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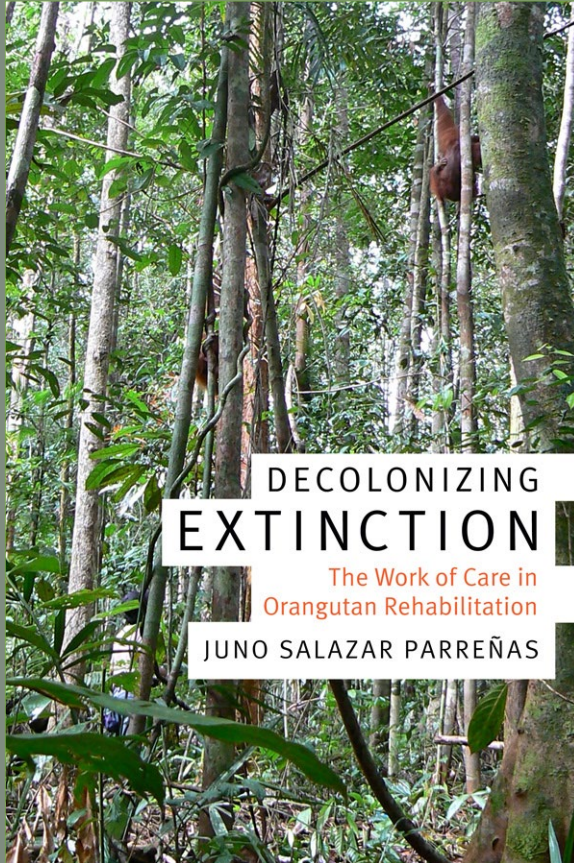


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BOOK REVIEW

# Extinction in the Postcolony

Dominic O'Key



*Review of:*

Juno Salazar Parreñas,  
*Decolonizing Extinction: The  
Work of Care in Orangutan  
Rehabilitation*. Experimental  
Futures. Durham, NC: Duke  
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The headline figures are stark. Since 1970, population sizes of wildlife have decreased by sixty percent. By the end of this century, half of all wild species are predicted to become extinct. This is the Sixth Mass Extinction Event. But what does it look like on the ground? How does this dramatic process of ecological loss transform human-animal social relations? And how does anthropogenic extinction connect to capitalism and colonialism?

Step forward Juno Salazar Parreñas's *Decolonizing Extinction*, a vibrant and ambitious contribution to the environmental humanities broadly and extinction studies specifically which interrogates how “colonial legacies and postcolonial institutions impact the way orangutans live and die” (4). A work of history, ethnography and theoretical intervention based on seventeen months of fieldwork in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, *Decolonizing Extinction* explores the complicated, precarious, and caring relationships between humans and endangered orangutans at two conservation sites. The first, Batu Wildlife Centre, is an enclosed nature reserve and sanctuary, built in 1975 and surrounded by a cement plant, housing developments, and agricultural farmland. A second site, Lundu, was opened in 1997 to safeguard the growing orangutan population. Yet due to the partial privatization of the forestry department (the date of this privatization goes curiously unspecified), both centres are run as public-private initiatives by the Forestry Corporation, relying on conservation tourism for funding and volunteer labour.

As a participant-observer, Parreñas shadowed the two centres' staff—caretakers, forest rangers, and volunteers—in their work to rehabilitate orangutans into semi-wild creatures. By telling their stories in granular detail, Parreñas paints Batu and Lundu as instructive sites for thinking through the Sixth Extinction. Instructive, first, because Batu and Lundu reveal how anthropogenic extinction connects to colonialism and capitalism. Sarawak is a semiautonomous state of Malaysia that is “treated as an internal colony” (2). With its partial postcolonial autonomy, and its vulnerability to deforestation, monocropping and oil palm plantations, Sarawak is a frontier for extinction-driving industries. Instructive, second, because Batu and

Lundu also point towards alternative futures. The work of orangutan rehabilitation is such a demanding form of cross-species labour, Parreñas argues, that it develops new human–animal relations, that is, new ways of “experimentally living together, feeling obliged to others, without a sense of safety or control that requires violent domination” (185). Parreñas draws these two threads together powerfully in her closely-observed study of the keeper Layang—his animal husbandry routines, his contempt for monocultural oil palm cultivation, and his ultimate death from pneumonia after rescuing endangered wildlife from Bakun Dam.

*Decolonizing Extinction* is divided into three sections. Each deepens Parreñas’s investigation into extinction and conservation in the postcolony. In the first, she explores how people build relationships with members of a species famous for solitude. Tracking the development of conservation practices from the early experiments of the 1950s to the professionalized 2010s, Parreñas notes how a once dominant practice of “ape motherhood”—a way of instilling orangutan independence, developed by Barbara Harrisson—has recently been replaced with a decidedly more “tough love” (34) approach, a rejection of “tender human–animal intimacy” (52) involving the physical punishment of unruly apes.

In the second section, Parreñas considers the problem of “enclosure” from a multispecies perspective. By focusing on the forced copulation of orangutans in nature reserves, Parreñas develops an understanding of how conservation “inflicts new forms of violence” (84) on female orangutans. Because the focus of conservation is on increasing the population size, rather than stopping deforestation, female orangutans are burdened with conservation’s reproductive futurism, and are thus regularly forced into sexual encounters they patently do not desire. At the same time, this section on enclosure also links indigenous and proletarian struggles to nonhuman extinctions, as Parreñas demonstrates how human and nonhuman communities have been jointly displaced by hydro-electric dam developments.

The third section turns to the future. Here Parreñas analyses how extinction is prey to financial speculation. Sarawak’s conservation

industry is funded by public-private partnerships. Thus the preservation of species becomes desirable only if it can offer a future return on investments: orangutans become assets, and the Wildlife Centre becomes a commercialized hospice that profits from species scarcity. Under capitalism, then, the future of conservation is bleak: “I suspect,” Parreñas writes, “that orangutan survival will rely on institutionalization, whether in wildlife centers or in zoos. This future seems especially likely when agricultural industries in Borneo continue to convert biodiverse forests into mono-crop plantations” (177).

Yet *Decolonizing Extinction* finds hope in the difficult, quotidian labour of multispecies work, in the “fleeting intimacies” (8) between human workers and endangered apes. By bringing feminist care ethics and animal studies into contact with extinction science and colonial history, Parreñas reaches her titular hypothesis: that the “everyday but extraordinary work of care that happens here in Sarawak’s two wildlife centers [...] is an effort at decolonizing extinction” (6). Parreñas contends that the work of cross-species care contains a promise, a “serious reconsideration of the current norms and practices around how we share this planet” (8).

Meticulously researched, *Decolonizing Extinction* tells a powerful story of how colonial histories and postcolonial presents inform the Sixth Extinction. But with the stakes of extinction and climate collapse so high, it is striking that the book is ultimately so modest in its conclusions, and so hazy about what “decolonizing extinction” actually looks like. Parreñas tries to escape such neat clarifications and categorizations by insisting early on that “to decolonize extinction is to resist definitively saying what should be or ought to be” (7). Yet at the same time she opts to follow posthumanist, decolonial, and new materialist thinkers in her conception of decolonization as a “fundamental reorientation toward others, especially nonhuman others, in which we accept the risk of living together” (27). But this is a notion of decolonization that, while characterized as a risk, has been largely emptied of its historically oppositional militancy, recast as a personal position — a reorientation — rather than a collective struggle.

Parreñas's definition of extinction also needs scrutinizing. In the introduction she writes that, from a "multiscalar" perspective, extinction as such, just like individual death, is an entirely natural "condition of planetary living" (9). Hence, for her, "the challenge of decolonizing extinction [...] is not to end extinction, but to consider how else might it unfold for those who will perish and for those who will survive" (9). Yet this argument rests on the idea that the Sixth Extinction is a natural process, a mere continuation or intensification of the background extinction rate that undergirds biotic processes. In actual fact, the Sixth Extinction is a socially-produced mass extinction, a crisis of capitalism that is not "inevitable" (9) as Parreñas implies, but the outcome of particular histories and interests that can actually be organized against. Extinction as such may be biological, but the Sixth Extinction is historical.

Parreñas makes no claims to solve or resolve extinction. Her focus throughout the book is limited, mostly productively so, to the question of how mass extinction transforms the ways humans and animals live and die together. But if decolonizing extinction "is not an attempt to try to stop it" (9), then is our only option a form of managed decline, in which we care for endangered species as they slide into oblivion? This runs the risk of emphasizing a passive acquiescence to capitalism's extinctions rather than agitating for our collective liberation from them. We can demand more, both conceptually and politically, from decolonization.