Tenderness and Rot, or Why I Should Be Allowed to Burn Down the Peabody

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To warm the frozen swamp as best it could

With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

—Robert Frost, “The Wood-Pile” ¹

The Yale Peabody Museum’s ornithology laboratory struggles mightily to enforce separation between “observer and observed,” as all good Western scientists must.² And yet, mocking the laboratory’s attempts at sterility, the smell that lingers inside refuses any such boundaries. The bitter, stale scent infused my hair and skin as soon as I entered. Somehow, the intangible but overwhelming sense of bird-ness mutated into a weighty presence in my lungs. Have you ever smelled a pet shop’s reptile section? Somehow the same texture of matted straw and shit had become airborne in that museum’s lab. From its scientists, I learned that the Peabody is among the grandest
and most complete archives of “scientific bird specimens,” at least in the Western Hemisphere. Boasting (and they are indeed boasting) more than 152,000 specimens in the form of skeletons, skins, fluid-preserved specimens, cryo-preserved tissue samples, eggs, and nests, the Peabody claims that the origins of their specimens span the globe.

Reassuringly, I was told that though scientists often travel internationally to retrieve the birds (retrieve, of course, meaning to stalk and kill), they must first navigate a mire of bureaucratic processes which determine if their quest is legitimate. To embark on their far-flung journeys, which curiously take them over and over again into the Global South for these extractions, scientists must first prove the necessity of their journey to state actors. Power relations in these exchanges become flattened between bird and human, South and North. Instead, front and center are conservationist scientists along with their articulations of care and concern. These state-and-science legitimized ways of acting on care seem to operate in ways that feel just like domination.

Enough. Let old passport requests and earnest declarations of care as violence join the unfettered “trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene,” to create an ever-hotter “compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.” In the few moments of my sharing artificially cleaned and cooled air with the preserved bird bits, I breathed some sense of solidarity in— too deeply— and never quite breathed it all back out. Mutated by, infected with, entangled in the possibility of avian agency, I am hopefully mired in a reimagining of care and relations. This essay is my attempt to trace the flight path of that reimagining into world(s) where we can be gentler with one another. This is a dream of tenderness and accountability, of care and decay, of the kind of world that finds itself made more livable and loveable by embracing multiplicities.

By paying attention to my ability to both see and smell these bodies, the terms of my engagement shifted. This approach marks a way of relating and researching that “more explicitly recognize[s] non-human actors.” Unable to turn away from the visceral experience of meeting these fragmented, stretched, preserved bodies, I found myself in a state of mourning that lasted for some time following my visit to the Peabody Museum. Seeing the cotton-filled bird bodies had evoked strange and strong sensations. During my time in the Peabody Department of Vertebrate Zoology’s ornithology collection-laboratory, I felt distress, fury, and above all, a rising panic over the birds’ preserved state. To name these feelings here is not only relevant but necessary to the focus of this essay. Grief and tears might provide an unusually
powerful solvent for eroding structures and boundaries erected by existing systems of power.

Patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, heterosexism: all these systems of domination normalize possibilities for how we relate to the world. An insistence on the presence of emotions in this writing posits both the birds and myself as subjects to be empathized and collaborated with, challenging the framework of relations present in the laboratory and often, academia. Refusing to ignore emotion is a small piece of the radical reconfiguring regarding what forms of knowledge are seen and validated. I am not an objective observer, nor would I want to be. My emotional responses inform me in distinct ways. Decay is not an easy process to find oneself in collaboration with. That, too, is an understanding that comes from my feelings on the ways that rot has seeped into my world.

Avoiding rot has clear evolutionary advantages, but the desire to frustrate materiality through preservation transcends survival instincts. We need only skim scientific disciplines’ histories to find their beginnings tied up in colonialism and imperialism. Across settings, these original power dynamics and intents persist in attempts to enforce sterility and objectivity in interactions with the more-than-human. In the laboratory, this manifests in many ways: the term “specimen,” Clorox-ed countertops, plastic gloves to separate us from what we study. This essay marks a moment set aside to think through how these boundaries and conditions of sterility ultimately manifest into unsustainable forms of preservation, inside and outside of the laboratory.

We might see the extension of this obsession with preservation in the collective inability of governments to adequately address the climate crisis, in their attempts to maintain present ways of life above all else. In place of radical and necessary adjustments, we are offered gradual shifts as a part of 50-year plans that designate our most vulnerable as incidental costs for maintaining a capitalistic world. Conservation attempts too, are implicated in this obsession with preservation, as they work with “anachronistic equilibrium models of the past... forestalling [change].” As we struggle to see the world(s) around us as neither “cosmic [n]or blissed [n]or cursed into outer space,” we are met with questions of multispecies entanglement, care, and quite possibly, desire. How might we understand these entanglements without being lured by the universalizing nature of homogeneity? As Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Hamilton remind us, “muddy grounds contain multiple worlds, and the differences of these worlds also need tending.” If we seek to make a mess in the
pristine environment of the laboratory, we had better be prepared for what starts growing out of it.

Though they may be construed in different terms by scientists, these same questions and concerns make themselves present in everyday mechanisms that the laboratory depends on to prevent rot. Despite floor-to-ceiling metal storage lockers and brisk, clinical attitudes about hand-washing, the Peabody ornithology department’s attempts to circumvent decay invariably center their work around it. Rot becomes an absence keenly felt—by those who are willing/able/wanting to feel it. Feminist science studies tell us that we should examine why effort and resources are spent on particular objectives; it is necessary, in a time of ecological, interpersonal, and psychological apocalypse(s) that we question the value and ethics of preservation. Why wage this war against rot—whose desires does it fulfill, and whose does it obviate?

Not even our questions escape the decay inflicted by temporality; language and phrasing evolve, shed, and mutate over time. And yet, frameworks present in the language used to structure relations between subject and object in the laboratory have not been adapted to accommodate the ever-more realized complexities of our entanglements. The Peabody ornithology department structures itself in part around a mission of preserving aviary presence in the human world: a species continuation constructed as achievable only with the violence of retrieval and study. Extracted DNA, bones and beaks become necessary to the scientists’ ability to achieve this mission. To challenge the presence of any one of the 152,000 specimens in the Peabody collection casts the querier as queer. Resist preservation, and you are resisting the logics of academia, science, and informed research. Queer of you to suggest that domination would not be required to care for those (deemed) unable to care for themselves. Discourses that insist on the morality of preservation obscure opportunities for serious inquiry and critique of the selfsame historical, multispecies relations that threatened birds’ worlds in the first place.

Donna J. Haraway argues that the concept of species gives structure to discourse on conservation, particularly the term ‘endangered species,’ which she argues both locates value and evokes “death and extinction... [for those] reduced to type” so that rational Man may nourish his “bright constitution.” When the Peabody’s head curator held up the brightly colored, preserved body of an extinct bird species’ last member, he invited us to come in close and touch feathers, touch wings. My queer sensibilities took this to mean that I was being offered a chance to orient myself to the bird as Man. By consuming this bird as a tragically extinct body, I too could experience
being rational and discerning about this object. It could become possible to find contentment in the consumption of, and if I were so academically inclined, the studies of this lost (yet eternally found) body. I did not step closer, nor touch the bird.

Instead, I began to wonder about what happens when scientists keep an organic lifeform from completely succumbing to the promised release and relief of decomposition. Sensation is equated to life and speech to intelligence—I am unconvinced. I was (and am) closer to the objectified, captive bird than rational and dominating Man. This moment of being unable to connect with the bird in any way comprehensible to the laboratory setting triggered a deep grief in me, a sense of exhaustion and identification with this body’s Othered-ness. In that room, the bird was only perceptible as Other, as object. Robin Wall Kimmerer tells us that this shift of viewing life not as subject, but as object creates sciences that are “reductionistic, mechanistic, and strictly objective.” 16 And it is this science that I am supposed to trust to save my world? This is a matter of questioning collective ethical commitments to the more-than-human lifeforms that humans share worlds with. The issue of how to live well with others does not begin or end with what science perceives as valuable sentience. The objective “active dis-entanglement of human from nature” disregards the “actual inseparability” of existence.17

I do not come to these hopes or frustrations alone; I know that I am entangled in ever-mutating and informative processes of care with the world around me. What I see and how I respond is changed by what resonates with me emotionally, what links conceptually, and how the queerness of my history reflects into my relationship with nature.18 I am situated, and not only in the identities that I am nurtured by; I am also a white settler, asking these questions at a land-grant university in a country built on stolen land, rife with unacknowledged apocalypses. But I take heart from what standpoint theory has offered many of us who reject objectivity: a way to make our knowledges of the world visible so that we might better resist the systems of domination keeping us apart. I am deeply invested in these questions of ethics and care as a queer(ed) body in relation with and taught by both humans and more-than-humans, especially plants. In intentionally locating myself, I choose to let my identities serve as a form of knowledge about the world, rather than a bias to impossibly remove. I have existed in many a liminal space, and feel deep compassion for bodies held in the unending, isolated preservation of the museum and laboratory archives.

I am also writing this essay with a squishy little companion: a potato gifted to me, going soft already. It is reminding me of the materiality of these questions, and the
importance of taking seriously temporal processes that occur as part of the earth’s regeneration. The tiny tricolor potato, the world at large, not as “resource to be exploited, ward to be protected... [but] dynamic, self-forming.” 19 What companions and travel guides must we bring along to seriously embark on the quest of extending care to bodies other than our own, of pursuing what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa terms an alterbiopolitics that “puts caring at the heart of the search of everyday struggles for hopeful flourishing of all beings.” 20 Tonight, when I make dinner for my quarantining roommate, I will use the little potato in a soup for her because they are sick and need nutrients. Tender and caring relations do not equate to asceticism or isolationism. What I am saying is that the conditions of our engagements matter, and have a lot to teach us.

My proposal is this: we have seen the entrapments of “good science,” and the un-dead smells that it produces. We have also seen how these same structures can subversively nurture emotions that grow into disruptive desires if we take care in how we reorient ourselves. These subversive desires lead me to wonder if this fixation on preservation, a main tenet of the laboratory, offers us a particular occasion to resist violence. After all, while the laboratory that I entered held bones and wings and other things that used to make up birds, the Western sciences’ long-standing romance with imperialism, colonialism, and eugenics has created site after site of violence in the quite human bodies of those it has sought (and seeks, in many ways) to subjugate and study. This connection should not be taken as a claim which necessitates flattening the details of contextualized, particular histories, but rather a truth to help make clear how science’s tendencies towards violence have been and are being recreated across space and time.

If we want to practice new ways of “rethinking boundaries between living and non-living matter,” it may necessarily mean that we need to write, dream, and feel our way towards contradictory epistemologies that allow us to conceptualize the “lively dead.” 21 When we get disoriented enough that “the trees are not trees [and] the birds are not birds,” as sci-fi writer Jeff Vandermeer’s unnamed biologist realizes in Annihilation, we might discover new entanglements. 22 Scientists’ preservation of bird parts, scraps, and bits displays an exertion of extreme control over bodies. Again, the feminist scientist in me is compelled to ask: what kind of way of relating to the world is being sanctified here? Rather than asking what the birds can (or want to) tell us, data is demanded from them. 23 If we dream of release from this unpleasant stasis, this repetitive attempt at the transcendence that Haraway has already warned us against, we must unplug the temperature regulating air conditioners and set off the smoke alarms. 24 In short, we need a funeral pyre.
But what kind of burning is needed? Fire can be understood as both “disastrous and generative,” a particular path to new growth under the right circumstances. A fiery approach requires a kinship and understanding with the bodies of the birds. I can’t claim the intimacy of kinship simply because of my sense of solidarity. It is here that I turn towards what Frost terms the “slow smokeless burning of decay” for an experience of transformation that might relocate agency in the body pieces/parts/partials of the birds. As they rot without permission, cells find release from the static objectification of the laboratory. Those prized bodies of long-extinct birds can break down, rejoining their kin in the damp crevices of the earth from which new life mutates into existence.

This turn towards decay is complicated by the fact that the Western intellectual tradition hasn’t historically assigned a strong value to putrefaction. Rot evokes associations of waste, that which “is no longer capable of being saved.” To challenge these associations necessitates reevaluating the premium put on preservation. Ancient alchemy suggests that decay is a “necessary stage in the process of regeneration.” In that context, material reconstruction was seen as not only possible, but promising. As Paracelsus explained, “destruction is the first essence of all Naturall things.” More presently, Mariya Shcheglovitova’s detailed research of “lively dead” trees in Baltimore proposes that “decay is needed to heal bodies and remediate land.” Across temporal dimensions, decay emerges as a force capable of ushering in rebirth, “conjuring multispecies worlds and with them, alternate visions for what it means to be alive.” Critically expanding our data practices to include sharing emotion and rewriting narratives offers new spots for potential frictions to form. Using these points of increased contact, we have more to hold onto while we get resituated. Despite the negative valence of rot, we can fumble and feel our way towards an entirely different relationship to putrefaction.

These new ways of being feel most possible when I think alongside mushrooms and moss. As I have come to know them, they are not afraid of questions that involve decay because they know its sensual and visceral importance in stimulating new life. Less comfortably, I find myself approaching mold, and rotting substances themselves for help feeling my way through this mess. These lifeforms confuse my urge to slip into romanticized thinking about decay. Objectification is not the only violence we should be wary of. We should remember warnings that “distilling rot to an ethical relation is not always possible or straightforward.” If we can incorporate these sensibilities in our ethical relation to rot, we might find another critique of the Peabody Museum’s approach to decay. Seeking to destroy any possibility of rot indicates an ethical
relation with decomposition that is grounded in not appreciation or care, but moral
control and ecophobia.33

The Peabody ornithology department presents their specimens as birds, despite the
deconstruction that these bird bodies have undergone. Whether they are truly birds or
just stretched out, fluid-preserved, cryo-preserved bits of what used to be birds, we
can refocus on the state of their material form. Whole or in pieces, perception as an
object is what forces these bits of matter to endure preservation, a “death that [does]
not mean being dead.” 34 Is it pertinent to ask about their right to decay? Languages
of rights and entitlements struggle to find purchase where subject is object.
Alternatively, it might be possible and richly generative to recognize the body’s organic
inclination to decompose as desire. A desire that, without the intervention of the
Peabody’s curator-scientists, would have been fulfilled for these birds’ bodies. To
specifically and intentionally deny their ability to decay recognizes putrefaction as a
transformative process that must be resisted in order to objectify and maintain power.
Rot insists that organic forms are universally susceptible. As we learn from “Soft,
Black and Liquid” on corporeal boundaries, the results of rot are “always unbearable, a
reminder of our finitude, an unavoidable product of our vulnerable corporeality.” 35
Might we instead understand rot as a reminder/promise/threat that we are all bound
up in this together?

Caring about materiality means caring about our bindings themselves. There is much
to learn from Zoë Todd’s deconstruction of the ways that the “machinations of human
political-ideological entanglements” determine what is appropriate and possible in
relations.36 Todd reminds us that we can tend to our “narrow conditions of existence”
by shifting logics, and remembering to take care of our relationships in the
“continuous co-constitution of life-world between humans and others.” 37 Tending with
tenderness means listening to those like self-described Black Feminist Love Evangelist
Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who pursues “learning from beings who have long term
practice... living [with] adaptation,” which is, as she sees it, the salvation of the
world.38 While the Peabody’s ornithology department seeks to learn from bird
adaptations, they situate the birds’ state of preservation as being necessary to this
project.

Contrarily, Joanna Radin describes how rot offers “a way of thinking ontologically in
reverse... understanding the order of things as they disappear rather than as they
come into being.” 39 This should not be mistaken as a call to develop new ethical
relations because of the novel value that they could produce. Rather, we can see
Radin’s queer thinking as instrumental in creating a new ontological home for some of the wayward scientific motivations that currently power preservation. Over a decade ago, Louis Lefebvre changed the way that scientists could conceptualize bird intelligence by suggesting that an “animal’s ability to innovate in its own environment” was more telling than laboratory tests. While this essay lacks the breadth to critique the anthropocentrism inherent in multispecies intelligence tests, frameworks like Lefebvre’s suggest there are ways of learning from birds that do not require holding organic processes hostage for the sake of new data.

Knowledges originating from diverse locations, interdisciplinary combinations/forms, and peoples continue to go unrecognized (at least in the objective laboratory). Consider instead the artist group Bird Collective, in which participants shifted perspective and sought out new relations by emulating birds: “Inhabiting the birds allowed us to break out of those strictures... we were able to embody different potentialities through the birds.” What I am suggesting is that it is possible and necessary for us to follow Gumbs’ suggestion that we learn to relate to the world in ways that are most “certainly a threat to the status quo.” This suggestion will have unclear, muddied results; but it is dynamic and rooted in a desire for care, which makes it worth adding to our rotting compost pile, created in honor of the never-dying, ever-dying bird bits.

In investigating this crisis of preservation, we rattle the political/economic/social structures holding us in place. Perhaps defenestration might speed up their decline. We are all, as Haraway reminds us, deep within the “string figure game of caring for and with precarious worldings,” yet care is not often a prioritized value in scientific spaces. To think critically and cooperatively in an ecological sense asks of us the “recognition of an intractably compromised, contingent, and politically complex condition of mutual implication.” Insisting that care is a core value means asking, in Theaster Gates’ words, “how can we be good to each other?” while knowing that the bounds of “each other” must extend beyond and across all kinds/kin/kith.

To see decay as a “mystical process that gives rise to new life” disorients us—maybe enough that we accidentally imagine birds as subjects, as having their own desires. The uncanny, unfamiliar thoughts found by thinking with processes of decay might leave us in a place where we find the only appropriate course of action is to give the birds their own funeral pyre, letting them burn as they will. While fire can embody a loving intimacy, I propose a pyre that experiences temporality as the force burning through it. Perhaps decay’s “smokeless burning” can give back to the birds a tender
agency as they rejoin their own, already decomposed, kin. 47 I wonder, too, if this moment would generate a sense of collectivity that seems to be missing from science.

It is clearly not only the sciences where collective care and action are lacking, but we might find the most obvious traces of their absence there. I return to the intelligence of mushrooms, the “fruit of a dense hidden world of hyphae, [that] tendrils out, talking to trees and to tree roots,” who have longtime whispered promises that “if you listened right, [your] thoughts move from the “I” to the “we.” 48 To see the world as interconnected, perhaps even as kin, takes time and effort, just like any intimacy. But, as we see in the development of Ladelle McWhorter’s relationship with garden dirt, our entanglements have the possibility of “altering [our] sense of self.” 49 Care can operate like rot; it has the potential to expand us and transform our sense of possibility. McWhorter eventually begins to ask “what it would mean to treat her own body as well as she treats her compost,” excising Yellow 6 and Red 40 from her world as they are no good at rot or decay. For her, this comes to mean that these chemicals “also have no place in life.” 50 Living queerly with rot, as Shcheglovitova reminds us, is both possible and necessary. 51

I find myself drawn in by early 20th-century artist Leonora Carrington’s fantastical and surreal stories of animal/human collaborations, which prompt us to ask why, for instance, a hyena and a human shouldn’t be allies against systems of empire and domination. 52 How might we creatively ally ourselves with the more-than-humans around us whose desires we may not, at first glance, comprehend or even notice? Because we desperately, deeply need one another, in “unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.” 53 Our more-than-human entanglements offer “important collaborators in the production of freedom.” 54 Decay itself requires conspiracy and collectivity from all those who help metabolize life after the end. 55 Systems of power and domination try to keep the temperature balanced and humidity low, but rot seeps in. It is in our best interests to foster decomposition, building both funeral pyres and compost piles. With whatever particular nutrients you can steal/liberate/release—conspire with rot to seed care and compassion into the very atoms of the worlds currently regenerating.

Elaina Foley is a writer and student. As a junior at Yale College, they are finding their way in queerfeminist science and technology studies with the help of many plants, people and other creatures (for whom they are so very grateful). If you’d like to contact Elaina, you can do so at elaina.foley@yale.edu or ask a bird around you to pass along the message.
Footnotes


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