

Environmental Imaginations of the California Channel Islands and Ecological Crisis in T.C. Boyle's *When the Killing's Done*

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Abstract



This article explores T.C. Boyle's thirteenth novel *When the Killing's Done* (2011) in regard to its representation of ecological crisis and the ensuing environmental activism. In particular, it argues that the distinctly urban background and way of life of the two main protagonists, National Park Service staff member Alma Boyd Takesue and radical eco-hipster Dave LaJoy, foster environmental imaginations of the California Channel Islands that underestimate the centuries-long agricultural uses of the islands and romanticize the islands' ecosystems as pristine 'wilderness.' While this perception in the tradition of the 'American cult of wilderness' prompts Alma and the National Park Service to reestablish a historical state of the islands' ecosystems through the calculated extermination of invasive species, eco-activist Dave fiercely fights for the right of every non-human animal to live. Ultimately, the novel deconstructs both these endeavors to biodiversity and animal rights as highly flawed and environmentally as well as ethically inconsistent.

Keywords: California Channel Islands, environmental activism, ecological crisis, T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done*

Resumen

Este artículo explora la decimotercera novela de T. C. Boyle con el título *When the Killing's Done* (2011) en cuanto a la representación de la crisis ecológica y al consiguiente activismo ecologista. En particular, afirma que el fondo y la forma de vida claramente urbanos de los dos protagonistas principales, Alma Boyd Takesue, miembro del personal del Servicio de Parques Nacionales, y Dave LaJoy, un eco-hipster radical, fomentan imaginaciones medioambientales de las islas *California Channel Islands* que subestiman los largos siglos de uso agrícola de las islas e idealizan los ecosistemas de las islas como 'naturaleza virgen.' Mientras esta percepción en la tradición del "culto americano de naturaleza virgen" anima a Alma y al Servicio de Parques Nacionales a restablecer un estado histórico de los ecosistemas de las islas a través del exterminio deliberado de especies invasoras, el eco-activista Dave lucha decididamente por el derecho de todos los animales no-humanos a vivir. En última instancia, la novela deconstruye ambos esfuerzos por la biodiversidad y los derechos de los animales como muy imperfectos e inconsistentes tanto ambiental como éticamente.

Keywords: California Channel Islands, conservación medioambiental, crisis medioambiental, T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done*

Only a stone's throw away from Los Angeles's clogged highways, noise pollution, and smog, the eight California Channel Islands occupy a space of about 350 square miles right off the Southern California coast in the Pacific. While their current main utilizations—ranging from active U.S. Navy base (San Clemente and San Nicolas) and tourist resort (Santa Catalina) to nature reserve (e.g. Anacapa, Santa Barbara)—are quite diverse, the islands share a relatively similar history: Starting in the Age of Discovery, the local Native American tribes, the Chumash and the Tongva, were more and more pushed to leave by European and, later, Mexican settlers. When California attained statehood in 1850, the islands became a legal part of the United States and were increasingly used for the extensive ranching of sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and pigs. In March 1980, the Channel Islands National Park was founded by Congress with the mission “to protect the nationally significant natural, scenic, wildlife, marine, ecological, archeological, cultural, and scientific values” (Channel Islands National Park Act) of the five islands lying within the park (Anacapa, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, San Miguel, Santa Rosa).¹ The California Channel Islands also constitute the setting for T.C. Boyle's 2011 novel *When the Killing's Done*, which sets out to explore twenty-first-century environmental imaginations of this particular landscape and the diverging eco-activist efforts to preserve these supposedly unspoiled spaces. Despite the fact that the literary work does not provide easy answers to complex issues such as the protection of biodiversity and the environmental ethics involved, it nevertheless fulfills important cultural functions by exposing contradictions in the eco-activists' actions and consequently also by stimulating the readers' own environmental imaginations.

The relationship of the environmental imagination—i.e. the way an individual or an entire culture conceptualizes the complex entanglements that link humans and 'nature'—and the development of green activism has been a critical one. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell, for example, argues that all environmental predicaments entail “a crisis of the imagination” and that in order to be able to adequately address today's environmental problems “better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it” (2) need to be found. In their discussion of ecocriticism's future, Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer similarly call for, among others, a reexamination of the potential effects that “discursive imaginative constructions [of nature] have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments” (10).² The environmental imagination of a place thus emerges not only from actual experiences but in close connection to topophilia, memory, cultural mythology, and national ideology, which, more often than not, are mediated in cultural practices and especially in literary productions (Buell, *Environmental Imagination*; Judd and Beach; Mayer).

¹ For information on the California Channel Islands and their history, see, e.g., Arnold; Daily; National Park Service (NPS), “History and Culture”; Nature Conservancy.

² The demand for the consideration of the “potential effects” of “discursive imaginative constructions” is part of a larger call for further developments in ecocriticism, which in its more comprehensive version requests “a methodology that reexamines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualizations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorizations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments” (Gersdorf and Mayer 10).

If, as Patrick D. Murphy has pointed out, “the really salient feature of an environmental literary work may be its impact on the reader’s point of view” (52), then the potential of the text to engage with the readers’ minds, and their environmental imagination in particular, emerges as a crucial aspect. In this line of reasoning, popular ‘mainstream’ literary best sellers reaching a substantial and broad readership beyond the specialized, mostly academic audience hold a special position. This is due to their (potential) ability to incite reflections on the interactions between non-human nature and humanity, contesting existing ethics and thus ultimately raising awareness of today’s environmental crises. Prolifically reviewed and fervently discussed in online literary platforms such as Goodreads or Shelfari, *When the Killing’s Done* constitutes one such best seller that achieves high public visibility. It is in this sense that *When the Killing’s Done* does “cultural work” by “providing society with a means of thinking about itself” and by “defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared” (Tompkins 200). At the same time, as new historicist Stephen Greenblatt maintains, the analysis of all literary narratives, “will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced” (227). Consequently, a reading of Boyle’s book will also offer a lens to explore the environmental imaginations that shaped the production of the text.

From his early short story collections (e.g., *Descent of Man* [1979]) to more recent works (e.g., *The Tortilla Curtain* [1995], *A Friend of the Earth* [2000], *Wild Child* [2010]), Boyle’s opus has already staunchly established its awareness of critical discourses on ecology and the environment (Schäfer-Wünsche 402). *When the Killing’s Done* continues this thematic orientation by fictionalizing the historical efforts of the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy to rid the Californian Channel Islands Anacapa and Santa Cruz of invasive plants and feral animals through their complete extermination. In the course of a three-decade-long project on Santa Cruz Island started in 1978, the Nature Conservancy relocated the complete population of golden eagles and eradicated all feral sheep and pigs, which had been deliberately introduced to the island for ranching purposes in the past. This resulted, as intended, in a revival of the island’s fox population as well as of a variety of native plants (Nature Conservancy n.p.). In a similar venture in the late 1990s, the National Park Service—with the help of the Island Conservation and Ecology Group (ICEG) and the financial support of settlement monies resulting from a court trial in the wake of an oil spill in southern California—exterminated the black rat population on Anacapa Island in order to protect and restore the “rare and unique wildlife on Anacapa” (NPS, “Restoring Anacapa” n.p.).

Partly composed as an eco-thriller, partly as a portrait of twenty-first-century (Californian) environmentalism, Boyle’s thirteenth novel uses these government-backed projects as a backdrop to depict the antagonism of its two eco-activist protagonists—Alma Boyd Takesue, who holds a doctorate in environmental studies, and Dave LaJoy, an eco-hipsterish “entertainment magnate” (Boyle 256)³—in their efforts to preserve the islands’ ecosystems and thus partakes in the much larger discussion of the politics of conservationism and biodiversity. Part One of *When the Killing’s Done* describes the

³ In the following, all quotations that are not further specified refer to Boyle’s *When the Killing’s Done*.

successful poisoning of the entire black rat population on Anacapa. Its very beginning already indicates the central themes: Recalling naturalist classics such as Stephen Crane's "Open Boat" (1897) or Jack London's maritime adventure tales (and Boyle's own 1990 *East Is East*), the recounting of the shipwreck of Alma Takesue's grandparents right after World War II establishes the forceful collision of human and 'natural' spheres as well as (the right to) survival as the central motifs. While Alma's Japanese American grandfather drowns off the California coast, her grandmother is washed up on Anacapa and survives. Although one would expect that this piece of Alma's family history might enable an emphatic understanding beyond species boundaries for Anacapa's black rat population, which arrived on the island in the same manner after shipwrecks in the 1850s, Alma turns out to be the rats' fiercest opponent in her role as superintendent of the National Park Service's project to exterminate these animals.

In her lifestyle as well as her beliefs, Alma Takesue personifies a particularly urban experience of the Channel Islands. Her private as well as her professional life render her a typical urbanite: Her apartment in a condo complex in Santa Barbara "occupies the war zone between the freeway out front and the railroad tracks in the back" (44), exposing her to rush hour noise and pollution. Not one plant in sight of her window is native and was not placed there deliberately by a landscaping company (46-47). Besides, she commutes to work by car, eats out daily, and takes pleasure in new technological gadgets—behavior that is much more indicative of life in the city than in the country. Her jobs as Projects Coordinator and Director of Information Resources for the National Park (48) involve her in manifold processes that highlight the city as a place of technological and scientific progress, education, and administrative centrality. For example, Alma's local National Park office in Santa Barbara is responsible for enforcing national environmental legislation such as the Endangered Species Act (1973) or the Channel Islands National Park Act (1980) and it works closely together with California's city colleges in its ecological research. Through her pronounced association with these national as well as regional environmental and scientific institutions and her fierce advocacy of their positions, Alma represents a much larger societal mindset in regard to her environmental imagination.

Alma Takesue's perception and imagination of the islands as place is highly influenced by her urban background. Dismissing the impact of one and a half centuries of farming and ranching as well as foregrounding their geographical remoteness from mainland California, she considers the Channel Islands pristine and their ecosystems unchanged by human interventions into the natural environment (e.g., 66-69, 117-21). Scholars such as William Cronon and Barney Nelson deem the evocation of "a howling wilderness which never in fact existed" (Nelson 2) a distinctly American phenomenon, which started as early as Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630-1651).⁴ In this manner, the California Channel islands are placed into the long-standing and prolific

⁴ The tendency to misconceive agriculture and its impact started early. Nelson writes: "New England was not a wilderness when the Pilgrims landed, and the Wampanoags were not wild hunter-gatherers. They were domestic farmers and pastoralists. [...] Ignoring the heritage of indigenous farmers and pastoralists, Americans still prefer to imagine their ancestors as simply reborn into a preagricultural land that had been created especially for them" (2-3).

tradition of American wilderness, which also constitutes “a fundamental tenet—indeed, a passion—of the environmental movement, especially in the United States” (Cronon 69; cf. see also Marris 3).⁵

This perception of the islands as a place outside civilization, devoid of human life, and outside time turns them into suitable sites of metamorphosis or for the search of a higher spiritual, political, or cultural identity (Clark 25). Abiding by this romanticized trope of nature, Alma feels closer to higher spiritual truths on Anacapa and seems—at least for short moments—to access a level of knowledge beyond her usual awareness:

Sometimes, when she's out there alone, she can feel the pulse of something bigger, as if all things animate were beating in unison, a glory and a connection that sweeps her out of herself, out of her consciousness, so that nothing has a name, not in Latin, not in English, not in any known language. (117)

Reminiscent of transcendentalist philosophies, the islands' nature consequently provides space for Alma's inquiries into the self and also access to glimpses into the higher order of beings or, if read in secular terms, into her relatedness to all living beings regardless of life form. Her remarks provided in the quotation above thus express a momentary realization of the full potential of her own “embeddedness in environment as a condition of personal and social being” (Buell, *Future* 142) and a re-envisioning of her mundane assessment of non-human animals—insights that are usually stowed away in what Lawrence Buell termed the ‘environmental unconscious’ (*Writing* 18-27).

Recognitions such as these are very closely linked to the American ‘cult of wilderness’ of the nineteenth century and would not be associated with (sub)urban or even rural spaces nor be expected to occur anywhere else. As wilderness, the Channel Islands function as antidote to city life or spaces of spiritual insights and are connected to a feeling of nostalgia for bygone days (e.g., Cronon). Accordingly, Alma—just as other characters such as Dave LaJoy—wishes to flee the hectic city life and therefore often takes refuge on the Channel Islands (57, 88) or is simply attracted by the scenery's visual “beauty”⁶ or “rare solace” (117). In a move that Raymond Williams termed the “escalator effect” (9-12), the assumed nativeness is associated with previous generations that each are thought to have been living even more in harmony with nature. At the celebration of a rat-free island, Alma muses on the fact that “[i]t's quiet, as quiet as the world must have been before the invention of the internal combustion engine, the sea and the wind providing the backdrop to the barking of the seals and the

⁵ Originally a biblical term (Deuteronomy 32:10 and Matthew 11:7), wilderness has changed its meaning and connotations in American culture several times. While the Puritans understood wilderness as a barren and desolate place of danger, temptation, but also salvation, today's conceptualization of the term goes back to the late nineteenth century (Knobloch n. pag.). At that time, the cultural influence of the (myth of the) frontier and the sublime turned wilderness into “sacred” space (cf. Cronon 69-73). Since then, as William Cronon convincingly argues, it has been invested with the “moral values,” “cultural symbols” (72), and the “deepest core values of the culture that created it” (73).

⁶ Through its close connection to the sublime, wilderness, for many, became “a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty” (Cronon 75). This strong tie of wilderness to visuality surfaces in Alma's public lectures when she uses photos to convince her audience of the National Park Service's environmental actions (66-68). The first slide of her public lecture on the rat eradication project, for instance, shows “Anacapa at twilight, Arch Rock glowing iconically and the sea so multi-faceted and calm it might have been painted in oils around it” (66).

mewling of the birds" (117). The perception of the islands as an idyllic wilderness motivates Alma, her boyfriend Tim Sickafoose, and her colleagues to take decisive action in order to prevent this space from any external intrusions such as the newly arrived animals and plants.

According to this comprehension of 'nature,' any deviation from an assumed 'natural' baseline state of the environment (which the National Park staff happens to see in the historical moment of the introduction of rats on Anacapa and of farm animals on Santa Cruz) is 'unnatural' and therefore represents a crisis. The solution to the undesirable changes, in this line of thinking, is the reversal of all (observable) transformations (e.g. 121, 428). Before one of her public lectures for the National Park Service, Alma elaborates on this conceptualization as well as her role in this endeavor:

[S]he will appear at the place and time specified to make the Park Service's case for what to her seems the most reasonable and obvious course of action, given the consequences of inaction. And if that action requires the extirpation of an invasive and pernicious species—killing, that is, the killing of innocent animals, however regrettable—then she will show that there is no alternative because the health and welfare, the very existence of the island's ground-nesting birds, will depend on it. There are fewer than two thousand breeding pairs [of Xantus's murrelet]. Rats, on the other hand, are ubiquitous. (49)

The perception of the islands as 'American wilderness' is of importance here since this belief brings with it the ethical requirement for humanity to 'save' wilderness at all costs (Proctor; Cronon). Consequently, this evaluation determines the agenda of the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy. Alma sees herself as the "instrument of good" (124) that has the personal as well as professional "obligation" and "duty" (121) to kill off the invasive rat population in order to save the indigenous island flora and fauna. Granting one (rare) species priority over another (ubiquitous) one, Alma not only readily embraces the highly artificial and abstract human construct of species classification to impose order onto the 'natural' world, but she is also willing to perform the "humane" (71) killings of more common non-human animals and plants, which she considers "collateral damage" (72). In this as in many other instances, the fierceness of her determination is expressed by military jargon and metaphors of war and combat, which also make clear that the undesired animals have become her opponents (see also "war cry," "invaders" 124, "survivor" 398).⁷

Besides the imagination of the Channel Islands as wilderness, Alma's, and more generally, also the National Park Service's and the Nature Conservancy's approach to environmental crisis are based on further assumed key characteristics of the non-human environment. Firstly, the deliberate adjustment of animal populations through statistical models rests on the notion that all reactions and interactions can be foreseen and that ecosystems are thus completely predictable and not subject to arbitrary and chaotic processes. This reluctance to acknowledge risks (which are often even manufactured and aggravated by society), which scholars such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens

⁷ The intensiveness of the fight between Alma Takesue and Dave LaJoy is similarly expressed in terms of war and conflict, yet, on a much more political level. In a move to emphasize the highly problematic logic of the privileging of some animal life forms over others, the novel opens up comparisons to Nazi Germany (73, 152) or the Vietnam War (e.g. 76).

consider typical for Western modernity, is exposed as a crucial human shortcoming in the novel. Throughout *When the Killing's Done* 'accidental' or unexpected events such as the breakdown of Dave's getaway boat (104), Alma's pregnancy despite her use of oral contraceptives (331), or the torrential downpour on Santa Cruz that triggers the death of one of the protesters (321) disturb people's plans and expose the very assumption that humans can anticipate all consequences of their actions in the future as hubris.

Another presupposition is what William Cronon calls the popular myth of "the balance of nature" (24), which assumes that "nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its 'natural' balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid 'disturbing' it" (24). According to Alma, the "mainland species" upset the previously existing "balance, unique to each island throughout the world" (67). This is a very problematic concept, not only concerning islands, as science journalist Emma Marris demonstrates with a wealth of examples throughout time and all over the globe, since "[e]cosystems are always changing, whether humans are involved or not" (4) and because disturbances in the status quo, i.e. plant or animal extinctions or new species creation "are so common in some systems that no stable endpoint is ever reached" (31; cf. also Heise, *Nach der Natur* 42-43). Nevertheless, this environmental imagination of the Channel Islands takes for granted that the arrival of Europeans marks a turning point that divides a valuable pristine and stable island biodiversity from one that is characterized by human intervention and change.

This stance also disregards the native peoples' interference with and intrusion into the environment, which are commonly highly underestimated (Denevan; Marris 54), but it also constitutes a dismissal of the very existence of the life of earlier residents, as Marris argues:

Many observers of nature mentally classified indigenous people with the fauna of a place. Unlike 'civilized man,' they didn't spoil a landscape but belonged to it, as much as the deer or birds did; any presumably minor alterations they made to the place could therefore be classed with beaver dams or grazed meadows as natural. (43)⁸

Besides, whatever is humanly modified once, according to prevalent thought in the novel as well as in the contemporary United States, has lost its inherent wilderness value and loses the urge of having to be saved (Cronon 81). "The faith that native ecosystems are better than changed ecosystems is so pervasive in fields like ecology that it has become an unquestioned assumption" (Marris 14; cf. also Heise, *Nach der Natur* 36-46). Consequently, energy and effort are repeatedly directed to saving the supposedly 'wild' spaces, while all other (sub)urban or rural areas, which actually constitute the sweeping majority of the United States, are not deemed as valuable and thus not subject to environmental campaigns (Cronon 81; Proctor 285-86; cf. also Pollan 189).

⁸ Alma's adversary, eco-saboteur LaJoy, also falls prey to this appraisal: Looking at Anacapa, he considers it "deserted and looking as pristine as if he were *the first* to discover it, as if he were Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo himself" (139; emphasis added) and wonders "about what it must have been like when *no one* knew what was here" (139; emphasis added). This assessment leaves out the centuries-long settlement by the Chumash and the Tongva (see esp. footnote 11) and posits the point of human influence with the arrival of the European 'discoverers.'

Yet, Alma and the environmental movement she represents go one step further than many of her peers who adhere to the American 'cult of wilderness.' They do not only intend to *preserve* a certain contemporary state of the island fauna but they want to restore a previous state, i.e. they plant to *undo* hundreds of years of coexistence between the islands' flora, fauna, and humans, even if that entails the deliberate annihilation of animal life. This endeavor to reinstate a historical natural condition is also flawed for several reasons: It disregards the interconnectedness of all places, even islands, with larger systems such as the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, or the lithosphere.⁹ Thus restoring, for instance, Anacapa's ecosystem would also imply impossible measures like bringing back the exact composition of the atmosphere, reinstating the global air and water temperatures, or the reestablishment of the degree of salinity (cf. Marris). More importantly, this project would consequently require the exact knowledge of all these environmental determinants—a venture that is doomed to fail for practical reasons. It is hard to obtain exact data on the historical conditions of the ecosystems, which is why assumptions are often based on scientific extrapolations and contested even in the scientific community (Heise, *Nach der Natur* 47-77). Alma and her colleagues, however, do not even try this comprehensive approach. They define the proposed 'ideal' historical state of the Channel Islands' ecosystems rather arbitrarily by the preservation of a handful of selected (endangered) species (such as in this case the eye-catching species of the island fox or Xantus's murret), which conservationists in similar cases have termed "charismatic megafauna" or "flagship species" (qtd. in Heise, *Nach der Natur* 48).

The desirable target state of the Channel Islands is not imagined to be based on the co-existence of human and non-human beings but rather to be characterized by the absence or minimal involvement of all humans.¹⁰ This is ironic since the California Channel Islands happen to be the place with the oldest record of human settlement on the North American continent and thus also with the longest history of human modification.¹¹ This highlights how pervasive the influence of the American 'cult of wilderness,' whose main basic tenet entails the exclusion of any human presence from the wilderness (Cronon 80-81; Knobloch n. pag.; Marris 50-55), actually is. In this line of thinking, all interaction between humans and the flora and fauna in environments designated as wilderness spoils 'nature' and is therefore objectionable. At the same time, the Channel Islands National Park Act (which was quoted in the introduction to this

⁹ Even extremely small variations in the singular components can have a huge impact on the overall system (cf., e.g., climate change). Recently, the term 'Anthropocene,' which was made popular by chemist Paul Crutzen (Heise, *Nach der Natur* 15), has been used as a designation for the last 200 years in earth's history in order to indicate the pervasive magnitude of human impact on global ecosystems.

¹⁰ Following through the logic of the 'American cult of wilderness' to its extreme, William Cronon comments that "the tautology gives us no way out: if wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the sole solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide. It is not a proposition that seems likely to produce very positive or practical results" (83).

¹¹ On several of the Channel Islands, ancient human remains have been discovered. The oldest were found on Santa Rosa in 1959. Meanwhile identified as "Arlington Springs Woman" (rather than "Arlington Springs Man"), these bone fragments are estimated to have an age of about 10,960 years (Johnson et al. 542), which makes this archaeological find the oldest in all of North America. For more information, see Johnson et al.; Dandridge; National Park Service (NPS), "Arlington Man."

article) wants to preserve the aesthetic (“scenic”) value of the islands and keep them as an object to be looked at from afar. Inspired by the prolific American tradition of visualizing the sublime and spiritual natural monuments (Wilton and Barringer; Dunaway), wilderness has thus been conceived in the United States not as a place of co-habitation or human workspace but as “a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty” (Cronon 75).

There is one more crucial assumption behind the restoration project advocated by Alma, namely that humans have the right (and also the mission) to privilege one state of the environment (the supposedly ‘pristine’) over another (the presumably ‘ruined’) and consequently to transform ecosystems and landscapes according to their liking—including the extermination of other species (120-22). Often referred to as ‘speciesism,’ this anthropocentric conceptualization of the environment establishes the human as the supreme being and authority in a hierarchically structured ecological system (Ryder; Singer). Here, Alma’s antagonist, eco-radical Dave LaJoy, who fights against the killings on the ethical base of animal rights and who epitomizes radical eco-activist groups and their environmental imaginations, comes into the picture. The clear structural opposition of these two pivotal characters in the novel places the moral debate about whether one should indeed go as far as to kill for nature’s (alleged) best at the center of *When the Killing's Done*.

In opposition to Alma, David (“Dave”) Francis LaJoy embodies a much more intuitive and emotional approach to the conservation of the Channel Islands. While he is capable of developing the deepest empathy for suffering animals (e.g. 72-73), he harbors unfounded distain and antipathy for most of his fellow humans, which, ironically, makes him as much a speciesist as Alma. Besides, most of his actions are tinted by a distinct egocentrism, which (together with a seemingly unfounded feeling of hate towards his urban environment and its residents [see, e.g., 77-79]) renders his character less complex and dynamic than Alma’s. In this manner, it is telling that even though a PETA pamphlet about animal rights violations opens his eyes to animal suffering, he decides not to join PETA but to found his own eco-activist organization called For the Protection of the Animals (FPA). Repeatedly, the text also emphasizes his preoccupation with the commercial success of his thriving entertainment electronics chain and his deliberate employment of neoliberal consumer politics for his business purposes to draw attention to his “pro-animal, anti-human” (81) stance (esp. 150-51). Similarly, he proudly lists his girlfriend singer Anise Reed, who grew up on a sheep ranch on Santa Cruz Island, among his possessions (80, 148). Together with her mother, Anise (who stays a side character in the novel) embodies the past human presence on the islands and the manifold historical interventions into the island ecosystems, which are hardly acknowledged by Alma and often romanticized by Dave.

Dave LaJoy fiercely opposes the National Park Service’s restoration efforts of the Channel Islands by culling so-called invasive species since, in his opinion, “[t]he loss of a single animal—a single rat—is intolerable, inhumane and just plain wrong” (73). In his view, an environmental crisis came into being not through the presence of newly introduced animal species on the Channel Islands but through their deliberate and

calculated extermination. He deems all scientists connected with projects such as species diversity, genetic engineering, or chemical research as propagandistic (70) and considers them to possess an “almost unimaginable degree of evil” (98). Furthermore, he accuses Alma of pretending to be “God” (74) in her decisions whether other life forms have a right to live (or not) and likens her planned termination of species of a (supposed) lesser value due to their commonness, ‘inferior’ nature, or quantity to the Nazis (73). Accordingly, Dave seeks to sabotage the efforts of the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy whenever possible and he invests an extensive amount of money, time, and effort in these endeavors: For instance, he enters the cordoned off Anacapa to widely distribute Vitamin K2, an antidote to the rat poison. In the second part of the narrative that describes the environmental agencies’ attempt to eradicate the approximately 5,000 feral pigs on Santa Cruz, he also sets out to impair the National Park Service’s equipment, releases raccoons on the island, and buys rattle snakes, hoping they might harm the environmental agencies’ staff members (407). Thus, Dave does not cling to a normative condition of the island ecosystems and, indirectly, places non-human animal life above the protection of biodiversity.

Akin to Alma’s situation, Dave’s life is emplaced in a distinctly urban background. He likes to indulge in the amenities of modern city life such as trendy cuisines, pricy gourmet wines, and indoor fitness at the gym. Having worked up his way over two decades from a small electronics store in downtown Santa Barbara (150), he now owns an entire chain of high-end home entertainment stores “for people with money” (82), lives in a gated community with an artificial lawn in the city, and owns two cars—one a leather-interior BMW—as well as a vacation home and a boat (79-82). His environmental imagination of the Channel Islands reverberates with his urban lifestyle, and, just as Alma, he shrugs off centuries of human presence and several decades of farming and ranching as nothing.

Stressed out by population density, traffic, and noise within the city, urbanite Dave perceives the islands as “another world, shut away from all fights and hassles” (88). To Dave, Anacapa, for instance, looks “as pristine as if he were the first to discover it” (139; see footnote 8). In opposition to his urban life experience, he immediately feels “cozy, cozy and safe and enclosed” (87), once he sets out on the boat, which he compares to a “cradle” (91), to the islands. Similar to Alma, he considers Santa Cruz not only to be rather undisturbed by civilization and he associates it with a past in which people presumably lived ‘closer to nature.’ Seeing the abandoned ranch house on Santa Cruz, he

felt a desperate stab of covetousness, as if after ranging all over the globe he’d found his true home, only to discover it belong to somebody else [the Nature Conservancy]. He wanted it. [...] Live like Adam. Or the wild man who rowed out from the coast at the turn of the last century with nothing but a box of apples, a slingshot and a couple of fishhooks and took up residence on the barren shit-strewn lump of Gull Rock, gobbling up gull’s eggs and whatever he could bring down with a sling-propelled stone. (256)

Accordingly, Dave exhibits an equally romanticized version of the Channel Islands as Alma as more authentic and pristine as well as a place of a simple and peaceful life style, all of which, in his opinion, require their protection against the National Park Service’s intrusions. As such, his urban vision of the Channel Islands is likewise constructed in a

dichotomy to the cityscape as the National Park Service's and the Nature Conservancy's understandings of 'nature.'

In regard to the efforts to restore the Channel Islands, Dave's actions are often impulsive, subversive, and emotional, which makes him a polar opposite of Alma's rational and planned operations representing the official environmental politics of the State of California and the United States. For example, in his quest to stall the projects to eradicate 'recently emerged' species, Dave has his co-founder of the FPA, Wilson, order ten thousand vitamin K2 tablets via the internet without knowing the exact application and the way they work biologically to protect the animals from the poison (87, 97). Besides, when Dave disseminates the pills on the island, he experiences the situation as "exhilarating" and feels "like a kid at play" watching "the stuff fly from his hand to loop and twist away from him like confetti" (97).

Moreover, his almost aggressive urge to protect all non-human individuals is neither stopped by threats of criminal charges nor jail time: After his failed attempt to sabotage the rat-eradication on Anacapa, he faces "six months in jail and a \$5,000 fine" (139) on the charges of "feeding wildlife and interfering with a federal agency" (137). Yet, this does not prevent him from repeatedly trespassing on the cordoned off Santa Cruz Island, among others, to release raccoons (268-70) and, later, to damage equipment and take pictures of the decaying carcasses of the feral hogs (killed by expert invasive species hunters from New Zealand) in order to sway the public opinion (305-06). In this respect, Dave's violent, unpredictable, and anarchical activism renders him the human counterpart to "nature acknowledged as an agent in [its] own right, capricious, awesome and easily capable of wiping humanity off the face of the earth" (Clark 202). And indeed, his determination to recklessly pursue his plans and his ignorance of possible risks lead to the death of a nineteen-year-old protester, student Kelley Johansson, during adverse weather on one of the sabotage trips (320-21) and finally to his own death in a ship collision on his way to release rattle snakes and rabbits on Santa Cruz (409-20).

Similar to Ty Tierwater in *A Friend of the Earth*, Dave LaJoy seems to be driven by a deep rage and an untiring fortitude in his pursuit of the rights of non-human animals (77-81, 132-33, 380). However, as much as he aims to protect the non-human at all costs, his affection and devotion do not extend to his own species. LaJoy displays derision, hate, and mistrust towards many of his fellow humans (e.g., 84, 259), particularly towards disadvantaged citizens since, in his opinion, they are solely responsible for their misery as they "had all the advantages of living in the USA instead of some third world country" (80). This position establishes him as the embodiment of what critics of early forms of ecocriticism have voiced: namely, the fear that ecocritical analyses would focus on the human subject in relation to the natural world only and consequently run the danger to 'forget' postmodern concerns such as social justice (e.g., Heise, "Hitchhiker's Guide" 505-07). Whereas, from Dave's standpoint, first-world human beings are responsible themselves for the failure to realize career opportunities and to enjoy social mobility in the 'land of opportunity,' animals are in dire need of protectors since they cannot defend their own rights and are completely and utterly at

the mercy of humans (80-81).¹² This is why Dave considers himself the mouthpiece of non-human animals and is so determined to enforce what he considers their interests. Hence, both Alma and Dave consider themselves on a mission to enforce the 'right' environmental approach to the Channel Islands, even if their particular projects are strikingly different.

Despite their fierce disagreement on the desired configuration of the Channel Islands' ecosystems and the ethics involved, both Alma and Dave share crucial ideas and beliefs. They both romanticize the Channel Islands' natural environment as pristine wilderness and value it much more than their urban home environments. As a result, they invest all their energy, time, and money in the conservation of wilderness. While Alma intends to restore a historical state of wilderness on the Channel Islands, Dave, however, wants to preserve the current status quo of the quiet and prevent any intrusions and animal rights violations by environmental agencies. The sole focus on the Channel Islands proves fraught with problems for an environmentally friendly and sustainable life-style outside this very specific area—not only due to the very problematic assumptions about nature such as its essential purity, stability, and controllability. This fixation on supposedly untouched spaces, as William Cronon emphasizes, has dire implications for institutional environmental activism and individual approaches to flora and fauna in rural or (sub)urban areas:

[T]o the extent that we live in urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our *real* home is the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. [...] By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. In its flight from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature—in all of these ways, wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism. (81)

In the same article, Cronon calls the efforts to preserve endangered species the "most striking instance" (82) of this development. Seen as "surrogates for wilderness itself" (82), threatened species are preserved by meticulous and comprehensive human interventions into, and control over, ecosystems under the contradictory pretense to create or perpetuate a supposedly pristine and undisturbed nature. At the same time as these endeavors are taking place, (sub)urban spaces, where according to the U.S. Census of 2010 more than 80% of Americans are currently living and where a considerable

¹² Dave LaJoy's character strongly evokes some of Boyle's previous well-known male protagonists: Just as environmental writer Delaney Mossbacher in *The Tortilla Curtain*, Dave does not recognize the privileged status that he as a wealthy white male holds in American society. As a result, Dave and Delaney are blind to the social and economic plight derived from poverty and marginalization. Besides, Dave's persistent engagement in ecotage, the use of violence, and his relentless obsession with the success of his environmental agenda find their equivalent in the behavior of the young Ty Tierwater in Boyle's *Friend of the Earth*. While both Delaney (rescued from the mudslide in Topanga Canyon by Cándido) and Ty (retreating to a mountain cabin with his ex-wife Andrea) get a chance to start over, Dave, however, is not given such an option, which indicates the utter failure of his violent and ego-centric approach to environmental protection that lacks human empathy entirely. In this context, Dave's last name is exposed merely as a sarcastic pun on his character: Contrary to what the name "LaJoy" suggests, Dave rarely enjoys himself or appears to be content in the presence of fellow human beings. Rather, the pleasure he experiences derives mainly from the zealous pursuit of sabotaging the efforts of the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy.

percentage of the nationwide pollution, garbage, and resource depletion is originating from (Posner 4), are left without eco-activist agenda and exist separately, without felt connection to 'nature' or wilderness, in the environmental imagination.

Indeed, all the rigorousness that Alma and Dave show in their environmental activism concerning the Channel Islands is much harder to find in their urban life style. They act more conscious of environmental problems as the majority of Americans (Alma with her fuel-efficient reduced-emission car, Dave with his concern about the raccoons in his neighborhood), yet, both of them are inconsequential in their actions and do not fully execute their activism. Neither Dave nor Alma are involved in endeavors to increase their fellow Californians' environmental awareness of their quotidian urban environment ranging from matters such as recycling over the use of public transportation to sustainable gardening in this arid region. Rather, they enjoy the amenities of Santa Barbara's urban life style such as the lushness of "overwatered" green lawns (46, 260), and the wasteful "color and glitz" (82) of the retail bombardment at Christmas. Since the urban landscape in Dave's and Alma's eyes is already severely modified by human influences, there is no use in directing their energy into its ecological enhancement. Rather, the city is seen as an entirely human sphere, in which 'nature' is out of place and in which other forces (such as the neoliberal economy) determine the course of events: "Once a landscape is no longer 'virgin,' it is typically written off as fallen, lost to nature, irredeemable. Then we hand it over to the jurisdiction of that other sacrosanct American ethic: laissez-faire economics" (Michael Pollan qtd. in Proctor 286).

Throughout the novel, this "typically American" (Nelson 7) binary dichotomy between 'fallen' urban landscape and precious wilderness becomes obvious. Annoyed by the highway noise outside of her apartment, Alma at some point muses that if she had enough money "she'd buy up all the property in town, raze the buildings, tear out the roads and reintroduce the grizzly bear" (48). It is telling that this hypothetical venture is eerily similar to the restoration of the 'wild' ecosystems of the Channel Islands before the impact of European settlers and shipwrecked rats. Instead of creating a sustainable urban environment in which humans, animals, and non-animate nature can thrive together, Alma imagines 'nature' as the absence of any human presence and any traces of modern life. In this manner, the environmentalists' focus on the preservation of the islands prevents a more thorough middle ground position in regard to the natural elements and processes in (sub)urban areas that are perceived as already considerably transformed by humans.

Neither the setting of the California Channel Islands, the characters of the environmental scientist and the eco-saboteur, nor the themes such as animal rights, environmental crisis, and anthropocentrism constitute novelties in T.C. Boyle's oeuvre.¹³

¹³ So far, Boyle has written several works, which are set on/near the California Channel Islands (cf., e.g., "Anacapa" [2009] or most recently *San Miguel* [2012]). Besides, the characters of the (natural) scientist (cf., e.g., "Descent of Man" [1979] or "Dogology" [2002]) and the eco-saboteur (cf., e.g., "Carnal Knowledge" [1990] or *A Friend of the Earth* [2000]) have appeared repeatedly, starting with his early short story cycles. Despite the immense multifariousness of Boyle's sizable oeuvre, the above named topics recur in varying intensity in numerous of Boyle's short stories and novels (cf., e.g., "The Extinction Tales" [1977], *A Friend of the Earth* [2000], "The Swift Passage of Animals" [2005]).

Yet, *When the Killing's Done* represents his first full-length novel dealing with the ethics of the protection of biodiversity and the microcosm of green movements in detail. The novel does not, however, provide encompassing answers to the environmental issues raised but rather—at times interspersed with Boyle's characteristic rhetorical devices of comedy, satire, and the absurd (Gleason 1-11)—exposes the flawed environmental ethics at play, the disregard of urban environments in eco-activism, and the ultimate failure of humans to understand as well as predict the workings of the natural environment.

For instance, the novel renders the supposedly rational treatment of ecosystems based on calculated historical baselines, species classification, and the predictability of human interventions not only an illusion but also as ethically dubious. In this manner, Alma, who privileges the fate of ecosystems over individual animals and has been responsible directly as well as indirectly for the death of thousands of snakes, rats, and pigs in connection with endangered species projects (113), is brought to “the verge of tears” (230), when she accidentally hits a “superabundant” (229) type of squirrel and becomes a witness to its death (229-30). In a similar episode (the close-up encounter of a recently killed hog on Santa Cruz Island), Alma's rational approach to biodiversity is briefly punctured by her recognition of the mystery (354), fascination, and ultimately perfection (355) of the animal Other. These episodes emphasize that “[t]he very presence of an animal can show up the fragility of speciesism and the violence of the practices that sustain it” (Clark 187)—revealing the danger that conceptual models of biodiversity protection divert attention away from the ethical ‘costs’ of the protection of biodiversity.

Especially towards the ending, *When the Killing's Done* parodies the human confidence and capability to fully comprehend nature and recognize previous human modifications of the ecosystems as such. When the presence of raccoons on Santa Cruz Island is confirmed by several sightings, Alma, who has started showing sporadic moral qualms about the extermination of invasive species since her above mentioned encounters with the dying squirrel and the dead hog (esp. 352-57), vehemently makes a case against their killing. Contrary to what one might expect, she does not base her argumentation on ethical claims but rather on her (erroneous) assumption that the raccoons are the “first natural transplant” (427) from mainland California, having made it to the island on floating debris during the winter storms (426). Addressing her colleagues, she makes her point:

Who's going to trap a raccoon and bring it all the way out here for a joke? What kind of joke is that? It doesn't even make sense. No, this animal got here the way the skunks and the foxes and the mice and the fence lizards and all the rest did and we have a clear duty not to interfere with it. Tag it maybe. Collar it. But nature's got to take its course. [...] Isn't that what we're doing here in the first place? (427)

Her failure to recognize the raccoons (which Dave had trapped in his backyard in Santa Barbara and later released on the island in a nightly venture) as the result of human intervention and her false supposition that she might be able to correctly analyze all processes in the non-human environment exposes her scholarly education and scientific

approach to environmental questions as ineffective and futile. Furthermore, her insistence on the need to leave the raccoons undisturbed on Santa Cruz bestows the narrative with biting irony: Due to the species' high adaptability in habitat as well as diet (Hadidian et al. 35-48), the raccoons would likely in a sustaining way change the nature of the island ecosystem, which Alma just passionately 'restored' at the cost of "seven million dollars" (426). If, as the novel suggests, the protection of endangered species ultimately cannot work (permanently) since humans do not have sufficient insight into the complexity of 'natural' processes, then the killing of non-native animals is illogical to begin with and can be seen as an act of human hubris and therefore as wrong. This criticism is not limited to Alma's environmental imagination but also extends to Dave's eco-activism.

Seconds before his death in the ship collision with a giant Japanese freight ship, Dave has an epiphany while on his way to release the rattle snakes on Santa Cruz. "And he understands, for the first time, how wrong this is, how wrong he's been, how you have to let the animals—the *animals*—decide for themselves" (420). This sarcastic side blow to the strongly anthropocentric nature of both Alma's and Dave's environmental policies and the problems of assessing non-human agency is complicated throughout the entire narrative by the heterodiegetic narrator's strong anthropomorphization of non-human animals. The recurring attribution of distinctly human feelings to animals, ranging from dolphins hating sharks (9) to the rats' "fierce will to survive" (55) to "ravens laughing from the trees" (200), evolves as a meta-comment on the seeming inescapability of human thought from anthropocentric perspectives. This can equally be read as a caution to compromise non-human animal life on the grounds of supposedly biocentric arguments.

Furthermore, Dave's death signifies the failure of an environmental activism that does not recognize its intertwinement with human interests. As in many other works, Boyle establishes parallels between human interferences in nature and cultural as well as political contexts (Gleason 104-05, 114-15; Schäfer-Wünsche 404). This comprises Dave's general hostility to his fellow human beings as well as his xenophobic and misogynistic paroles towards Alma (76). Moreover, it also includes Alma's unexpected pregnancy. Despite the agreement with her boyfriend Tim to not contribute to the earth's overpopulation by having children (331, 340), Alma breaks her promise since she cannot bear to abort the baby, which prompts Tim to leave her (390). In this turn away from her rational vow not to contribute to overpopulation towards the preservation of the life of her unborn child, Alma lives up to her name,¹⁴ even if this is just a sporadic move, since she continues her engagement in the project to exterminate invasive species on the Channel Islands (427-30). In these (and other) social reverberations of the debates about the right to live (and kill) and about the value as

¹⁴ In the Spanish language, the noun *alma* denotes 'soul' or 'spirit of life'; the Latin adjective *almus/alma* describes something as 'fertile' or 'nourishing' (Van der Spek 78). For the most part of the novel, however, the name Alma cynically mocks her crucial involvement in the efforts to kill off large numbers of island animals.

well as the status of non-human life, the ethical dimensions of all actions performed in the name of environmental activism are revisited and put into question.

Finally, *When the Killing's Done* also comments on the internal dynamics of the environmental protection movement. The violent clash between Alma's and Dave's different normative perspectives in the end does not help the islands' ecosystems (which is symbolically indicated in the introduction of raccoons to Santa Cruz Island and the demise of Dave's environmental organization due to a lack of funding and public support [403]) but rather harms the individual projects as well as the general reputation of the green movement. While some might read this as an expression of hopelessness in regard to a coherent environmental movement, one can also see it as a call for cooperation: With predictions forecasting a reduction of the number of existing species by up to 50 percent until the end of this century (Heise, *Nach der Natur* 9), on the one hand, and a profound dissent on the general scientific basics of biodiversity (Heise, *Nach der Natur* 10, 14-45), on the other hand, a revisitation of one's own specific environmental imagination concerning species diversity and animal rights and an openness to dialogue are absolutely necessary.¹⁵

Thus, *When the Killing's Done* uncovers numerous paradoxes and ethical as well as practical deficiencies in prevalent environmental imaginations of 'nature' in general, and the California Channel Islands in particular. It shows that the labeling of the islands as 'wilderness' bears severe challenges and draws environmental attention away from the majority of living and working spaces. Unlike other works of environmental fiction, *When the Killing's Done* does not introduce clear normative environmental ethics in regard to the protection of biodiversity but it problematizes contemporaneous discourses and practices. This conceptualization seems to reverberate well especially with current, rather self-critical environmental imaginations: Many users of the online literary platforms commented that they discovered environmental concerns they "didn't even know you had to worry about all that much" (Melissa n.p.) and were stipulated to ponder the issue "how far you should go in preserving certain wildlife at the cost of others" (JudithAnn n.p.). Judging from the entries and reviews on these internet platforms, *When the Killing's Done* has indeed the potential to prompt reflections on definitions of and reactions to ecological crises beyond specific academic audiences and environmental activists, which situates Boyle's novel right in the heart of long-established ecocritical concerns.

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¹⁵ In regard to biodiversity, there is currently no common consensus among (natural) scientists about important benchmarks such as the definition of biological species, concrete data about actual and historical numbers of species or the actual and historical speed and ecological consequences of species extinction (Heise, *Nach der Natur* 14-45). Yet, what is even more crucial for a normative approach to biodiversity is the understanding that the cultural significance of species diversity does not derive exclusively from the aforementioned scientific data but rather from the close combination of this information with long-established powerful narrative patterns (such as the idea that in Western cultures modernization inevitably brings about the 'end of nature'). For more details, see Heise's *Nach der Natur*.

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