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HUMANITNÍCH STUDIÍ
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Evaluation of the MA Thesis *A Strange Affection: Gender, Race, and Interspecies Relations in Francis Ratcliffe's Australian Travelogue* by Faolan Thompson

In this thesis, Faolan Thompson examines the 1930s scientific travelogue *Flying Foxes and Drifting Sand* by British zoologist Francis Ratcliffe. Turning to a literary genre that is marked by ‘a constellation of conflicting social, linguistic, and political forces’ (50), Thompson’s wager is twofold: that unlike Ratcliffe’s scientific writings, the book allows exploring affective encounters and interspecies entanglements *together with* Ratcliffe’s imbrication in practices and epistemologies of science, Empire, gender, race and settler colonialism (the unmarked categories of whiteness, masculinity, and humanness), *and* that such an exploration can affect and instil more-than-human ‘response-ability’ (Haraway) not only for Australian fruit bats in times of accelerating habitat destruction and extinction.

Drawing on feminist science studies and environmental humanities, their close reading indeed offers a compelling *ecological* account that holds human and more-than-human relations together. Through different focal points – biography and empire; the body and the senses; animal relations and violence; and Ratcliffe’s relationship with the bats – chapters differently situate and examine Ratcliffe’s explorations. More specifically, they show how ‘country’ gets under Ratcliffe’s skin and entrains his senses, how animal violences and settler alliances tell about race and colonialism; and how the bat ‘looks back’ and Ratcliffe learns to meet her gaze – and (attempts to) kill her.

The strength of the work is that transverses and connects multiple fields of inquiry, including feminist science studies, environmental humanities, multispecies studies and critical studies of race without prioritising any one. Reiterative re-contextualisation strikes up new conversations with(in) these fields that demand that the reader is and stays *engagé*. In well written prose, Faolan’s writing takes time to probe and revise earlier readings (‘When I first marked these passages, I was struck by how blatantly sexual they seemed; re-reading them in the context of Ratcliffe’s sense of embodiment, I am struck by how playful the language actually is—it is almost as though he is poking fun at common conventions of landscape



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metaphor in Western writing' (32). They powerfully shows how humanist inquiry is entangled with the more-than-human world and vice versa. Most importantly in my view, they avoid resolution: Ratcliffe is neither villain nor saviour; affection and care can include, even necessitate, violence and death, without violence ever being simply exonerated (as a sacrifice for science, for example). As readers we are thereby propelled to 'stay with the trouble', much as Thompson argues for Ratcliffe's text – where a sleepless night after his encounter with impoverished Aboriginals and a dying dog might not speak so much of 'sentimentality' (55) but of a haunting of encountering the undead.

Such a wide-ranging investigation inevitably means that more could have been said on concepts such as symbiogenesis (10), actants, or the material-semiotic that will remain opaque to readers unfamiliar with these theories. *Flying Foxes*' protagonists somewhat regrettably make their compelling appearance only in the final chapter.

In line with the emphasis on the 'mutual constitution of objects and agencies of observation' (10), for the defence, I would like to invite Faolan to reflect on their research apparatus and what they might have learned about their positionality in the process of doing this research. Further, since I find the fourth chapter the densest, I would like to hear more about the relation of humanness, animality, race and environmentality in relation to the bull story and the proposition that 'a closer reading of the story might ... illustrate the availability of whiteness as a cruel and arbitrary structure, told through the bull's cruelty to each other' (48).

Overall, the thesis meets and exceeds the requirement, and I recommend the grade excellent (1)

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Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, Ph.D., supervisor