

Haunting, ruination and encounter in the ordinary Anthropocene: storying the return Florida's wild flamingos

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj**Aurora Fredriksen** 

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Abstract

In the spring of 2006 wild flamingos returned to Florida, though not to the places their kind had inhabited 100 years and more ago at the southern edge of the Everglades and the Florida Keys. Instead this group of flamingos alighted 80 miles northward in Palm Beach County's Stormwater Treatment Area 2 (STA-2), a human-made facility for filtering anthropogenic pollutants from storm runoff. This paper takes the return of wild flamingos to Florida as a case for thinking through haunting, ruination and encounters in what I call 'the ordinary Anthropocene': the ongoing, everyday more-than-human relationships, actions and less-than-planetary assemblages through which the Anthropocene is sensed and lived. After setting out a case for thinking with haunting, ruination and encounter as a way of making sense in the ordinary Anthropocene, I trace three interwoven narrative threads that unspool from the encounter with the STA-2 flamingos: First, I trace the transfiguration of living wild flamingos into idealised symbols of tropical dreamworlds over the 20th century. This leads me sideways to the present-absence of flamingos in the mid-century writings of Rachel Carson and through her backwards to John J. Audubon and the genocidal ruinations of the 19th century as they flicker in the margins of his ornithological writings. I end by returning to the present, to the encounter with STA-2 flamingos in the ongoing moment of living with others in the late capitalist ecologies of south Florida. The conclusion considers what might be taken forward, into the uncertain future, from this telling.

Keywords

encounter, flamingos, Florida, haunting, ordinary Anthropocene, ruination

Revenant flamingos

In the spring of 2006 a handful of wild flamingos alighted in Florida, though not to the places their kind had inhabited over a 100 years ago at the southern edge of the Everglades and the Florida Keys. Instead this group of flamingos alighted 80 miles northward in Palm Beach County's

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Stormwater Treatment Area 2 (STA-2), one of six massive human-made wetlands (STA-2 is 15,500 acres), closed to public access, built to filter anthropogenic pollutants from storm runoff before it enters the Everglades. Since this initial sighting the flamingos have returned to STA-2 in spring in numbers varying from a high of 147 to zero, with most years somewhere in between. They don't stay long, only a month or two at most. So far scientists have been unable to get near enough to the birds to tag them, and so no one is sure where they come from and where they go, but given their numbers and that they are untagged and able to fly there is relative certainty that they are wild flamingos and not escapees from one of the state's many captive populations.

The ecological details of this return are not so surprising: American Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) once alighted in Florida in flocks numbering in the hundreds to thousands, but due to 'over-harvesting' for meat and feathers in the mid 1800s, they were gone from the state by 1900.¹ Despite their historical extirpation from Florida, however, American flamingos are a relatively abundant species in nearby Cuba and the pan-Caribbean region, and sightings of flamingos in Florida have been on a steady rise over the past half a century.² Large artificial wetlands, especially those inaccessible by the public like the STAs, are known to attract wading birds of all sorts.³ Given these details, and as flamingos have been described as more nomadic than migratory in habit,⁴ perhaps it was just a matter of time before they alighted at one of south Florida's STAs. Indeed, what is remarkable about this return is not that a group of migratory/nomadic birds from a large pan-Caribbean population alighted at STA-2 to forage, but the strangeness of the returning birds being flamingos. The return of wild flamingos to Florida forces the unsettling realisation that they were ever absent from Florida's land- and seascapes to begin with: flamingos, after all, are ubiquitous icons of the Sunshine State, appearing everywhere from numerous captive populations and countless souvenirs, to state lottery tickets and school mascots.

In popular reporting, the return of wild flamingos to Florida has unsurprisingly been framed as a story of hope amidst all the environmental doom and gloom.⁵ In a 2016 segment for the popular morning news and chat show, *Today*, for example, three hosts laugh gleefully on the sofa as a segment on the return of wild flamingos to Florida plays with the title 'Pretty in Pink' on the screen. The clip of the segment is categorised on the show's website under 'Good News'.⁶ And indeed, in the middle of the sixth mass extinction, with Cornell's prestigious ornithology lab recently announcing the astounding number of three *billion* birds lost from the US and Canada since 1970 alone,⁷ there is something hopeful about the return of once lost birds and especially of iconic birds like American flamingos.⁸ Yet, beneath the surface of hopeful return there is an uncanniness – an unsettled feeling of strangeness within the familiar⁹ – that resounds in the absences this return makes visible, in the encounters it evokes with collective memory and forgetting and in the violent histories of ruination and the uncertain futures it draws into the present.

In this article I trace threads of the strange story of Florida's revenant flamingos as a story for the Anthropocene. Unlike many stories of the Anthropocene, it is decidedly unspectacular; it doesn't involve calamitous weather events or runaway climate change (not directly at least); it doesn't foreground the twinned spectres of future planetary ruin or redemption. Instead, it is a story for what I call the *ordinary* Anthropocene: the ongoing, everyday more-than-human relationships, actions and less-than-planetary assemblages through which the Anthropocene is sensed and lived.¹⁰ The call to tell stories for the ordinary Anthropocene, then, stands with Haraway and others in its assertion that 'it matters what stories tell stories', recognising that stories pattern thought on what is and what could be. Against the spectacular, the unilinear and the planetary, this article argues for the value of stories that stay with the troubles of ordinary, emplaced relations of living and dying in the ecologically troubled present. Accordingly, this article dwells with the particular and emplaced, with the specific happenings and hauntings raised by the return of Florida's wild

flamingos as a way of decentring imaginations of a universal Anthropocene and directing attention instead to everyday ways of living with and relating to others in the emplaced present during this time of onrushing environmental crises.

In the following section I expand on storying as method and practice, and set out a case for thinking with haunting, ruination and encounter as a way of making sense in the ordinary Anthropocene. I then trace three interwoven threads that unspool from the encounter with the STA-2 flamingos. In these three sections I deliberately resist the usual sequencing of histories, following instead the nonlinear associations of haunting: I start in the middle, with the immediate realisation forced by the STA-2 flamingos that Florida's wild flamingos were gone to begin with, tracing the transfiguration of living wild flamingos into idealised symbols of tropical dreamworlds over the 20th century. This leads me sideways to the present-absence of flamingos in the mid-century writings of Rachel Carson and through her backwards to John J. Audubon and the genocidal ruinations of the 19th century as they flicker in the margins of his ornithological writings. I end by returning to the present, to the encounter with STA-2 flamingos in the ongoing moment of living with others in the late capitalist ecologies of south Florida. The conclusion considers what might be taken forward, into the uncertain future, from this telling.

Ghost stories for the ordinary Anthropocene

Scholars in cultural geography and the environmental humanities have long argued for the importance of telling (nonfiction) stories as a way of making sense of wider patterns through tracing the contours of specific and emplaced happenings.¹¹ A growing body of work in extinction studies has added ethical urgency to the call for storying, arguing for the importance of documenting and narrating as a way of making sense of ecological loss, opening up spaces for multiple, more-than-human meanings and bearing witness to the destruction of more-than-human worldings.¹² As Deborah Bird Rose writes, tracing the myriad 'processes of destructive disconnection' through which lively entanglements are unwound, worlds made unliveable and bodies of all sorts displaced is one way of answering the ethical imperative to witness.¹³ I share foundational sensibilities with this work on extinction, however the story I explore here is not about extinction, nor even about endangered species, but instead something altogether more ambiguous. Destructive disconnecting is an important part of the story of Florida's wild flamingos, but here also is a story of return, of the possibilities and struggles of living through and beyond apocalypse.¹⁴ Ambiguity like this is unavoidable in stories for the ordinary Anthropocene, it's part and parcel of the fragmentary, shifting assemblages of emplaced, present worldings as they unfold within the uncertain contexts of rapid environmental change. Storying this ambiguity allows for the parsing of multivalent happenings, for the tracing of narrative threads not only as an act of witness to the devastating unravelling of ecologies, but also as an invitation to engage with the ethical challenges of weaving new ecological relationships in a time of environmental emergency.

In Florida spectacular stories of the Anthropocene are writ large in the state's increasingly frequent high-intensity catastrophes: in the super storms flattening the Keys and flooding cities, in overdeveloped beachfronts and ever-sprawling suburbs, in dwindling populations of 'native' wildlife and proliferating 'invasives', in beaches along the gulf coast poisoned by oil from massive offshore spills, in the rising sea levels threatening Miami and the Everglades. Amidst all this spectacular wreckage, however, one can also find in Florida many other, ambiguous, stories for the ordinary Anthropocene: iguanas raining down from trees,¹⁵ alligators taking up residence in golf courses,¹⁶ panthers done in by the suburbs¹⁷ and, of course, the return of wild flamingos.

Compared with devastating superstorms and flooding coasts – or even with raining iguanas for that matter – the return of wild flamingos is decidedly less apocalyptic. In this section I argue for the value of dwelling with such ambiguous, less-than-spectacular stories, for following the threads of emplaced relationships and the ghostly traces they make visible in the landscape as a way of making sense of the Anthropocene beyond the universal and catastrophic. My intention is not to minimise the importance of cascading catastrophes as central characteristics of the Anthropocene, but, to paraphrase Isabelle Stengers, while these are important issues, they may be too big for thinking.¹⁸ Stepping outside the tunnel vision of onrushing planetary apocalypse opens up space for reflection and for careful thinking about the multivalent, always emplaced, present of shifting ecological relations. Attending to strange everyday happenings like the movement of wildlife as they strive to adapt to radically changed environments is one way to ‘step outside’, to open up pathways for thinking through the shifting assemblages of everyday relating, living and dying in the ordinary Anthropocene.

Importantly, as Anna Tsing and colleagues assert, these contemporary, everyday happenings and relations through which the anthropogenic destruction of landscapes and ecologies unfold are suffused with the more-than-human ghosts of colonialism, modernity and its legacies.¹⁹ Far from the global sequential movement from stable Holocene to cataclysmic Anthropocene to a future perfect ‘after’ of stratigraphic imaginaries,²⁰ then, stories for the ordinary Anthropocene dwell with the ‘multiple unruly temporalities’ of haunting.²¹ As Wylie, following Derrida, notes, ‘Spectrality effects in place, and differentially in different placings, an unsettling complication of the linear sequence of past, present and future’.²² Stories for the ordinary Anthropocene are thus almost always ghost stories, drawing in different times and places, fragments of what was or what might be, brought into view – sometimes jarringly so, sometimes only flickering at the edges of perception – by the current onrush of disorienting ecological shifts.

Two additional concepts are useful for thinking with the ghosts of ordinary Anthropocenes: ruination and encounter. I use ruination in the dictionary sense of the word, which, as Ann Stoller writes, is ambiguous, at once encompassing ‘an act of ruining, a condition of being ruined and a cause of it’.²³ In its ambiguity, ruination is a ghostly thing, drawing in different times and places, different durations, different effects and affects.²⁴ In distinction from the material ruins that are often taken as mediums of haunting,²⁵ ruination can be harder to sense, something less immediately tangible. Ruinations of the past might be forgotten if they don’t leave obvious material traces (ruins), or if observers lose the memory of how to read the traces.²⁶ Ongoing ruinations might also be hard to sense, in the middle of things the outcome is not always clear. Sometimes the observer needs to be attentive to the spectres of ruination, sometimes they find us.²⁷

Along with ruination, encounter is an essential component of ordinary Anthropocenes. Encounters, like ruination, unsettle the here and now: they take place somewhere and sometime, but they can fold in other places and times.²⁸ Encounters between species can draw multiple, more-than-human meanings into place, opening possibilities for response-ability, but equally can result in violence and irresponsibility to more-than-human others.²⁹ Translation across difference is not always successful.³⁰ As Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant write, encounters are not shortcuts to the truth or ‘revelations of realness’, but sometimes encounters ‘stage a high-intensity tableau of the way things are or could become, sometimes strangeness raises some dust’.³¹ Encounters are moments of strangeness where more-than-human presents and potential futures might be glimpsed, and where the more-than-human ghosts of the past might be raised, but not all parties or onlookers will see them. Storying encounters is a way to make these multitemporal hauntings explicit, to bear witness to past and ongoing loss, to trace the lines of ethical entanglement and suggest ways forward.³²

A note on naming

From its origins in quaternary stratigraphy, the Anthropocene has entered the popular lexicon as shorthand for our current ecological moment in which humans are a dominant force in driving change to various Earth systems – especially, but not only, the atmosphere in the form of anthropogenic climate change. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities have roundly critiqued the idea of the Anthropocene for its figuring of a universal Anthropos, implicating the human species in general for the coming planetary disaster.³³ A common response has been to call for renaming the current planetary moment in order to better locate the source of destruction – Capitalocene, Plantationocene, White-supremacy-scene are all good candidates.³⁴ Alternately, and more in line with my ambitions here, are moves to displace the planetary and universal with something more grounded and particular, as with Haraway's³⁵ Chtulucene and its focus on earthly, tentacular relations in place. While recognising the value of these alternative namings for thinking planetary crisis differently, I follow Heather Davis and Zoe Todd³⁶ in their assertion that, by figuring a universal 'Anthopos' the name Anthropocene 'implicitly aligns itself with colonialism' and thereby very aptly captures the colonial, Modernist imaginaries, logics and erasures that have patterned this contemporary ecocidal moment. Stories for the ordinary Anthropocene can stage a confrontation with this legacy, making legible the many ghosts of colonialism and Modernity that haunt the emplaced present.

Staging such a confrontation – with colonial modernity's ruinations – is what the story of STA-2 flamingos that I tell here does. As members of a numerous species (American flamingos still flock by the thousands in the Caribbean and are listed as 'Least Concern' in the IUCN Red List), the STA-2 flamingos are not so much spectral themselves in the usual ways ascribed to threatened species: they do not portend a future absence,³⁷ they are not dwindling lines on the dull edge of extinction³⁸ and with their distinct and striking shape, bright colouration and habit of feeding in open water they are unmistakably present.³⁹ Instead it is the encounter with these flamingos that is spectral. In returning to a territory (though not the same place) where they were long absent these wild flamingos draw in many unseen or unthought – though always/already present⁴⁰ – spectres of past ruination, including the many 'bad death ghosts' of colonial modernity.⁴¹ In what follows I trace the threads of these hauntings to make them explicit, telling the story of the return of Florida's wild flamingos as a story about larger processes and logics of ecological destruction that haunt the present of their uncertain return.

Transfiguring flamingos in Florida's 'dreamworlds of progress'

*Anthropogenic landscapes are also haunted by imagined futures. We are willing to turn things into rubble, destroy atmospheres, sell out companion species in exchange for dreamworlds of progress.*⁴²

Between the spectacular and the mundane, one might also sense the Anthropocene through the register of the slow, hind-sight ecological catastrophe of the 20th century project of transforming Florida's unruly land-, swamp- and seascapes into amenable spaces for (sub)urban sprawl, industrial agriculture and luxury real estate. This feat of Modernity was achieved through the draining of large swaths of the Everglades, the bulldozing of mangroves, the straightening of the Kissimmee River and widespread spraying of DDT across the landscape.⁴³ With the majority of the state's wild ecologies thusly 'tamed', the way was (literally) paved for building up a new vacationland, thick with tropical imaginaries of the exotic, symbolised in no small part by the appealingly bright pink, instantly recognisable swooping figure of the 'pink flamingo'.⁴⁴

After their extirpation in the late 19th century, flamingos might have gone the way of so many other disappeared species and been forgotten in the popular imaginary (victims of so-called ‘shifting baseline syndrome’). Few people today would associate parakeets with Florida, even though they once ranged more extensively through the state and disappeared around the same time as, and perhaps later than, flamingos.⁴⁵ Flamingos, however, experienced a curious transfiguration in Florida’s 20th century: decades after they were gone from its shores, flamingos surged in the cultural imaginaries and material cultures of Florida, becoming indisputable ‘cultural icons’ of the state.⁴⁶ By making the long absence of wild flamingos from Florida unsettlingly apparent, the STA-2 flamingos implore a recounting of this movement from living to semiotic birds.

In the 1920s, Florida began its long association with tourism, first as a place of tropical luxury for the wealthy. From this early period, when Miami and the Keys emerged as winter resorts for the rich, flamingos were part of the branding. One of Miami’s first luxury hotels, the Flamingo Hotel opened in 1921, the same decade that the state’s first flock of captive flamingos was brought in to decorate the lawns of a zoological park. In the 1930s the state’s most famous captive flock was brought to the Hialeah Race track (after the first flock brought in 1932 promptly flew away, a second flock of pinioned birds was brought in 1933 and the inability to fly gave them no choice but to take up residence in one of the track’s infield lakes). Alongside namesakes and captive flocks, in the 1920s and 30’s flamingos took off as motifs in South Beach’s art deco buildings and as instantly recognisable figures in marketing and on bright souvenirs.⁴⁷

In the post-WWII era, the construction of the interstate highway system and new air conditioning technology accelerated Florida’s tourist economy, opening up the dream of a tropical vacationland within driving distance to millions of middle- and working-class families.⁴⁸ Flamingos continued to function as the ubiquitous mascots of Florida’s tourist trade, with increasing numbers of living birds brought in to reside in tourist attractions and their likenesses adorning hotels, postcards and countless souvenirs. In 1957 the pink plastic lawn flamingo was invented in Massachusetts⁴⁹ expanding the distance between flamingos as symbols and flamingos as living things, and consolidating a new association of flamingos with artifice, kitsch and even outright bad taste. In the 1980s the inclusion of a shot of Hialeah’s flamingos in the opening credits of the popular tv show *Miami Vice* brought a renewed sense of cool. In the 21st century flamingos are ‘in’ again, perhaps in no small part due to their enduringly alluring, social media friendly, colour. A search for images tagged with #flamingo, #flamingolife or #iloveflamingos on Instagram returns streams of images featuring oversized flamingo pool floats, flamingo plush toys and fashion accessories, the aforementioned lawn ornaments and an array of other bright pink objects interchangeably mixed with images of living birds.

Post-extirpation, then, flamingos only rose and rose in the cultural lexicon of Florida. Yet the flamingos of Florida’s 20th and early 21st centuries have always been signs and cyphers distinct from the fleshy living birds of their likeness. The semiotic flamingo – with living captives as mascots and plastic likenesses as totems – has been enrolled in the popular imaginary of Florida as a tropical dreamworld, obscuring a wild past and its ruination with cheerful escapism. In this transfiguration, flamingos were abstracted from living bodies, becoming symbols first of tropical luxury, then light-hearted kitsch and now a sort of ironic, social-media friendly playfulness. The news that wild flamingos had *returned* to Florida came not as a shock exactly – the absence of wild flamingos in Florida was known to those interested in knowing – but as an unsettling call to remember. The return of wild flamingos forces their previous absence to the fore and implores one to reflect on it, raising the unsettling spectre of ruination in the wake of Progress – the mass destruction of tropical ecologies in order to sell the idea of ‘the tropics’ to tourists.

Of course, the transfiguration of flamingos – from wild living birds to semiotic markers of Florida’s tourist worlds – was never complete. Even before the uncanny appearance of the

STA-2 flamingos, the present absence of wild flamingos has occasionally come into view, a flickering feature of Florida's land and seascapes. This is the case, for example, with the steadily increasing number of wild flamingo sightings since the 1950s. Before considering such bodily encounters, however, I turn first to another place where wild flamingos return to view: in nature writing on Florida. Specifically, in the next section I consider the ways wild flamingos raise spectres in the writing of Rachel Carson and then, in a different, more disturbing way, in that of John J. Audubon.

Signalling ruination in the margins

In the 1950s, the same decade in which a factory in Massachusetts started casting the first plastic flamingo lawn ornaments, Rachel Carson was living in the Florida Keys researching and writing her lyrical account of the US' eastern shores, *The Edge of the Sea*.⁵⁰ A natural history of coastal environments, Carson's scientific descriptions of habitats and coastal species are punctuated by passages that exceed the usual confines of the genre. The US's eastern coastlines have undergone some of their most ruinous anthropogenic transformations in the 65 plus years since Carson wrote about them, perhaps none less so than her beloved Florida Keys. Yet even before the Anthropocene was named, it flashes retrospectively into view in Carson's writing; her reflections on time and ecological change in the Florida Keys presage current discussions of the ways in which landscapes, particularly coastal ones, signal the Anthropocene.⁵¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly in writing about the inherently rhythmic, liminal spaces of seashores, the ways that coastal environments unsettle unilinear time is a recurring theme in *The Edge of the Sea*. Carson's chapter on Florida's shores, entitled 'The Coral Coast', is where this temporal unsettling comes most clearly into view, opening with a reflection on the way the land- and seascapes of the Keys materialise multiple times in the present:

The atmosphere of the Keys is strongly and peculiarly their own. It may be that here, more than in most places, remembrance of the past and intimations of the future are linked with present reality. In bare and jaggedly corroded rock, sculptured with the patterns of the corals, there is the desolation of a dead past. In the multicolored sea gardens seen from a boat as one drifts above them, there is tropical lushness and mystery, a throbbing sense of the pressure of life; in coral reef and mangrove swamp there are dimly seen foreshadowings of the future.⁵²

In this and in other passages throughout the text, Carson's writing reveals small moments of the uncanny in the land- and seascapes of coastal places. It is not only the decentring of unilinear time evoked here and in her discussion of rhythmic tides and shifting sea-levels, but also in her attention to strangeness – of improbable patterns of being, of lifeways unintelligible to humans, of atmospheres of place – that Carson conveys the haunting qualities of the sea shore. Of all the many creatures present and gone, flamingos appear in Carson's writing fleetingly, as spectral figures returning from a lost past. In an account of an evening walk along the shore she writes:

The spiral shells of other snails—these quite minute—left winding tracks on the mud as they moved in search of food. They were horn shells and when I saw them I had a nostalgic moment when I wished I might see what Audubon saw, a century and more ago. For such little horn shells were the food of the flamingo, once so numerous on this coast, and when I half closed my eyes I could almost imagine a flock of these magnificent flame birds feeding in that cove, filling it with their color. It was a mere yesterday in the life of the earth that they were there; in nature, time and space are relative matters, perhaps most truly perceived subjectively in occasional flashes of insight, sparked by such a magical hour and place.⁵³

In this reflection on the abundance of a recent past, contrasted to a diminished mid-century present, Carson again evokes a folded, relational sense of time. What seems forever to humans is a 'mere yesterday' in the temporality of deep time. What is past – represented but not encompassed by flamingos – can almost be seen in the mind's nostalgic eye.

The uncanniness of this absence is conveyed in the strange spaces left by the absence of ecological partners, in this instance the horn shells left uneaten by the flamingos that are no longer there. In this way the horn shells too become spectral, ongoing traces of an ecological relationship unravelled, a knotted lifeway undone.⁵⁴ Reading this passage from the viewpoint of the Anthropocene, the absences multiply outward. They reverberate forward, taking on new meanings post-Carson's own warning a decade later of cascading wildlife losses in *Silent Spring*,⁵⁵ amplified further through the current lens of biodiversity crisis in the Anthropocene. The absent flamingos in *The Edge of the Sea*, a synecdoche for environmental losses⁵⁶ that Carson sensed in the 1950s, flash out of the page as a synecdoche for the much larger tragedy of anthropogenic mass extinction in the Anthropocene. The Keys as described by Carson no longer exist. The absence of flamingos is compounded by the loss of so much more. Even the coral that make up the reefs at the centre of Carson's writing are dying, victims of polluted waters, warming seas and increasingly frequent big storms.

Carson's reflections on absence also reverberate backward, raising ghosts in the margins, unwritten tales that spin out from her evocation of John J Audubon, the American ornithologist and naturalist after whom the eponymous bird conservation charity is named. Within Audubon's ornithological writings – most famously collected in the canonical *The Birds of America* (1827–1839)⁵⁷ – the traces of ruination resound. Most obviously (and as implied in Carson's writing), Audubon's descriptions of abundant worlds of birdlife draw a sharp contrast with the absence of this abundance – they give rise to longings to 'see what Audubon saw'. His descriptions of vast southern forests, swamps and sparsely inhabited shores contrast with today's vast tracts of agricultural land, strip malls and suburban subdivisions. His descriptions of abundance are important points of reference for today – they haunt the reader with what once was,⁵⁸ describing tantalisingly 'what rich socioecological worlds looked like'⁵⁹ for readers generations past the living memory of such worlds.

Beyond the sense of a past abundance that most clearly haunts the present reader of *Birds of America*, though, there are dimmer spectres in Audubon's writing, troubling flashes of bad-death ghosts returning in small side-notes and in between the lines of what is written. For Audubon didn't just describe abundance, but also, indirectly, the work of diminishing this abundance. His accounts of collecting birds and their eggs can be read as accounts of the unravelling of entangled lifeways in real time, of ghosts in the making. In entangled ecologies, destructive disentangling multiplies outward: flamingos are not the only ghosts in the making in Audubon's tale of collecting.

Characteristically of many a 19th century European gentleman's passion for nature, Audubon's accounts of his ornithological journeys through the Americas both resonate with rapture inspired by the sublime beauty of nature and are suffused with an assumed mastery over nature and the attendant violence of this assumption.⁶⁰ His account of searching for the American Flamingo is exemplary in this respect:

It was on the afternoon of one of those sultry days which, in that portion of the country, exhibit towards evening the most glorious effulgence that can be conceived. The sun, now far advanced toward the horizon, still shone with full splendour, the ocean around glittered in its quiet beauty, and the light fleecy clouds that here and there spotted the heavens, seemed flakes of snow margined with gold. Our bark was propelled almost as if by magic, for scarcely was a ripple raised by her bows as we moved in silence. Far away to seaward we spied a flock of Flamingoes[sic] advancing in "Indian line," with well-spread wings, outstretched necks, and long legs directed backwards. Ah! reader, could you but know the emotions that then agitated my breast! I thought I had now reached the height of all my expectations, for my voyage to

the Floridas was undertaken in a great measure for the purpose of studying these lovely birds in their own beautiful islands. I followed them with my eyes, watching as it were every beat of their wings; and as they were rapidly advancing towards us, Captain DAY, who was aware of my anxiety to procure some, had every man stowed away out of sight and our gunners in readiness.⁶¹

The remainder of Audubon's account of American flamingos consists of several paragraphs detailing his failed attempts to kill flamingos so as to collect their bodies for ornithological study, followed by an account of his relief at finding that a fellow naturalist had killed so many flamingos that he would generously share a few of the carcasses as well as some eggs taken from nests.

Shifting from a rapt description of the sublime beauty of both the liminal space of Florida's southern coasts and the birds inhabiting them to a litany of destruction, Audubon's written account can make for uncomfortable reading today; the cascading loss of wildlife makes it increasingly difficult to brush away the discomfort with a shrug of it being 'of its time'. The continued popularity of Audubon's accompanying illustration of the American Flamingo⁶² – with its unnaturally kinked (broken) neck belying the violence and killing wrapped up in Audubon's passions – attests to the ease with which many readers resist seeing the bad death ghosts in the margins. Telling their story confronts this resistance by making their presence explicit.

Beyond the ruination of Florida's wild flamingos that today resonate through Audubon's writings and their accompanying illustration, in the background of his account of American Flamingos, there are glimpses of another ruination in progress, namely, the murder and expulsion of Florida's previous human inhabitants by its European colonisers. In Audubon's account, this ruination flickers into view only through a passing reference to a fellow naturalist who, in the course of collecting plants and shooting flamingos, was 'at last murdered by some party of Seminole Indians, at the time of our last disastrous war with those children of the desert'.⁶³ In referencing the first of a series of violent wars aggressively waged by the US government against the indigenous people of Florida, and in the jarringly racist language of the day, Audubon's story about hunting flamingos conjures stories of the mass destruction of human lifeways – stories of genocide in progress – that are just out of view in his writing, side notes to his ornithological pursuits.

Audubon's trip to the Florida Keys to 'procure' flamingos took place in 1832, 13 years after the conclusion of the First Seminole War (1816–1819), and only 3 years prior to the Second Seminole War (1835–1842).⁶⁴ As with the other so-called Indian Wars taking place around this time, these wars were instigated by a belligerent US government in a late push in the centuries-long genocidal colonisation of the Americas. While many of Florida's indigenous people were killed, died of disease or were forcibly relocated to distant reservations in Oklahoma during the violent campaigns of the 19th century, others survived and remained, moving further into the then unwanted wetlands of the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp. Through a side note in a tale of 'collecting' flamingos, another violent history of destruction flickers into view, an unsettling reminder of the violent war waged on indigenous people and the theft of their lands that preceded the rise of Florida as a tropical vacationland.

As with the disappearance of wild flamingos presaging the appearance of figurative and captive flamingos as mascots of tropical leisure, the simultaneity of the genocidal campaign against Florida's indigenous peoples and the annihilation of its flamingos is not incidental. The overharvesting of flamingos for meat, feathers and eggs and the destruction of their habitats for new development is tied into the same patterns of colonisation, erasure and accumulation that saw the systematic murder and eviction of Florida's indigenous peoples. They are two aspects of the same ruination, both caught up in the violent wreckage of ecological relations and the undoing of entangled lifeways wrought by settler colonialism and its accompanying hubris of universal Progress: they are aspects of the same wave of destructive disconnecting.

The appearance of wild flamingos at STA-2 returns this violent history to the present, making it difficult to skim over in the reading. The return of flamingos, however, also signals the possibility of living through apocalypse. Against the odds of the genocidal history briefly recounted here, today the Seminole Tribe of Florida continues its ongoing resistance to colonisation. As well as co-opting colonial legal systems to reclaim portions of its stolen territories through state and federal court cases, the tribe has successfully defended its right to make income from gambling on reservation lands, using its considerable income from colonial tourist economies⁶⁵ to fund education and healthcare for its members.⁶⁶ As the next section explores, the story of Florida's wild flamingos also exceeds the violent expulsions of the past, with the STA-2 birds signalling the possibility of living, if not yet thriving, in Florida's late-capitalist landscapes.

Encountering flamingos in the ruins

Notably, the STA-2 flamingos are not the first flamingos to return to Florida since the 19th century. Whitfield et al's recent review found evidence of increasing sightings of flamingos since the 1950s, usually just one or two at a time, but a flock of 65 birds was seen in Florida Bay in 2003. There's no definitive answer as to why the STA-2 flamingos sparked the narrative that wild flamingos had returned to Florida whereas previous sightings had not, but at least part of the answer is likely the size of the flock – variable but with a high number of 147 in 2014 – and the regularity of their return – every year since 2006, excluding 2017 and 2019, always around April. Perhaps also there is something to be said for their choice of sites: birds in Florida Bay are offshore, in Florida's coastal waters, perhaps more easily imagined as having blown over from Cuba in a storm, but a small flock alighting in a human-made stormwater treatment facility inland around the same time year after year cannot be imagined away so easily.

The STA-2 flamingos' chosen site of return at a human-made stormwater filtration site is far from their historic habitats both topographically – 80 miles inland – and topologically – transfiguring lifeways forged in the salty shores to ones unfolding in nitrate-polluted freshwater runoff. The site is not exactly the 'capitalist ruins' – the blasted landscapes left in the wake of capitalist accumulation – described by Tsing,⁶⁷ but it is something akin. The STAs were built to mitigate the ecological damage of unending development and growth – in particular to filter the huge quantities of nitrate pollution from industrial-scale agriculture that would otherwise flow into the Everglades wreaking ecological havoc. Indeed, the STAs are meant to lessen ruination, to ameliorate the ecological impacts of industrial monocultures. In other words, the STAs are technical fixes for late capitalism's destructive overflows: they are designed to protect the sensitive Everglades ecosystem from the worst impacts of industrial agriculture *without requiring industrial agriculture itself to change its ways*. As such, they are part of a contemporary reconfiguration of late capitalist patterns of ruination, an infrastructural fix for a human-centred Anthropocene. Compared to Florida Bay, encountering flamingos in such a place is a surprise, unsettling received imaginaries that divide nature from society, wild spaces from human places.⁶⁸

Unlike Florida Bay or the Everglades National Park, STA-2 is also a site of some mystery: it is closed to the public. In response to repeated reports of keen birders sneaking into the STA-2 site in attempts to glimpse Florida's revenant flamingos, the Everglades chapter of the Audubon Society started running 'Flamingo quest' tours of STA-2 in April and early May. For several years the tours were opened for bookings (and booked up) months in advance, but in 2020 tour bookings were suspended until which time birds are again spotted on the site. As the Flamingo Quest page on the Audubon Everglades website explains:

Like all birding, the birds are in the wild and free to come and go as they please, there is no guarantee to see the Flamingos on any specific date.

- In 2014, the Flamingo count *increased* towards the end of April.
- In 2015, the Flamingo count *decreased* towards the end of April.
- In 2016, the Flamingos *did not show up until the end of April and increased in May!*
- 2017 was the first year the Flamingos *were not seen on the tours or by SFWMD personnel in the area.*
- In 2018, the Flamingos were seen in the restricted access area in late April by SFWMD personnel, but *none* were seen on Flamingo Quest tours.
- In 2019, the water levels were *very high* and no Flamingos were seen in the area.

Who knows what will happen in 2020?⁶⁹

In their transient presence, coming and going in between predictability (most years since 2006 in the spring) and unpredictably (not all years, in varying numbers, in different months), the STA2 flamingos create an atmosphere of anxious anticipation: when will they come again? *Will* they come again? ‘*Who knows what will happen in 2020?*’ Of course, the anxiety is one-sided, revealing more about human desires to encounter wild flamingos *in Florida* than anything particular to the fate of the birds, given their nomadic habits and relative abundance in the region.⁷⁰

The news mediated encounter with the STA-2 flamingos, meanwhile, is infused with excited imaginaries of Florida’s ‘pink flamingos’,⁷¹ but the non-human difference that wild birds bring to this encounter sits awkwardly with these pre-set framings.⁷² As well as the uncertainties evoked by their free comings and goings noted above, even when they are present at STA-2 they refuse to sit politely for close viewing and selfies like their captive kin. Moreover, these birds have chosen an inland stormwater treatment facility as their site of return – not exactly a place that conveys tropical paradise or luxury leisure on the seaside. The STAs are manmade facilities designed to mitigate the worst effects of industrial agriculture on the Everglades without changing industrial agricultural practices, they are not picturesque settings. They are enablers of Progress and its wreckage, but as vast artificial wetlands set aside from busy human worlds they have also become places of refuge for wildlife expelled from other places. The utilitarian plainness of this setting upsets the 20th century’s semiotic pink flamingo, but in so doing returns our attention to actually living wild flamingos, and the urgently present question of how to share space with wildlife in the everyday, ordinary Anthropocene.

Glimmers of a hopeful future

The preceding story of wild flamingos alighting in Florida’s STA-2 raises dust in the absences they make apparent. The STA-2 flamingos conjure complex interplays of memory and forgetting, the uncanny blurring of wild flamingo bodies with cultural abstractions of ‘the pink flamingo’. Clearly, the return of Florida’s wild flamingos forces remembrance of the destruction of past flamingo populations, the ruination of flamingo bodies and habitats to the point where Florida was made unliveable for these birds. Pushing further at the edges, as the preceding narrative has done, follows the destructive disconnections of flamingos’ extirpation outward to the ruination of larger entangled worlds encompassing other exterminated wildlife and Florida’s indigenous peoples, expelled from their lands and lifeways alongside birds and plants and waterways. The flamingos are not only reminders of ruined pasts though. Their presence draws absences to the fore, but also possibilities, the way things could be. The promise of a flourishing multispecies future at STA-2 flickers bright in good years, like in 2014 when 147 birds were spotted. But they dim again in desolate years, like


2017 and 2019, when not a single flamingo was seen. In most of the years since they were first noticed, just a few dozen flamingos have been counted at STA-2, a mere glimmer of possibility for birds that flock by the hundreds in Mexico and the Caribbean. And yet there is a glimmer.

By narrating the violent logics of colonial modernity that pattern encounters in the ordinary Anthropocene of south Florida, this article seeks to move beyond the good news story of flamingos' return not as a way of dismissing the hope therein, but as a call to face up to the hard work that holding space open for Florida's wild flamingos will involve. Since the initial buzz created by the STA-2 flamingos, Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has convened a special Biological Review Group to evaluate whether flamingos should be listed as a native species, a move that would give them special legal protections under state law. This is would be a good start, but legal protection can only go so far within the context of ongoing ecological ruination informed by the logics of colonial modernity. Confronting the ruinous legacies of colonial modernity that pattern the present encounter with flamingos at STA-2⁷³ would mean 'resisting the allure of toxic dwelling'⁷⁴ that has brought us here and grappling with questions of wider restorative justice for the Everglades ecosystem. The small story told here doesn't offer neat solutions, but it does invite us to get down to the difficult work of living with others in and through the multiple ecological catastrophes of the ordinary Anthropocene.

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Notes

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