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Book Review

Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation by Juno Salazar Parreñas
reviewed by Hilary Hagar | MA student, Western University, London, Canada



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Conservation in Colonial Context

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reviewed by Hilary Hagar

MA, ANTHROPOLOGY

COLLABORATIVE SPECIALIZATION IN ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

WESTERN UNIVERSITY, LONDON, CANADA

The three species of orangutan that populate the islands of Borneo and Sumatra are the only non-human Great Ape species in Asia and represent some of the most threatened primates in the world. Although the establishment of rehabilitation centers and sanctuaries is nothing novel to primate conservation, the growing global consumption of palm oil in recent decades and the subsequent destruction of orangutan habitats, has increasingly put pressure on these slow-growing primates. Reflecting an interdisciplinary and novel approach to these familiar concerns is the work and care Dr. Juno Parreñas has put into reconceptualizing what it means to decolonize, and how to do so within the context of conservation and rapid extinction threat on both population and genus levels. An expert at crossing disciplines, Dr. Parreñas is currently an assistant professor of the core faculty in the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University, where she continues to pursue research that bridges animal studies, conservation, gender, economics, and feminist science. *Decolonizing Extinction* is a composite of her own personal experiences and the stories others shared with her during the two years she spent conducting her doctoral research in Sarawak, a semi-independent state within Malaysia on the northwestern side of the island of Borneo.

With specific attention paid to the Bornean orangutans of Sarawak (*Pongo pygmaeus pygmaeus*) and the people who care for them, Parreñas argues for thinking outside the “traditional” aims of most current conservation initiatives, which have largely maintained inherent limitations and shortcomings typical of top-down approaches. These can be easily identified by the exclusionary protection of natural spaces through fences, signage, or even firearms in extreme cases. She questions this approach to conservation, which is largely defined by privileged and limited access to lands and resources at the cost of local economic sustainability. Parreñas suggests alternatively that cohabitation and shared vulnerability with the non-human other, as experienced by orangutan caregivers, is needed for longer term conservation success. Drawing influence from various scholars like Donna Haraway, Maria Lugones, Eve Tuck, and Wayne Yang, her feminist engagement with this topic aims to shift the ways in which we think about the conservation and preservation of endangered species by highlighting the levels of *othering* within these efforts. For Parreñas decolonizing extinction means “experimentally living together, feeling obliged to others, without a sense of safety or control that requires violent domination, and while being open

to the uncertain possibility of experiencing harm from contact with others, even when that potential harm may be fatal” (185).

Through stories gathered in semi-structured interviews and informal meetings with interlocutors, *Decolonizing Extinction* aims to present the reader with a deconstruction of how we think about the extinction and conservation of non-human others and how this can be enacted. This approach allows Parreñas to weave an informative and evocative narrative of the current bleak outlook for critically endangered orangutan populations. For Parreñas, decolonization takes on a broader meaning to encompass the non-human. Through this conceptual framework, which is influenced by her background in gender and feminist studies, she challenges many of the assumptions ingrained into conservation and ecosystem management. These often perpetuate a problematic and othering dichotomy between human and nature, in addition to sidelining or outright villainizing the interests of local communities. The decolonization of extinction “is about vigilance against domination, purity, and work toward new multiracial futures following contact. [...] liberation constrained by social relations and not about liberation constrained by justice on the basis of humanity” (191-192). This extends into advancing new and more long-term solutions to human/ non-human conflicts over space and resources by questioning how exactly we are conceptualizing the *other* in conservation.

Parreñas argues that this expression of decolonization is currently being enacted in the *work of care*, likened to “tough love,” provided by the local staff and volunteers at the Lundu and Batu Wildlife Centers who risk their lives to be orangutan caregivers. Parreñas focuses on these two sites where orangutan “rehabilitation” is dominated by a captive mating program which emphasises species-level survival rather than actual habitat re-immersion. The contradiction here is that orangutan habitats continue to shrink, so while the captive populations might increase, even in the short term most of the orangutans under care cannot be *rehabilitated* to the wild. Finally, Parreñas calls for a re-imagining of how we see ourselves living with the non-human other by accepting the risks of vulnerability, and to consider ways of interacting otherwise. In Parreñas’ words: “[t]aking decolonization seriously [...] entails questioning deep-seated assumptions about life and ecology: who is living, in what ways are we in relation with them, what constitutes selves in these relations, and to what obligations are we committed” (6-7).

Parreñas’ ethnographic book fills a gap in current conservation literature for solutions to global crises by employing a feminist understanding of how the “other” is defined and disadvantaged, combining this into an interdisciplinary approach. These crises demand projects that step outside traditional exclusionary responses to habitat loss or fragmentation towards planning that is flexible enough to work in complicated contexts without risking broad generalizations that have in the past caused more harm than good, and which, unfortunately, continue to do so. Parreñas utilizes the applicable experiences and dialogues she has had with the orangutans and caregivers at both wildlife centers to illustrate her main points. Primarily, decolonizing extinction and how we treat endangered species is about being open to vulnerabilities. This includes an acceptance of the inevitability of death and the need for humankind at large to come to terms with surrendering control. She argues that by recognizing what the *affect* of those vulnerabilities are and what coexistence with *others* means, we can learn to live within this affective and embodied space together.

The first two chapters introduce the reader to the contexts in which the social relations that follow throughout the rest of the book are situated and develop. Parreñas starts with a brief history and political overview of Sarawak for the reader, as well as the origins of orangutan care and rehabilitation there. These sections provide examples of the embodied affective relations that occur, in direct and indirect ways, between orangutans and humans at different levels, including local caregivers, international volunteers, and visiting tourists. In doing so, she successfully demonstrates where control is illusionary or limited at best and that vulnerability is unavoidable.

In chapters three and four, Parreñas introduces relations with and between space and loss, both of which are shared experiences by orangutans and Sarawakians. With regard to space, Parreñas shows how the social behaviour of the normally highly solitary orangutan changes in the relatively small roaming areas of the rehabilitation centers, where females are forced to face and interact with often violently aggressive males more frequently than they would in the wild. In addition, the reader is presented with the contradiction of a breeding program, which condones coerced copulations between young female orangutans and adult males who are twice their size with the aim of raising the captive population numbers, while efforts to preserve the wild habitats they can one day return to are seemingly sidelined and forgotten. Both orangutans and Sarawakians share the loss of their traditional homelands as a result of state projects. This is made visible in part through the intentional capitalization of an endangered species and the simultaneous destruction of natural habitats for economic interests at different levels. These chapters illustrate three key arguments: 1) the underlying biases inherent to sexual inequality and privilege, 2) the delineation of which behaviours are considered *normal* or *natural*, and 3) the limitations of empathy when wage labour is so depended upon it replaces traditional beliefs and taboos that had previously intimately connected humans to non-human others like orangutans.

Parreñas then returns to the broader context of Sarawak in the last two chapters, where she draws connections between the shared limitations of both people and orangutans in becoming totally free. Readers bear witness to the analogous “arrested autonomy” (20) faced by Sarawakians and the “free but fearful” (29) lives of orangutans. This inheritance from colonial occupation forms similarly limiting constructs and socio-political-historical constraints that remain as yet unchallenged, at least on any large scale. The chapter concludes with the notion that rehabilitation centers like the Lundu and Batu Wildlife Centers are more aptly described as wildlife *hospices*, where orangutan individuals are cared for, but ultimately their deaths are unavoidable, and there is no real reduction in the risk of this entire species going extinct.

In the conclusion, Parreñas presents the reader with an update on the different people and orangutans introduced throughout the book, which itself can be best described as an obituary. The somber nature and tone of the end of the book is clearly intentional, as one of the key points throughout is the inevitability of death and a recognition of the futility of our attempted struggle against extinction. To emphasize our interrelated interdependence on others, like us or unlike us, Parreñas writes, “[e]verybody we know will pass away. How well we die depends on others” (185), simultaneously emphasizing where we have control, or rather influence, and lack thereof.

While the overall flow of the book carefully weaves through each example, one section near the end stands out from the rest. The brief section on the bacterium *Burkholderia*

pseudomallei is the only non-human/orangutan example used. *B. pseudomallei* has been classified as a “bioterrorist agent” (184), and thereby does act as another example of where the human and non-human interact *vulnerably* in a shared environment. However, the juxtaposition between this section of the work and the rest of her book comes close to dampening the impact of her message. Parreñas attempts to connect this example with the main themes of the book by presenting it as the ultimate cause of death for one of her close friends and colleagues in Sarawak, who was infected during a wildlife rescue necessitated by the development of a large dam. Perhaps further elaboration or other non-human/orangutan examples would make the mention of *B. pseudomallei* more seamless within a book otherwise focused exclusively on orangutan–human and human–orangutan relations.

Nevertheless, *Decolonizing Extinction* is situated directly within the active and growing discourse of primate conservation and of ethnoprimateology, and critiques ongoing conservation practice in a realistic manner that refuses to gloss over harsh realities. It represents a novel approach to and engagement with this prominent field of research by providing a platform for which the marginalized experiences of “others” can be recognized. Parreñas expertly crosses disciplinary boundaries by highlighting the complexity of relations and contexts that situate all conservation efforts: the life conditions and livelihoods of individuals in communities targeted for conservation around the world, both human and otherwise.

Decolonizing Extinction is perfect for graduate or upper-year undergraduate students interested in the practice of conservation, biological or socio-cultural streams of anthropology, the global and local economics behind conservation planning and efforts, and critical studies in feminist science. Parreñas succeeds in engaging her readership and has structured this book to show the truth of the matter without shying away from its associated morbid themes. A robust notes section provides support for critical points and for those needing further clarification, and an in-depth bibliography corroborates Parreñas’ arguments while providing additional material for interested readers. *Decolonizing Extinction* renders extinction, conservation, and rehabilitation open and vulnerable. It argues that while there may be little hope in reversing the current trajectory for orangutans, we must nevertheless change the ways in which we think about endangered species and non-human others. We must learn how to live *vulnerably* with them, if we intend to do so at all, even if only for a short while longer.