaughters* focuses on a different set of human-animal relationships in places as diverse as North America, Libya, and the Marshall Islands. McHugh focuses on contemporary Indigenous narratives and notes that genocidal threats often come in the form of violence against animal ‘kin’. One chapter examines the work of Tuareg novelist Ibrahim Al-Koni, author of *Anubis: A Desert Novel* (2005), *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Gold Dust*. These novels concern an unacknowledged genocide of ‘more than a hundred thousand nomadic North African tribal people, who starved to death alongside their herds in barbed wire

enclosures' (18). McHugh argues that these novels also demonstrate the 'loving but doomed relationship of interspecies intersubjectivity shared between a Tuareg tribesman and a camel' (18). The relationships are described as growing 'from a spiritually and physically sustaining love that is not easily grasped by outsiders' (19).

Another chapter focuses on the killing of Inuit dogs by Canadian government officials, a series of events experienced as 'a devastating attack on a community, a special form of terrorism that exploits the unique relationship shared between Inuit (in Inuktitut, literally 'people') and their quimmit 'many dogs') (McHugh 123). This 'special form of terrorism' included a 'systematic campaign in the mid twentieth century to exterminate Inuit via their sled dogs' (124), rendering the Inuit immobile, unable to hunt and drastically alter their world and practices, leading to relocations, child removal and other state interventions. Reading sources from the Inuit-initiated Quiiqṭani Truth Commission, McHugh follows the ways in which the retelling of their human animal bond is a form of resurgence and resistance to the 'extinctionist ideologies' (131) that were applied to both people and dogs, to people via their dogs. She also attends to the ways in which these stories become a way of 'sustaining Indigenous metaphysics' (17) and to 'form the response that is the thing that makes the dead useful to sustaining social life' – that is, the novel as archive, a living archive that can be made useful for future resurgence and revitalization of indigenous knowledges. In the case of the Inuit, McHugh points out that 'human-animal relationships felt as historic and vital to a seminomadic culture can provide important material as well as ideological means of mutual escape from the forces of settlement that would otherwise will them to enslavement and eradication' (153).

In contemporary novels that 'revisit old ways of life for knowledge of human-animal relations' (5) she finds 'vibrant form[s] of resistance to the forces of destruction' (1) brought by settler colonialism. And these resistances come through the articulation of the profoundly enmeshed human animal lives with 'birds and bees as brokers of indigenous life' and 'agents of social justice' (159), camel/human brotherhoods in the novels of Ibrahim al-Koni and botched whale-hunting in the case of Robert Barclay's *Melaj: A Novel of the Pacific* (2002) set in the Marshall Islands. These narratives provide examples of 'highly visible, culturally significant

human-animal bonds' that articulate the 'political tensions' and 'embodied lives that anchor human-animal studies' (7).

McHugh argues that the 'cultural complexities of human-animal relationships make them particularly good sites for picking apart how processes of domination become interwoven and therefore, for advancing conversations about the difficult realities of massive deaths of humans alongside other species, conditions that confound metaphorical and other controversial comparisons' (7). The animals in the stories are not merely metaphors (a simplified cipher for telling human stories), because the texts demonstrate how deeply enmeshed human cultures are with other animals not as 'meta' or above, but 'intra', from within. McHugh's careful analysis highlights how in these texts there is no easy way to 'transcend everyone's very basic condition of cross-species entanglements' (8), no untroubled vantage point from which to be 'meta'. Added to this, whereas western perspectives grounded in animal human binaries tend to exaggerate the differences between species in order to bolster hierarchy, McHugh is interested in 'alternative perspectives that are grounded in traditions with different metaphysical assumptions' (14). McHugh is careful to situate each text in relation to indigenous epistemologies that ground them. As such, the book points readers to epistemologies that are likely to be unknown to many of them, and is written from the perspective of an outsider looking in. It draws frequently on debates in posthumanist thinking that McHugh seeks to make relevant to the indigenous knowledges she is interested in. In the introduction, McHugh situates the book alongside posthumanist thinkers who challenge the separation of 'discourse' and materiality in a variety of ways (Shukin, Wolfe, Braidotti, Despret, Hardt and Negri, Derrida), but do not engage with indigenous knowledges (and are likely more relevant to Animal Studies more broadly, than the novels specifically). McHugh acknowledges that the point about the inseparability of discourse and materiality is also made by indigenous scholars. Kim Tallbear points out that when western scholars in Animal Studies 'discover' alternatives to instrumentalist relationships with nonhumans they need to be aware that 'indigenous people have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives' (2014, 234). This is what McHugh is also drawn to. Not only are

'new' anthropos possible, they have always already been there, though subordinated by coexisting systems of domination.

McHugh's literary analysis of life-worlds that brings human and animal death and resistance to the fore is illuminating and insightful. The cruelty and violence that colonization inflicts on human and animals, and their relationships to each other, is made very clear in McHugh's handling of the novels and their subject matter. The analysis necessitates vital engagement with indigenous knowledges that should be better known within Animal Studies scholarship. The analysis also benefits from McHugh's wit and characteristic writerly flair, one of my favourites being her description of the 'birds and the bees' as a 'dead metaphor with dying referents' and destined to become a 'genteelism for extinction' instead of sex. The final chapter takes a more personal turn, and McHugh tells readers why it is that for her love is a 'story that always concerns oblivion' (192); a section that also brings home the point that animals are never simply 'metaphors' in stories that shape and change worlds.

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