



FAKULTA  
HUMANITNÍCH STUDIÍ  
Univerzita Karlova

Appraisal of MA Thesis

**A Strange Affection: Gender, Race, and Interspecies Relations in  
Francis Ratcliffe's Australian Travelogue**

by

**Faolan Thompson**

Faolan Thompson's account of the travelogue *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* (1947) written by „English ecologist and future conservationist Francis Ratcliffe (1904-1970) is trully an intellectual delight to read. Through close reading of the literary/scientific text, the thesis discusses settler colonialism in Australia in its complex relations to interspecies and soil ecologies, economics but also to gender and racial formations that underwrite societies in Australia as well as in the imperial Britain. It is difficult to believe that Ratcliffe's book has not yet received analytical attention and was not studies closely. Fortunately, Faolan Thomson found the book and found it touching. The genre of travelogues has proven an excellent and rich source for historical studies of mentalities, every-day histories as well as concepts of racial/gender/sexual and other forms of othering. All this is in this exploration of imperial expansion and exploitation. Furthermore, Faolan Thomson reads the text as a material traces of how and „where [Ratcliffe's] sense of the world, including his perspective on human and animal agency and individuality, are troubled“ and thus open to new and more vulnerable reorganisation. With each chapter, hence, we follow different categories and power axes to shuffle – scientific epistemology, economics of the Empire, gender and race otherness and lastly animality—to create a much more complicated and ambivalence rich concepts of more than human ecology/economy.

Faolan Thomson presents Francis Ratcliffe as an embodiment of many contradictions of the Empire, but also as someone who through his practices and affections disidentifies with the Empire, as someone who „embrace[s] traditional masculinity, especially as it pertains to colonial science and exploration“ (63), yet also as someone who models „inter-active“ and response-able“ perspectives, actions and approaches vis-a-vis flying foxes and other species he encountered in „the outback“.

Discussions of more than human ecology, of interspecies relationships (or forms of intra-actions) tend to fall prey to romanticisations – take as an example the ways in which mushrooms and mycorrhiza have become used symbols for solidarity on the political Left; or the ways in which the microbes are hailed (and subsequently commodified) as the ultimate healing agents reconnecting our embodiments (the brain and gut) to intended organic “health” – this does not happen in Thomson's analysis. They manage to embrace and stay with the deep and troubling ambivalences that are part of the intra-actions between Ratcliffe and the bats. Symptomatically,

the first “touching” encounter with the bat is the moment when the bat dies in (and by) his hand (65). Thus, Ratcliffe’s ecological concerns and his attempt to bring ‘evidence’ as to flying foxes’ innocuousness to farm economies, is never fully free of the colonial/gender/racial violence.

How does the analysis of this historical – and particularly situated—text speak to doing ecology in the antropocene? And to the current “rewilding” attempts, or ecological approaches grounded in what Jamie Lorimer has called “probiotic management”? Does this text help us understand their hidden colonial, racial/gender/disability implications?

Faolan Thomson’s text beautifully and compassionately touches on the ways in which Ratcliffe – as an agent of the empire – was affected (“it is a narrative of being affected”, 71) by different forms of life and vitality (human, floral, animal). But is there a way how we can account for the other pole of the various moments of the “intra-activity” and being affected? Is it possible to reach beyond the text to experience the larger than human contact?

Faolan Thomson has written a very dense, context and theoretically-informed text that is yet very attentive to the primary source. Their reading of the text, as is clear from the above, is as multi-layered and rich as critical and analytical. It is also, again I repeat myself, beautifully written.

I am very happy to recommend the thesis to defence with a clear “excellent” grade. I would love to see the thesis—or its sections—revised and published and/or developed into a PhD thesis.

In Prague, September 18, 2022

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of two distinct, stylized parts that appear to be initials or a name.

Kolářová Kateřina