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"The Viral Creep: Elephants and Herpes in Times of Extinction"

Lowe, Celia and Ursula Münster

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Across the world, elephant endotheliotropic herpesvirus is increasingly killing elephant calves and threatening the long-term survival of the Asian elephant, a species that is currently facing extinction. This article presents three open-ended stories of elephant care in times of death and loss: at places of confinement and elephant suffering like the zoos in Seattle and Zürich as well as in the conflict-ridden landscapes of South India, where the country's last free-ranging elephants live. Our stories of deadly viral-elephant-human becomings remind us that neither human care, love, and attentiveness nor techniques of control and creative management are sufficient to fully secure elephant survival. The article introduces the concept of "viral creep" to explore the ability of a creeping, only partially knowable virus to rearrange relations among people, animals, and objects despite multiple experimental human regimes of elephant care, governance, and organization. The viral creep exceeds the physical and intellectual contexts of human interpretation and control. It reminds us that uncertainty and modes of imaging are always involved when we make sense of the world around us. (Text from authors' abstract)

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