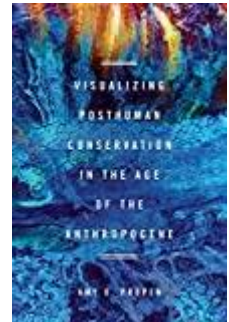


**Amy D. Propen.** *Visualizing Posthuman Conservation in the Age of the Anthropocene.* New Directions in Rhetoric and Materiality Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018. Illustrations. xv + 192 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8142-5492-9.



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**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

As the world warms up to the idea that we are in a new phase of extinction, Amy D. Propen has written and published a book that argues for compassionate approaches, relationships, and visual agency to navigate the trouble and prevent the casualties of vulnerable species, including ourselves. Propen, an associate professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, employs her background in rhetoric and professional writing to argue that to recognize the co-creative agency of both humans and nonhumans is to realize our responsibility to protect, and to do so in a more relational, and therefore compassionate, way. Propen's book is an excellent source for understanding *how* that sense of responsibility is cultivated through the analytical lens of visual material rhetoric.

As a student of visual culture and creative geography, I was expecting to find more images and visual analysis in Propen's book, but I soon realized that I was reading a conscientious analysis of material rhetorical artifacts as embodiments of the author's vision. As a culmination of relation-

ships between humans and nonhumans, the materials Propen features are convincing examples of how visual sensibilities and meaning making can influence conservation without explicit illustrations. The rhetorical artifacts are thoroughly referenced and explained as "embodied knowledge making" or "enactments of world-making" with the potential to transform our understanding of places, practices, and the voices of marginalized species (pp. 1, 150). Therefore, a lack of illustrations does not limit Propen's ability to persuade the reader of her vision of a posthuman conservation ethic.

Collectively, the chapters achieve the author's purpose, but individually each chapter can stand alone as an example of a strongly written case study about the convergence of relationality, rhetorical artifacts, agency, and responsibility, which makes this book a strong resource for anyone teaching visual rhetoric, environmental ethics, environmental communications, or environmental humanities. In the preface, Propen shares a personal story of "The Scrub Jay and the Peanut," an

example of the relationship built on communication and material exchange that is possible between humans and nonhumans. In opening the book with this narrative of kinship and compassionate knowledge making, Proppen eases the reader into what becomes a rather advanced composition.

Chapter 1 explains a dense bundle of subjects that play important roles in the subsequent four chapters. Some of these subjects are posthumanist conservation ethic, visual material rhetoric, and compassionate conservation. Posthuman conservation decenters humans, embraces coexistence with nonhumans, and realizes there are material agential connections. Visual material rhetoric is a form of material discursive practice and knowledge making. Compassionate conservation is a movement that includes responsibility and ethical obligations in the study of the Anthropocene, a movement that strives for peaceful coexistence among all animal life and is cocreated through human and nonhuman agents.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are case studies that each examine a visual material as embodiments of agency, place, and advocacy. For example, chapter 2 discusses a photo series by Chris Jordan that originally appeared in a National Public Radio (NPR) story in 2011, documenting the carcasses of Laysan albatross and evidence of death from ingestion of ocean plastics. Jordan's photo illustrates the tragic impacts of human consumerism and have since become materials of environmental advocacy and a well-known "reference point for ocean conservation and cleanup" (p. 50). The photos are powerful and rich in emotion, inspiring an "affectual transmission" that presents a way forward, which "involves seeing in ourselves, anthropomorphically, another; the way forward involves compassion and empathy—it involves seeing in a way that makes a difference in the world" (p. 68). Chapter 3 examines a rhetorical configuration of technoscience materials from various stakeholders in the seismic testing debate that stemmed

from the Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) Company's 2009 application to renew its license for the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant, a plant that is located near earthquake faults between San Francisco and Los Angeles. After the 2011 tsunami induced nuclear disaster in Japan, PG&E paused their application intending to complete seismic testing, which local and environmental advocates perceived as a potential threat to various marine species. While the materials (texts and articles) were produced by human organizations, they make "salient" the voices of vulnerable species and therefore are examples of a posthuman and more compassionate approach to conservation. Chapter 4 analyzes the *Atlas of the Patagonian Sea: Species and Spaces* (2009) as illustrative of the role of cartographic practice in rhetorical knowledge making and discursive practices by advocating for the nonhuman species that inhabit the vulnerable spaces represented therein. Proppen concludes the book with an explanation of the palm cockatoo's rhythmic and musical mating practice—an example of a world-making practice shared with humans—that effectively illustrates the "embodied intra-actions of material discursive practice," which also gives way to an understanding of how we (humans) *become with* our nonhuman kin (p. 156).

Proppen's book is an example of high-quality writing, spending a lot of time with her sources. The bibliography is a wealth of wonderful titles written by accomplished scholars in the fields of feminist geographies and multispecies ethnography: Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [2010]), Rosi Braidotti (*The Posthuman* [2013]), and Donna J. Haraway (*When Species Meet* [2008] and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* [2016]), to name a few. What is missing in the discussions about compassionate conservation and nonhuman relationships are inclusions of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews. There is a quick mention of this on page 133, but there are missed opportunities throughout the chapters to draw more of these

connections and to represent more diverse scholars from the literature.

In conclusion, Proppen has produced a masterful deep dive into posthuman conservation and a

rich dissection of visualization. While it may be short on visuals, it will continue to resonate with this creative geographer for some time.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

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