Storying Multispecies Worlds
Monarchs, Milkweed and the Spectacle of Extinction

Eline D. Tabak

It is the early morning of 26 March and my friend and I are driving to Santa Cruz to visit Natural Bridges State Marine Reserve. We are not visiting for the marine life, but for the Monarch Butterfly Trail next to the reserve's visitor centre to see the last of the season's overwintering butterflies. We are rather late for the season, its final week, really. I had not been able to make the trip to California earlier and when I finally arrived, the West Coast was experiencing unusual stormy weather for the winter season. Attempts at visiting small monarch hot spots in the Bay Area had been thwarted by cold days (monarchs only fly at a minimum of 13 degrees Celsius), storms and a bomb cyclone. Most disappointing, our earlier planned trip to Pacific Grove, which advertises itself as Butterfly Town, USA, was cancelled because the roads were flooded, and the town's Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary and the local Natural History Museum were closed. After what feels like a string of bad luck, we are on our way from Oakland to Santa Cruz on the final weekend of March. My friend is driving, so, I have ample time during the ride to focus on how I am feeling: the nerves, the excitement, the vague nausea. The overwhelming question remains: Will I finally see monarch butterflies today?

My trip to the West Coast is part of the last stretch of research for my project on storytelling and insect decline. There are over one billion insect species described in the world, many of them in decline or endangered (Saunders et al. 2023), and yet, there are not many individual species, including their unique and complex lives, that are the focus of creative storytelling. The monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), however, is one of those species. Monarch butterflies are amongst the most well-known species on the edge of extinction, a rare example of charismatic microfauna in decline (Ducarme et al. 2013; Lorimer 2007). When I started thinking about monarch butterflies, it was widely known and accepted that the iconic monarch was in steep decline and had been for a while. Still, the butterfly was not listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List, the most comprehensive list of global species' conservation status, until 2022 (Rodrigues et al. 2006: 71). Official categorization aside, there was already a decent amount of creative work, ranging from visual art and documentaries to novels and children's books, dedicated to the small critters and their decline. This is partially because the monarch has long since been an icon across

North America thanks to a wide array of narratives touching upon "beauty, natural wonder, scientific discovery, conservation imperatives, and civic duty" (Gustafsson et al. 2015: 612). The beauty and natural wonder in these narratives refer to the butterfly's impressive migratory journey across North America: a spectacle. The phenomenon is not the same everywhere, as there are two monarch populations: the western and eastern. Both populations have their own migratory journey. Western monarchs travel across the West Coast to overwinter in the eucalyptus groves of California, while the eastern population travels from Canada to the oyamel fir forests of what is now known as the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in Mexico. The latter of these two has been the focus of a significant part of contemporary extinction storytelling, which is generally concerned with charismatic megafauna (Heise 2016).

The stories told about insect decline and, more widely, practices of storying extinction, draw our attention to certain species and, with that, those that are left out via a variety of narratives (Rose et al. 2017). The call to bear witness to biodiversity loss and disappearing life, our human entanglements with the more-than-human world, seems like an ethical obligation, one often realized through practices of storying (Rose 2013). However, as critical theorist Eva Haifa Giraud (2019) reminds us, with any ethics of entanglement also comes a reality of exclusion. "Attention", she writes, "also needs to be paid to the frictions, foreclosures, and exclusions that play a constitutive role in the composition of lived reality" (ibid.: 3). The question that follows is: What frictions and exclusions do we find in the storying of extinction and insect decline? What is left out? Storying, here, should be understood as an active process, a verb that refers to the act of telling or relating the story (or even history) of extinction. Through storying, meaning is made and remade (Phillips and Bunda 2020: 6). Through this storying, we, as audience and readers, learn to read between the lines and see what is considered important enough to be part of the narrative and the multispecies landscapes of extinction – and what is left out.

Using the monarch butterfly as an example, this chapter homes in on the question of what stories get told and which stories are left out in the current era of the sixth mass extinction. I use a combination of autoethnographic research and close readings of a short selection of literary narratives on the iconic North American insect. Ecocritical scholarship and other interdisciplinary research on narrative culture have long engaged with the possibilities of storying multispecies relationalities in literature (e.g. Brown 2006; Fenske and Norkunas 2017; Iovino and Oppermann 2014; Norris 1985). Similarly, work in critical extinction studies generally focuses on what story can do; multispecies ethnographic research ascribes special meaning to the practice of storying, especially through the mode of "lively ethographies" (van Dooren and Rose 2016: 89). Extinction studies scholar Thom van Dooren, for example, writes that Australian-based ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose "taught [him] that stories are more than a mode of expression, they are a means of understanding, of thinking, of attending, of relating, and so a profoundly important opening into responsibility" (2020: 1–2). However, I will show throughout the course of this chapter that even the storying of charismatic microfauna, such as the monarch butterfly, is constrained by certain modes of storytelling and engaging with the natural world, popular narratives and problems, such as plant awareness disparity (Parsley 2020). I start looking for monarch butterflies in the first week of spring in West Coast and Santa Cruz County. My focus then shifts to the ways the monarch is storied in literature and pop-

ular fiction, particularly looking at how the western population and milkweed are often left out of these narratives because of the spectacle for which the eastern population is known. The aim of these analyses is not to criticize the works and their authors but rather to highlight certain modes of storytelling and blind spots when it comes to charismatic microfauna. The works I examine here include Barbara Kingsolver's critically acclaimed *Flight Behaviour* (2012), Peter Kuper's graphic novel *Ruins* (2015) and a novel, *The Butterfly's Daughter* (2011), by popular writer Mary Alice Monroe. In the final section, I briefly explore the importance of turning to the everyday and banal when storying extinction in multispecies worlds. But firstly, I will return to Santa Cruz, USA, and the Monarch Butterfly Trail.

(Fig. 1:) Welcome to the Monarch Butterfly Natural Preserve. Photograph by the author.

Looking for the Western Monarch

When we arrive in Santa Cruz, we first go to the waterfront. Although the sun is bright and feels warm, it is still rather chilly: only around eleven degrees Celsius. I know it is still too cold for the last monarchs to start their journey to the north. The stories I have read describe either clumps of roosting monarchs (always in their hundreds or thousands) as brown leaves, rustling in the trees, or, more poetically, as a fire. The underside of monarch wings provide camouflage and are significantly darker than the bright orange and black pattern of the familiar dorsal view of their wings. At the very end of the season, I do not expect to see branches full of butterflies, and I worry I will not recognize a single

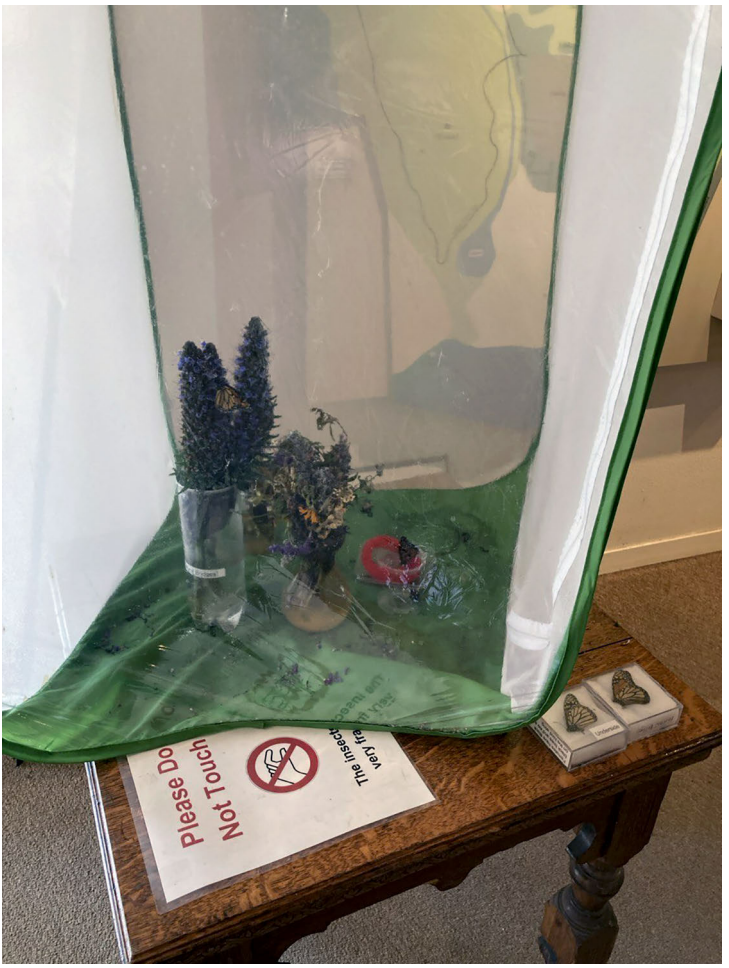
roosting monarch on a eucalyptus tree. We decide to wait a little longer, just until it is warm enough for the butterflies to fly. Before planning my travels to California, I was reassured by Emma Pelton of the conservation organization Xerces Society's Western Monarch Lead in our online correspondence that I would still be able to see monarchs all over California. But now, after ten days of walking around the Bay Area or hiding from the rain and storms without any certain sightings, I doubt if we will see them, even though we will soon visit one of the few dedicated monarch groves in Northern California.

And so, instead of facing the potential disappointment of a flightless grove, my friend and I get a coffee to go and walk to the beach to look at the waters of Monterey Bay. It is a good moment to think about the county in which this monarch grove is located. Two of the main industries in Santa Cruz County are education and tourism, and as of 2023, it is the most expensive county in which to live in the United States (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2024). Before the Spanish and, after that, the Mexicans arrived, the Santa Cruz area was home to the Awaswas nation of the Ohlone people. The Awaswas language is now extinct, with the last speaker having passed away in the 19th century (Shipley 2002). Coincidentally, the mid-19th century also saw the introduction of the eucalyptus tree groves – predominantly the southern blue gum or *Eucalyptus globulus* – from Australia (Morgan 2021). The trees were originally planted across California for lumber, but the wood was not suitable for woodwork. Nowadays, large numbers of the western monarch population overwinter in eucalyptus tree groves like the one near Natural Bridges, Santa Cruz.

In the early afternoon, we go Natural Bridges. We first go to the visitors' centre, which is right next to the Monarch Butterfly Trail. Even though Natural Bridges is a marine reserve, the parking lot's "Open during construction" plastic banner shows the iconic dorsal view of the butterfly's wings and the wooden sign in front of the centre also sports a small, orange monarch. The focus on the monarchs is immediate and makes me feel hopeful that we will still get to see some. Inside the centre, there is a small gift shop with a single volunteer and a permanent exhibition with some information on the local marine wildlife and monarch butterflies.

Close to the entrance to the exhibition, there is a small table with one of those cheap foldable nets that can be used for protecting plants or, indeed, breeding insects. There is a laminated card that warns visitors not to touch the cage. I walk closer and see what I think are several monarchs through the white mesh, before I realize that one side is made of clear plastic. Inside of the mesh cage are three small vases with flowers and what looks like a small dish with sugar water – and more monarch butterflies than I can count on one hand. Another cage, a slightly bigger one, holds several monarchs in different stages of emergence: the butterflies are exiting their pupal case. I see a split chrysalis with only black antennae and two legs sticking out, one that is still complete but clear, and a third one where the butterfly appears to be struggling to free the last of their body from the chrysalis while their wings are still crumpled and sticking together. Knowing how delicate the scales on a butterfly's wings are, it seems almost impossible that these tightly clustered appendages will form into four fully functioning wings that can and do take these animals up to 2,500 miles. While my friend and I are looking at the caged butterflies, we can hear the volunteer in the gift shop talk to another visitor about the monarchs she saw on the trail: it is our cue to finally go.

(Fig. 2:) Exhibition in the visitors' centre. Photograph by the author.



Stepping on to the boardwalk part of the trail, I immediately smell the blue gum trees. The first thing that catches my eye is not an orange monarch but rather the destruction the storm left. My friend and I talk about the storm: how her house was left without electricity, how I found myself walking around San Francisco on the day of the bomb cyclone because I forgot to check the weather report; how this extreme weather left humans and other-than-human animals defenceless. The storm is more than its external physicality, even the remnants we are seeing right now leave us worried and slightly uneasy (Lee and Ingold 2020). The boardwalk of the monarch trail has been cleared, but the grove itself is still filled with fallen branches and what appears to be uprooted trees. Looking at the many fallen branches, I am reminded of how my trip to Pacific Grove was cancelled because of a fallen Eucalyptus tree near the monarch grove's entrance. Eucalyptus trees, specifically the blue gum, can reach up to 45 metres high and pose a significant risk to both human and other-than-human life in stormy weather. In the grove, I think we are both overwhelmed by the visual reminder of the storm, which also functions as a sign of

sorts, showing just how fragile these groves and the butterflies that inhabit them are. The destruction left by the storm and lack of butterflies in these first few minutes serve as a "spectre", a haunting view foregrounding "the diminishments that may precede extinction" (Newman 2024: 11). Extreme weather events, such as the March storms, will continue, and threaten individuals and entire species in decline.

We continue our walk, but it takes a while before either of us see the first monarch. I only spot it after two other visitors point it out. From there, they seem to be everywhere. The butterflies are beautiful and bigger than I expected. They are also rather quick. Seeing them fly in front me, I feel like I understand the draw of their corporeal charisma, which "involve[s] embodied practice and draw[s] on the full panoply of senses" (Lorimer 2007: 918). In the groves, the butterflies rest on leaves and branches and fly above the boardwalk. There is another sign mentioning the monarch's "cluster culture" and shows an image of hundreds of monarchs roosting together in a eucalyptus tree. The image of the cluster is familiar, although I am used to seeing the oyamel firs (*Abies religiosa*) of Mexico's mountains in the background of these photos and illustrations. We walk past the boardwalk and farther down the path, which is muddy and shows the many branches and tree trunks that had to be cut and cleared away from the footpath, to a clearing. In this open space, it is easier to spot monarchs by finding the shadows they leave on the grass and then looking up. There are flashes of orange everywhere: not the hundreds I had secretly hoped to see, but still dozens.

In this clearing, I also notice the glimpses of houses between the trees and start paying attention to the sound of traffic surrounding the grove. If anything, our walk in the grove highlights how vulnerable the western monarch population is. There are very few places where the butterflies can come together to overwinter safely. On top of that, the recent turbulent weather has decreased the western population after remarkably high counts in November (Pelton 2023). Extinction is not a linear process. The butterflies' overwintering sites face multiple challenges: climate change and extreme weather, lack of funding and management, property development and more. Indeed, despite an overall focus on the eastern population in science communication, research and fictional narratives, the eastern monarchs are actually doing relatively better, with an approximate decline of 70 %, compared to a decline of over 95 % in the western population (Xerces Society 2022). Reading the stories about monarchs, you would not know that one population is doing better than the other. The exact reasons for their steep decline are unknown, but experts mostly agree that habitat loss is key, i.e. the loss of wildflowers and milkweeds, their host plants (Pleasants and Oberhauser 2013). Considering this, it may appear surprising that monarch extinction storytelling and the public's attention are focused predominantly on the eastern population, which used to span hundreds of millions and is significantly larger than the western one.

Extinction is tricky like this: exciting stories, such as a four-generation migration spanning three countries, pull our attention in one direction, while absolute numbers can hide just how poorly the population in the other direction is doing. Despite walking slowly and pausing often to watch the butterflies and other wildlife, my friend and I are at the other end of the trail soon. There are no longer as many monarchs and we see the same signs welcoming visitors to the monarch butterfly grove, asking us to be careful and trying to tempt us into planting milkweed to protect and nourish the next genera-

tion of migrating butterflies. We decide to walk back to the car and return to Santa Cruz. During this short walk, we complain about the unleashed dog we see, I ruin my shoes by stepping in a puddle of mud trying to throw away litter, and I feel the strangest sense of relief. My own encounter with life at the edge of extinction does not come close to the scales in the stories I have read – the trees full of clusters, the fiery bushes – and I am mostly thinking about the sense of banality we encountered on our trip: the directionless violence that leads to loss of life (Yusoff 2012). Last year came with many celebratory messages regarding the increasing number of monarchs counted. Yet, we not only see here just how unsafe their roosting site is, but also how ordinary the butterflies' main threats are: wind and stormy weather, unleashed animals and noise pollution, lack of funding and encroaching development. Considering the ways extinction is currently storied, one would expect extinction to look very different, almost like a spectacle.

Storying the Monarch Butterfly

Rather than small reserves on the West Coast, the focus of many popular stories about the monarch and its potential extinction lies with the butterfly's three-country migratory journey, with its climax at their overwintering site in Mexico. The main character Luz, for example, in Mary Alice Monroe's novel *The Butterfly's Daughter*, follows the monarchs back to Mexico after the death of her grandmother (who is known as *La Dama Mariposa* and raises butterflies in her garden). In this tale, the monarch's migration is the framing story for the journey of the (human) main characters, echoing the sentiment that other-than-human animals often function as symbolism or an allegory for their human counterparts in stories (Norris 1985). To highlight this connection, every chapter in Monroe's novel starts with a short paragraph on monarch life and migration. The framing paragraphs in *The Butterfly's Daughter* are indented, with a smaller italicized font:

> Monarch butterflies that emerge in the fall are unique. Butterflies that emerge in the spring and summer live two to four weeks. But the fourth-generation monarchs that emerge in the fall do not mate. They follow their instincts and migrate south. Called the Methuselah-generation, they live for six or seven months. (Monroe 2011: 35)

These informative epigraphs are a way of highlighting that the monarch butterflies and their journey are indeed special, or a natural wonder. Looking at their lifespan, they certainly are: Butterflies have an average adult lifespan of a couple of months. The parallel between a human journey and butterfly migration adds a certain dimension to the human part of the narrative. By this, I mean that by connecting the novel's characters to what has long been considered a natural wonder, the narrative implies that their human journeys are special, or unique, similar to the monarchs' migration. While highlighting the uniqueness of the monarch's migration, Monroe turns this migration into a secondary narrative by means of a frame narrative (or epigraphs) that supports the main storyline. Scholars in the fields of extinction and animal studies have argued that other-than-human animal lives come to matter when they matter for human lives, even in sto-

ries that celebrate a so-called natural wonder (Heise 2016; Jørgensen 2019; McHugh 2011). By emphasizing a single element, other parts are left forgotten.

The monarch's migration can also be an essential part of the plot and the literary narrative as a whole, but even then, there is a tendency to let the butterflies' lives reflect the human characters. The premise of Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* is an anomaly within the monarch's usual migration. The big question (and an important part of the novel's plot) is, of course, why the monarchs have decided to overwinter in the southern Appalachians rather than the warmer mountains of central Mexico, as this means the entire swarm (kaleidoscope) will die. This *new* mystery is how lepidopterist Ovid Byron first connects with Dellarobia Turnbow and her family. When Dellarobia invites Byron for dinner, the conversation inevitably turns to the butterflies residing on the nearby land. When Dellarobia asks Byron why people would study the monarch butterfly, he answers the following:

> […] as of today, the most interesting and alarming question anyone in the field has yet considered, I think. Why a major portion of the monarch population that has overwintered in Mexico since God set it loose there, as you say, would instead aggregate in the southern Appalachians, for the first time in recorded history, on the farm of the family Turnbow. (Kingsolver 2012: 121–22)

While Kingsolver places the monarchs elsewhere, their migratory choices constitute "the most interesting and alarming question" one can ask. A "major portion of the monarch population" not surviving because of their decision to stay in the Appalachians would, of course, result in a devastating loss for the overall population. In the novel, their potential death is an important part of what drives the plot, making *Flight Behaviour* an exemplar of extinction storytelling.

A comparative reading of monarch stories foregrounds the similarities and differences in a range of contemporary extinction narratives. Similar to Monroe's novel, the monarch butterfly's autumn migration is the focus of the frame narrative in Peter Kuper's *Ruins* (2015). The graphic novel's framing story starts with a single panel: a light blue square with a simple illustration of a monarch butterfly chrysalis hanging from a single bare branch on an otherwise completely black page.[1] After turning this first page, there is a fully black page on the left-hand side and a slightly bigger panel on the right: this time, the chrysalis is deformed and small squiggles around it represent movement. You can see the monarch butterfly inside: its iconic orange, white dots and black veins are already visible through the chrysalis. The following pages, with each square gradually gaining in size, the newly formed butterfly carefully emerges from the cocoon, and the reader has their first sighting of the iconic orange wings. The butterfly takes time to dry, and then flies over Interstate Highway 87, which is fully located in the state of New York, running south. Further localizing the narrative, the following pages show the Manhattan skyline. The colour of the panels slowly changes, signifying the end of the frame narrative (for now) and the beginning of the main story.

1 The graphic novel *Ruins* does not have page numbers to cite.

The frame narrative is its own story, weaving in with the main narrative through a subtle change of colours and the appearance of the bright orange monarch, but it also divides the different unnamed and unnumbered chapters of *Ruins*. Despite the two main characters – Samantha and George – spending most of their time in Oaxaca, Mexico, the main story is not about monarch butterflies or their decline. The rest of the frame narrative shows the monarch butterfly flying southwards to the oyamel forests for the winter, coinciding with Samantha and George's visit to and the story's climax at the *Reserva de la Biosfera Mariposa Monarca*. As the perceived climax of the butterflies' own migratory journey, this reserve has become an important place in monarch storytelling.

La Reserva de la Biosfera Mariposa Monarca

There are certain parts of the monarch butterfly's life that recur in storying their lives and decline. Their four-generational migration is one; another is the *Reserva de la Biosfera Mariposa Monarca* or the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. The reserve is a well-known protected area in Mexico, located between the states of México and Michoacán, where the eastern monarchs overwinter in the oyamel forests (Brenner 2006). It is also a place where people go to encounter a natural wonder and witness life at the edge of extinction. The reserve features prominently in monarch stories, unlike the different monarch groves and sanctuaries on the West Coast. As a well-known place in monarch storytelling, the reserve can be understood as what Sheila Hones describes as "a spatial event […] which happens at the intersection of agents and situations scattered across time and space, both human and non-human, absent and present" (2008: 1302). For Hones, the way that these forces intersect can produce different meanings and, just as the story of the monarch has changed over time, the meanings associated with the reserve also differ across time, space and communities.

In the context of extinction – and conservation – the importance of storytelling for the reserve is twofold. Not only is the reserve an important place in monarch narratives (both fictional and non-fictional) as a site where people encounter both a natural wonder and life on the edge of extinction, but from its initial designation, storytelling itself has been an important tool for interested parties, including Mexican writer and activist Homero Aridjis, who campaigned for the site to become a protected area (2008; Aridjis and Ferber 2020). While there were already people living and working in the oyamel forests centuries before the location of the monarch's overwintering site became more widely shared, publicizing this location turned space into place: a destination for not only butterflies and locals, but also tourists wanting to see a natural wonder. The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve exemplifies that, when it comes to life on the edge of extinction, the idea of the public – i.e. what is done in public view or concerning people in general – only goes so far with conservation in mind. Convinced that illegal logging was one of the main reasons monarchs were in decline, Homero Aridjis made a personal request to Miguel de la Madrid, who was then the President of Mexico, to turn the oyamel forests into protected land in 1986 (Aridjis and Ferber 2020). The *Reserva de Biosfera de la Mariposa Monarca* was established in honour of his request. The monarch's overwintering site became a protected area. This meant that the Mexican government had a greater

say in who was allowed to enter and use the resources of the forests. The reserve became less accessible to some and more accessible to others, paving the way for organized crime in these supposed human-free zones (Gonzalez-Duarte 2021). On top of an increase in human violence, monarchs have continued to decline over the years. The designation of a protected area did little to increase the monarch population. In 2008, Aridjis lobbied the World Heritage Committee during his tenure as Mexico's ambassador to UNESCO, and the reserve became a World Heritage Site (Aridjis 2008; Aridjis and Ferber 2020). The reserve raises important questions: What is the function of a single element in determining and (re)directing people's attention in the context of extinction, both inside and outside of literary narratives? And what are the consequences if one such event or place is deemed so extraordinary it overshadows other important parts of a story?

The Spectacle of Extinction

However, while there are many reasons to go out and visit a new place to witness something beautiful, there are just as many (if not more) reasons to not go to certain places and see certain animals (Guasco 2022; Pick 2015). While the establishment of the reserve in Mexico made way for a new wave of ecotourism, a trip like this is not accessible or even desirable for everybody. The draw is still strong and, as a result, the reserve has become an important place in non-fictional and fictional monarch storytelling: it is the long-searched-for overwintering site; the place where people can encounter the spectacle of the monarch butterfly. (Incidentally, the word 'spectacle' is derived from the Latin *spectaculum*, which means public show.) While some authors (e.g. Kingsolver) decide to move the spectacle elsewhere, other stories take the reader right to the reserve, the place where people encounter monarchs, as happened in Kuper's graphic novel (2015).

Near the end of *Ruins*, Samantha and George travel to the reserve. On their way, George reads a book on the monarchs that informs him (and the reader) of deforestation and monarch habitat loss. As they approach the reserve, Samantha calls to George that it is time to put down the book in order to properly appreciate the moment and witness where they are. True to its grandeur, the spectacle of the monarchs cannot be contained on a single page. The graphic novel includes a page that can be opened, revealing a large drawing of the roosting butterflies. Unopened, there is a mostly green panel, showing the oyamel firs and around twenty monarchs (most not large enough to warrant detail like the white dots). After opening the page, the reader is immediately confronted with a sea of orange-red butterflies. A floating panel briefly zooms in on Samantha and George's faces. Their mouths and eyes are open wide with disbelief and Samantha says: "This doesn't seem… possible!" Their initial disbelief of the view mirrors Dellarobia's in *Flight Behaviour* when she does not comprehend the sight of the displaced monarch roost (Kingsolver 2012: 14).

The medium of the graphic novel allows for a very visual encounter with the monarchs: the open pages are overwhelmingly orange. There is a murky green in the background, but the fiery orange of the monarch butterfly dominates both the fore- and middle ground. Samantha and George's figures are small compared to everything around them. The monarchs are everywhere, from detailed butterflies, including antennae and

compound eyes, that seem to fly off the page, to small butterfly-like shapes made up of orange and brown lines. Samantha makes a reference to the butterfly's aesthetic charisma: "It's so beautiful, but I doubt I'd feel this way if they were another creature… like, say, cockroaches […] or flying monkeys!" The couple walks further, stepping away from their initial encounter and, with that, the sense of wonder that characterized it. Instead, they talk about the monarchs' prognosis, and see a large group of tourists. When Samantha notes how crowded the place is, George comments that the forest probably would not have survived without tourism. *Ruins* is set in Oaxaca during a time of political upheaval, and Kuper does not shy away from showing the violence of these times. By contrast, the scene in the reserve is a quiet trip, seemingly devoid of politics, violence and any form of unrest. Although there is a single panel that shows people other than Samantha and George, it depicts ecotourism as a mostly positive thing. Especially taking into consideration the double page, the overall sense is that of a close and personal encounter with the classic idealized monarch spectacle. The Butterfly Reserve is a popular destination for both real and fictional people: tourists, writers such as Halpern and Kuper, and the characters in *Ruins* and *The Butterfly's Daughter*. In bringing the story of the monarch butterfly to readers across the globe, the Butterfly Reserve plays a perhaps unexpected, yet, important role as the site where people encounter not only a natural wonder but life on the edge of extinction. Through storytelling, the site crosses cultural and spatial boundaries. Yet, as we see in *Ruins*, the history and politics of these are sometimes left behind when trying to convey that sense of wonder. And one cannot help but ask: What gets left behind when telling the story of the monarch butterfly? What places are left untold?

Placing Milkweed

Extinction, however, does not merely take place in spectacular encounters and conservation areas, such as the Monarch Biosphere Reserve – or even among animal species. Extinction is, after all, a multispecies event that goes beyond the animal kingdom. Thinking about charismatic insects alone often ignores or erases entire (or parts of) ecologies being destroyed, which, in turn, causes decline and extinction. The deterring state of the butterfly groves in California are a prime example of this. Moving away from the vast oyamel forests in Mexico, in this section, I will scale down to a different configuration of life. Here, I (re)turn to milkweed, which is perhaps the most charismatic of all plants that are important to the monarch's survival, and the place it inhabits in monarch storytelling. Ecocritic Jessica White writes: "When we take the time to pay attention to plants, by reading them on the page and in real life, their intricacies become apparent" (2019: 103). Milkweed is certainly worthy of attention when it comes to the monarch butterfly, as the butterfly and plant co-evolved. The butterflies only lay their eggs on milkweed plants, and its leaves are the only food the caterpillars eat. In short, having developed a dependency on the plants, the monarch cannot survive without milkweed.

This is not a mutually beneficial or desired relationship. As part of its evolution, milkweed has developed defences against the monarch by producing toxic chemicals, a rather milky latex (after which the plant is named) and, of course, its bristly leaves (Agrawal 2017). Experts mostly agree that habitat loss due to industrial agriculture,

meaning that the female butterflies do not have enough milkweed plants on which to lay their eggs, plays an important factor in monarch decline (Pleasants and Oberhauser 2013). On top of that, milkweed has long been considered a *weed*, something undesirable or unwanted and, thus, unwelcome, yet resilient (Argüelles and March 2021). Lawns in the United States, especially considering the longstanding American culture of perfectly mowed and manicured grass, have made urban areas inhospitable spaces. These are spaces that, when filled with wildflowers and other plants, have become incredibly important hotspots for insects. Cultural geographer Anna Lawrence puts it succinctly: the weed "reveals the limits to a more-than-human ethics of care" (2022: n.p.). Despite this, the monarch needs milkweed to survive and, in turn, milkweed has become a relatively charismatic plant over time, especially considering that it is viewed by humans and most other animals as a poisonous weed. Initiatives across North America have long since used milkweed to convey the importance of wildflowers for other-than-human life, feeding new caterpillars and encouraging monarchs to breed on their migratory routes. After extremely low numbers were recorded in 2014, a campaign to plant milkweed was initiated, which included governmental agencies, agricultural firms, lawns and the White House (Gustafsson et al. 2015).

Knowing all this, it is peculiar that milkweed does not often star in extinction narratives, specifically in the spatialization of the monarch butterfly. The monarch-milkweed relationship works on a particularly small scale: with a single butterfly, after a long migration, laying one or two eggs on a single plant so the caterpillars can eat the leaves and pupate. From tiny egg to chrysalis, a substantial part of the monarch's life is spent coexisting (being born, eating, pupating) with milkweed. Similar to the forests in Mexico, the places where milkweed grows are incredibly important to monarch life and survival. And yet, milkweed seems to be a victim of "plant awareness disparity" (Parsley 2020) or "plant blindness", a term first coined by James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler that refers to "(a) the inability to see or notice the plants in one's environment; (b) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs" (1999: 82) and more. Here, attentiveness (or the lack thereof) to the ordinary seems to be key. This does not mean, however, that milkweed is completely absent in the spaces of monarch storytelling; rather, the way the plant is incorporated in literary narratives differs in such a way that indicates inequalities of perception and care.

Some scholars argue that literature and literary storytelling are sometimes in a unique position to bring together the complexity of simultaneous environmental, political, social and economic forces (Hoydis et al. 2023; Trexler 2015). Reading the novel *Flight Behaviour* as a climate change risk narrative, Americanist Sylvia Mayer (2016) explores the different spatial instabilities and alterations climate change poses. The realization of shared risk, Mayer argues, creates an ethics of connectivity rather than proximity through the deterritorialization that climate change causes. Connectivity, in the novel, is achieved by creating new connections through the rather unexpected and literal relocation of the monarch butterflies' overwintering site, which shows that connectivity should not be dependent on proximity. As Mayer astutely notes, this is achieved by displacing the monarchs and the ways the novel's narrative incorporates Dellarobia's increasing awareness of changing regional and global processes (ibid.: 497).

These processes not only include monarch migration and climate change but also how they are related to politics and global economics.

And indeed, in *Flight Behaviour*, the complexity of it all, with the monarch butterflies at the centre of it, starts to materialize in Dellarobia's narrative: "[Byron's] 'complicated system' began to take hold in her mind, a thing she could faintly picture. […] This was a living flow, like a pulse through veins, with the cells bursting and renewing themselves as they went" (Kingsolver 2012: 146). And amongst this living flow, between climate change as something "she knew to be wary of" and "hundreds of factors [that] came into play" (ibid.: 147), there is a fleeting reference to milkweed:

> Fire ants, for example, had now come into Texas, where the monarchs were vulnerable. Ants ate the caterpillars. And farm chemicals were killing the milkweed plants, another worry he mentioned. She wondered if she should tell Ovid about the landslide in Mexico. (ibid.: 147)

In this enumeration, only a few out of hundreds of factors, the brief mention of pesticides killing milkweed on agricultural land appears inconspicuous. This is despite the fact that pesticide use, according to experts, has been detrimental to monarch populations (Pleasants and Oberhauser 2013). While the fire ants and the landslide (which is mentioned earlier in the novel) are highly localized threats to the monarch, all of the latter need milkweed for survival and the plant is decreasing throughout their migratory route. Instead of putting the monarch and milkweed next to each other on the same narrative level, in Dellarobia's mind, milkweed has become part of a slightly more abstract list of factors that includes climate change and landslides. Milkweed, it seems, becomes part of the narrative on a larger scale that does not allow for individual plants to be present and, thus, shows the intimacy of the monarch-milkweed relation. Despite an ethics of connectivity, it seems that plant blindness prevails, and milkweed is lost in the scales traversed by the novel; just like the western population of monarchs is lost among the spectacle of the eastern population.

The Everyday of Extinction

Back in Europe, thinking about my journey to the butterfly grove, I am once again struck by the realization of how banal the reality of extinction can be; how much risk there is in looking past the everyday: the often small (butterflies), the sometimes undesired (milkweed), the relatively unimpressive (the western population's migration). I think about the questions that encouraged me to go to California: What becomes part of the narrative of insect decline, or more broadly extinction, and what does not? What stories are used to tell stories (Haraway 2016: 12)? In the face of a more exciting story – the mystery and spectacle of the monarch – an entire population is left out. The same goes for milkweed when compared to the monarch butterfly itself. I do not blame the cultural imagination, or the stories out there, for the lack of care for the eastern monarch. There is more to it, of course. But I do think that storying is an active verb, an act of putting something out there, of creation. With our eyes focused on the spectacular, these everyday violences

against vulnerable species are not the most popular or exciting story to share. However, they are necessary stories. Banality is not a bad thing: looking for the small and mundane means that we do not lose track of life on the edge of extinction. It means opening our senses to what is out there while it is still there.

In the comfort of my house, I remember and can now laugh about how worried I was that I would not recognize the monarchs, because I was only used to images of branches full of roosting butterflies or single monarchs resting on colourful milkweed. Narrating the multispecies world, or storying multispecies worlds, is a powerful practice, especially in what is now widely known as the sixth mass extinction. These stories, then, should also reflect the complexities of multispecies life and include different populations and other species – such as the eucalyptus groves of California and the milkweed that sustains monarch butterflies all across North America. Echoing my own decision to go the West Coast instead of the famous reserve in Mexico, this paper is a call to turn away from grandiose narratives and spectacles, and, instead, turn attention to what is there: those small animals and weeds stuck between the busyness of life. To pay careful attention to everything that is out there before it slips away. The everyday of extinction is also the everyday of life. Instead of critique or damnation, I share my work as an invitation, to look at those small everyday stories that are right there yet untold. The next step is to find creative, compassionate and careful ways of telling these stories to respond to and reshape the current narrative of insect decline.

Bibliography

Agrawal, Anurag A. 2017. Monarchs and Milkweed: A Migrating Butterfly, a Poisonous Plant, and Their Remarkable Story of Coevolution. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Argüelles, Lucía, and Hug March 2021. Weeds in action: Vegetal political ecology of unwanted plants. Progress in Human Geography 46(1), 44–66. DOI: 10.1177/03091325211054966

Aridjis, Homero 2008. Mexico's Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. World Literature Today 82(4), 80.

Aridjis, Homero and Betty Ferber 2020. Afterword. In: Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication, edited by Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran. New York, NY: Routledge: 391–401

Brenner, Ludger 2006. Áreas naturales protegidas y ecoturismo: el caso de la Reserva de la Biosfera Mariposa Monarca, México [Protected natural areas and ecotourism: the case of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, Mexico]. Relaciones. Estudios de Historia y Sociedad 27(105), 237–265. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28125572_Areas_naturales_protegidas_y_ecoturismo_El_caso_de_la_reserva_de_la_biosfera_mariposa_monarca_Mexico> [Accessed 13 September 2024].

Brown, Eric C. 2006. Insect Poetics. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.

Ducarme, Frédéric, Gloria M. Luque and Franck Courchamp 2013. What are "charismatic species" for conservation biologists. BioSciences Master Reviews 10, 1–8. Avail-

able at: <https://biologie.ens-lyon.fr/biologie/ressources/bibliographies/pdf/m1-11-12-biosci-reviews-ducarme-f-2c-m.pdf?lang=en> [Accessed 13 September 2024].

Fenske, Michaela, and Martha Norkunas 2017. Experiencing the more-than-human world. Narrative Culture 4(2), 105–110. DOI: 10.13110/narrcult.4.2.0105

Giraud, Eva Haifa 2019. What Comes after Entanglement? Activism, Anthropocentrism, and an Ethics of Exclusion. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Gonzalez-Duarte, Columba 2021. Butterflies, organized crime, and "sad trees": A critique of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve Program in a context of rural violence. World Development 142, 105420. DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105420

Guasco, Anna 2022. On an ethic of not going there. The Geographical Journal 188(3), 468–475. DOI: 10.1111/geoj.12462

Gustafsson, Karin M., Anurag A. Agrawal, Bruce V. Lewenstein and Steven A. Wolf 2015. The monarch butterfly through time and space: The social construction of an icon. BioScience 65(6), 612–622. DOI: 10.1093/biosci/biv045

Haraway, Donna J. 2016. Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Heise, Ursula K. 2016. Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Hones, Sheila 2008. Text as it happens: Literary geography. Geography Compass 2(5), 1301–1317. DOI: 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00143.x

Hoydis, Julia, Roman Bartosch and Jens Martin Gurr 2023. Climate Change Literacy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann 2014. Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Jørgensen, Dolly 2019. Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age: Histories of Longing and Belonging. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kingsolver, Barbara 2012. Flight Behaviour. London: Faber and Faber.

Kuper, Peter 2015. Ruins. London: SelfMadeHero.

Lawrence, Anna 2022. To be a weed. The Ethnobotanical Assembly [e-journal] 4. Available at: <https://www.tea-assembly.com/issues/4/to-be-a-weed> [Accessed 16 January 2024].

Lee, Jo, and Tim Ingold 2020. Fieldwork on foot: Perceiving, routing, socializing. In: Locating the Field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology, edited by Simon Coleman and Peter Collins. London: Routledge, 67–85.

Lorimer, Jamie 2007. Nonhuman charisma. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 25(5), 911–932. DOI: 10.1068/d71j

Mayer, Sylvia 2016. From an ethics of proximity to an ethics of connectivity: Risk, mobility, and deterritorialization in Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior. Amerikastudien/American Studies 61(4), 489–505. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44982336> [Accessed 13 September 2024].

McHugh, Susan 2011. Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Monroe, Mary Alice, 2011. The Butterfly's Daughter. New York, NY: Gallery Books.

Morgan, Ruth A. 2021. Fueling the colonial future: An environmental history of the blue gum, from British India to California. Pacific Historical Review 90(2), 183–210. DOI: 10.1525/phr.2021.90.2.183

National Low Income Housing Coalition 2024. Out of reach: The high cost of housing. National Low Income Housing Coalition, online. Available at: <https://nlihc.org/oor> [Accessed 10 July 2024].

Newman, Milo 2024. Remembered belonging: Encounters with the spectral more-than amidst landscapes of decline. Cultural Geographies 1–17. DOI: 10.1177/14744740231223183

Norris, Margot 1985. Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Parsley, Kathryn M. 2020. Plant awareness disparity: A case for renaming plant blindness. Plants, People, Planet 2(6), 598–601. DOI: 10.1002/ppp3.10153

Pelton, Emma 2023. The vanishing butterfly groves of California. Xerces Society, online. Available at: <https://xerces.org/blog/vanishing-butterfly-groves-of-californi a> [Accessed 16 January 2024].

Phillips, Louise G., and Tracey Bunda 2020. Research through, with and as Storying. London: Routledge.

Pick, Anat 2015. Why not look at animals? NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies 4(1), 107–125. DOI: 10.25969/mediarep/15175

Pleasants, John M., and Karen S. Oberhauser 2013. Milkweed loss in agricultural fields because of herbicide use: Effect on the monarch butterfly population. Insect Conservation and Diversity 6(2), 135–144. DOI: 10.1111/j.1752-4598.2012.00196.x

Rodrigues, Ana S.L., John D. Pilgrim, John F. Lamoreux, Michael Hoffmann and Thomas M. Brooks 2006. The value of the IUCN Red List for conservation. Trends in Ecology & Evolution 21(2), 71–76. DOI: 10.1016/j.tree.2005.10.010

Rose, Deborah Bird 2013. In the shadow of all this death. In: Animal Death, edited by Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1–20.

Rose, Deborah Bird, Thom van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew 2017. Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Saunders, Manu, Simon Leather, Jenni Stockan and David Yeates 2023. Insects. The Living Planet: The State of the World's Wildlife. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 227–248.

Shipley, William F. 2002. The Awaswas language. In: A Gathering of Voices: The Native Peoples of the Central California Coast, edited by Linda Yamane. Santa Cruz, CA: Museum of Art and History, 173–182.

Trexler, Adam 2015. Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

van Dooren, Thom 2020. Story(telling). Swamphen 7, 1–2. DOI: 10.60162/swamphen.7.14359

van Dooren, Thom, and Deborah Bird Rose 2016. Lively ethography: Storying animist worlds. Environmental Humanities 8(1), 77–94. DOI: 10.1215/22011919-3527731.

Wandersee, James H., and Elisabeth E. Schussler 1999. Preventing plant blindness. The American Biology Teacher 61(2), 82–86. DOI: 10.2307/4450624

White, Jessica 2019. Arboreal beings: Reading to redress plant blindness. Australian Humanities Review 65, 89–106. Available at: <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/AHR65_05_White.pdf> [Accessed 13 September 2024].

Xerces Society 2022. Monarch Butterfly Conservation, Xerces Society, online. Available at: <https://xerces.org/monarchs> [Accessed 16 January 2024].

Yusoff, Kathryn 2012. Aesthetics of loss: Biodiversity, banal violence and biotic subjects. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 37(4), 578–592. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00486.x