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Abstract	<p>“Now nature—tamed, endangered, mortal—needs to be protected from people” (15), writes Susan Sontag in her book of essays, <i>On Photography</i>. Even though this book of essays was published in 1977, originally it began as a single article titled “Photography,” which was coincidentally published in the same year when the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was passed. Sontag continues, “When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures” (15). For Sontag, nostalgia provokes us to take pictures, and “photographs actively promote nostalgia” (15). What interests me here and in the following discussion is how deeply and paradoxically nostalgia is related to the act of depicting environmental phenomena during and after the postmodern period. In her recent book titled <i>The Future of Nostalgia</i>, Svetlana Boym observes how Vladimir Nabokov was conscious of the interrelationship between nostalgia and the representation of nature. In his memoirs, Nabokov describes an aging swan, which is a sign of death, as “dodo-like.” Boym explains: By describing his bird as “dodo-like” Nabokov interrupts all the clichés and poetic references to the swans of other time. The detail turns the predictable swan into a creature of individual memory and anticipatory nostalgia. (280) This “anticipatory nostalgia” is a particular nostalgia for “something that hasn’t happened yet” (280). It is very much like Sontag’s nostalgia, and the image of the dodo is one of the most suitable motifs for studying the paradoxical relationship between nostalgia and the act of depicting environmental phenomena in the extinction narratives of popular science writers and postmodern novelists. In contrast to the ecological narratives of Darwinian</p>

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Nostalgia and Extinction Narrative: A Comparative Study of Popular Science Writers and Postmodern Novelists

Keita Hatooka

“Now nature—tamed, endangered, mortal—needs to be protected from people” (15), writes Susan Sontag in her book of essays, *On Photography*. Even though this book of essays was published in 1977, originally it began as a single article titled “Photography,” which was coincidentally published in the same year when the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was passed. Sontag continues, “When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures” (15). For Sontag, nostalgia provokes us to take pictures, and “photographs actively promote nostalgia” (15). What interests me here and in the following discussion is how deeply and paradoxically nostalgia is related to the act of depicting environmental phenomena during and after the postmodern period.

In her recent book titled *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym observes how Vladimir Nabokov was conscious of the interrelationship between nostalgia and the representation of nature. In his memoirs, Nabokov describes an aging swan, which is a sign of death, as “dodo-like.” Boym explains:

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nostalgia. (280)

This “anticipatory nostalgia” is a particular nostalgia for “something that hasn’t happened yet” (280). It is very much like Sontag’s nostalgia, and the image of the dodo is one of the most suitable motifs for studying the paradoxical relationship between nostalgia and the act of depicting environmental phenomena in the extinction narratives of popular science writers and postmodern novelists.

In contrast to the ecological narratives of Darwinian writings, such as Stephen Jay Gould’s essays and David Quammen’s *The Song of the Dodo* (1996), which revel in environmental ethics, the anti-Darwinian or parodic narratives of the postmodernists, such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), which obsessively deal with the extinctions of *homo sapiens* and the other species, never connect environmental phenomena with ethics. In this paper, however, I will not argue that there is a serious gap between the extinction narratives of scientists and postmodernists. I will, rather, emphasize the common ground among their narratives.

1. Weeping for the Dodo: Gould, Dawkins, and Haraway

Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, in his essay titled “The Dodo in Caucus Race,” appeals for the preservation of records of the existence of extinct species, by letting the extinction of the dodo overlap with the death of the last native Yiddish speaker of his extended family, and even quoting a nostalgic line from Wordsworth: “The sunshine is a glorious birth / But yet I know ... that there hath passed away a glory from the earth” (233). This ode is, of course, an obvious expression of the 19th-century poet’s romantic nostalgia. As if he himself is a 19th-century nostalgic subject, whose job is

to preserve the earth's "glory," Gould begins his story of the preservation of fossils as follows:

When such valued parts of natural or human diversity disappear as active, living presences, we take special interest [...] in preserving the fossil artifacts of extinguished vitality. (231)

In another version of the dodo story by Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, his nostalgia is private and the recovery from sentimentality is optimistic. Dawkins compares the extinction of the dodo with the death of his friend, Douglas Adams, who is known as the author of several British TV series. Dawkins nostalgically remembers that Adams was moved by the "sad case of the dodo" and wrote a scenario for a TV program titled *Doctor Who*. The plot is that Professor Chronotis uses a time machine to visit 17th-century Mauritius to "weep for the dodo" (276). Not only because of Adams's death, but also because this episode of *Doctor Who* was interrupted and never broadcast, Dawkins dramatically breaks up his narrative. He writes: "Call me sentimental, but I must pause for a moment—for Douglas, and for Professor Chronotis and what he wept for" (276). Only after two paragraphs, however, Dawkins happily reports that a group of Oxford scientists was permitted to "take a tiny sample" of DNA from a dodo. DNA for Dawkins is a fossil for Gould. In short, when they feel nostalgia, they preserve records of extinct species.

From the feminist perspective, however, Gould's and Dawkins's nostalgic narratives seem to be rather manly. By directly quoting Sontag's words from the beginning of my paper, Donna Haraway considers the nature of nostalgia in connection with manhood. From her anthropological and feminist perspective, she analyzes how masculine narratives of science make

use of nostalgia. For example, in the early 1900s, the leaders of the American Museum of Natural History took pictures of African wildlife as well as shooting it, because they were afraid that their manhood was endangered. As Haraway points out suggestively, Carl Akeley's dioramas in the museum show that Akeley himself was a historical transitional figure from "the western image of darkest to lightest Africa, from nature worthy of manly fear to nature in need of motherly nurture" (43). While Sontag suggests that taking pictures of endangered nature is nothing but preserving its dead body, for Haraway's Akeley, creating dioramas of Africa with a gun and a camera is nothing but preserving nostalgic records of Africa in order to protect his "endangered self":

The "naked eye" science advocated by the American Museum perfectly suited the camera, ultimately so superior to the gun for the possession, production, preservation, consumption, surveillance, appreciation, and control of nature. Akeley's aesthetic ideology of realism was part of his effort to bridge the yawning gaps in the endangered self. (45)

In other words, Akeley's dioramas turn the images of Africa into his anticipatory nostalgia for his own endangered self.

On the other hand, Gould says self-deprecatingly:

I have never met a curator who would not prefer the happier task of restoring a remnant to vitality. Nearly anyone in this line of work would take a bullet for the last pregnant dodo. (233–34)

For Gould, however, such a curator's role is "heroic rather than futile" (234). When we reconfirm that Gould compares himself to the 19th-century

nostalgic poet, it is not necessarily misdirected to say that he defends his “endangered self” as well as a curator’s by appreciating that their works are not quixotic but truly heroic: “But should we not admire the person who [...] strives valiantly to rescue whatever can be salvaged, rather than retreating to the nearest corner to weep or assign fault?” (234). Gould never feels nostalgia for the dodo; rather, he places emphasis on the human ambivalence about the dodo:

Dodos provide a particularly good illustration for my two conflicting principles: lament at the paucity of preserved remains, and blame for death largely laid to the victim’s inadequacy. (237)

In his essay, therefore, it is the detailed history of the consciousness that turns the image of the dodo into a motif of the paleontologist’s anticipatory nostalgia for himself.

2. The Egg of the Dodo: Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*

The manliness of Gould might be seen in his crafting of humanistic or optimistic narratives with little nostalgia, whereas the endangered self of Thomas Pynchon’s character Frans van der Groove shows a close similarity with such figures as Haraway’s Akeley. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which was also published in the same year the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was established in the United States, Pynchon puts in an odd episode where the 17th-century Dutch colonialist Frans shoots a dodo because he feels nostalgia for his hookgun:

He knew that a snaphaan would weigh less, its cock, flint, and steel give him surer ignition—but he felt a nostalgia about the haakbus [hookgun].

(111)

In Pynchon's text, a nostalgic weapon kills an endangered species in order to transform it into human nostalgia. Most interestingly, just like a camera turning the light of an object into a negative, and just like responding to Haraway's concept, "the western image of darkest to lightest Africa," Frans's firearm turns the dodo's egg from light into darkness:

Once he sat all day staring at a single white dodo's egg in a grass hummock. The place was too remote for any foraging pig to've found. He waited for scratching, a first crack reaching to net the chalk surface: an emergence. Hemp gripped in the teeth of the steel snake, ready to be lit, ready to descend, sun to black-powder sea, and destroy the infant, *egg of light into egg of darkness*, within its first minute of amazed vision, of wet down stirred cool by these southeast trade. . . . Each hour he sighted down the barrel. It was then, if ever, he might have seen how the weapon made an axis potent as Earth's own between himself and this victim, still one, inside the egg, with the ancestral chain, not to be broken out for more than its blink of world's light. *There they were, the silent egg and the crazy Dutchman, and the hookgun that linked them forever, framed, brilliantly motionless as any Vermeer.* (109; emphasis added)

As Steven Weisenburger points out, the Dutch painter Vermeer depicted everyday scenes as motionless "in a kind of photographic stasis" (71). That is to say, for Frans, his gun is a camera which tends to preserve the crucial moment of the dodo's birth and death. "I stick to my clumsy old matchlock," Frans writes to his brother, "don't I deserve a clumsy weapon for such a clumsy prey?" (109). This analogy between gun and camera reminds us of the

criticism of Susan Sontag directly: “The old-fashioned camera was clumsier and harder to reload than a brown Bess musket. The modern camera is trying to be a ray gun” (14).

Frans’s self, however, appears in more pessimistic form than the manhood of Haraway’s Akeley. Frans’s unsettled feeling between piety and impiety can be regarded as a sign of the endangerment of his Calvinistic self. “Are they Elect,” the narrator asks, “or are they Preterite, and doomed as dodoes?” (110). Even though Frans still sticks to his nostalgic weapon to distinguish himself from the doomed dodo, his negative sympathy for dodos ironically opens other possibilities.

It seems that Frans’s fear of his endangered self is caused not only by anxiety about his manliness but also by perplexity about his humanness. The breakdown of the boundary between humans and animals is connected directly with a theme of Pynchon’s narrative, as another 17th-century colonialist in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is portrayed as a “peculiar bird” (554), which reminds us that the dodo for Frans is a “strange, awkward bird,” a “clumsy prey,” and a “perversion” (109–10). This colonialist in America named William Slothrop writes about sympathy for pigs, but because of its impiety his book *On Preterition* is banned and burned in Boston. Even though he finally sails back to England, his descendant Tyrone Slothrop dreams that William’s vision may come true in the anarchic zone of Germany just after World War II. Besides he voluntarily wears a pig costume for a town ceremony and a female pig kisses him. In this peaceful image of the episode Slothrop feels neither anxiety nor perplexity about his endangered self, but rather he enjoys the freedom of such a borderless self.

3. The Song of the Dodo: Vonnegut and Quammen

We can understand that the unsettled situation of “self” shows the particular function of postmodern narratives to weaken the performative power of nostalgia. As Linda Hutcheon pointed out, “Our contemporary culture is indeed nostalgic; some parts of it—postmodern parts—are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony” (n.pag). The idea of self for the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut is one of the extreme examples of this. The main character Billy Pilgrim, who has been kidnapped by Tralfamadorians, writes in his letter, “The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance” (27). In their concept of time there is no cause-and-effect relationship between the self of Billy and his amazing experience. When Billy asks the Tralfamadorians “Why me?”, they answer “there is no why” because his situation is just like “bugs trapped in amber” (76–77). This randomness of time and self make the Tralfamadorians free from nostalgia. They never weep for the dead because “those who die are meant to die,” and Billy says that this is what Charles Darwin taught:

On Tralfamadore, says Billy Pilgrim, there isn’t much interest in Jesus Christ. The Earthling figure who is most engaging to the Tralfamadorian mind, he says, is Charles Darwin—who taught that those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements. So it goes. (210)

Why Charles Darwin? Of course Darwin does not suggest that “those who die are meant to die,” as the Tralfamadorians claim. In *The Origin of Species* Darwin writes:

Thus, as it seems to me, the manner in which single species and whole groups of species become extinct accords well with the theory of natural selection. *We need not marvel at extinction*; if we must marvel, let it be at our own presumption in imagining for a moment that we understand the many complex contingencies on which the existence of each species depends. (454; emphasis added)

Perhaps the passage that states “We need not marvel at extinction” might have something to do with the coolness of the Tralfamadorian principles. If so, it is necessary for us to be reminded of Darwin’s emphatic concept, “rarity” (451). Darwin just suggests that it is too late to marvel at extinction. While Vonnegut tries to overcome the nostalgic way of thinking by denying the premodern simplicity of cause-and-effect, and pays no attention to the importance of rarity, this temporal idea of rarity is still a hot topic to explain the global ecosystem crisis and the endangerment of our lives. Of course, it is also a narratological issue for nonfiction environmental writers to discuss the phenomenon of rarity separately from the nostalgic representation of extinction.

How to manage both the temporal idea of rarity and the timeless sense of anti-nostalgia? David Quammen’s scientific and literary practice in *The Song of the Dodo* shows us a good example of extinction narratives during and after the postmodern period. To show his apocalyptic vision that *Homo sapiens* will go extinct in the course of time, like the dodo, Quammen adapts the viewpoint of the Tralfamadorians into his narrative:

Eons in the future, *paleontologists from the planet Tralfamadore* will look at the evidence and wonder what happened on Earth to cause such vast losses so suddenly at six points in [geological] time: at the end of

the Ordovician, in the late Devonian, at the end of the Permian, at the end of the Triassic, at the end of the Cretaceous, and again about sixty-five million years later, in the late Quaternary, right around the time of the invention of the dugout canoe, the stone ax, the iron plow, the three-masted sailing ship, the automobile, the hamburger, the television, the bulldozer, the chain saw, and the antibiotic. (608; emphasis added)

By letting us know how difficult and weird it is to imagine the phenomenon of extinction without the sequence of events, Quammen confronts us with a fear of our own destruction. As Scott Slovic argues, “Beyond the veil of extinction literature, so abundant in these waning days of the millennium, is the idea that we ourselves, *Homo sapiens*, are the ultimate dodos” (244).

By invoking Vonnegut’s Tralfamadorians, an incarnation of anti-nostalgia, Quammen succeeds to convert a worn-out dodo story into a contemporary fable. After pointing out the importance of rarity in Darwin’s thinking, Quammen narrates the fictional story of the last dodo to spoil our enthusiasm for extinction:

Raphus cucullatus had become rare unto death. But this one flesh-and-blood individual still lived. Imagine that she was thirty years old, or thirty-five, an ancient age for most sorts of bird but not impossible for a member of such a large-bodied species. She no longer ran, she waddled. Lately she was going blind. Her digestive system was balky. In the dark of an early morning in 1667, say, during a rainstorm, she took cover beneath a cold stone ledge at the base of one of the Black River cliffs. She drew her head down against her body, fluffed her feathers for warmth, squinted in patient misery. She waited. She didn’t know it, nor

did anyone else, but she was the only dodo on Earth. When the storm passed, she never opened her eyes. This is extinction. (275)

In this extinction narrative, there is no nostalgia at all. For Quammen, the crucial moment of the dodo's extinction is no longer worth narrating dramatically, because the "toilet of its destiny has been flushed" (274). With this unreserved expression, Quammen also demystifies nostalgic legends of the last individuals of nearly extinct species.

4. A Photograph of Darwin's Finches

Even if the song of the dodo is forever vanished, legends surrounding the extinction of the dodo are passed down from generation to generation. Since such legends concerning scientific facts are exactly what Quammen intends to debunk in his book, even Darwin's finches are not exempted from his criticism:

The Galápagos finches and their supposed importance to Charles Darwin have been woven into one of the more piquant legends in the history of science. The legend says that Darwin observed these birds in Galápagos, saw the signs of adaptive radiation among them, and was thereby led toward his theory of evolution.

[...] The most crucial of the originating facts pertained to the finches. Yes?

No. It makes a good story, but no. (225)

By following Frank J. Sulloway's article, "Darwin and His Finches: The Evolution of a Legend," Quammen promotes his project to sort the scientific facts from legends, and concludes that "The Galápagos finches aren't the be-

all and end-all of adaptive radiation. They are merely an emblematic case, made famous in textbooks and popular histories because of their association with Darwin” (230).

However, it is very ironic that a picture of Darwin’s Finches dramatically appears in *National Geographic* magazine in November, 2004, the feature articles for which are titled “Was Darwin Wrong?”, whose main article is written by David Quammen. As a response to a question what subject he most enjoyed shooting, the photographer Rob Clark, who is famous for his sports photographs, enthusiastically answers:

The finches. Those are Darwin’s birds! He handled them, studied them. It was those beaks on those birds that led him to think of new ideas, that made him wonder why. (124)

According to the editor of the magazine, Clark’s photographs “allow us to appreciate Darwin’s genius—and, in a sense, to imagine that we are seeing and thinking like Darwin, with new patterns unfolding before our eyes” (vii). Surely, it is appropriate to say that Clark’s photograph of the tagged finches seems to succeed in the realization of the legendary moment, when the bodies of the finches led Darwin to think of his theory of evolution, even though Quammen points out in *The Song of the Dodo*, “The actual finch specimens brought home by Darwin do bear locality tags, Sulloway reports, but the tags aren’t in Darwin’s handwriting” (227).

Although, for Susan Sontag, “The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist” (24), the photographer’s optimistic reliance on the legend is beyond simple sentimentalism. The innocent tension of his photograph, which is emphasized by the white background (“Rob chose to keep things simple,”

explains the magazine. “He picked a wide range of items he calls ‘pieces of evidence,’ then set up and lit each in the same way ‘to get a rhythm going—Exhibit A, Exhibit B—one related to the next.’”), may allow us to forget what Quammen claims in *The Song of the Dodo*: “For every neat legend told and retold, a bit of messy but significant reality is ignored. [...] Ignoring reality can be hurtful” (353).

Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this paper is how deeply nostalgia or anticipatory nostalgia is related to the act of depiction of environmental phenomena during and after the postmodern period. By rereading two postmodern fictions such as Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and moreover by adopting Donna Haraway’s feminist rereading of Sontag’s words, we can regard David Quammen’s dodo story as neither a nostalgic narrative nor a narrative of anticipatory nostalgia for man’s endangered self anymore.

Yet, when his collaborator discourages him by taking the picture of “Darwin’s finches” to ignore reality, does Quammen have to feel (anticipatory) nostalgia for his endangered self as a skeptical popular science writer and an expert of biogeography? This question is not easy for a popular science writer to answer, because his/her relation with media, such as magazine, newspaper, and television, has been increasingly considered as a part of his/her artistic and commercial self, especially since the decline of the 1970s photojournalism, in which a photographer/writer, such as W. Eugene Smith, organized both photographs and captions independently. Furthermore, as Stuart Culver points out, “The tense relation between still photographs and printed words [...] can be seen as a moment of passage from the classical opposition of visual art and literature to the postmodern conflation of sign

and image” (203).

By adopting the concept “nostalgia” as a key ingredient in my comparative study, I have explained not only how Vonnegut’s and Pynchon’s narrative experiments can be useful to understand the popular scientific representations of non-humans in Gould’s and Dawkins’s essays, but how popular science writers such as David Quammen succeed to promote their environmental ethics by respecting the amoral visions of the postmodernists as well. Thus, I will conclude by underlining the representational possibility which Quammen’s imagination shows us: the song of the dodo. While letting us turn our thoughts from the dodo’s presence to its song, which is impossible to preserve, Quammen never urged us to visualize nor to depict the song. He declares that the song is “forever unknowable” and encourages us to accept such uncertainties concerning the dodo. He writes: “The Song of the dodo, if it had one, has been lost to human memory” (262).

Quammen’s *The Song of the Dodo* depicts a world of the subjunctive mood in which we cannot feel nostalgia for the song of the dodo because it is uncertain whether the dodo had its song or not. The title of his book suggests that we are in complete ignorance of the reality of the dodo’s song, while he expressing the anxiety that “Ignoring reality can be hurtful” (353). It is within such a contradiction that Quammen’s work opens up representational possibilities for the extinction narratives during and after the postmodern period.

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