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Cross-Pollinating: Indigenous Frictions and Honeybee Fictions

As a US undergraduate in the 1990s, my favorite course was Practical Beekeeping. Admitting it today makes me sound edgy, even hip, but back then it was just a sure sign that I was an animal nerd. What happened? Increasing awareness of the precarious fate of honeybees in our time is only part of the story, which is more broadly shaped by shifting perceptions of environments as mutable multispecies communities.

Anxieties about bees' and other eusocial insects' separation from "human will" used to result in elaborate dismissals of their "radical autonomy," what Eric Brown elaborates as their ways of being "beyond our capacity for language" (xii). As an exemplary case, Jacques Derrida identifies "the old yet modernized topos of the bee" in Jacques Lacan's dismissal of honeybee communication as "coding"—that is, as exhibiting purely mechanical or "animal" reaction without the possibility of a response (123). For Derrida, such studied unresponsiveness to the capacity for another species to respond proves a key deconstructive element in the ontological hierarchy of human over animal. It also flies in the face of entomological studies. Starting with Karl von Frisch's translations of honeybees' waggle dances in the 1920s, scientific evidence over the past century relentlessly demonstrates in ever greater detail how bees share knowledges at and beyond human capacities. As our global food security and much biodiversity as well have come to depend on honeybees' work as pollinators, stories about their and our capacities to respond to ever more precarious conditions appear to concern the fates of more species than we will ever know. Amid growing concerns about their plummeting populations in recent decades, honeybees' complex social lives appear more imbricate with those of humans as well as other animals and plants.

By looking at patterns emerging across contemporary honeybee fictions, this essay explores how representations of responsiveness in human encounters with the nonhuman collective intelligences of honeybees relate a biopolitics of endangerment to settler-colonialist histories. The current industrial-agricultural reliance on a single species, the western or European honeybee (*Apis mellifera*), grew from movements of the species far beyond native habitats, and as a direct result of European colonial expansionism.

Amid mounting evidence that trucking bees to pollinate one monocrop after another may be driving them to extinction, their displacements of some and consequent fostering of other indigenous creatures and Native knowledges clarify that they have never been simply exploited. Challenging assumptions about human governance of populations, a more complex biopolitical vision of ecology is at the heart of several recent attempts to depict bees in the irreducibly collective structures of hives, and especially swarms.

Marking a dramatic turn in the aesthetic history of honeybee representation, some contemporary bee fictions highlight what is at stake for animal studies and ecocriticism in the posthumanist challenge of thinking about organisms together with environments by attending to biological mechanisms in the contexts of their political articulations. Mapping a break with the biopolitical philosophy associated with Giorgio Agamben that emphasizes singularity and sovereignty as the proper (human) concern over bare (animal) life, Cary Wolfe cautiously advances “another *thought* of the biopolitical in which human and nonhuman lives are deeply woven together *de facto* even if, *de jure*, they ‘politically’ have nothing to do with each other . . .” (48). Wolfe is less clear about how this thought proceeds from a line of thinking advanced by Donna Haraway, Vinciane Despret, and other human-animal studies scholars who elaborate how our knowledges and experiences as humans are inconceivable apart from particular multispecies relationships. Without that context, the image that he returns to of a cow in a concentrated animal feedlot operation limits understandings of its ecological implications.

Wolfe’s primary intention is to highlight the problematic thinking through which livestock become killable but not murderable. From his object choice, ecocritic Ursula Heise surmises that all posthumanist animal theory is concerned with is the politics of domestication. From her perspective, it therefore constitutes a rear-guard action that extends animal-rights and welfare advocates’ attempts “to establish animals as members of the human social, political, and legal community” (149), and repeats their mistakes of privileging domesticates at the expense of endangered wildlife (*ibid.*). Extending thinking about the politics of our interwoven lives to honeybees, however, reveals the limits of “the” community that Heise has in mind. As semi-feral working animals, honeybees provide us with more and better food through their work as pollinators, which can involve crowding out other pollinators as well as enabling still more wildlife to exist in depleted conditions. Their changing stories become legible as such only through an ecopoetics that does not trump so much as stands to be enriched by posthumanist approaches to zoopoetics.

Honeybees are eusocial, their colonies considered superorganisms, like our own microbiome-dependent human bodies, and quite unlike most other bee species. Unlike the Hawai'ian yellow-faced bee (*Hyaleus longiceps*), a species listed alongside six others as endangered in 2016—a first for bees in the US (Dell'Amore)—honeybees are unable to live alone. Their colonies are adaptable to a wide variety of conditions, including housing in human-built portable hive structures, through which they have traveled and come to share with Eurowestern people a global colonial history. Further complicating the bee-endangerment picture is that, while indigenous species like the Hawai'ian yellow-faced bee have in part been crowded out by imported honeybees, they yet remain indebted to them for calling attention to their dropping numbers, even in some cases their very identity as native pollinators. Attention to their plight follows from the fact that honeybees are undergoing drastic transformations that have as much to do with beekeeping practices as the stories we tell about them.

Longtime symbols of diligence, utopian community, sweetness, and light, honeybees' twentieth-century associations trend toward the unpleasant. Following the development and escape of a hybridized European-African strain dubbed "Africanized honeybees," or colloquially "killer bees," in Brazil in the 1950s (Schneider, DeGrandi-Hoffman, and Smith 352), the growing recognition of honeybees' coordinated-communications capabilities, if not their ecological uncanniness, fueled their figuration as an invasive menace in the US, the stuff of horror films like *The Swarm* (1978). With their slow northward territorial expansion, tracked through the Cold War and into today's War on Terror, Africanized bees range ever farther across the Americas even as they gain a special hold on US racial and colonial imaginaries. Produced by researchers in South America who bred different European and African subspecies of *Apis mellifera*, the "killers" are more than just remarkably prolific intra-specific hybrids that respond comparatively faster and in greater numbers in defense of their hives than their ancestors: they embody a human threat signified by killer bees' official moniker, Africanized honeybees.

In discussions developing around the international activist movement Black Lives Matter, the weirdness of the term "Africanized" draws attention to killer bees' eerie similarities to descendants of other populations relocated across the Atlantic in the colonial period, whose darker bodies and defensive behaviors likewise are often perceived as signs of aggression, provoking responses that all too often turn lethal for them. Decades ago, the nineties hardcore hip-hop release *The Swarm* by Wu-Tang Killa Bees (an assemblage of artists in or associated with the multiplatinum rap group Wu-Tang Clan) in-

licated more creative potentials for cross-species alignments, portending the many ways honeybee fictions engage productively with indigenous frictions.

As the strangeness of “Africanized” indicates, indigeneity immediately raises the question: Where do honeybees belong? In most places where they live today, honeybees are not native and not wild, complicating associations with indigeneity and again environmental concerns about bees’ impending doom. The western honeybee is the most widely distributed bee species, and due to its economic significance the most heavily monitored kind of bee, arguably even “the best-known insect on the planet” (Seeley 3). Accordingly, this species has come to serve as the proverbial canary in the coal mine, indicating alarming death rates among their own kind as well as among wild bee and other pollinating species. As animate creatures whose self-sustaining pollen- and nectar-gathering has the added benefit of artificial pollination that assists in both the sexual reproduction and genetic outcrossing of most vegetal species—an estimated seventy-five percent of crop plants, including most fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds, as well as ninety per cent of wild plants worldwide (Buchmann and Nabhan)—the mounting evidence of potentially fatal stresses on these and other pollinators rightly inspires movements for protection.

Only planning for eco-salvation becomes complicated where honeybees have been made to replace native pollinators. Biologically gynocentric and colonial organisms, honeybees bring together complex cultural as well as agricultural colonial histories, particularly in the Americas, where they had been extinct for millennia before seventeenth-century European peoples arrived with their hives. Not long after, Thomas Jefferson apocryphally wrote, “The Indians ... call them the white man’s fly, and consider their approach as indicating the approach of the settlements of the whites” (79), a fantasy that exemplifies how bees became enlisted in the ideological along with material processes of settler colonialism, as well as what makes the fragility of these relations so compelling today.

More clearly than with most animal species in agricultural production, honeybees’ rising economic significance within the past century adds to pressures that are bringing worldwide food production to record highs and risking catastrophic breakdowns. While scientists fail to settle on a single cause, the Colony Collapse Disorder crisis first observed in 2006 increasingly appears to be a symptom of the highly contingent and unsustainable growth of “apis industrial agriculture,” a peculiar form of animal farming in which we consume not animal bodies but the products of animal labor (Nimmo 185). Moving beehives across vast distances to pollinate a succes-

sion of crops makes farming more efficient, but it compounds pressures like the spread of parasites and diseases through severely limiting the diet of animals evolved to forage widely. Extinction in this case would result not from active predation or habitat displacement but the very conditions of industrial-scale agriculture—propelled by the doubling of the world’s human populations along with the increase of our caloric consumption by almost a third, all within the past fifty years (“Food”)—which has grown to depend on large-scale monocrop plantings, the fertilization of which in turn requires the commercial apiculture of the European honeybee.

Unfortunately, liberating our Lilliputian livestock is not a solution. Never simply confined, dominated, or exploited when housed in fields to do their thing, honeybees are self-organizing societies that have always, and perhaps can still, thrive in symbiosis with humans; only together with us they have become unevenly engaged with the fates of other populations. Honeybees’ increasingly complex relations to vulnerabilities in food chains and ecosystems reveal the need for the kind of biopolitical thinking about animals advocated by Wolfe, in which violence becomes conceivable as “an affair of power over and of life that is regularized, routinized, and banalized in the services of a strategic, not symbolic project” (27). Such a shift can be illustrated through scenes of attacks by colonies of honeybees against colonizing humans in recent novels, although their implications for a biopolitics of indigeneity are more readily grasped in the context of narratives more centrally concerned with communicating honeybees’ power over and of life.

Minor scenes in J. M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood* (1998) and Louise Erdrich’s *The Plague of Doves* (2008) invite comparison for staging honeybees on the attack, and specifically targeting descendants of white settlers. Through Coetzee’s semi-autobiographical reminiscences of his Afrikaans’ grandfather’s farm, we see young white John approaching a hive that clearly has been raided previously by people in search of honey. His faith in his own good intentions proves no protection against the “little, black bees” who send him running (97), and a sense of poetic justice grows through recognition of the animals as the native Cape honeybee subspecies (*Apis mellifera capensis*). Erdrich’s story adds a more complex sense of honeybee poetic justice because it is set in North Dakota where the bees are invasives, yet they play an active part in the cosmology of Anton, a part-Ojibway narrator. Later in life, Anton recalls how the feral hive nesting in the wall of his house attacked the white guy hired to demolish it, and more: Anton describes how he himself comes to witness the incident because the house has called out to him along with the bees, asking for help. A staple of Erdrich’s fiction, the traditional

Ojibway worldview, in which humans, animals, and things are relationally co-constituted (Rainwater 158), here encompasses an invasive species and a Métis man, although it remains unclear whether the author or her character recognizes the complexity of their relations as such.

The naiveté of both Coetzee's and Erdrich's characters regarding bees may relay more than the authors intend. Although highly aware of themselves as precariously tied to the land, neither of them questions whether the bees belong there, too. Moreover, because both authors appeal to the tropes of "killer bees" in lieu of honeybee biology, the biopolitical implications of these scenes become clearer only in contrast to stories that convey a greater sense of intimacy with, and understanding of, bee communication, particularly in the form of the swarm.

Swarming is the unique behavior through which honeybees collectively choose a new home from among several options. When a hive decides that it is big enough, the old queen leaves with more than half of the worker bees to form a new colony. Terms like "queen" support the everyday perceptions of hive rule captured in Charles Butler's 1609 title, *The Feminine Monarchie*. By the end of the twentieth century, however, entomologist Tom Seeley's meticulous studies of swarm behaviors indicate that honeybees operate at crucial moments more along the lines of what he outlines in terms of a US-style democratic political model. A swarm settles somewhere, scouts go out, then return to share information about different options through waggle dances, and finally conclude with a collective decision to move into a new home—which Seeley's inventive bee experiments on a remote island in the Atlantic Ocean have shown is almost always the best of all of the available options. It is an eerily similar process to what goes on between the neurons in our brains when we make decisions, arguably the defining hive-mind quality of a superorganism. Citing other entomologists like Bert Hölldobler and E.O. Wilson, Seeley argues that, "in both cases, a constellation of units at one level of biological organization cooperate closely to build a higher-level entity" (237). Exactly how honeybee swarms process information eludes human understanding.

In recent fictions, swarms also call attention to the complex roles of nonhuman intelligences in mediating indigenous pasts and futures. Three novels feature female characters attracted to gynocentric communities. These people find themselves at the center of a honeybee swarm that has literally settled on their bodies. Through intimate contact, they recognize the non-human intelligence that has organized the swarm and, as a result, actively distance themselves from their settler heritage. Each novel is ostensibly about

a girl's coming to terms with the racist and colonialist legacies of her own human community, and her encounter with the swarm triggers profound social transformations. By the end, each girl is moved to become a beekeeper, and, what is perhaps most curious is that, across the decades, this character type increasingly, if haltingly, is also identified as indigenous. Far from operating as a metaphorical "queen bee," each girl promotes power distribution in communities that both value and reflect the model of honeybees.

In David Malouf's critical success *Remembering Babylon* (1993), the character Janet eventually grows up to live as a nun in a convent, but the obvious beehive metaphor becomes complicated by her becoming also an internationally recognized bee-breeding researcher. Early critics of the novel took exception to its silencing of Aboriginal characters, but Clare Archer-Leane more recently links the novel's concerns with human animality to its visualizations of human-animal encounters in order to show that the story deconstructs romanticized Nature in order to introduce a more explicitly "post-pastoral" vision (5). At stake in such a vision is the very existence of Aboriginal peoples, which grows even more apparent through the novel's bee sub-plot. Compelled to solve the mystery of nonhuman intelligence in her early encounter with the swarm, Janet's later success at hybridizing indigenous Australian native stingless honeybees with imported European honeybees figuratively folds back on the girl's youthful attachment to Jemmy, a white man assimilated to Aboriginal culture, who is the historical figure at the heart of the story. Like Janet, descended of settler stock but with no direct experience of their putative homeland, her hybridized bees allow her to model an alternative future to the displacement and eventual murder at the hands of other white people that is Jemmy's fate along with that of his adoptive Aboriginal community.

In Sue Monk Kidd's bestseller, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), a similar swarm experience inspires the central narrator Lily to flee her brutal white father in the company of her black nanny, Rosaleen, who in the Jim-Crow-era Deep South is threatened with lynching for legally registering to vote. Lily and Rosaleen take shelter in a community of African American women who worship a female deity with honey in the tradition of their slave ancestors, and Lily eventually apprentices as a beekeeper with their leader. In a place and time fraught with racial tensions between white and black people, questions of indigeneity—of who belongs, and where—become coded as family legacies. Although the girl's self-identification as white may inspire far more explicit accusations of "cultural theft" (Grobman 9) than *Remembering Babylon*, all along the novel hints that the girl is being kept from knowing that her long-dead mother was not white, and that she may be finding her kin and kind in

the company of bees. Following a sustainable pre-apic-industrial-agricultural model, the descendants of imported European honeybees and African slaves make a life and a living together off the land, seemingly happily ever after, when in the end Lily's father opts to abandon her with them.

A young adult novel, Lindsay Eagar's *Hour of the Bees* (2016) envisions a gynocentric community mostly through the Chicana protagonist's dramas with her sister and other schoolgirls, but all along her grandfather calls attention to the nagging problem of her reluctance to embrace what he terms their "Spanish" heritage in the New Mexico desert. Similar to those of Janet and Lily, her experience of being covered by a swarm results in dramatic changes, in this case her family's relocation to the grandfather's farm, thereby saving it from developers. But the family's collective decision to become beekeepers relates still more directly to a dawning sense of indigenous belonging. The magic worked by the swarm of bees also corroborates the grandfather's tall tales about himself personally occupying the same land for over a thousand years, which implicitly reveals too that they are all Native Americans. Although the cultural reference points otherwise remain vague, the explicit admixture of Anglo, Spanish, Chicana, and indigenous elements—what Gloria Anzaldúa identifies as characterizing the "New Mestiza" (Anzaldúa)—here might be read as dramatized in a coming-to-consciousness with the help of bees, quietly rehearsing a recasting of racial, along with species, divisions into biopolitical relations.

But under what conditions? If the massive die-offs of honeybees in the past two decades have inspired "a renaissance of bees in the modern imagination" (Botelho 99), then it only becomes evident when bees move to the center of the story. An even more pervasive sense of doom—evident in controversial, headline-grabbing terms like "beemageddon" or "beepocalypse" that are now being repurposed in elaborate denial campaigns by pharmaceutical-corporation lobbyists and litigators (Carroll; Simon 3)—more explicitly appears in other fictions. It is spun as a choice for bees, the penultimate outcome of the courtroom scene in the animated film *Bee Movie* (2007), which features an anachronistic male worker bee suing successfully for the rights of bees to keep their own honey. Liberated queer bees with legalese then inadvertently trigger a worldwide wipeout of unpollinated flowering plants, which inspires the bees to go back to work, saving the world. More predictably "happily ever after" for younger audiences than *The Secret Life of Bees* and *Hour of the Bees*, the film explicitly depicts bees as making collective choices, which is again the defining behavior of swarms, only here projected at the species level and on a global scale.

Similarly projecting honeybee autopoiesis at the species level, Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation A* (2009) dramatizes how the "hive mind" embodies ways of knowing and being in the world that align still more directly with indigenous human worldviews, despite massive scale death. *Generation A* is the most prominent contemporary novel to detail the looming global threats accelerated by the commercialization of honeybee pollination. It begins after their mysterious disappearance from the entire planet, when a handful of honeybees miraculously reappears across the globe, only to kill themselves by stinging five people scattered seemingly at random.

"Beepocalypse" here is portrayed as a symptom of industrial farming's impending "pharmageddon," that is, the global-scale ecocide set in motion by a profit-hungry agricultural-pharmaceutical corporation. Through the course of the story, it is revealed that the company will increase production of a highly addictive drug that resigns people to social alienation, and that causes massive die-offs of bees and other insects wherever it is produced. Within the characters' lifetimes, honey, apples, and almonds have become extremely high-end, black market fare, and the rapid deterioration of social systems, both symptomatized and propelled by the apparent extinction of honeybees, has become the new norm.

Scientists conclude that the victims of bee stings—who ironically dub themselves the Wonka children—appear to have been selected by the last remaining bees because they share a rare resistance to the drug, a protein secretion that, through the stimulus of oral storytelling, enables them together to become a collective "superentity," smarter than the smartest individual among them (Coupland 355). And the stung ones first form their "hive mind" while holed up on Haida Gwaii—Pacific Northwestern American islands that are special in part because of their Galápagos-level biodiversity, as well as the continuous presence there across eight millennia of the Haida, a matriarchal tribal people—all the while observing the sudden, violent disintegration of tribal life that follows the not-so-coincidental importation of the new drug to the remote islands' Native community.

The optimist in the group muses that the bees orchestrated their stinging to prove to the world that their species will come back, but the fate of the Indigenous human community suggests that it is the last gesture in a mass suicide. When the remaining Haida gather ceremonially at the site of the world's last lost beehive to all take the drug together, one by one experiencing its alienating and addictive effects, they stage in human terms how a "hive mind" falls apart. In a near future in which honeybees' disappearance signals severe diminishments of global plant varieties and food

supplies, and consequently modern mobility, communication, and economic systems, *Generation A*'s most visible loss is a culturally specific, communal sense of connectivity shared by gynocentric animal and human communities, honeybees, and Haida.

Entomological accounts of swarming honeybees are revealing negotiations that operate in mirror-image patterns to the ways in which our own brains' neurons are increasingly understood as operating in conversation with each other, not following a chain of command as it was previously assumed. Political scientists embrace the new model of swarming as a more "lively" and accurate baseline for the "agentic assemblages" that constitute the vibrancy of social engagements (Bennett 31-32). But the novelists gathered here clarify that more than a metaphor is at stake in the conceptual swarm. As honeybees in fiction emerge as endangered communities not just like, but deeply entangled with, human ones, what they communicate about the biopolitical legacies of settler colonialism may not be so important as how they do so.

These fictions invoke the "hive minds" of honeybees as old ways of community self-sustainment focused on populations and operating across species lines. While optimism surges in media theory, too, around new swarm-like social forms such as flash mobs, their "alternative logics of thought, organization, and sensation" (Parikka xix) might be more directly harnessed by identifying mechanisms through which humans and other animals operate together as superorganisms, chief of which, according to Coupland's novel, is creative storytelling. The performance of "the power of the politically activated multitude, in the form of the swarm," (Chambers-Letson 109) then appears not so much an emancipatory guide as an affirmation of long-suppressed biopolitical potentials. "Hive minds" swarming their way through indigenous frictions in honeybee fictions might be exactly what is needed for the sake of all the species who depend on their flourishing.

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