

## Misfits in the Breach: Between Ecology and Economy in Helen Humphreys's Wild Dogs

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Article abstract

This essay examines Helen Humphreys's 2004 novel *Wild Dogs*, arguing that the narrative offers resistant responses to the seamless models of ecology and economy that are currently articulated by neoliberal culture. The often difficult lives of the canine and human misfits that populate the novel, alongside their sometimes unexpected actions and decisions, call attention to the inadequacy of ecological and economic narratives that would promise full and perfect, if cutthroat, functionality. The novel not only illustrates the socioeconomic and epistemic ill effects of a zero-sum neoliberal ideology of economic efficiency, but perhaps more importantly for situating neoliberalism within an ecocritical frame, the novel also interrogates the ecological dog-eat-dog story of "nature" that so often serves as the alibi for today's spiralling and violent economic designations of biopolitical disposability. Both dogs and humans in *Wild Dogs* embody rankling remainders of the common-sense predator-prey binary; in the process, they initiate forms of care and relationship unaccounted for by the speculative presumptions of neoliberal biopolitics.

# Misfits in the Breach: Between Ecology and Economy in Helen Humphreys's *Wild Dogs*

JESSICA L.W. CAREY

**I**N *ANIMAL CAPITAL: RENDERING LIFE in Biopolitical Times*, Nicole Shukin calls attention to dominant North American representations of ecological and economic systems and suggests that the hegemonic framing of capitalism as a zero-waste apparatus mimes the equally common-sense model of the ecosystem as a “closed loop,” thereby “serv[ing] an ideological vision of capital as biopolitical totality” (70). In other words, mainstream discourses of ecology and capitalism appear to be mutually reinforcing the idea that we can create and govern systemic models of total efficiency. Yet this narrative effaces something crucial about ideal machines that we learn in high school physics: they remain hypothetical. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, “Where is design, there is waste” (30), and, as we have seen throughout the history of neoliberal capitalism, obsessive designing has resulted in profound systemic designations of economic disposability. Moreover, and perhaps more counterintuitively given the extent to which we have naturalized our model of nature, the hegemonic model of ecology is similarly fallible: as Timothy Morton has traced at length in *Ecology without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought*, the dominant conceptual apparatus of ecology is evidently, like capitalism, an idealized tableau of happy efficiency that belies its remainders and misfits.

What possibilities other than death exist for the inevitable misfits of such heavily idealized systems? Canadian author Helen Humphreys's 2004 novel *Wild Dogs* is preoccupied with this question. The narrative traces the precarious lives of a group of people in an unnamed North American city who have all lost their pet dogs, in one way or another, to a feral pack amassing in the woods at the edge of the city. The human characters are initially strangers but form an uneasy collective in the act of pacing the forest's edge every evening and calling their dogs' names. United and undone by their individual losses — their loss of

the dogs and consequently their perceived loss of the potential to form reliable relationships — the characters must find ways to rework their approaches to both human and interspecies relationships. Humphreys's novel is a significant meditation on the inadequacy of contemporary hegemonic ecological and economic imaginaries: the novel forces us to account for everything that we might pretend these systems throw away, preclude, or erase, and it calls on us to reconsider our usual frameworks of relationship and care in the process.

*Wild Dogs* is not only a narrative about misfits but has also remained somewhat of a misfit itself in the realm of academic criticism: though the novel garnered a Lambda Literary Award for lesbian fiction and was later translated into a stage play in Toronto by Nightwood Theatre in 2008, it remains underread in each of the fields for which it would reverberate most, namely Canadian literature studies, ecocriticism, and animal studies.<sup>1</sup> Alongside these fields, the novel interrogates the supposed seamlessness between and within ecology and capitalism, which remain the primary conceptual apparatuses that we use to understand our collective life. Although most areas of the humanities necessarily continue to theorize the disposability endemic to the imaginary and material frameworks of neoliberalism, the fate of those lives left out of the normative ecological story is of particular concern in ecocriticism and animal studies. For instance, ecocritical theories of “queer ecology,” such as those of Morton and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, bring into relief the selective heteronormativity of prevailing naturalized notions of ecology. Meanwhile, theorists in animal studies continue the effort popularized by Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida, among others, to deconstruct the human/animal binary that constitutively denies altogether the existence of misfits or the non-category that includes domestic animals, the largely impenetrable abyss of animal knowledge, and human-animal relationships premised on something other than sacrificial value. *Wild Dogs* not only renders this matrix of concerns — misfit concerns — in a way that productively develops models of power and knowledge negotiated in recent theoretical work but also gestures toward alternative ecologies of care.

The threat of economic disposability structures the everyday lives of the human characters in *Wild Dogs*, each of whom narrates at least one chapter. Alice, perhaps the novel's “main” character, has recently broken up with her boyfriend, John, after he abandoned her dog Hawk at the

edge of the woods. She has spent her adult life moving between “jobs that other people see as temporary, as jobs for struggling students, as jobs that are beneath most ordinary folk” (29), which she experiences as a cumulative cycle preventing her from either landing a higher-paid position or saving enough money for an advanced education. Alice traces her economic misfit status back to her first job at a carwash:

No one had to be nice to me. That’s what I learnt at the carwash. I wasn’t protected by anything. Even the total slimeball who worked at the car-rental agency down the street could accuse me of stealing loose change from his ashtray and be believed. It didn’t matter that I was reading all the books on the university English list. What mattered was that working at the car wash was lower than almost everything else, and somehow everyone knew this. (30-31)

Her work at all of her contingent jobs has a certain use value for the system, but as the doer of that work, along with scores of workers in the globalized late capitalist regime, she is deemed by the system to be utterly replaceable and thus unworthy of security and protection. Society’s designation of Alice as disposable signals that neoliberal logic functions as a form of biopolitics, a form of politics that in turn operates primarily as a conceptual apparatus of security: as Michel Foucault famously argued, biopower is a form of governance aimed at securitizing the population(s) deemed worthy of protection, marked by “the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it . . . consists in making live and letting die” (*Society* 247). Ultimately, biopower relies on the aggregation and marshalling of particular kinds of knowledge concerning populations — knowledge that generates biopolitical norms capable of sorting lives worthy of protection from lives that we as a society should either “let die” or exclude more vigorously (kill) *in the very name of* protecting the lives that matter.<sup>2</sup>

Other characters share Alice’s economic misfit status and thus find themselves beyond the protective border of neoliberal biopolitics. For Malcolm, a recluse who has also lost his pet dog to the feral pack, mental illness occasions his withdrawal from the economy and from human community, and he lives alone in a farmhouse filled with his dead mother’s antiques. Lily’s position is also marked by disposability because of disability: Lily has suffered brain damage in a fire and subsequently seems to lose status as a recognized subject worthy of being nurtured. Her only human company is the loose pack of people who

assemble nightly to call their dogs; when she goes missing, neither her parents nor the authorities seem to know or care about any details of her life, and her parents speculate that perhaps she has killed herself (52). Lily's lack of standing in the *oikos* figuring a concomitant lack of status in the broader economy — à la Gregor in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* — is reiterated in several other characters. Walter is relegated to the basement after his wife dies because his grown daughter and her husband worry that Walter's little dog will threaten the safety of their baby, thus demonstrating how important the logics of futurity and speculation are to an often exclusionary discourse of long-term protection and security. Ironically, however, the somewhat abstract figure of "the child" whom we recognize from this ideology of futurity<sup>3</sup> does not always procure protection for actual youths, who instead are often treated as disposable threats to the efficient functioning of the neoliberal economy, as Henry Giroux and others have persuasively argued.<sup>4</sup> Teenaged Jamie is this latter kind of figure in the novel, defined by society at large as destined for delinquency and viewed by his stepfather as a worthless yet threatening presence in the family home and thus always as a potential target of violence.

Significantly, though, Humphreys does not frame economic disposability as a condition affecting only a smattering of misfits; rather, her central characters' lives unfold against a backdrop of systemic precarity that infuses the whole city, radiating outward from the now-shuttered furniture factory that was the city's economic heart. Alice's father's dismissal from the factory after a disabling work accident is echoed years later in the mass layoffs that follow the factory's closure, swallowing the livelihoods of seemingly innumerable men in the main characters' lives, such as Alice's ex-boyfriend, John, and most of Jamie's friends' parents, including Spencer, a character whose economic despair becomes pivotal in the novel. As David Harvey argues, the unanchored structure of neoliberal finance and its consequent ability to capitalize on successive crises by various mechanisms of "accumulation by dispossession" have created an economic system in which virtually no one is able to feel secure. Understanding this ideology of neoliberalism — dog eat dog, kill or be killed, "there is no alternative," et cetera — as a kind of tautological, self-fulfilling discourse concerned with scrambling for security in vain, and at all costs, is a key feature of Foucault's articulation of neoliberalism as a biopolitical regime of "veridiction," in which

economic ideology has become implemented in such a pervasive way that the only measure of worth left considering is whether a given action or actor is economically viable (*Birth* 32). Alice notes the ubiquity of this biopolitical stance, declaring that “It has always surprised me how much people buy into appearances, how they don’t try to see beyond a uniform or a position” (29). Repeatedly in *Wild Dogs*, this regime of veridiction seems to “prove” itself on the backs of the misfits: they must not be worthy of the system’s consideration if they cannot succeed on the system’s terms.

Eventually, we see the limit case of this deadly logic in Spencer’s actions. Unemployed while his wife works, Spencer is yet another economic misfit. The neoliberal shift to a feminized service economy locks him into a role that he never intended to play: “It pisses me off to have her out there earning our living and then coming home and giving me shit. . . . I was never meant to be a housewife” (130). Spencer is also part of a group of local men who decide to go into the woods to hunt the pack of wild dogs in an attempt to address the real threat that the dogs pose to the area’s livestock. The hunters do find the pack in the woods and kill several of the dogs. It also becomes clear that Lily has decided to join the dog pack herself, and Spencer shoots and kills her in the midst of the melee. Spencer and his fellow hunters are emblematic of the fact that neoliberal biopolitics is a field of power relations in which everyone participates, not just the state: everyone is made to feel responsible for deciding who is worthy and who needs to be eliminated from the game. Ian Baucom argues that this form of biopolitical logic was generated in tandem with the rise of late capitalism and the disciplinary skills that it requires: we all need to learn how to assess and speculate on each other’s level of risk and thus worth. We are all to some extent, even the misfits, insurance agents — participants in a “speculative epistemology . . . by which value detaches itself from the life of things and rearticulates itself in the novelistic theater of the typicalizing imagination” (106). In other words, neoliberal biopolitics prioritizes our ability to see and act on “types” of others whom we encounter.

Along these lines, Spencer’s account of Lily’s death reveals the killing to be primarily an act of biopolitical management, analogous to the sorting logic deployed by the economic system that has rendered Spencer a misfit: “It wasn’t a dog. I think I knew that from the beginning. But it was wild. I knew that too” (133). For him, the only way to

protect himself is to discern and then eliminate “the wild,” that which threatens his hope of retaining some agency within the system: “Is the only choice either to be the wild thing or to shoot at the wild thing? I think so. There is no living safely with wildness. If you let a wild thing into your house, it tears everything to pieces” (136). It is clear that Spencer has internalized the thoroughly naturalized zero sum narrative of biopolitical survival and security that runs through our common imaginations of both the economy and ecology: eat or be eaten. Yet his drive to cleanse his life of wildness renders this common-sense narrative increasingly difficult to accept without question, especially when he admits that, deep down, he knows that “I shot the girl, not because I thought she was a dog, but because I knew she was a woman” (136). In one sense, Spencer’s admission is a textbook illustration of what Carol J. Adams has been arguing for decades — and unfortunately still needs to — concerning patriarchal culture’s obsessive transubstantiation of “animal” and “female” signs as a means of objectifying and doing violence to both (see Adams). Yet it is also potentially illuminating to consider the statement from the perspective of neoliberal biopolitics and its influence on how we understand both “nature” and the economy. Certainly, Spencer has a particular problem with women since his emasculation is central to his disposability in the economic system. However, his statement also illustrates how particular forms of hatred and fear become uncritically subsumed in the supposedly indiscriminate substitutability of “wildness” that forms a key part of the logic of neoliberal biopolitics: ostensibly, *any* being falling below perceived utility for the system at any given moment might be deemed disposable. In other words, in Spencer we gain a palpable education in how dominant economic ideology functions to naturalize biopolitical exclusions and preferences. Femaleness might be the relevant “wild threat” for Spencer, but dog eat dog is understood to be the general rule, and there is not supposed to be any remainder. In other words, in our popular understanding of both ecology and the economy, we are supposed to do whatever is necessary to survive, and we are supposed to assume that, when it comes to the “circle of life” known as survival, it is not personal, it is just lunch.

In light of this characteristic of the hegemonic model of ecology — its function as an alibi for neoliberal biopolitics — it becomes increasingly difficult to continue framing the ecological sphere as a restorative refuge from the utterly flawed relational system of neoliberal economics.

The impulse to do so, however, is still understandable: since, as Shukin describes, we tend to figure ecology as an ideal, “closed loop” system in which everything nourishes and is nourished by something else, it remains easy for Humphreys to present “nature” as an alternative sanctuary for misfits, situated literally and figuratively outside the city. Lily briefly experiences nature in this way when she becomes part of the dog pack. Yet, as Spencer illustrates, Humphreys more often thwarts such a move: he might begin the day of the hunt revelling in his oneness with nature, experiencing “[m]y body in the body of the world” (129), but the ensuing killing shatters this sense of harmony and purity. It is already clear in the novel that the contemporary economy is producing misfits that cannot easily be recuperated for sunny functionality, but Humphreys is evidently also interested in probing the misfit remainders of ecology. Throughout *Wild Dogs*, she dwells with the misfits of this model of ecology in three interlinked ways: she refrains from pretending that we can ever separate the economy from ecology for our idealizing purposes in the first place; she refuses to skim over or euphemize the rupturing violences that help to constitute ecology’s much-romanticized holism; and, perhaps most importantly, she simply affirms the existence and experiences of those left out of the typical ecological narrative.

Humphreys’s attention to the entanglement of economy and ecology situates her work as a response to the originary claims of Canada’s settler ideology, in which nature and money have often tended to figure each other in an overly neat and confident manner. Humphreys perhaps most explicitly invokes this legacy in a different work, “Natural History,” a series of vignettes published in *Queen’s Quarterly* that I will only briefly discuss here. She begins the series with a text box labelled “Beaver” comprised of two charts: “Hudson’s Bay Company Standard of Trade, 1706,” listing the number of pelts that one should trade for items such as “6 dozen metal buttons” (114); and “Value of Furs,” which provides guidelines for the value of various pelts relative to that of the beaver, such as “4 wolf for 1 beaver” (115). Yet the stories that follow “Beaver” belie the easy economic equations of early Canadian commerce and illustrate how the obvious co-implication of ecology and economy is hardly a ground for concluding that the systems are ideal machines that we need not question or that they ever were. Instead, Humphreys renders our participation in North America’s rich ecosystems — and even our utter dependence on them — with deep ambivalence rather



than the “it is what it is” sensibility that tends to imbue our current concept of ecological interdependence. The vignette “American Robin,” for instance, illustrates that not even bare necessity is sufficient to erase a boy’s conflicted feelings about the robins that he and his brother need to hunt for the survival of their family: his mother tells him sacrificial folklore about the robins, but this “does not stop him from wanting to free the bird somehow from death” (118). Such ambivalence departs from our commonplace attitude toward the ecological fact that beings kill one another for food; as I have argued elsewhere (see Carey), more representative of our culture’s response to the predator-prey relationship is prominent animal welfarist Temple Grandin’s justification of animal agriculture by comparing it favourably with the ecological alternative of “hav[ing] my guts ripped out by coyotes or lions while I was still conscious” (235). My argument is not that ecological interdependence is untrue or escapable but that the totalizing manner in which we currently exonerate the violence endemic in ecological relationships — to the extent that anyone trying to interrogate the ethical quandaries of such violence, such as vegetarians, are popularly accused of “a denial of reality that can be its own form of hubris” (Pollan 362) — is both a symptom of and a licence for our naturalized acceptance of the dog-eat-dog violence of neoliberal capitalism.

Perhaps fittingly, the characters in *Wild Dogs* that provoke the most examination along these lines are the dogs themselves. In *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Donna Haraway articulates what has become a basic premise in animal studies for the analysis of human-animal relationships: “Dogs are not an alibi for other themes. . . . [Dogs] are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (5). Evidently, Humphreys agrees: the pet/feral dogs at the centre of the novel are not mere symbols of what happens to the human characters; they participate in the relational ecology of the narrative on their own terms. Relationships between the humans and the dogs are tangible and substantial, to the extent that, when the humans go into the woods to look for Lily, Alice admits that they are equally interested in finding the dogs (60). At the same time, however, the dogs are also figuratively crucial to understanding the problems that I have been tracing with our current imaginaries of ecology and economy since they live and die at the fraught intersection of these two figurative and material apparatuses. To be sure, what

happens to the dogs reinforces and develops the novel's meditation on economic disposability: they begin as pets deemed worthy of protection and material comforts such as walks, sharing human beds, sausage rolls, and dog treats; however, once they become feral, the same dogs are understood by society, if not by their former owners, as a disposable threat. Significantly, their disposability becomes material reality for them — they are hunted down and exterminated — once they begin to kill livestock. Ecologically, they are “just” killing for food; economically, they are the threat, and the livestock are the beings worthy of protection (for the time being, of course).

Once more, though, Humphreys implies that perhaps we should not let our notions of ecology off the hook in our haste to condemn the violences of the economy. The dogs also engender intense reflection in the human characters on the violent nature of nature. Above I noted that the dogs were “just” killing for food, and the quotation marks are necessary because there is a current of dis-ease concerning eating that runs through *Wild Dogs*. Just as in “American Robin,” the ecological necessity of killing for food does not place the practice above reproach or at least above ambivalence and contemplation. The pain of such violence, especially for the “eaten” and those immediately adjacent to the “eaten” in the ecological web, is not so easily reconciled. For instance, immediately after Alice recounts her experience of economic disposability at the car wash, she tells another story from the same period in her life about the dryers at a nearby laundromat being used solely to process pigs' ears into dog chews. Her anecdote not only confronts us with the fact that our mundane indulgence of ecology expressed in producing dog chews depends on pails “full of pink triangles of flesh, bloody and with coarse blond hairs still stuck to them” (32), but also indicates that it is difficult to separate the violence of a dog's apparently ecological habit of chewing on a pig's ears from the violence of the economy that chews up and spits out Alice. Both are presumed to be a matter of course in contemporary society; neither is so in the hands of Humphreys.

Even Spencer, who yearns for immersion into the predator-prey ecology of hunting, finds that he cannot fully rationalize its violent consequences: “I wasn't keen to kill them, but I was keen to hunt them. Sometimes you forget one thing in the shadow of the other. You forget that hunting is about killing. So . . . I tried to be reverent about knowing this was the last morning they would spend on this earth. That's

what a good hunter does. He has respect for what he kills. He even feels sad that he has to kill it. But the killing of the dogs was set in place by the act of hunting” (131). Here Spencer frames hunting as a straightforward sequence of causal steps — a narrative — that nevertheless carries embedded within it something that resists the terms of that narrative, something that he is not “keen” to think about or even remember: the death of the animal. The story of ecology is evidently simple — beings need to die to keep the cycle of nourishment going — but an inscrutable excess rankles; there is a sense that this narrative is too limited to capture everything happening affectively, ethically, and even just materially in animal lives, human and otherwise.

Characters continue to identify — and identify *as* — misfits of the common-sense model of ecology throughout *Wild Dogs*. Jamie, for instance, who reminds Alice of a large dog “constantly trying to insert himself into the landscape” (25), nonetheless feels alienated from the ecological narrative offered by his teacher: “Fight or flight, that’s how one of my teachers described different animals. . . . I can’t seem to run or fight. I don’t know what sort of animal that makes me” (100). In other words, in terms of his teacher’s ecological story (and since he is evidently not yet lunch), Jamie remains only in the mode of being excluded from the story altogether. Lest we conclude that the remainders of the ecological story are exclusively human, however, which would undoubtedly open the door to a recuperation of the standing-ready man/nature divide of human exceptionalism, there are several key examples of non-human animals seemingly exceeding the frame set by the typical ideological tableau of ecology. Watching a heron waiting patiently for a fish to swim by, Alice admits to “wanting the story to go the way it should, for effort to be rewarded” (66); here we not only see the constructed character of the “story” of ecological predator-prey relations but also hear the resonance, again, between the ideological promises of neoliberal economics and those of the go-to ecological model. Yet Alice observes how often the story does not “go the way it should,” noting that “[t]here is sometimes no reward for patience” (66). Turning her focus to a school of fish in a nearby river, she meditates further on the unexpected remainders and excesses of ecology’s predator-prey story. She observes the fish forming a wheel shape that enables their collective surveillance of their surroundings, only to be attacked from above by an osprey. On the one hand, her conclusion that “[d]eath waits just beyond

the danger we can imagine” (67) merely describes the basic condition for successful predation in an ecosystem; on the other, the evocative phrasing situates death beyond any definitive ability to understand the dynamics of ecological predation, beyond even humanity’s masterful scientific imagination,<sup>5</sup> thus recalling Spencer’s deep ambivalence concerning killing animals.

In other words, Alice frames death itself as a kind of misfit of ecology. Moreover, it appears to be so not only in the metaphysical sense that we might assume she means and then dismiss; in fact, Alice is interested in moments at which death does not seem to serve an ecological purpose — the ways that death becomes a misfit according to the very terms of the ecological story that posits death as the constitutive condition for nourishment. She observes dead fish in the water just as “something starts eating the dead fish from the water side” (67). On “the water side” of their bodies, the fish are fulfilling the ecological nourishment story: “They are being consumed by the world they inhabited” (67). Yet Alice is equally intrigued by what is happening on the other side of the dead bodies: “in the world they visit — that flat, blank sky above them — they float undisturbed. The fish never had a desire to be here, and this world has no desire to taste them now” (67-68). Unlike the typical sacrificial discourse in which we recuperate all animal death for an ecological purpose, it seems that Alice wishes to consider the idea that “purpose” and violent death might not be entirely co-extensive, that the sacrificial equation might not be as neat as it looks. This possibility reverberates as she next observes a raccoon eating a fish, and, “just as it seems he’s enjoying his meal, the raccoon stops eating, lays the fish at the base of the tree, and scrambles away into the woods. There was no danger. No other animals approached him. There was no sound from me. He hadn’t eaten enough to be full” (68). Again, animals seemingly resist fully playing the roles set out for them in the typical predator-prey story: the food is left uneaten for no intelligible reason.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, in one sense, this is too broad and too individualized a reading of ecology; after all, the fish will nourish something else if not that raccoon, or at the least its body will give nutrients to the soil, and so on. But these facts are somewhat to the side of the point that I am trying to make: it is not that ecology is not, for the most part, a circle of life, that nutrients are not endlessly recycled, but that the limited ways in which we tend to represent these processes and then map them onto the

imaginaries of our collective life end up papering over too many of the aspects of life that are just as real as mutual consumption: senselessness, loss, futility, joy, play, the abysses of love — these all become misfits if they are not legible in terms of purpose.<sup>7</sup> Rather than seeing it as one relationship among many, in key respects we have normatively elevated the predator-prey relationship to an all-encompassing metanarrative that we pretend is sufficient to validate both our economic system and our place in the world. In fact, the model is glaringly incomplete. Alice's lover, Rachel, a wildlife biologist, suggests as much when she opines,

The truth of our communion with nature is the bird lifting from the branch, the white of the deer's tail as it bounds away into the undergrowth. We make a story up to connect all these fugitive glimpses together. The story might not be true at all, but the moments are, and somehow we find it unbearable to live with just the moment. (173)

Given what we witness in *Wild Dogs*, it seems that we “find it unbearable to live with just the moment” for at least two major reasons — beyond the fact that we humans seem to love a good story, a grand model. First, the “story” itself does violence to our lived moments, making many of them painful to inhabit. Although, as Morton reminds us in *The Ecological Thought*, “All that we call Nature is mutation and often pointless” (44), the biopolitical regimes of economic and ecological “health” persist in categorizing whole segments of population as disposable, with the accompanying detrimental effects for those lives.<sup>8</sup> Second, to distinguish for a moment the ecological story that we construct from the predator-prey relations that evidently happen regardless of our attempts to rationalize them, it is important to dwell on a point raised by Spencer and other characters in the novel: just because death is apparently necessary in nature, the pain and confusion that it causes for both the dying and the surviving are no more sensible or indeed bearable for that. As animal studies theorist H. Peter Steeves has recently argued,

Such means of gaining nutrition — such means of *living* — developed because they were possible. Nature explores any possibility it can get its hands on. . . . *I* could have designed a nicer world than this one — perhaps with less diversity and perhaps with less imaginative flourish, but definitely with less blood and suffering, a

world where everyone photosynthesizes, for instance, and nothing stalks and murders anything else. It isn't hard to imagine a better life. But this is not the way of nature. (200)

Ultimately, it seems, ecology does not provide any supreme justifications; no wonder that we “make up” stories to explain ecology, for we are left to make sense — moment to joyful or unbearable moment — of this non-sensical world that we inhabit.

Generally, then, *Wild Dogs* is concerned with how to go on living in a condition of having been left behind, whether by the economy or by ecology. It is in this respect that the novel resonates most strongly with recent theories of queer ecology; for instance, the reworking of melancholia by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands is also an attempt to theorize how we might deal with ecology's remainders otherwise, beyond the scope of the official narrative. She articulates an approach to ethics in which disposability becomes a cause of reflection and ethical engagement rather than ignored or treated as a condition that we need to get over or accept, arguing that “[p]articularly in a context in which certain lives are considered ungrievable . . . melancholia represents a holding-on to loss in defiance of bourgeois (and capitalist) imperatives to forget, move on, transfer attention to a new relationship/commodity” (354). Here, rather than recuperated back into the smooth circle of life, the losses of those deemed disposable stubbornly persist in us, constituting us in a manner that potentially “propels a *changed* understanding of the present” (333). No easy task, to be sure: in *Wild Dogs*, Rachel signals the anxiety inherent in working from the position of the left behind, observing a dead fox on the road and its living companion who evidently “didn't quite know what to do except to keep this uneasy vigil over the body of its mate” (168). She remarks that “[t]his is what love makes possible. This is how it can end up and this is why it is to be feared. I never want to be that fox. I never want to feel that pain. And I am not talking about the dead fox, but the living one” (168-69). Yet the main characters' loss of their dogs is the crisis point that requires these characters to explore new approaches to their relationships with others, because it forces them to confront, finally, the condition of having been left out, rendered disposable.

The fact that the loss of pet dogs is a “rock bottom” requiring a fundamental change in the characters' perspectives on relationships sheds crucial light on the role that non-human animals play in our imaginary

of human disposability. In biopolitical terms, cultural discourse implies that even misfits, if they are human, have the biopolitical upper hand of knowledge — and therefore a measure of control — over the non-human world. Humphreys limns this restoration of human mastery baldly with respect to Spencer, as we have seen, and equally so with both Alice's ex, John, whose frustration with his unemployment and unstable relationship with Alice provokes him to drive Hawk out to the woods, and Jamie's equally insecure stepfather, who, according to Jamie, has decided that "[t]he dog had to go because I loved him and my stepfather's hatred of me had to be the strongest thing in the house" (95). Yet Humphreys also traces the extent to which our biopolitical presumptions about non-human lives are not always malicious; rather, such presumptions are often a constitutive aspect of care.

The love that is possible between humans and dogs has inspired much theorizing by animal studies scholars such as Haraway, Marjorie Garber, Alice Kuzniar, and Susan McHugh, among others. Such work often explores the potential for a profusion of affects that could resist or rewrite the heteronormative policing of desire and care. For instance, Kari Weil suggests that "[t]o peer into dog love is to redefine the nature of Eros as necessarily more than . . . if not other than the heterosexual, species-specific desire of a male for a female. It is a love of family that expands the boundaries of family, a love that binds without domination" (96). To some extent, *Wild Dogs* traces the fraught process of initiating or even conceiving of a relationship that would bind "without domination," suggesting that, under the weight of our overdetermined ecological and economic systems, realizing the kind of dog love that animal studies often champions can be a challenging process. Returning to Foucault, his proto-biopolitical model of "pastoral power" can help us to trace this difficulty. Pastoral power is "a power of care. It looks after the flock, it looks after the individuals of the flock, it sees to it that the sheep do not suffer, it goes in search of those that have strayed off course, and it treats those that are injured" (*Security* 127). Some recent work in animal studies has returned to the pastoral model to examine the interspecies roots of paternalism in discourses of care. Anand Pandian, for example, notes that "[r]elations between shepherds and flocks rely upon a radical difference in kind between pastors and the populations in their care. Flocks are made up of beings that would scatter, starve, suffer, die, or simply lose their way without the careful atten-

tion of someone else with better judgment” (86; see also Shukin, “Tense Animals”). Taking up the lens of pastoral power enables a reading of the ways in which we persist in couching our care of others — animals perhaps most of all — in the ability to know and predict their needs and desires. The main characters in *Wild Dogs* might not have much, but at least they feel that they have that power of care over their dogs, until the dogs thwart even those meagre expectations. As Alice realizes, “[o]ur mistake was in believing that they were more attached to us than we were to them. . . . We couldn’t imagine a world for them where we weren’t central” (85).

So what kind of care can flourish in the wake of pastoral power? Perhaps predictably, the answers in *Wild Dogs* are incomplete and tentative, but the characters set forth some compelling possibilities that can help to develop some of the ethical options currently emerging in relevant realms of theory. When Walter’s and Alice’s dogs inexplicably return, restoring the human-pet relationship, both Walter and Alice choose to renew these relationships in the knowledge that they can never really know why the dogs left or returned. In this move, the characters affirm a key argument of many in animal studies, such as Matthew Calarco, who concludes that the only hope for more ethical relations lies in a commitment “always to proceed agnostically and generously, as if we might have missed or misinterpreted the Other’s trace” (81). Likewise, summing up Haraway and reiterating many others working in animal studies and subjectivity theory more broadly, Colleen Glenney Boggs notes how for Haraway “Loving an animal is the ultimate kind of such other-love because it opens us up to the alterity of the other and the possibility that the reciprocity we hope for will not follow” (65). I have been attracted to such ideas for years: given the violent presumptions that license biopolitical violence, what better alternative than to try our best to *stop presuming*?

But what does this “agnostic” restraint look and feel like on a day-to-day basis, especially since it appears that we have no hope or desire of ceasing to interact with each other? To understand how *Wild Dogs* sheds some light on this question, it is useful to return to the model of melancholia as a potentially transformative practice (see Mortimer-Sandilands). If we read carefully the characters’ varying responses to the violence of the present systems, then it becomes clear that divergent forms of melancholia are at work, some more conducive to a changed



relationship with the world than others. Alice's lover, Rachel, for instance, is deeply affected by past traumas, cutting herself off from interpersonal connections in a biopolitical attempt to protect herself. In this more traditional rendering of melancholia, we can see a microcosm of the grand narratives of ecology and economy: on both personal and societal levels, a perceived overarching negative determinism allergically crowds out the moments and experiences that are irreducible to the dog-eat-dog model. Instead, then, the transformative form of melancholia that gives hope for a different future to the main characters in *Wild Dogs* depends on their refusal to get over or give up those irreducible moments. Perhaps it does not really sound like melancholia when Alice says "I don't think any more that my life is about what has happened to me. It's about what I choose to believe" (185); however, if we read her comment in terms of a melancholic refusal to subscribe to economic and ecological determinisms, then we can interpret it along such lines.

In other words, in the context of our normative imaginaries, evidently "proceeding agnostically" actually requires constant decision making and, in fact, *preferential* decision making in favour of possibilities that resist the overdetermined axiom that all unknowns are likely dangerous. In other words, implementing in the everyday the somewhat aporetic practice of refraining from presumption involves consciously making some decisions to presume against the "type" that might seem more secure in our usual insurance agent-like biopolitical imagination. For instance, once Hawk returns and Alice has to decide whether to let her out of her sight, she concludes, "I just have to trust that she won't disappear" (184), even though she has just as much evidence that Hawk will leave her as that she will stay. To proceed as if the unknown is not hazardous is considered to be constitutively stupid in our security-driven culture, but several characters begin to recognize that doing so is the only way to preserve experiences, however small or fleeting, of something other than the threatened trauma of disposability. Humphreys traces this overturned presumption of stupidity with Lily, seemingly the only one cognitively limited enough not to see the inherent danger in going into the woods to find the dogs, yet she is unexpectedly welcomed into the pack, ironically remaining relatively safe until the group of hunters attempt to restore their normative brand of security. Such decisions are not limited to human experience either; for instance, Alice notices while watching deer feed that as prey animals most of

their movements seem to be governed by fear but that, as their mouths make contact with the grass, “[t]hey trust the world completely in that instant, and I can see how their enormous fear is equally balanced by this capacity to trust in their surroundings, and there is peace in that” (36). In another instance, Alice and Rachel are visited separately by a small bird, seemingly for no reason, and briefly “blessed with its wild trust” (85): the highly rational Rachel notes that “I don’t have an answer for that. I don’t know why the bird trusted me” (174) but admits that she hopes it will come back.

Throughout *Wild Dogs*, characters repeatedly frame the decision to trust others as non-sensical, lacking evidence that such trust is warranted; ultimately, however, the novel tends to suggest that forging connections with others outside the ostensibly securitized prescriptions of dog-eat-dog ecology and neoliberal biopolitics can constitute a lived resistance to disposability. Alice decides to trust her dog’s return, Jamie and his mother decide to leave his stepfather to live in a cabin on Malcolm’s property, and Walter moves in with Malcolm, initiating an odd cohabitation marked by a considerable measure of personal distance. Walter reasons that the arrangement is “[n]ot what I would have imagined for myself, not what I would have foreseen from the beginning, but right nonetheless” (158). All of this is not to deny that being rendered disposable can be deadly but to affirm that it is worth questioning why our models of social existence articulate such limited and reductive expectations of each other’s behaviour and our surroundings. Misfits, human and otherwise, are more than a mere symptom of the inadequacy of our conceptual systems: they are no less real than the systems that ignore them, and *Wild Dogs* provides a glimpse of a relational model beyond the systemic decree of ubiquitous disposability.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this exclusion are not my main concern here, though I think that an ecocriticism scholar’s recent passing comment to me that the novel is “soapy” might be illuminating: possibly, the novel’s at-times sentimental prose style does not mesh with the desires of many in these contingent and/or emerging fields that we emphasize “authoritative” narratives to articulate our critical concerns, such as J.M. Coetzee’s novels in the case of animal studies. Although I understand a strategic focus on potentially canonical texts, I am convinced that a wide range of texts deserves a place at the ecocritical and animal studies table, especially since these fields are part of a broader critique of our culture’s normative

claims about itself, including the claim that recognizably “masterful” prose — often, of course, a watchword for masculinist prose — is the only prose worthy of serious critique.

<sup>2</sup> As Foucault describes this logic, “the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is [viewed as] something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (*Society* 255).

<sup>3</sup> I borrow this language of “futurity” primarily from Lee Edelman’s 2004 *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, in which Edelman interrogates “the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (3-4).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Giroux’s *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?*, in which Giroux notes that, “[h]istorically, it has become commonplace for youth to be treated equivocally by adults as both a threat and a promise; the ambiguity that characterizes this mix of fear and hope has given way in the last 20 years to a much more one-sided and insidious view of young people as lazy, mindless, irresponsible, and even dangerous” (71).

<sup>5</sup> Here I am reminded of ecocritic Greg Garrard’s point that “ecology is something we are *constituted* to be likely to be wrong about most of the time” (502).

<sup>6</sup> Engaging with Vicki Hearne’s work on animal training, Kari Weil similarly notes that, “[j]ust as, in Hearne’s view, dogs and horses often reject the stories we tell about them, so may they reject the stories that we tell about ourselves” (61-62).

<sup>7</sup> Here my argument echoes a similar but different list of ecological misfits offered by Morton: “Where does [environmental rhetoric] leave negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness? Are these simply nonecological categories?” (16).

<sup>8</sup> Garrard has recently suggested that we not criticize the discourse of “health” into oblivion because there is likely no “normative framework as emotive and accessible as ‘health’” (510) for communicating the concerns central to environmental discourse. Although we might agree that the rubric of health is unparalleled in its normative force, I maintain the necessity of critiquing it for that very reason: this critiquing is different from proposing that we abolish affirming any desire for health in writing about the environment; rather, it is a call to ensure that we always keep a critical eye on how this discourse might operate to exclude and/or to provide naturalizing alibis for various biopolitical norms worth interrogating.

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