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A. Economics, Markets, and Capitalism

Cheryl Lousley

E. O. Wilson's *Biodiversity,* Commodity Culture, and Sentimental Globalism

> *"Biodiversity, the concept, has become the talisman of conservation, embracing every living creature." – E. O. Wilson*

In this position paper, I return to *Biodiversity,* the 1988 landmark collection of papers edited by American biologist E. O. Wilson, which established biodiversity as a popular scientific concept. I propose that it be read as part of a sentimental culture that provided a fantasy space for global subjectivity. Sentimental cultures underpinned the main humanitarian movements of the last two centuries (abolition, temperance, animal welfare, child protection, refugee assistance) but have been less discussed in relation to environmentalism. Escobar (1998, 56) describes biodiversity as a "vast institutional apparatus," including United Nations conventions, research centers, pharmaceutical companies, and non-governmental organizations, which functions to make "biodiversity" appear as an object of study and investment, as well as a site of contestation and re-articulation by social movements. Children's literature, children's toys, theme parks, restaurants, nature films, popular television programs, school projects, ecotourism, groceries, and household products do not figure in Escobar's account, even though these are prominent pathways for the travel and institutionalization of biodiversity as a concept. Broadening the discursive formation to include these seemingly trivial, though astoundingly pervasive, cultural texts and practices points to how biodiversity functions at the intersection of material, political, and affective economies.

Biodiversity, the book, began as the National Forum on BioDiversity, held in 1986 in Washington, DC, sponsored by the United States National Research Council and the Smithsonian's Directorate of International Affairs. Just as the awkward neologism "BioDiversity" was consolidated into the seemingly self-evident "biodiversity," the national particularity of this effort was subsumed into the international Convention on Biological Diversity, signed at the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro. The globality and generality of the term—capable of "embracing every living creature" (Wilson 2006, 359)—relied,

however, on its metonymic articulation through the case of Amazonia and tropical deforestation. Wilson's (1988) introduction rests its argument for the importance of biological diversity on extrapolation from one tropical species, scale, and site to another, and from the tropics to the biosphere as a whole. One-quarter of the papers focus on tropical forests, and the metonymic relationship is built into the structure of the collection: Part 3 is labeled "Diversity at Risk: Tropical Forests," followed by Part 4, "Diversity at Risk: The Global Perspective." The collection includes papers by six of the eight US scientists that Wilson (2006, 358) only half-jokingly refers to as the "rainforest mafia."

As Slater (1996) has argued, the Amazon rainforest figured in the 1980s as an Edenic site, a microcosm and last refuge of the diversity of life itself. This tropical articulation and global extrapolation is evident in *Biodiversity*'s cover image, based on a poster prepared for the forum, which features a colorful toucan magnified in a drop of water on a green leaf. Other, slightly less prominent plants and animals and less prominent habitats figure in the background and in other water droplets. That biodiversity values all forms of life is demonstrated by the re-scaling and re-sizing of these diverse examples: the beetle is the largest animal; the beluga and the chimpanzee are not even a quarter of the size of the toucan. Positioned together on the leafy green "web of life," each animal becomes both representative of its biological order and equivalent to the others on the universalizing grid of biodiversity. As miniatures enclosed like glass-globed souvenirs, these scenes of arrested vivacity eulogize life at the moment of its imminent loss (Olalquiaga 1998).

Despite arguments that biodiversity provided a scientific replacement for the sentimental attachment to charismatic megafauna that previously structured conservation priorities (see Erlich 1988), Wilson's (2006, 359) triumphant claim that biodiversity now acts as a "talisman"—an object with supernatural powers of protection—suggests the rapid institutionalization of the concept is related in some way to its affective allure. Signifying biodiversity as "exuberant abundance" (Slater 1996, 127), the imagery of lush greenery and multi-colored animals remains instantly recognizable, adopted for the commercial signage of the restaurant chain Rainforest Café along with countless other commercial and advocacy materials (Slater 2003, 2004). To appreciate its convergent appeal for scientific, advocacy, and commercial uses, it is crucial to recognize the shift Slater (1996, 2003) traces from the colonial-era term "jungle," with its impenetrable vegetation and dangerous inhabitants, to the fragile "rainforest" in the late

1970s. The first remains a barrier to capital and love; the latter is remarkably open to both. "Fragile" and "fragility" are the key words Wilson (1988, 9) uses to describe tropical forests, and by extrapolation, biological diversity.

Framed as an "embrace," or act of love, Wilson's biodiversity hovers between the innocuous and the colonizing; a sentimental parenting that protects by collecting and monitoring the vulnerable, now equated with all life (as space expedition blue-green planet imagery positioned the Earth a decade before). Feminist literary scholars increasingly note that vulnerability is staged in sentimental narratives as part of a social fantasy where powerlessness is valued and turned into a source of pleasure and disavowed power (Armstrong 1987; Noble 2000; Sánchez-Eppler 2005; Berlant 2008). A classic example is the orphan narrative. Because figured without economic or political power or duty-bound protectors, the orphan must rely on voluntary attachments, thereby demonstrating that compassionate love—love alone, not economic interest or social duty or blood ties—can undergird social relations (Armstrong 1987; Nelson 2003; Weinstein 2004). The orphan mobilizes a fantasy world of love, where one is *wanted* and ultimately recognized as loveable, often at the very moment it is too late (thereby deferring closure and intensifying the bittersweet pleasure of recognition). Tropical forests appear like orphans in *Biodiversity* (as do other biomes in the more recent conservation focus on "biodiversity hot spots"): isolated yet vivacious locales unable to protect or rehabilitate themselves from logging and deforestation. Just as the orphan can only appear as an orphan—and hence, open to new attachments—by removing the family, biodiversity appears vulnerable through the absence of a responsible nation-state or other form of paternalistic governance. Sentimental fantasies of vulnerability are mobilized for social reform by imagining that the political realm might be organized according to the affective structure of a loving family (Tompkins 1986; Sánchez-Eppler 2005; Berlant 2008); a voluntary family whose sympathies extend beyond naturalized borders (Weinstein 2004).

That the sentimental narrative of love relies on effacements of power helps to explain how a discourse of protection, which implies protection *from* development, can function to protect *for capitalization* (O'Connor 1993), facilitating and validating new attachments. Affective labor ascribes value, which can then be appropriated for capital accumulation under the alibi of environmental concern (Baudrillard 1981; O'Connor 1993; Foster 2008). The collection of flora and fauna on the cover of *Biodiversity,*

transparently rendered as if accessed solely through the botanist's magnifying glass, appears already in commodity form: disembedded from their sites of socio-biocultural production and meaning, and reassembled in a sentimental public display, a shop window where each object is equally available for love. Biodiversity's inscription of seemingly intrinsic value is a sentimental version of commodity fetishism; a moral abstraction that presumes a certain exchangeability of life forms. Choose the toucan, or the beluga, or even the beetle—each might be at risk; each deserves love (or a research grant, or a conservation campaign). To appear as irreducible and singular, they must be depicted as exchangeable for one another on the level of moral value.

Commodity culture also facilitates the extension of love, making widely available a mobile set of objects and meanings, which can be personalized and taken into the home or passed to others in an affective network of mutual recognition. Sentimentality and commodity culture are so closely intertwined because love of things is central to sustaining intimate relationships and memories (think of the meaning ascribed to wedding rings or a photograph of the dead).[1] But even in this mass-produced and fantasy form, there is no singular version of biodiversity but rather travelling clusters of meaning-laden objects, images, stories, personas, and events, around which form imagined communities of shared taste and affect. Shared taste in loving nature—demonstrated through social practices and choice of domestic objects—is one way in which class identities and social networks develop and are affirmed (Bourdieu 1984; Price 1999). Sentimental attachments thus facilitate market expansion by endowing commodities with personalized meanings and stories, and engendering "intimate publics" among consumers (Berlant 2008, 5), who feel they belong to a collective organized around shared affects rather than political mediation. Politically and ecologically decontextualized in order to be equally, singularly available for love, the global collection on the cover of *Biodiversity* prefigures the imagined collective as a flattened global biosphere organized around horizontal affections. The cultural imagining of this affective global community is an example of what Robbins (1999) terms "feeling global," and what I call sentimental globalism.

1 See Sánchez-Eppler (2005) for an extended discussion of the complex place of commodities and objects in sentimental cultures, especially her discussion of postmortem daguerreotypes and photographs in Victorian mourning practices.

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