

Perspective

**Catherine Owen’s “Dodo”  
as Animal Rights Theory**  
Terry Trowbridge

Western imperial culture burdens Canadian society with an unjust hierarchy of animals. Thinkers implicitly use hierarchy to arrange animals along a “chain of being,” from creatures worthy to exist, to unworthy expendable victims. The justifications of hierarchy sometimes include subtle reasons that an animal is doomed. At other times, the need for justifying the existence of one creature instead of another is blatant. Whether subtle or obvious, the chain of being projects a purpose onto everything within its purview. Colonial explorers must imagine the world in terms that allow an empire to conquer the animals that live in new territory. Therefore, the injustices of imperialism result in a logical disconnection between the realities of indigenous life forms and western societies. In the twenty-first century, the blinders that allowed Europeans to expand their political domains over the earth are being vigorously called into question. The logical disconnection between western culture and the conquered world is being subverted by apparent imminent ecological catastrophes around the world.

Canadians live in an ecologically diverse nation that is the political result of cultural and ecological imperialism by several European powers. Comfort and survival depend on how well Canadians can overcome the legacies of colonization by challenging the logic of environmentally unsound thinking. People need to explore the reasons that they are facing so many impending global catastrophes. Catherine Owen, a Canadian poet, has written a poem, “The Dodo” (13), that reveals multiple layers of prejudice in the legacy of the dodo’s extinction. “The Dodo” lays bare the rationalizations used to justify forced extinction in ways that allow readers to radicalize their own critical thinking about animal rights and the environment.

Dodos are important to Owen because they are famous. She compares them to Mae West's "dubious glamour" and also to a poster child "of the vanished." As for Owen herself, she claims that when she was a child the dodo was the only creature of which she was aware that had been erased from the earth. For the dodo to be the only extinct creature that Owen knew about in her youth is a startling claim since every Canadian child knows about dinosaurs. However, extinction is not enough for describing the dodo. The book in which "The Dodo" appears, *The Wrecks of Eden*, is about the tension between naturalists and their culture (22), as well as the pressures of citizenship and modern human-driven extinction (48–49, 60). There must be a profound effect on her environmental politics and Canadian identity if awareness of these tensions began to develop in her early youth. That the dodo stands apart even from dinosaurs suggests that Canadian children already develop a critical consciousness that distinguishes natural selection from irresponsible killing by humans.

Owen noticeably foregrounds two ways that the dodo acts as a symbol of hierarchy. One is a sort of explanation based on competition or will-power. Competitiveness is a loose rationalization about evolution that is used as a justification for violence. The second symbol is a subtler expression of how that irrational sense of competition now affects a claim to entitlement based on intelligence.

At issue is the legitimacy of extinction. Human selection, as opposed to natural selection, is based on conscious efforts to manipulate a species or habitat. Human society is replete with examples of conscious selection in action (Darwin 71–100). There are also many examples of extinction as an unintended consequence of human expansion (Crosby 273) and development (Carson 111). Twenty-first century thinkers like Australian Susan Hawthorne (93–100) and Indian Vandana Shiva (*Biopiracy* 4–5; *Stolen Harvest* 72–74) have already made the point that the extinction of a species through imperialist activities is the result of illogical claims about how ecologies are constructed. Hawthorne and Shiva report results of colonial enterprise that are severely damaging to local creatures and indigenous human societies. The human and ecological effects of disconnected rationalizations can be profound and even

global. Owen is remarking on how the events surrounding one species' extinction have become a globally recognized signifier for a wide range of human activities and justifications that result in environment degradation and loss of biodiversity.

What Owen demonstrates is a way in which seventeenth-century colonists create an argument that the dodo deserved to die because existence is a privilege of creatures that compete with human hunting. She paraphrases the sailors that hunted the bird: "It deserved to be exterminated, just sitting there like that, doing nothing" (13). The colonist's assumption is that guns and hounds are justified if the prey behaves passively. In the twenty-first century the irrationality of this claim is becoming obvious. The dodo was passive because guns and hounds were not components of the local ecology. There was no way for European weapons or hunting techniques to fit logically into the dodos' lives. The result was that they were eradicated.

There is no evidence that colonists of the early 1600s were thinking about the possibility of eradicating an entire species from the earth through their own actions. A comprehensive theory of evolution and extinction did not reach European public consciousness until the Victorian era. Owen imagines justifications that would lead to one of the tragic conceits of a European public who use theories of evolution for their own rationalizations. The sailors' logical errors translate into the assumption that the factors of natural selection, which are diverse, unconscious, and unplanned over thousands of generations (Darwin 164), can be used as justification for an extinction caused by human actions carried out over a few decades.

The other way that the dodo is used to construct hierarchy is subtly embedded in English colloquialisms. What Owen calls "unflattering epithets" are the unconscious evolution of embedded Victorian values. "Don't be such a dodo ... Dull as a dodo" resonate as mocking unintelligent subjects who are caught being naive (13). As a metaphor, the dodo is a curious lapse of logic in the English language. The binary combination of smart and stupid are not necessarily made out of direct opposites in the metaphorical dodo. Intelligence is assumed to be synonymous with the ability to compete. The ability to recognize hunters

and compete with a human predator is a very specific kind of violent intellect. However, “Dull as a dodo” can apply to any naive statement or stupid misunderstanding. The ability to recognize a murderous alien is privileged as a relevant contrast for every possible type of mistake. Comparing the dodo to a foolish human is a very subtle way that violence is made ubiquitous in everyday speech. The human prejudice that legitimizes violence against animals is indirectly turned against other humans. Through the offhand remark, “Dull as a dodo,” a flawed hierarchy of intellects in the animal world is being used to define innocuous actions in human life.

“The Dodo” is a poem demonstrating how prejudices that misappropriate privileges over other species inform the way theories of extinction rationalize the failure of humans to control the consequences of their imperial projects. Those consequences continue to resonate in the language of the twenty-first century. So then how does the critical consciousness of “The Dodo” fit into the broader range of twenty-first century political thought, environmentalism and animal rights?

Likely, Owen is not the only Canadian to connect the animals of her youth to the politics of her adult life. Early in her life an extinct animal made a lasting impression on her sense of history. This poem indicates that the way children think about extinction and imperialism has the potential to resurface years later as part of the heritage that Canadians put to use in radical meditations on culture. *The Wrecks of Eden* marks a transitional point in Canadian poetry at large. Canadian writing has always incorporated themes relevant to expansionism and geography. The poets of the first decade of the twenty-first century revolutionize these themes in order to redefine their relatedness to the environment. Contrasted with a few other environmentally related collections that were published at the beginning of this decade, Owen’s work stands out as politically volatile. Tim Lilburn’s 1999 book *To the River* struggles with an aesthetic that belongs to the wilderness of Saskatchewan as much as it belongs to the man who has inherited Saskatchewan’s human settlements. Christopher Dewdney’s 2002 epic *The Natural History* is a meditation about the poet’s primal experiences that are part of ongoing cycles found in the fossil record of the Canadian Shield and the Niagara

escarpment. Di Brandt's 2003 collection *Now You Care* envisions the new dilemmas of human relationships during a full-fledged environmental apocalypse.

Catherine Owen's 2001 book *The Wrecks of Eden* is possibly the first book of Canadian poetry that successfully sustains, from beginning to end, a sense of critical consciousness that relates the author to the historical injustices of imperialism in the animal world. The poem "The Dodo" is an example of how her poetry can be seen as primary texts in the development of reflexive theory for environmental politics and animal rights. Owen is therefore a contributor to more than just this century's literary canon. The Australian social theorist Susan Hawthorne writes about various poets from around the world contributing to feminist environmental theory and feminist anti-imperialist theory in her influential 2002 book *Wild Politics* (56). Hawthorne cites Suniti Namjoshi in Bangladesh (6), Flora Nwapa in Nigeria (51), Ama Ata Aidoo in Ghana (52), and Hawthorne herself (38, 60). Poems like "The Dodo" should also be treated as Canada's early contributions to the global revolutionary politics of the twenty-first century.

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