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Wandering the aisles of my local Woolworths in April this year, I noticed a large number of chocolate bilbies replacing chocolate rabbits. In these harsh economic times it seems that even the Easter bunny is in danger of losing his Easter job. While the changing shape of Easter chocolate may seem to be a harmless affair, the expulsion of the rabbit from Easter celebrations has a darker side.

In this paper I look at the campaign to replace the Easter bunny with the Easter bilby, and the implications this mediated conservation move has for living rabbits in the Australian ecosystem. Essential to this discussion is the premise that studies of ecology must take into account the impact of media and culture on environmental issues. Of particular interest is the role of narrative, and the way the stories we tell about rabbits determine how they are treated in real life.

While I recognise that the Australian bilby's struggle for survival is a tale which should be told, I also argue that the vilification of the European-Australian rabbit is part of the native/invasive dualism which has ceased to be helpful, and has instead become a motivator of unproductive violence. In place of this simplified dichotomous narrative, I propose an ethic of "ecological remembrance" to combat the totalising eradication of the European rabbit from the Australian environment and culture.

The Bilby vs the Bunny: A Case Study in "Media Selection"

Easter Bunny says, 'Bilby, I want you to have my job. You know about sharing and taking care.'

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I think Australia should have an Easter Bilby.

We rabbits have become too greedy and careless.
Rabbits must learn from bilbies and other bush creatures'.

The lines above are taken from Ali Garnett and Kaye Kessing's children's story, *Easter Bilby*, co-published by the Australian Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation as part of the campaign to replace the Easter bunny with the eco-politically correct Easter bilby. The first chocolate bilbies were made in 1982, but the concept really took off when major chocolate retailer Darrell Lea became involved in 2002. Since this time Haigh's chocolate, Cadbury, and Pink Lady have also released delicious cocoa natives for consumption, and both Darrell Lea and Haigh's use their profits to support bilby assistance programs, creating the "pleasant Easter sensation" that "eating a chocolate bilby is helping save the real thing" (Phillips).

The Easter bilby campaign is a highly mediated approach to conservation which demonstrates the new biological principle Phil Bagust has recognised as "media selection." Bagust observes that in our "hybridised global society" it is impossible to separate "the world of genetic selection from the world of human symbolic and material diversity as if they exist in different universes" (8). The Australian rabbit thrives in "natural selection," having adapted to the Australian environment so successfully it threatens native species and the economic productivity of farmers. But the rabbit loses out in "cultural selection" where it is vilified in the media for its role in environmental degradation. The campaign to conserve the bilby depends, in a large part, on the rabbit's failures in "media selection". On Good Friday 2012 [Sky News Australia](#) quoted Mike Drinkwater of Wild Life Sydney's support of the Easter bilby campaign:

Look, the reason that we want to highlight the bilby as an iconic Easter animal is, number one, rabbits are a pest in Australia. Secondly, the bilby has these lovely endearing rabbit-like qualities. And thirdly, the bilby is a beautiful, iconic, native animal that is struggling. It is endangered so it's important that we do all we can to support that.

Drinkwater's appeal to the bilby's "endearing rabbit-like qualities" demonstrates that it is not the Australian rabbit's individual embodiment which detracts from its charisma in Australian society. In this paper I will argue that the stories we tell about the European-Australian rabbit's alienation from Indigenous country diminish the

species cultural appeal. These stories are told with passionate conviction to save and protect native flora and fauna, but, too often, this promotion of the native relies on the devaluation of non-native life, to the point where individual rabbits are no longer morally considerable. Such a hierarchical approach to conservation is not only ethically problematic, but can also be ineffective because the native/invasive approach to ecology is overly simplistic.

A History of Rabbit Stories

In the *Easter Bilby* children's book the illustrated rabbit offers to make itself disappear from the "Easter job." The reason for this act of self-destruction is a despairing recognition of its "greedy and careless" nature, and at the same time, its selfless offer to be replaced by the ecologically conscious Bilby. In this sacrificial gesture is the implicit offering of all rabbit life for the salvation of native ecosystems and animal life.

This plot line slots into a much larger series of stories we have been telling about the Australian environment. Libby Robin has observed that settler Australians have always had a love-hate relationship with the native flora and fauna of the continent (6), either devaluing native plants, animals, and ecosystems, or launching into an "overcompensating patriotic strut about the Australian biota" (Robin 9).

The colonising dynamic of early Australian society was built on the devaluation of animals such as the bilby. This was reflected in the introduction of feral animals by "acclimatisation societies" and the privileging of "pets" such as cats and dogs over native animals (Plumwood). Alfred Crosby has made the persuasive argument that the invasion of Australia, and other "neo-European" countries, was, necessarily, more-than-human. In his work, *Ecological Imperialism*, Crosby charts the historical partnership between human European colonisers in Indigenous lands and the "grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche" (194) of introduced life that they brought with them.

In response to this "guilt by association" Australians have reversed the values in the dichotomous colonial dynamic to devalue the introduced and so "empower" the colonised native. In this new "anti-colonial" story, rabbits signify a wound of colonisation which has spread across and infected indigenous country. J. M. Arthur's (130) analysis of language in relation to colonisation highlights some of the important lexical characteristics in the rabbit stories we now tell. He observes that the rabbits' impact

on the county is described using a vocabulary of contamination: "It is a 'menace', a 'problem', an 'infestation', a 'nuisance', a 'plague'" (170). This narrative of disease encourages a redemptive violence against living rabbits to "cure" the rabbit problem in order to atone for human mistakes in a colonial past.

Redemptive Violence in Action

Rabbits in Australia have been subject to a wide range of eradication measures over the past century including shooting, the destruction of burrows, poisoning, ferreting, trapping, and the well-known rabbit proof fence in Western Australia. Particularly noteworthy in this slaughter has been the introduction of biological control measures with the release of the savage and painful disease Myxomatosis in late December 1950, followed by the release of the Calicivirus (Rabbit *Haemorrhage* Disease, or RHD) in 1996. As recently as March 2012 the [New South Wales Department of Primary Industries](#) announced a 1.5 million dollar program called "RHD Boost" which is attempting to develop a more effective biological control agent for rabbits who have become immune to the Calicivirus. In this perverse narrative, disease becomes a cure for the rabbit's contamination of Australian environments.

Calicivirus is highly infectious, spreads rapidly, and kills rabbits en masse. Following the release of Calicivirus in 1995 it killed 10 million rabbits in eight weeks (Ponsonby Veterinary Centre). While Calicivirus appears to be more humane than the earlier biological control, Myxomatosis, there are indications that it causes rabbits pain and stress. Victims are described as becoming very quiet, refusing to eat, straining for breath, losing coordination, becoming feverish, and excreting bloody nasal discharge (Heishman, 2011). Post-mortem dissection generally reveals a "pale and mottled liver, many small streaks or blotches on the lungs and an enlarged spleen... small thrombi or blood clots" (Coman 173).

Public criticism of the cruel methods involved in killing rabbits is often assuaged with appeals to the greater good of the ecosystem. The Anti-Rabbit research foundation state on their Website, [Rabbit-Free Australia](#), that:

though killing rabbits may sound inhumane, wild rabbits are affecting the survival of native Australian plants and animals. It is our responsibility to control them. We brought the European rabbit here in the first place — they are an invasive pest.

This assumption of personal and communal responsibility

for the rabbit “problem” has a fundamental blind-spot. Arthur (130) observes that the progress of rabbits across the continent is often described as though they form a coordinated army:

The rabbit extends its ‘dominion’, ‘dispossesses’ the indigenous bilby, causes sheep runs to be ‘abandoned’ and country ‘forfeited’, leaving the land in ‘ecological tatters’.

While this language of battle pervades rabbit stories, humans rarely refer to themselves as invaders into Aboriginal lands. Arthur notes that, by taking responsibility for the rabbit’s introduction and eradication, the coloniser assumes an indigenous status as they defend the country against the exotic invader (134). The apprehension of moral responsibility can, in this sense, be understood as the assumption of settler indigeneity.

This does not negate the fact that assuming human responsibility for the native environment can be an act of genuine care. In a country scarred by a history of ecocide, movements like the Easter Bilby campaign seek to rectify the negligent mistakes of the past. The problem is that reactive responses to the colonial devaluation of native life can be unproductive because they preserve the basic structure of the native/invasive dichotomy by simplistically reversing its values, and fail to respond to more complex ecological contexts and requirements (Plumwood). This is also socially problematic because the native/invasive divide of nonhuman life overlays more complex human politics of colonisation in Australia.

The Native/Invasive Dualism

The bilby is currently listed as an “endangered” species in Queensland and as “vulnerable” nationally. Bilbies once inhabited 70% of the Australian landscape, but now inhabit less than 15% of the country (Save the Bilby Fund). This dramatic reduction in bilby numbers has multiple causes, but the European rabbit has played a significant role in threatening the bilby species by competing for burrows and food. Other threats come from the predation of introduced species, such as feral cats and foxes, and the impact of farmed introduced species, such as sheep and cattle, which also destroy bilby habitats.

Because the rabbit directly competes with the bilby for food and shelter in the Australian environment, the bilby can be classed as the underdog native, appealing to that larger Australian story about “the fair go”. It seems that the Easter bilby campaign is intended to level out the threat posed by the highly successful and adaptive rabbit

through promoting the bilby in the “cultural selection” stakes. This involves encouraging bilby-love, while actively discouraging love and care for the introduced rabbits which threaten the bilby’s survival.

On the [Rabbit Free Australia Website](#), the campaign rationale to replace the Easter bunny with the Easter bilby claims that:

Very young children are indoctrinated with the concept that bunnies are nice soft fluffy creatures whereas in reality they are Australia’s greatest environmental feral pest and cause enormous damage to the arid zone.

In this statement the lived corporeal presence of individual rabbits is denied as the “soft, fluffy” body disappears behind the environmentally problematic species’ behaviour. The assertion that children are “indoctrinated” to find rabbits love-able, and that this conflicts with the “reality” of the rabbit as environmentally destructive, denies the complexity of the living animal and the multiple possible responses to it. That children find rabbits “fluffy” is not the result of pro-rabbit propaganda, but because rabbits *are* fluffy! That Rabbit Free Australia could construe this to be some kind of elaborate falsehood demonstrates the disappearance of the individual rabbit in the native/invasive tale of colonisation. Rabbit-Free Australia seeks to eradicate the animal not only from Australian ecosystems, but from the hearts and minds of children who are told to replace the rabbit with the more fitting native bilby. There is no acceptance here of the rabbit as a complex animal that evokes ambivalent responses, being both worthy of moral consideration, care and love, and also an introduced and environmentally destructive species.

The native/invasive dualism is a subject of sustained critique in environmental philosophy because it depends on a disjunctive temporal division drawn at the point of European settlement—1788. Environmental philosopher Thom van Dooren points out that the divide between animals who belong and animals who should be eradicated is “fundamentally premised on the reification of a specific historical moment that ignores the changing and dynamic nature of ecologies” (11).

Mark Davis et al. explain that the practical value of the native/invasive dichotomy in conservation programs is seriously diminished and in some cases is becoming counterproductive (153). They note that “classifying biota according to their adherence to cultural standards of

belonging, citizenship, fair play and morality does not advance our understanding of ecology" (153). Instead, they promote a more inclusive approach to conservation which accepts non-native species as part of Australia's "new nature" (Low). Recent research into wildlife conservation indicates a striking lack of evidence for the case that pest control protects native diversity (see Bergstrom et al., Davis et al., Ewel & Putz, Reddiex & Forsyth). The problematic justification of "killing for conservation" becomes untenable when conservation outcomes are fundamentally uncertain.

The mass slaughter which rabbits have been subjected to in Australia has been enacted with the goal of fostering life. This pursuit of creation through destruction, of re-birth through violent death, enacts a disturbing twist where death comes to signal the presence of life. This means, perversely, that a rabbit's dead body becomes a valuable sign of environmental health. Conservation researchers Ben Reddiex and David M. Forsyth observe that this leads to a situation where environmental managers are "more interested in estimating how many pests they killed rather than the status of biodiversity they claimed to be able to protect" (715).

What Other Stories Can We Tell about the Rabbit?

With an ecological narrative that is failing, producing damage and death instead of fostering love and life, we are left with the question—what other stories can we tell about the place of the European rabbit in the Australian environment? How can the meaning ecologies of media and culture work in harmony with an ecological consciousness that promotes compassion for nonhuman life?

Ignoring the native/invasive distinction entirely is deeply problematic because it registers the ecological history of Australia as continuity, and fails to acknowledge the colonising impact of European settlement on the environment. At the same time, continually reinforcing that divide through pro-invasive or pro-native stories drastically simplifies complex and interconnected ecological systems.

Instead of the unproductive native/invasive dualism, ecologists and philosophers alike are suggesting "reconciliatory" approaches to the inhabitants of our shared environments which emphasise ecology as relational rather than classificatory. Evolutionary ecologist Scott P. Carroll uses the term "conciliation biology" as an alternative to invasion biology which focuses on the eradication of invasive species. "Conciliation biology recognises that many non-native species are permanent,

that outcomes of native-nonnative interactions will vary depending on the scale of assessment and the values assigned to the biotic system, and that many non-native species will perform positive functions in one or more contexts" (186). This hospitable approach aligns with what Michael Rosensweig has termed "reconciliation ecology"—the modification and diversification of anthropogenic habitats to harbour a wider variety of species (201). Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Mark Bekoff encourages a "compassionate conservation" which avoids the "numbers game" of species thinking where certain taxonomies are valued above others and promotes approaches which "respect all life; treat individuals with respect and dignity; and tread lightly when stepping into the lives of animals" (24). In a similar vein environmental philosopher Deborah Bird Rose offers the term "Eco-reconciliation", to describe a mode of "living generously with others, singing up relationships so that we all flourish" (*Wild Dog* 59).

It may be that the rabbit cannot live in harmony with the bilby, and in this situation I am unsure of what a conciliation approach to ecology might look like in terms of managing both of these competing species. But I am sure what it should *not* look like if we are to promote approaches to ecology and conservation which avoid the simplistic dualism of native/invasive. The devaluation of rabbit life to the point of moral inconsiderability is fundamentally unethical. By classifying certain lives as "inappropriate," and therefore expendable, the process of rabbit slaughter is simply too easy. The idea that the rabbit should *disappear* is disturbing in its abstract approach to these living, sentient creatures who share with us both place and history.

A dynamic understanding of ecology dissipates the notion of a whole or static "nature." This means that there can be no simple or comprehensive directives for how humans should interact with their environments. One of the most insidious aspects of the native/invasive divide is the way it makes violent death appear inevitable, as though rabbits *must* be culled. This obscures the many complex and contingent choices which determine the fate of nonhuman life.

Understanding the dynamism of ecology requires an acceptance that nature does not provide simple prescriptive responses to problems, and instead "people are forced to choose the kind of environment they want" (189) and then take actions to engender it. This involves difficult decisions, one of which is culling to maintain rabbit numbers and facilitate environmental resilience. Living within a world of "discordant harmonies", as Daniel

Botkin evocatively describes it, environmental decisions are necessarily complex. The entanglement of ecological systems demands that we reject simplistic dualisms which offer illusory absolution from the consequences of the difficult choices humans make about life, ecologies, and how to manage them.

Ecological Remembrance

The vision of a rabbit-free Australia is unrealistic. As organisation like the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation pursue this future ideal, they eradicate rabbits from the present, and seek to remove them from the past by replacing them culturally with the more suitable bilby. Culled rabbits lie rotting en masse in fields, food for no one, and even their cultural impact in human society is sought to be annihilated and replaced with more appropriate native creatures. The rabbits' deaths do not turn back to life in transformative and regenerative processes that are ecological and cultural, but rather that death becomes "an event with no future" (Rose, *Wild Dog* 25). This is true oblivion, as the rabbit is entirely removed from the world.

In this paper I have made a case for the importance of stories in ecology. I have argued that the kinds of stories we tell about rabbits determines how we treat them, and so have positioned stories as an essential part of an ecological system which takes "cultural selection" seriously.

In keeping with this emphasis on story I offer to the conciliation push in ecological thinking the term "ecological remembrance" to capture an ethic of sharing time while sharing space. This spatio-temporal hospitality is focused on maintaining heterogeneous memories and histories of all beings who have impacted on the environment. In Deborah Bird Rose's terms this is a "recuperative work" which commits to direct dialogical engagement with the past that is embedded in the present (*Wild Country* 23). In this sense it is a form of recuperation that promotes temporal and ecological continuity. Eco-remembrance aligns with dynamic understandings of ecology because it is counter-linear. Instead of approaching the past as a static idyll, preserved and archived, ecological remembrance celebrates the past as an ongoing, affective presence which is lived and performed.

Ecological remembrance, applied to the European rabbit in Australia, would involve rejecting attempts to extricate the rabbit from Australian environments and cultures. It would seek acceptance of the rabbit as part of Australia's "new nature" (Low), and aim for recognition of the

rabbit's impact on human society as part of dynamic multi-species ecologies. In this sense ecological remembrance of the rabbit directly opposes the goal of the Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia to eradicate the European rabbit from Australian environment and culture.

On the Rabbit Free Australia website, the section on biological controls states that "the point is not how many rabbits are killed, but how many are left behind". The implication is that the millions upon millions of rabbit lives extinguished have vanished from the earth, and need not be remembered or considered. However, as Deborah Rose argues, "all deaths matter" (*Wild Dog* 21) and "no death is a mere death" (*Wild Dog* 22). Every single rabbit is an individual being with its own unique life. To deny this is tantamount to claiming that each rabbit that dies from shooting or poisoning is the same rabbit dying again and again.

Rose has written that "death makes claims upon all of us" (*Wild Dog* 19). These are claims of ethics and compassion, a claim that "we look into the eyes of the dying and not flinch, that we reach out to hold and to help" (*Wild Dog* 20). This claim is a duty of remembrance, a duty to "bear witness" (Wiesel 160) to life and death. The Nobel Peace Prize winning author, Elie Wiesel, argued that memory is a reconciliatory force that creates bonds as mass annihilation seeks to destroy them. Memory ensures that no life becomes truly life-less as it wrests the victims of mass slaughter from "oblivion" and allows the dead to "vanquish death" (21). In a continent inhabited by dead rabbits—a community of the dead—remembering these lost individuals and their lost lives is an important task for making sure that no death is a mere death. An ethic of ecological remembrance follows this recuperative aim.

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