Review of *We Loved It All: A Memory of Life* by Lydia Millet (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2024, pp. 272 ISBN: 978-1-324-10525-1)

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Species extinctions, as well as mass species extinctions, might be thought of as some of the most normal phenomena in the history of life on Earth. 99.9 percent of species that formerly inhabited the planet have gone extinct, and mass extinction events have occurred at least five times throughout evolutionary history. In her newly published work of non-fiction, *We Loved It All* (2024), American novelist Lydia Millet reminds readers that while the current age is a period of mass extinction, all indications suggest that these are not "normal times" (5). At the present moment, humans are the first ever species to deliberately cause a mass dying of other species. Amidst this anthropogenic ecocide, extinction is something we humans reflect on, produce books and films about, and even build academic fields around.[1] In view of this profound awareness of extinction, as well as the recognition that our own species survival hinges on the continued existence of other species, it is unsettlingly *unnormal*–or in Elizabeth Kolbert's words "unnatural"[2]– that we are not directing all our collective efforts towards warding off the sixth mass extinction.

With the publication of *We Loved It All*, Millet makes her first entry into non-fiction. Since the early 2000s, Millet has penned over a dozen works of fiction, many of which coalesce around a thematic interest in the environment, climate change, and non-human animals. Her stylistic technique often combines dark topics with lyrical prose, sly wit, and ironic undertones. The more recent works, especially, mediate a sense of the complex, paradoxical, and sometimes uneasy stance that humans hold towards non-human species. *We Loved It All* extends Millet's exploration of this topic through a non-fictional mode. The book, as signalled by its cover, is marketed as an anti-memoir. For while the narrative presents readers with the author's personal memories and experiences, it is ultimately not Millet's own life that takes centre stage. At the core of the book, instead, is the story of anthropogenic extinction and related meditations on what modern society has done to the human-nonhuman relationship. The diversity of the nonhuman realm is the "all" referenced by the book's title, yet one might be inclined to read the titular "love" as ironic, given the many examples Millet provides of the brutality with which our species has historically treated other species.

The book is divided into three biblically-entitled main sections ("When the Perfect Comes," "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," and "Ring the Bells"). Each section contains ten chapters that encompass sub-sections of varying lengths –some are merely short vignettes– about loosely interconnected topics. The thematic scope of the book is vast. Millet jumps between subjects like a pollinator buzzing between flowering plants. The topics addressed range from ex-boyfriends, to Topsy the elephant, colonialism, angelfish, and the author's time spent working as a copyeditor for adult magazines. Frequently touching on her life as a mother and her daytime job as a writer and editor for The Center for Biological Diversity, Millet connects the personal and quotidian to the grand scale of evolution and the planet. The book draws on an eclectic array of thinkers, myths, works of literature, and pop-cultural

[1] Extinction studies has established itself as an academic subfield at the interface of ecocriticism and animal studies over the past decade, with leading scholars such as Ursula Heise and Dolly Jørgensen exploring the ways in which species extinction is culturally understood, mediated, and narrated.

[2] Kolbert's book *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014) was influential in popularizing the idea of an ongoing mass extinction event fuelled by human activity.

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references, demonstrating Millet's skills as a researcher.

If the book may be said to put forward any main argument, it is this: modern society has fundamentally broken the human-nonhuman bond and continues to undermine possibilities for multispecies coexistence. While humans were once surrounded by nonhuman animals and lived in close communion with them, we are now left isolated, alone, and cut off from the natural world.[3] The culmination of this development is the extinction crisis, and the nonhuman animals, too, in their rapidly decreasing numbers, experience species *aloneness* (Millet 2024, 101). At several points throughout the narrative, Millet casts market logic, extractivism, and the commercialization of nature as the prime drivers of ongoing mass extinction. These forces extend to nonhumans not only through habitat loss and ecocide, but also through their labour and forced participation in the capitalist economy. One particularly striking example Millet provides of this exploitation is the tale of so-called pit ponies that were used in coal mines and kept underground for the duration of their lives. Through references to her own daughter and son, Millet further explores how the movement from community with nonhumans to estrangement from them is mirrored in the process of growing up: children lose interest in the natural world as they reach adolescence, particularly in the age of screens and digital media. The separation of humans from the natural world is also articulated by foundational narratives in Western culture, such as the Eden myth, which is retold in the opening chapter, setting the thematic tone for the rest of the book.

While the book covers a sweeping array of topics, its style remains lyrical, precise, and meditative. A key aspect of Millet's style is her use of a self-reflexive lens, something that is made apparent in the author's discussions of issues related to writing. She reflects, for example, on the decline in literary reading and on the importance of humour in writing fiction. The author also shares her thoughts about the difficulty of writing about animal multitudes (or the multitudinous dying that is mass extinction), while also criticizing how Western literature tendentially perpetuates individualism in its obsession with the self and the lone hero. Yet, although Millet self-reflexively puts forward such critiques, she seems to partly fall prey to some of the dilemmas she addresses. Millet's own self is strongly present throughout the book, and while the author's presence in the text makes for a personal and relatable narrative, it arguably calls to mind individualistic and navel-gazing currents of autofiction. Of course, part of Millet's point in her exploration of selfhood is that she is made up just as much of childhood pets, the birds in her backyard, and the javelina she once ran over with her car, as any notion of an autonomous and self-contained self. And perhaps what Millet wishes to convey is that all of our selves are implicated in the sixth extinction. But the sense of individualism very much undergirds the text, in tension –perhaps– with its projected ideal of enmeshment with the nonhuman.

Another point to note about style is the book's tendency towards what might be thought of as a form of mythologization of nonhuman species. Habitually throughout the text, nonhumans are referred to in terms such as "the beasts," "the others," and "the vanished ones." The use of this mythologizing terminology might be one of the main difficulties with the book. One wonders whether the reference to nonhuman nature through phrases like "the beasts and the green" (Millet 2024, 248) does not have the effect of evoking an even greater distance between humans and "the others." Millet may be attempting to underline just how separated we have become from our fellow lifeforms – to illustrate how they now appear to us as one homogenous group of creatures usually subsumed under the term "animal" (Derrida 2008, 48). And while Millet also recounts stories about separate species and individuals, the risk with the use of expressions like "the vanished

3 The central ideas of Millet's book resonate strongly with John Berger's reflections in his essay "Why Look at Animals?": as Berger notes, writing in 1977, "[i]n the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them" (2009, 21).

ones" is that the extinction crisis becomes rendered as something vague and ahistorical. Although Millet remains cognizant of animals as "brand ambassadors" and spokespersons "working in sales" (Millet 2024, 11), one might claim that to a certain extent the book participates in the same mechanisms that capitalist modernity utilizes to obscure material animal suffering and exploitation by reproducing animals as spectral and timeless signifiers of market life.[4]

A critical reading of *We Loved It All* should therefore probe the diversity and plurality of "the others" that the book refers to. A related dilemma is the question of who the "we" of Millet's book –including its title– alludes to. Millet deploys the universalizing "we" and "our" at many points in the text, particularly in its more lyrical passages. Consider, for example, the following extract:

Before we had the tools for swift travel and recording, and for the wide dissemination of visual and auditory documents, we knew only the beasts and trees and plants that happened to live near us. Those who existed far away were little more than rumours, relayed in rare, hard-to-read manuscripts and fireside tables … Today we can see and hear multitudes. No volume could contain them all: the internet of animals is an endless archive … We're among the first generation to be able to know, not only by reporting but by the evidence of our eyes and ears, the awesome variety of the living –the multiplicity of its forms (2024, 238).

Here, and in similar passages, the book reads as a Western-centric narrative, which homogenizes distinct cultures and obscures for example Indigenous experiences of nonhuman nature. The fact that many cultures live in close proximity with nonhuman species is not something that the book addresses to any great extent.

These issues aside, *We Loved It All* has many praiseworthy qualities that make the book a valuable contribution to species extinction literature. As extinction studies scholars such as Ursula Heise and Deborah Bird Rose have demonstrated, extinction narratives usually take the form of elegiac, tragic, or epic texts that feature charismatic megafauna and culturally valued species at risk (Heise 2016; Rose, van Dooren, & Chrulew 2017). In this context, Millet's book might be read as a novel and inspiring take on the extinction narrative. The intermixing of personal anecdotes, poetic meditations, and scientific facts, is executed in a compelling way, and the loosely structured stories about myriad different species and individual animals make for a structurally intriguing narrative.

But while the book offers a fresh take on the extinction narrative, it also signals some unresolved tensions in writing about species loss and endangerment. As mentioned above, Millet devotes narrative space to reflecting on the decline in literary reading, and yet she also calls attention to –through her own use of non-fiction, notably– the role that fictional stories can play in catalysing political action and meaningful change. By inspiring such tangible action, fiction can counter the paralyzed witnessing, the "climate nihilism (Kornbluh 2021, 771), and the "sleepwalk to extinction" (Monbiot 2003) that characterizes the current devastation of ecosystems around the world. At the same time, it is precisely their participation in acts of witnessing that make extinction texts such as *We Loved It All* so powerful. The impression readers will be left with upon completion of Millet's book is that the text's testimony of the sixth extinction takes the form not of an inert cabinet of species and specimens, but reads, rather, as a mosaic of lively and engaging stories about the nonhuman realm. Suitable for both general and academic audiences, this book is a moving and forceful piece that does a great deal of work in *un-normalizing* both anthropogenic extinctions and human domination of other animals.

4 This "spectral traffic" of animal signs in post-industrial capitalism is analyzed at length by Nicole Shukin in her work *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (2009).

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