

The Question of Evolution in the Buddhist Ecology of Thalia Field's *Bird Lovers, Backyard*

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Thalia Field's work, which she describes as an "ecology of questions," inhabits the edges of genres between lyric essay, story, film-script, and poem. Her verbal environments explore ecology and environmental justice, the history of animal sciences, and interspecies communication, considering notions of progress and what it means to be human. Her most recent book, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* (2010), spins itself from the twigs and strands of terminologies ranging from architecture to zoology as she tracks questions of language, behavior, and relationships between species. "Whose *Umwelt* is it anyway?," she asks in this extended study of human dominance and the way we use language to interpret and shape the world (and ourselves) for ourselves and other life forms.

Foregrounding Western culture backlit by a Buddhist outlook, Field dwells on an edge of cross-cultural migration and transformation as Buddhism takes deeper root in the contemporary Western context. Educated at a lycée in France, Field worked at the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre and at the Théâtre National de Marseilles, and remains active in creating performance art. Field now teaches creative writing at Brown University and also occasionally at Naropa University. This latter post reflects her interest in Tibetan Buddhism and its central commitment to compassionate awareness. It is this very outlook that infuses *Bird Lovers, Backyard* and powers Field's playful yet demanding attention to language. Taking shape through a self-aware narrative practice that interrogates naming and storytelling, Field's indirect and obliquely Buddhist appeal for transformed perception and behavior contributes to a growing call for evolutionary narratives that might help move our species towards a more just and sustainable culture.

This paper begins with the framework of the Four Noble Truths and Alan Sponberg's "hierarchies" models, which highlight the Buddhist eco-logic at work in the information-rich, densely poetic narratives of *Bird Lovers, Backyard*. After considering the book's recurrent glimpses into what Tibetan Buddhist discipline brings to the environmental crisis, the paper closes in conversation with ecological thinkers Charles Sokol Bednar and Bron Taylor, as well as Tibetan anthropologist Geoffrey Samuel, and considers the crossroads and questions presented by both evolutionary narratives and the evolutionary moment itself.

Buddhism and Environmental Ethics

As multilayered as Field's own work, Buddhist traditions in Asian societies have traditionally been pluralistic. In a recent article for *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, David Loy balances historian-critics and Green Buddhists, first acknowledging that the historical texts, rooted in ancient India, do not speak to "ozone holes, melting glaciers or extinction events" (253), then focusing his attention on the Buddhist contribution to resolving the ecocrisis in terms of a radical reorientation of self-other relationships with a potential to transform the behavior of individuals and social systems.¹ In general, Buddhist conduct is seen to be rooted in an understanding of the nondual, interdependent nature of beings, a view that inspires an attentive sense of responsibility for cultivating benign behaviors of body, speech, and mind.

At issue in Field's stories, which unfold in human-made environments, is human conduct, specifically, the hyper-dualistic yet not uncommon patterns of abusive domination as well as the perceptual frameworks and normalizing language that make such extreme behavior possible. Her concern with perception reflects the heart of the Buddhist approach. And to uncover these roots of Buddhist ethics within the dense text of *Bird Lovers, Backyard*, it is useful to keep in mind the heuristic structure of the Four Noble Truths. The common starting point for all Buddhism, this first set of teachings given in the 5th century by Siddhārtha Gautama after his definitive breakthrough to the state of Buddhahood (from the Sanskrit root *budh-*, meaning "knowing" or "awakened") are observations on the nature of common experience as well as insights arising from his realization of the vastness of awareness beyond *conditioned* perceptions. The Four Noble Truths thus help move listeners from ignorance to awareness.

To sketch these four points in brief, *The First Noble Truth of Suffering* observes that life, or our world as we know it, is characterized by dissatisfaction, ranging from simmering anxieties to immensities of loss and pain. This cycle of suffering begetting further suffering is known as *samsara*. In turn, *The Second Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering* identifies the root cause of this existential pain as grasping, whether in hope or fear, in craving or aggression, and deduces that these graspings all stem from an ignorance that habitually, but wrongly, misperceives the self as being always separate from others. With its process view that regards self, other, and situation as an interpenetrated and interpenetrating nexus of changing causes and conditions—thus as a

¹ Even the most text-bound traditionalist critics concede that Buddhism needs to be responsive to changing conditions in order to be a living tradition. See Donald Swearer's closing remarks on the category of Buddhist scholars he calls "ecocritics" in his "An Assessment of Buddhist Eco-philosophy," 11. Also see his balanced discussion of a range of positions in "Buddhism and Ecology: Challenge and Promise."

kind of mental ecology—Buddhism shares ground with common ecological understandings of interdependence. Indeed, the much misinterpreted, perhaps poorly translated, Buddhist term "emptiness" or "voidness" refers to this pervasive interdependence of causes and outcomes. Thus, in the Buddhist view, entities are understood to be "empty" of the quality of being bounded, impermeable selves separate from others, a separation and boundedness that mark the common, dualistic way of perceiving things.

Consequently, *the Third Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering* points to an "awakened" state beyond dualistic misperceptions and their resulting sufferings that constitute *samsara*. This non-dual, unconditioned state of awareness beyond subject and object, is often called *nirvana*, and is regarded as a possibility available to—and, indeed, inherent in—all beings. Though this inborn nirvanic quality, known as "buddha-nature," does not overlap with the concept of "soul" in the theistic sense, it is described as an incorruptible, all-inclusive awareness, as the abiding essence of all human and nonhuman beings without exception. Thus, Sponberg refers to this non-dual consciousness as a "transhuman quality" ("Ecological Self" 5). Finally, *the Fourth Noble Truth of Path* bridges the otherwise bewildering gap between the *samsaric* imprisonment emphasized by the first two truths and the possibility of nirvanic liberation posited by the third. Connoting the cultivation of wisdom suffused with compassion, this "path" is in actuality supported by meditative practices designed, precisely, to disentangle the mind from its habitual self-other dualities and their ensuing, limiting misperceptions of the "real." Crucially too, the "path" and its associated meditative discipline seek to enable the subject to turn this expanded awareness of the *porous—or "empty"*—nature of things into a basis for compassionate behavior in the everyday world.

Malcolm David Eckel not only points out the emphasis on the "human goal(s)" of mental development at the core of the Buddhist path, but also raises "the paradox of anthropocentrism" within a worldview that sees interdependence as manifest reality and all beings as equal in light of "buddha-nature" (341-342). It is this very paradox that Alan Sponberg explores at length in his essay, "Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion," in which he links the concept of *hierarchy* to human responsibility for the welfare of other beings. Furthermore, Sponberg asks Green Buddhists to balance their ready embrace of what he calls the "horizontal dimension" of interrelatedness with a new understanding of and appreciation for the "vertical dimension" ("Green Buddhism" 362). Sponberg defines this equilibrium as a "development and evolution of consciousness"—an evolution that is a widening of the mind to incorporate radical interrelatedness ("Green Buddhism" 362). He regards this upward movement as reflecting the spiritual progress of an individual and as mirroring "the very structure of the Buddhist conception of the cosmos itself" ("Green Buddhism" 356). Moreover, entailing as it does the concept of karmically determined rebirth, this cosmic structure is

described by Sponberg as a hierarchy of expressed potential, “a range of progressively greater degrees of awareness and ethical sensibility available to all life-forms” (“Green Buddhism” 359).

With this view of evolutionary development and in light of the demands of the human-made ecological crisis, Sponberg calls for an understanding of the rigorous personal responsibility necessary to arrive at the actual experience of interdependence, to the kind of “interdependence-as-lived” needed to make positive change.² Sponberg insists on the provocative term “hierarchy,” as it allows him to contrast two polarized models of how hierarchy might flow, observing that the normative definition of the word is at the roots of the current ecocrisis, one driven by a narrow-mindedness that his revision of the concept helps resolve.

He compares his first model, the “hierarchy of oppression,” to a pyramid by way of illustrating the common interpretation of “hierarchy” as a top-down view based on self-centered domination and control:

Reaching the apex of the cone [...] would thus represent the ultimate “success” to which one could aspire, but that ultimate “success” would, of course, be a state of total alienation—alienation not just from others but from oneself as well—because one can “succeed” only by rejecting one’s actual nature of interrelatedness. (“Green Buddhist” 366)

Antithetical to this hierarchy that shapes most of our current social systems and drives ecological disaster, Sponberg’s second model, the “hierarchy of compassion,” is defined by interrelatedness. Using the image of an inverted pyramid, with the widest part—signifying an expansion of consciousness and care for others—at the peak, he describes a process of ethically growing up: “As one moves upwards, the circle of one’s interrelatedness (or, rather of one’s expressed interrelatedness) increases. In fact, the only way one can move up is by actively realizing and acting on the fundamental interrelatedness of all existence” (“Green Buddhist” 366). As seen earlier, two core principles for a Buddhist environmental ethic are the transformation of the concept of the “self” and the reconfiguration of self-other relationships in light of the ideas of interdependent existence and in light of the equality of all beings by virtue of “buddha-nature.” Here Sponberg identifies one of the root causes of the ecological crisis as the predominant conception of an unchanging selfhood—a fixity that he calls “species-

² Sponberg’s hierarchies, addressed to Green Buddhists, are thus also a call to action. He argues that without working to develop oneself, the “interdependence” that ecologically minded Buddhists are drawn to becomes merely an “article of faith,” a passive belief, left unrealized without the requisite transformation through praxis (373). Consideration of Buddhist practices, which Geoffrey Samuel has called “techniques for restructuring the self and the emotions, of realigning the relationship between one human being and others” (“Body” 203), is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Field herself hints at such practices in references to Padmasambhava, *mantra*, and *samadhi* (meditative absorption). See Samuel, “Body.”

specificity,” in which the outer form of self and other remains eternally the same (“Ecological Self” 8). Thus a sparrow is always a sparrow and a man a man—a view that can supply the perceptual distancing required for control and exploitation. In stark contrast to this vision, Sponberg refers to the shared quality of “buddha-nature,” saying, “With a conception of personal identity that is fundamentally trans-human, Buddhists have traditionally shaped the problem of inter-species relationships in quite different terms” (“Ecological Self” 8).

Buddhism and the Inter-Species Mosaic of *Bird Lovers, Backyard*

This concern with inter-species relationship is at the heart of *Bird Lovers, Backyard*. The book provides a space to think through poetic case studies of human behavior towards nonhuman life, looking at how we situate ourselves within the swarming systems of the “live, live world” (81). Field’s book offers a study of extinction and extermination, of the socially normative outlook of dominance, and of the use of language underlying such a view. Its nine chapters form an overarching poetic essay in which the parts expand and refine her inquiry into a systemic pattern of human dominion over weaker animals and ecosystems. Her stories unfold in built environments, including an office-building food court, a videorecording, a natural history museum, a library, and, in the first and last chapters of the book, she also entertains the unknown possibilities of “an unbuilt field,” of which she asks “How do we tell which way [it] is headed—to the forest or the city?” (8). Questions of place and of home abound, as Field takes us to scientists’ homes become laboratories, a sparrows’ habitat commandeered for a NASA testing site, food courts where pigeons and people forage, and people’s backyard gardens where the ants thrive amidst the roses, the poetic voice always asking in the process: “Who has the right to sleep where, walk where?” (16). In this study of contested spaces, of domination and abuse, Field’s chapters focus on a wide range of characters and life forms, including: Nazi and Nobel prize-winning ethologist, Konrad Lorenz; “Genie,” the abused suburban-Californian feral child; the Greek god Morpheus, post-apocalyptic bacteria, radioactive ghosts, and the haunted visionary William Blake; unseen city architects and unflappable pigeons; “life-loving” gardeners and “ant invaders” (122); “bouncy” astronauts, sparrows gone extinct, and *bodhisattvas* gone beyond (35).³

³ A *bodhisattva* (Sanskrit: “bodhi” wisdom/awakening/enlightenment; “sattva” being) is most simply defined, as Frank E. Reynolds and Charles Hallisey have done, as a “future buddha” (11). This futurity is, in turn, commonly understood as the “path” or the “bodhisattva path,” which refers to a process of cultivating the wisdom of emptiness/nonduality as well as the kind of conduct rooted in this wisdom. The distinction between “*buddha*,” a term expressing total awakening, and “*bodhisattva*,” corresponds to different levels of “wisdom,” i.e. the ability to see through subtler and subtler “veils,” or habits of duality (see Gethin 230-231.) While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the development of

In studying extinction, extermination, and abuse, Field faces not only the enormity of suffering, but also the ignorance around it, rooted in a cultural callousness towards the pain of others. This acknowledgement of unnoticed and unquestioned suffering echoes the First Noble Truth, which, as explained earlier, constitutes the first step in a Buddhist pedagogy for living more consciously, kindly, and fully. Field's often sardonic tone has a plain-spoken, quotidian quality that drives home the message of how our culture is creating her book's grim material. "Oops," she says, reflecting our carelessness in a chapter recounting the mistakes that led to the extinction of a particular sparrow species (32). This further exemplifies the "obliqueness" of her Buddhist outlook referred to earlier: not only are actual Buddhist figures fleeting and few, but Field's tone also tends to be mostly cheeky and rarely pious. The everyday quality of her diction and tone allows her to point out the violence that is often shrouded in the normalizing effect of group behavior, as seen in the ninth chapter, "Discussion Group," (112-122), which consists entirely of a web chat-room transcript on the topic of "Need solution to kill ants in the garden" (112).

Given Field's tacit Tibetan Buddhist outlook, which entails the committed wish for all beings' happiness and liberation from suffering, this chapter focused on so-called "ant invaders" opens on a note of black humor with the chat-room convener's complaint that "the ants are enjoying [her garden] too much" (112). This section continues in this comic vein, casting light on our unconsciously contradictory self-perceptions, as when chat-room responders named ButterflyLov[er], angelkate42, and lovelife_7 swap grisly accounts of how to "cut to pieces," explode, and boil ants alive (122). Field's everyday tone and context, as well as her deft comic portrayal of human bungling, prevent the reader from smugly judging the book's characters as villains, and instead holds up an uncompromising mirror to how our species regards others.

Paradoxically thus, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* is a kind of studies for future human potential, operating by way of past example, as Fields depicts our species at a crossroads between truly evolving or merely becoming reduced to a "series of mistakes" (32). She tells stories of the "having fallen," of extinction and other aftermaths, whilst always hinting toward the future, whilst repeatedly asking questions that begin to trace

the *bodhisattva* doctrine in tandem with the doctrines of emptiness/non-duality in the later *Mahayana* (or "Great Vehicle") tradition, Luis O. Gomez states a key point to keep in mind when considering Field's use of the figure of the *bodhisattva*, and when thinking of a Buddhist ecological outlook. Gomez observes that, for a *bodhisattva*, *nirvana* became a different matter than the emphasis on individual release from suffering found in early Buddhism: "to be a bodhisattva meant to adopt the vow [...] of seeking perfect awakening *for the sake of living beings* [...] and not to aspire merely to individual liberation" (77).

A reading of *Bird Lovers, Backyard* alongside Joseph Meeker's book *The Comedy of Survival* (1980), taking their shared interest in Konrad Lorentz (who is the author of Meeker's preface) as a starting point, would yield interesting tensions and divergences as well as odd overlaps within the shared space of a "literary" and even "comic" approach to questions of ecology, extinction, and evolution.

our species' unconscious violence to its logical, though never openly stated, end and endings (8). In the opening chapter, "Inscription for a Falling Body" (1-23), she recounts the history of pigeons once feted by French courts, saying, "These birds were cared about once. Then minds changed," as their story ends a few decades later with millions of North American passenger pigeons exterminated to the point of extinction (9). She contemplates pigeons' insouciant "pursuit of happiness," despite their reduced state of scavenging in office-building food courts—a place that also shows how far humans have fallen, as her characters think about pigeons and comically wish for snacks (12).

Already on the book's first page, this fallenness of ours threatens to unfold into the future, when the poetic voice proposes that "instead of a narrative build-up, what if we have Icarus crawling right into the water [...] skipping right past the story-part to lie down in the ending?" (1) Given the book's focus on extinction, this ending we are trying to avoid seems to be the outcome of human domination—perhaps in reference to the crime that E. O. Wilson has charged us with, namely the crime born of our short-term vision that might make us a "planetary killer" (Wilson 102). Field goes on to say that this avoidable ending "involves the violence of names and a basic ignorance of history" (8). The hypothetical vanquishing of this ignorance echoes the Second Noble Truth, as it implies a commitment to seeing clearly the mechanics of the suffering that we are enmeshed in making. In *Bird Lovers, Backyard*, a work that is ultimately concerned with learning, this quest for lucidity constitutes the essence of Field's project of questioning the names we give to and the stories we tell about the relationship between self and other.

One of the kinds of ignorance with which Field grapples is a profound and pervasive disconnect between cause and effect (in Buddhist terms, *karma*). Confined in their "specious present[s]" (35) as her characters are, they do not see logical long-term outcomes, just their daily lives unfolding in easy conventions that feel like fixed laws rather than constant choices. To counter this habit-shrouded ignorance of cause and effect, Field weaves the word "warning" throughout her third chapter, "This Crime Has a Name" (31-41), not only recounting the decisions and missteps leading to the extinction of the dusky sea-side sparrow, but also hinting that this warning extends to us. Punning on the Buddhist saying "that death comes without warning," she slyly offers that it comes "sometimes with plenty of warning" (41), adding elsewhere, "But often there is warning, warning, and more warning" (33). Time and again, Field reflects on memory as a way of learning, observing that extinctions seen in "hindsight" through history seem too massive in scale and distant in time to be linked to the everyday decisions that caused such devastation (36).

Crucially too, this devastation involves another ignorance at the core of the Buddhist approach—the blindness to the self-serving assumptions and attitudes that

drive extermination. The socially sanctioned perceptual habits of dominance—in which other life forms are seen as nuisances or simply unimportant—are rarely noticed or questioned. Field's book provides a means for this examination, again especially in this third chapter, "This Crime Has a Name," where she shows us plainly what we are doing. Performing what she elsewhere calls "species ventriloquism" of a now-extinct sparrow, Field here tells a story that allows us to see the workings of the pervasive top-down view that isolates humans from other species and shapes the institutions that shape the world (103). As she says elsewhere, "Everyone wants to be one flight up" (10)—and in chapter three, through the figures of sparrow, astronaut, and *bodhisattva*, we see Sponberg's hierarchies manifesting their distinct forms of upward mobility. Interestingly, this chapter is but one of two places in the rich weave of *Bird Lovers, Backyard* in which Field overtly references Buddhist figures and terms, including *bodhisattvas*, "wisdom beings," wholly dedicated to the welfare of others; *samsara*, the state of suffering in which reality is perceived as a struggle between self and other; as well as Buddhist techniques—like *mantra* and *samadhi* (meditative absorption)—for cultivating the peaceful perception of non-dual reality called *nirvana*. In fact, the *bodhisattva*/buddha figures of this chapter offer us the only glimpse of the Third Noble Truth of *nirvana* in the entire book.

Moreover, as a savvy practitioner of narrative strategies, Field brings the cultural heroes of astronaut and *bodhisattva* into sometimes comic contrast. She begins a paragraph on NASA with "The whole space program started with the Bumper 8, sent ten miles up from an outhouse and a ladder" (36), and ends with a description of the sparrows' marshland commandeered for the rocket launches, saying "the mosquitoes drove the astronauts crazy" (36). From this, we move directly to another paragraph—the first mention of the term "*bodhisattva*" in the essay—as this section begins with a glimpse of a *bodhisattva*'s "*parinirvana*," i.e. the moment when a Buddhist meditator irrevocably lifts-off from *samsara* (36).⁴ Thus, in this humorous outhouse-to-outer-space sequencing, Field offers two contrasting hero narratives. In the first, driven by curiosity and patriotic Cold War competitiveness, the highest aspiration is to engineer the first manned moon landing. Cleverly animating the idea of humanity's godlike technology bound to baser urges, she humbles the lofty goal of the moon mission with

⁴ In discussing his own evolutionary model, the hierarchy of compassion, Sponberg reflects upon Gary Snyder's thoughts on what Snyder calls "spiritual Darwinism" ("Green Buddhism" 362). Sponberg quotes at length from Snyder's *Practice of the Wild* (1990), and includes cautionary words against "an evolutionary spiritual destiny for humanity under the name of higher consciousness," a view that Snyder fears would, in its movement to transcend past limitations, "willingly leave the rest of earthbound animal and plant life behind" ("Green Buddhism" 362). What Sponberg's essay works to make clear is that the very nature of a *bodhisattva*—and the wisdom-that-is-compassion they are defined by—supposes a widening expansion of one's circle of concern. Thus, for a *bodhisattva*, "giving up the world," a phrase that Thalia Field plays with in a few places, means abandoning one's samsaric perceptions, not one's care for others (35).

her crude allusion to the toilet and to the swamp-loving might of mosquitoes. In the contrasting hero narrative, we glimpse the breakthrough moment of a *bodhisattva* and hear the name of a uniquely Tibetan buddha, “Padmasambhava”—both mighty, altruistic figures defined by a total focus on the “welfare of all beings” (Field 36; Lopez and Rockefeller 25).⁵

In considering the photos of Earth from the Apollo missions, Greg Garrard builds upon Gretchen Legler’s phrase, a “god’s eye view,” saying that the photos “promise a kind of transcendental power that we, as individuals or as a species, do not possess” (Garrard 162). And in this chapter which recounts the story of a species’ sole viable habitat being drained to make room for rocket-testing, we see the American icon of the astronaut as symbolizing the isolated apex of Sponberg’s hierarchy of oppression in which one individual, however unconsciously, ascends at the cost of other beings. By contrast, the *bodhisattva* inhabits Sponberg’s hierarchy of compassion, at the wide peak of interrelated consciousness, defined as this figure is by a total evolution of human body, speech, and mind, an evolution achieved through a process driven solely by compassion for others (and the growing realization that there are, in actual fact, no “others”).⁶

While this sets up an opposition, Field includes a balanced spectrum of astronauts’ responses to their isolation in space, responses that resonate with Sponberg’s pyramids—the astronauts either exulting in the rarefied solitude of the heights or sensing a profound interbeing with all things. For instance, Field quotes Mike Collins of Apollo 11 on his solitude: “[...] I was described as the loneliest man ever in the universe (...) which was really baloney (...) I rather enjoyed it” (40). On interconnectedness, she also cites Edgar Mitchell of Apollo 14 “The biggest joy was on the way home [...] suddenly I realized that the molecules of my body and the molecules of the spacecraft and the molecules of my partners, [sic] were prototyped and

⁵ Padmasambhava (8th century) is a thaumaturgic figure, known as chief composer of Tibetan Buddhist shamanic-tantric practices designed to integrate body-mind, self-other, and thus assimilate the nondual ontology of emptiness—or essential interrelation. The wonder-working stories surrounding Padmasambhava disshevel conventional conceptual and emotional frameworks to point towards the inconceivability of ultimate being. They bewilder with contradictory more-than-human time scales and a vast cosmological vision that moves instantaneously between atoms and universes, illustrative of mastery over time and space and matter. An unquiescent figure in this contemplative tradition, as “the embodiment of the activity” of the buddhas, this energetic, often ruthless figure—said to fit the aggressive speed of today’s times—represents actions driven solely by compassion, untainted by fear, greed, and self-interest (Khyentse 1).

⁶ It is precisely as an “evolutionary process” that Herbert Guenther speaks of the *bodhisattva* path (121). And in exploring the Tibetan term for *bodhisattva* (*byang-chub sems-dpa’*), he offers that it is “primarily a descriptive term for a qualitative (or, if you so prefer, a mental-spiritual) process, not a designatory term for a static or quantifiable entity, a ‘concrete’ person” (Guenther 117). This view reinforces the characteristic of compassion for all living beings highlighted earlier in footnote 3: a *bodhisattva* could be seen as a collection or stream of responses that flow in the direction of universal care.

manufactured in some ancient generation of stars, and that was an overwhelming sense of oneness, of connectedness” (41). Field, moreover, creates slippage between her characters through phrases and descriptions that can apply equally to the astronaut figures—whether at the top or bottom of the life pyramid—or the one of the *bodhisattva*. The phrase ““Bearing the hopes and burdens of all mankind,” initially offered as quoted material about the astronauts and the moon mission, equally well describes the *bodhisattva* vow to help free all beings from suffering (38). Further amplifying its playful ambiguity, this phrase about bearing the lives of all others also connects with the sparrow, describing its own last moments before its species becomes extinct: “I was the one male dusky alive [...] waiting to see what would happen, or how it feels to be part of something big. My single body was tiny spindle falling apart, yet holding this huge thing” (40).

In similar ways throughout the chapter, Field blurs the boundaries between these three central forms of being—spacemen, *bodhisattva*, bird—sometimes appealing to shared needs for food and a place to live: “I don’t like pesticide sauce on my mosquitoes,” says the extinct sparrow (36). Elsewhere, Apollo 12 astronaut Alan Bean shares a memory of the NASA spacecraft that is more akin to a bird’s tree perch: “When you land on the moon [...] nobody’s out there, this little limb and the two of you and you’re it on this whole big place, and that’s a weird feeling. It’s weird to be two people and that’s it” (39). This hybrid memory of astronaut and bird is an especially apt narrative strategy to evoke the displaced sparrow species dwindling from six living members to two before extinction. Through this conflation of characters, Field provides a place to practice seeing from the wide peak of Sponberg’s hierarchy of compassion.

This conflation also invites the reader to experience the permeability of seemingly fixed species. While Buddhism arguably has an anthropocentric view in seeing human life as the most conducive form of incarnation for attaining enlightenment, there is, complicating this view, the central doctrine of inherent “buddha-nature,” which paradoxically sees all beings as already enlightened. From this perspective, the lives of even the most benighted sparrow or spaceman are already sacred. An additional nuancing of the particular kind of anthropocentrism found in Buddhism is the crucial idea that Field mentions near the chapter’s end: that of buddhas and *bodhisattvas* incarnating in whatever form is needed to teach or “be of benefit to beings” (40). By that logic, a sparrow or a spaceman can also be construed as already fully realized buddhas in our midst. Either way, both Field and Buddhism make clear that our vision of others—as disposable, as inherently valuable, as fully-fledged buddhas here to teach us—defines our behavior and what we are. In a further example of her “poetics of conflation” that emphasizes the porous boundaries between species, Field poignantly fuses the sparrow and Buddhist saint in a death scene that includes *mantra* (or sounds used as meditative

support) and the skilled state of meditative absorption called *samadhi*. In so doing, she offers the reader a glimpse of both nirvanic care and samsaric crimes:

If you take away my home, it turns out I don't have a place to live. If I were a bodhisattva, I would have practiced for death from the very beginning, and in the flash of just one life could rest my feathered body in *samadhi*, speak my last *Om Ah Hum* (or whatever it is a sparrow says) and never return to *samsara*. "Universally care for the myriad things." (38)

Echoing the third chapter's title, "This Crime Has a Name," as well as the supreme importance of lucidity in the Buddhist value system, this moment also calls for precision of language in the service of clearly seeing our actions. Reminding us of the awareness that correct naming can actually bring, Field hints here at a home stolen, and from that at a second crime—extinction—which, she notes, is an "endless" ending, what Holmes Rolston III has called "a super-killing" that "kills birth as well as death" (Field 37; Rolston 141). Plainly saying what we are doing, and caring for things by not designating them by wrong names, these two ideals are central to Field's project. The "stewardship of naming" which she advocates is symbolized through other figures in this chapter: the "Name Disputers," who form a school of ancient Chinese logicians for whom "the right word implied the correct relation" (39). Field offers a quote from this school to illustrate her own book's concern with showing the imbricated nature of language and ethics: "What causes names to be misplaced are dissolute explanations (*shuo*, also "persuasions" or "arguments"). If explanations are dissolute, then inadmissible is deemed admissible and the not-so so, the not-right is deemed right, and the not-wrong, wrong" (39). Further extending the need for a "stewardship of naming," Field notes: "Lying about names is the first sign of violence," a principle confirmed, as we saw, in the ant "invaders" (122), or elsewhere when a lab rat is called "a data point" just before his head is perfunctorily lopped off (125). Through such examples, Field points out that "Carelessness about words can kill" (105), a remark she offers in her seventh chapter, an essay devoted to language and learning, and one worth exploring before considering "This Crime Has a Name" further.

She precisely begins the seventh chapter, "Recapitulation: Youthful Folly," with this concern for mis-naming, introducing a pet lizard "named Newt, although he was a skink" (100), telling of his slow starvation because Field was "inadequate as a conversationalist," unable to determine his needs (101). Opening with this humbling experience of ignorance, this chapter contemplates what it means to learn. It is the only directly autobiographical piece in the book, unfolding in diary-like form with the *I Ching* hexagram "Youthful Folly" interspersed. Field recounts learning to respectfully train her dog, Lila, learning from her teacher and from Lila herself, as they "work[ed] together [...] to respect the commitment of sharing a home" (111). The narrative centers around

her own coaching with Vicki Hearne, a highly regarded dog-trainer, poet, and philosopher who “couldn’t help but see human behavior as inseparable from language” (103).

Hearne’s perspective on the role of language in shaping perception and social realities, such as creating “grammars for crime” that create “criminals to speak in it” (110), offers a rich zone of attention in reconfiguring relationships between self and other. And, given Hearne’s commitment to kindness as restated in the chapter’s epigraph, her reconfiguration shares ground with Buddhist efforts to bring together self and other: “And kindness—dear reader! Kindness these days is everything. –Vicki Hearne” (100). That Hearne’s work happens in the domain of human-animal relations magnifies this othering, especially in view of prevalent human attitudes of dominance and abuse towards “what” are thought to be lesser beings. On this point, Field elsewhere harks back to pioneering zoologist Heini Hediger’s wish that “through improved *human* behavior—words such as ‘dangerous, dull, and destructive’ might be ever less frequently applied to animals” (129, italics mine).

In this seventh chapter, “Recapitulation: Youthful Folly,” Field thus further explores naming and grammar as underlying our behavior and social systems. After all, grammar is the articulation of relationships, the creation of relation or disconnection, the framework for “hierarchies of oppression,” in Sponberg’s parlance, or for respectful negotiation needed to share space. Here we see the role that a poet’s assiduous attention to language can play in the work of learning to live more ecologically, for as Field asserts, sharing the words of her teacher, “Poetry, Vicki wrote, can’t solve problems. But thinking through problems about language can bring back awareness” (106). Poetry as a *practice of awareness*, as a way out of ignorance, brings us to the Fourth Noble Truth of the Path out of samsaric confusion. For Buddhism, the essence of the spiritual path is learning through unlearning: dissolving damaging habits, developing clearer ways of seeing, moving beyond perceived limitations to greater vision and possibilities of experience. Within the Buddhist framework in general, and in the Tibetan vehicle most especially, there are, at the concrete and pragmatic levels, as many paths towards awareness as there are predilections, and Field’s book of self-aware poem-essays provides a stimulating stretch of road.

Within this contemplation of (un)learning, Field’s seventh chapter also offers readers a glimpse of what is, traditionally in Buddhism, one of the most important ways to actualize the Path, namely the teacher-student relationship. She examines this relationship not only in her work with Vicki Hearne, but also with her Buddhist teacher, a Tibetan nun. Here we see again Sponberg’s model of a hierarchy of evolved compassion-awareness, for the Tibetan tradition, grounded as it is in the intimacies of human meditation experience, depends for its continuity upon the mechanism of the teacher-student relationship. The intent of this apprentice-master system is cleverly

communicated by Field, who nests her discussion of Tibetan teacher-student discipline and surrender within a narrative about dog-training. She thus squarely faces Western anxiety about moral authority as dangerous and about surrender as foolishness, or worse, slavishness. Indeed, when depicting herself working with her dog Lila, she slyly subverts the latter prejudice, whilst simultaneously undermining the stereotype of dog as “submissive and servile” (as Konrad Lorenz labels dogs in a previous chapter) (77), by sharing a moment of Lila’s triumph of self-discipline: “I hid behind a tree and witnessed her determination to respect the command, no matter what presented itself. She was a master” (106).

Observing that “Discipline should be about true independence of mind” (108), Field also allows her readers a glimpse into the Buddhist definition of a teacher as someone who—or something that—stands outside one's mental habits, one's limitations of knowing, and thus expands an individual's view and possibilities of being:

Finding a teacher is hard to explain because it's about home; not a place to hide or seek safety and comfort, but a refuge to meet the hardest challenges. I barely realized at first what kinds of surrender something like a teacher would entail—basically everything I held on to so fearfully as "me." The whole story, the very idea of stories, had to be started again; all the way back to "sit." (108)

In this passage, we are given what Buddhism considers a key component on the path to learning to live differently: the humility of letting go of what you think you know about who you are and how you might live, a *surrender to an "unknowing"* that can usher in real change.

In *Transforming the American Dream* (2003), political scientist Charles Sokol Bednar urges our society to undertake this kind of comprehensive change, calling for “a new ecological social paradigm that replaces the dominant techno-industrial paradigm, [which] means, in effect, transforming the American dream with its emphasis on egocentric individualism, which treats nonhumans, and frequently humans as objects used for self-gratification” (7). Bednar discusses an “outright ignorance, [a] culturally induced denial” (2) about the ecological crisis, examining the systemic enmeshment of our existing institutions, ranging from economy to education, in the dominant paradigm and its unsustainable capitalist vision of “endless growth” (9). And, like Field and Hearne, he is attuned to the conceptual and linguistic roots of social systems, suggesting that the dominant cultural paradigm “[d]istorts the way humans perceive the world and themselves” (184). *Bird Lovers, Backyard* works always against this ignorance and denial, questioning our distorted perceptions, dismantling self-other dualisms—especially in the realm of animal others—interrogating the language, names, and “grammar” furthering habitual relationships of oppression. After all, for a poet, language leads, and for an ecocritical poet like Field, language leads behavior. And for a Buddhist,

both words and actions are led by ignorance or awareness—in the direction of either callousness or care.

Exemplifying Gretchen Legler's observation that "[e]very piece of narrative scholarship is a challenge to Euro-American notions of objectivity, self, knowledge and language" (n. p.), Field's conflation of sparrow and spaceman in "This Crime Has a Name" and of human and dog in "Recapitulation: Youthful Folly" reaches towards transformative experiences of interrelatedness beyond the habitual boundaries of the self, thereby offering a view from Sponberg's wide peak of compassion-awareness. This narrative technique of an interspecies fusion of selves reflects the Buddhist notion of a fluid self, which Sponberg describes as being "quite literally the (ever changing) sum of our habits" ("Ecological Self" 4). In her exploration of what species and selfhood might mean, Field even conflates selves within one and the same species—"Actually there were six of me," says the sparrow (36). By way of further testing the boundaries of species, Field opens "This Crime Has a Name" with a list of possible views of the concept ranging from "DNA" to "matter of context or [...] convenience," as well as "illusion, past-present, accident, karma, nonsense, or I simply say nothing" (31-32). The essay's final page, wryly subtitled "Discussion Questions," asks "Are you sure species exist? What is your species concept?" (41). She engages the reader again with ethologist Charles Otis Whitman's "bright idea" that "instead of by how we look [...] species could be better defined by how we behave" (34). Later she adds, "Shall we behave like doves or like wolves?" (82) by way of a quote attributed to Konrad Lorenz—and her book constantly puts our species and our notions of selfhood at just this kind of existential crossroads.

Evolutionary Narratives, Buddhist Humility, and Eco poetic Attention

Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker argue that evolutionary "transitions come at times of crisis, [and] they involve tremendous cost" (428). In light of the scale of quickening ecological degradation, Swimme and Tucker observe that "the central reality of our times is that we are in such a transition moment," an idea that David Loy upholds, calling us "a transitional species" (Swimme and Tucker 429; Loy 265). All three agree, along with Bednar, that an evolutionary narrative can help guide us through this difficult transition, providing inspiration for the requisite changes in self-concept that are needed to make an ecologically sound shift in our way of life. Evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson adds the assertion that how we narrate ourselves shapes who we are as a species, and highlights the "genelike properties" of stories and the speed of such "nongenetic evolutionary processes" (26)—a needful speed given the breakneck environmental change of our times.

At this transition moment, Field mostly presents bleak outcomes of where we are headed if we continue in the direction we are going. She also offers fleeting glimpses of a more positive future state that becomes possible at this crossroads. Early in “This Crime Has a Name,” Field muses on the fact that “Darwin replaced fixed species with evolving ones—an endless variety of response to daily life on a single planet” (32). A bright evolution is also briefly caught sight of in the momentary presence of posthuman buddha/*bodhisattva* figures. In this chapter that opens with Wittgenstein’s talking lion and contemplates the gap between human and animal *umwelts* of constructed reality and understanding, Field daringly marks the *bodhisattva* as another species, provocatively asking: “If we could hear the last words a bodhisattva utters as he passes to *dharmata* would we understand them?” (41).⁷

This is just one glimpse of an evolved humanity in a book that otherwise ends in dreary yet Artaudian chaos, as tired adults and hopeful children seek to comfort a monstrous newborn, a surreal new species just hatched from an egg. Quite transparently, this image connects to Konrad Lorentz’s remark about a “creating a new species (89). As a teller of stories himself, Lorentz is arguably Field’s central cautionary tale, and when she speaks of him writing “in 1940 of creating a new species” (89), she calls for (what certainly includes her own) alertness to the abuses of evolutionary narratives. Thus, the book’s *bodhisattva* figures prove fleeting not only because Field is not a pious or prescriptive writer, but also because of her awareness of history. After all, evolutionary narratives and dreams of superhumanness formed part of the ideology powering the Holocaust, an event which haunts this book. The ghost of the *Shoah* can, for instance, be seen in the extended contemplation of Lorentz’s use of animal behavior to advance his career by supporting Nazi racist ideology, in Vicki Hearne’s mention of Göring’s distortion of the word kindness, even in the “solution” sought for the ant invaders, or in the “pigeon problem,” both of which recall Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil. Field’s work operates with full consciousness of Simon Estok’s point that racism and speciesism “are thoroughly interwoven with each other and must eventually be looked at together” (75).

Moreover, in writing of Lorentz’s misuses of his expertise—a counterpoint to her chapter about Buddhist teachers and disciplined surrender—Field tells a cautionary tale about the specious moral authority and the demand for an unwavering commitment to an equally dubious ideology that both prevailed in Fascist states in the past century. The difference between this Fascist model and a Buddhist one is the difference between

⁷ *Dharmata* is defined by Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche in his *Bardo Guidebook* (1991) as “The innate nature of phenomena and mind” (173). The *bardo* of *dharmata* is described in the Tibetan system as an after-death state of consciousness in which the “appearances of this lifetime have subsided, there is no physical body, and no conditioned experience” (169). Thus, essential reality, beyond subjective, habitual constructs is laid bare.

Sponberg's pyramids of isolation and oppression or interconnected care. In light of 20th century abuses, for Field, any evolutionary narrative must, to use Bron Taylor's argument for environmental ethics "stand [...] on sacred ground" (99).

Bednar and Taylor both speak of the intense commitment required from individuals and society to move to an ecological paradigm. Both also see a need for a sacred dimension to this work. Bednar calls for "metanoia or a profound transformation of mind and character," saying that "[w]ithout metanoia, the psychological conditions and the political will to reshape the institutions and values that threaten ecological disaster will be absent" (179). In "On Sacred or Secular Ground?," Taylor asserts that people will not be moved to change their behaviors merely because of scientific knowledge of our genetic kinship with other species, stating: "I do *not* find [...] [a] naturalistic, evolutionary-scientific worldview *existentially compelling*, ironically, because an environmental ethics based wholly on science is insufficiently *religious* to be *rationally* persuasive" (103). He adds that what is being asked of people are "significant risks or sacrifices; the poor may be asked to leave aside a food-source [...] until practices for sustain[ability] are established, and the affluent must be asked to dramatically reduce their rates of consumption" (107). Making these changes, Taylor maintains, depends on a potent paradox of the sacred: "Only when we perceive that the value of the living natural world is grounded in something greater than ourselves, something other than our human ability to value it, will our rational capacities be satisfied fully that life on earth matters" (104).

As a contemporary poet-critic who reflects Buddhist ethical responses, Field provides an alternative way of conceiving of our role in the environment. Field's ecopoetic/Buddhist practice works and plays hard to reveal our culture's perceptual distortions through her exploration of how we use words to create distance and reify the imagined boundaries between self and other. And the Tibetan Buddhist perspective that obliquely colors her book offers understandings that meet some of the unique demands of the ecocrisis: it accommodates the long-term view that Bednar and Taylor note is needed for the arduous work of a paradigm shift; it includes an appreciation of the humility needed to learn; and it fosters a tolerance for inconceivability, that is, a quality of "unknowing" or surrender that is the essence of change.

Slovic portrays us as a "species daunted by [...] vast processes," speaking of the "imperceptibly vast changes in the human and environmental realms" (152). And Bednar's closing page predicts a "painful and prolonged process" of shifting our lifestyle to an ecological one (182). Expressing herself from a Buddhist perspective, Field observes in an interview that "[l]arger timeframes or scales rarely occur to us" (Mellis). In *Bird Lovers, Backyard*, she addresses this point sardonically as she thinks about her inability to perceive the future, and to see in the present the causes of the death of her species: "To be effective, I must stay in touch with what is going on in my

own medium-sized spacio-temporal interval. If we all didn't commit to that (and set out acting on out-dated or far-fetched beliefs) we might go extinct even faster. Or just act like jerks" (35).

In thinking about the efficacy of "out-dated or far-fetched" Tibetan spiritual practices designed to transform the self, Tibetan anthropologist Geoffrey Samuel places emphasis not on the "explicit goal of their spiritual exercises" but on cultural "shifts of attention," including "a shift in the nature of time" (*Tantric Revisionings* 339). With regard to this different appreciation of time, he goes on to say that "[l]ife is oriented towards a long-term goal [...] rather than the very short-term framework of the contemporary economy" (*Tantric Revisionings* 339). Such cultural shifts are only possible with the humility which sees that a change is needed. Field argues that our destructiveness is rooted in ignorance, in "youthful folly," and that realizing this, we can then learn and be taught. She shows even the racist figure of Lorentz as a somewhat befuddled perpetrator, who, towards the close of that chapter by the same title, "confesses" some of his confused "mental obstacles" and thanks one of his teachers who unveiled to him a new way of seeing (81).

Field's emphasis on youthful folly exhorts us to grow up, another glimpse of her oblique Buddhist evolutionary narrative. At most, her work is a finger pointing at the moon(-landing)⁸ and perhaps beyond, to something "out of this world" within us—if by "world" we imply our confined and confused perceptions. In her inclusion of the delightfully multiple meaning of "specious present"—an expression bridging dubiousness, species, and the precariousness of the moment—we arrive at a fork in the road of not-knowing.⁹ In one direction lies ignorant self-destruction, an ignorance that includes *ignoring* warnings, and in the other, a creative unknowing—the difficult, disciplined state of not-knowing, of inhabiting an open question—that characterizes Buddhist practice and that is essential to the process of transformation. In this astute adaptation of the limits of knowing, Field blurs the edge between extinction and evolution. For at the fullest expansion of consciousness, i.e., Sponberg's wide peak of interrelatedness, humans finally fulfill the promise contained in the name *homo sapiens* only to go beyond what we know, "becoming something else" inconceivable to our present selves (Trungpa 131).

⁸ A pun on the well-known Zen expression of not mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon. This analogy points to the limits of language, cautioning for attentiveness to the difference between words about (meditative) experience and actual experience. Similarly, Field's writing is mistrustful of language, as well as suggestive and indirect, leaving readers with to work through the questions she raises.

⁹ Field's quote cites the philosopher William James, who, in the chapter "The Perception of Time," in his work *The Principles of Psychology* (1918), considers this term borrowed from E.R. Clay. Field writes, foregrounding the dubiousness of our subjective perceptions: "Please consider William James and his 'specious present'—what we perceive as the *natural* unit of time" (34).

Field's book considers the question of human evolution and the dangers and possibilities of evolutionary narratives, offering in Slovic's terms, "more refined ways of thinking" (163) about this rich edge we dwell on, this pregnant space between difficult questions and answers. We are in just such a moment in our species' story, as Holmes Rolston III notes: "Never before has this level of question—superkilling by a superkiller—been deliberately faced" (141). In part through an ecopoet's rigorous attention to language, in part through glimpses of Buddhist saviors who teach us to save ourselves, this is precisely where Field brings us: to a potent crossroads, where how we see a sparrow might mean the first stirrings of a way of life beyond our ken.

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