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Coolooloi

Abstract:

The etymology of the word ‘interview’ comes from Middle French *s’entrevoir* – to see each other. Using interviews to research relationships between dingoes and people on Fraser Island (K’gari) enables me to see the people who talk with me and to see a complex situation from different perspectives. Some of the controversies around dingoes and people on K’gari are exemplified in the case of Jennifer Parkhurst, a dingo researcher who in 2010 was prosecuted by the Queensland government for feeding dingoes and for interfering with a natural resource on K’gari.

An interview is a staged dialogue between an interviewer and an interview participant for an audience or reader that also requires ‘a continuous negotiation of terms’ (Masschelein et al. 2014, p 25). As a form of collaborative practice an interview combines ‘preparation and anticipation’ with ‘improvisation and spontaneity’ to create something that is ‘never entirely predictable’ (Masschelein et al. 2014, p 21).

The qualities that make an interview a collaborative work of art in its own right involve trust. They relate to an interviewer’s preparation, what an interview participant says and/or does, the ways both participants shape the live interview, and the context that an interviewer provides in the transcription and narration of the interview when it becomes text.

This extract, ‘Coolooloi’, applies techniques of ‘repair, assemblage and re-assemblage, stitching together, a kind of bricolage or experimental tinkering’ (Gibbs 2015) to an interview with Jennifer Parkhurst. It aims to balance the documentary aspect of the situation (Gornick 2001, p 13), or the ‘problems and provocations’, with the ‘sensations, affects, intensities’ that the writing is seeking to create as its ‘mode of addressing problems’ (Grosz 2008, p 1). From this interplay emerges the story itself, which belongs to neither Parkhurst nor me. Ideally interviewer and interview participant become complementary narrators who allow the voice of the reader ‘its role in the creation of the narrative’ (Adelaide 2007).

Biographical note:

Rowena Lennox is a doctoral student at the University of Technology Sydney writing about dingoes and people. Her essays, fiction, memoir, poems, short articles and an interview with Bill Gammage have appeared in *Hecate*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Meanjin*, *New*

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Statesman & Society, Seizure, Social Alternatives, Southerly, Sydney Morning Herald, Transnational Literature and Writers in Conversation. Her book *Fighting Spirit of East Timor: the Life of Martinho da Costa Lopes* (Pluto Press: Sydney, and Zed Books: London, 2000) won a NSW Premier's History Award in 2001. She has worked as a book editor for many years.

Keywords:

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Coolooloi

I was drawn to Fraser Island – known to its Butchulla custodians as K’gari – by the story of Jennifer Parkhurst, who spent six years observing dingoes there before she was prosecuted by Queensland’s Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) for interfering with a natural resource and for feeding dingoes. Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), the body that manages most of K’gari, is part of DERM. Before her prosecution Parkhurst had been critical of how QPWS were managing dingoes on K’gari. She told me DERM prosecuted her because they had to, as she put it, ‘shut me up’ and ‘get rid of me’ (Parkhurst 2015).

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The Queensland government’s heavy-handed treatment of Parkhurst intrigued and scared me. She claimed that she fed a pack of dingoes because they were going to die of starvation; she was on the dingoes’ side. Her photographs of dingoes are intimate and affectionate (Parkhurst 2010).

Parkhurst agreed to let me interview her at her house in Rainbow Beach in Queensland. In May 2015 I travelled to Hervey Bay on the Fraser coast to attend a forum called ‘Dingo – friend or foe?’ (SFID 2015). The day after the forum, as I drove from Hervey Bay to the Cooloola coast to interview Parkhurst, I felt a sense of alienation. Cooloola comes from *goolooloi* or *coolooloi*, the Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi Aboriginal word for cypress pine. Cooloola is such a euphonious word but the wind was not singing to me through the cypress pines’ spindly foliage as I drove south.

At the forum farmers had described the violence of dingoes’ predation on cattle and calves, and spoken with impunity of their own violence toward dingoes. I expected my interview with Parkhurst would traverse similar territory. My obsession with dingoes was nothing compared to hers but I thought if she could tell me why she was obsessed I might know more about why I was.

* * *

In the late afternoon Jennifer Parkhurst and I sat on the patio out the back of her compact, two-storey, A-frame house. Kari, Parkhurst’s diabetic alert dog, sat on her lap as we talked. Kari was a fluffy, soft-haired poodle-Maltese cross: intelligent, a fussy eater, and, on the surface, not at all like the dingoes who had captivated the person she cared for.

Parkhurst was fascinated by dingoes’ serpentine grace long before she came to the Cooloola coast. When she found out there were dingoes on nearby K’gari, she wanted to learn as much about them as she could. Whatever she found out, she said, she wanted to share with people. She wanted to teach the world about dingoes.

So she had to make the dingoes trust her enough to incorporate her into their pack structures. She managed to make them trust her, she said, 'by being submissive'. She ignored all she'd been told about how to approach dingoes and worked on her understanding that canids have alpha and beta and gamma animals in a pack; that they rely on a system of dominance–submission.

She was in their territory, she told me, she didn't want to impose on them. As she put it: 'I would squat down and let the dingo suss me out. Spend a short time with each different pack that I was observing until slowly over time I'd stay there a bit longer and a bit longer and a bit longer until it got to the stage where they expected to see me there and, eventually, they would greet me like a member of the pack when I did turn up.'

Our interview started with stories of fascination: dingo greeting ceremonies, dingo lovemaking, dingo territorial battles and dingo rituals for entering another pack's territory peaceably. For six years, Parkhurst set herself apart by doing her research, as she put it, 'without using the stuff the scientists were using, the ground spray things, the tracking collars, the GPS stuff, the cameras in the bush and all of that. I wanted to be able to prove that I could do it without luring dingoes to me with food.'

Parkhurst was not a disinterested observer. She named the dingoes she was observing. She knew them as individuals. She knew their personalities, identified them by the way they walked. Some of them became close friends. When dingo pups started to die of starvation in the lean time after they were weaned and before they had learnt to hunt for themselves, she grieved.

People told her, 'This is your job. Get used to it. Detach yourself.' But, Parkhurst said, 'I could never detach. And I think that's kind of good, even though it hurt. It gave their lives meaning, to me.'

These attachments made her vulnerable. She cared very deeply about the deaths of the pups. She also cared very deeply about the young dingoes who were killed by QPWS staff because they showed no fear of people.

Some would say that she cared too much because, after watching successive litters of pups die of starvation, she and her then boyfriend started to give food to the alpha female of a group of dingoes Parkhurst had called the Hook Point pack. Their territory stretched across the southern tip of the island from the eastern beach to the tangled forests of Coolooloi Creek, facing the mainland.

Parkhurst called the alpha female Kirra. Kirra had visited camping areas in search of food since she was young, Parkhurst told me, without incident.

But Ranger Colin Lawton claimed that QPWS started to receive reports of the Hook Point pack ‘interacting with people, and aggressively interacting with people ... we’re getting some really serious attacks on people down there’ (*Australian Story* 2011). In early May 2009 rangers killed four of Kirra’s ten-month-old pups –two males and two females – at Coolooloi Creek (Allen et al. 2015, supplementary material).

A few months later, in late August, five DERM officials, accompanied by a police officer to keep them safe, raided the house where Parkhurst lived, the house where we were talking, and removed computers and hard drives containing her photographs and film footage, as well as personal diaries and QPWS dingo autopsy reports she had obtained through Freedom of Information requests.

In court on 3 November 2010 she pleaded guilty to all 46 charges relating to her interactions with dingoes. For feeding dingoes on 34 separate occasions and eight charges of disturbing dingoes in a recreation area she received a forty thousand dollar fine. For four charges of interfering with dingoes in a protected area she received a jail sentence of nine months wholly suspended with an operational period of three years. Magistrate John Smith warned her to keep away from Fraser Island’s dingoes and Parkhurst complied.

After the trial she went to Victoria, where she had grown up, to stay for three months. Her return to Rainbow Beach was difficult. Looking at the island made her cry. ‘To be sitting here,’ she said, ‘knowing Kirra was over there and I couldn’t explain to her why I wasn’t with her anymore was heartbreaking.’

Just before her trial Parkhurst visited the island with her father to say goodbye to Kirra. She didn’t know what the outcome of the trial would be, whether she would be going to jail. They didn’t find Kirra so they cleaned up rubbish on the beach instead. As they were driving along the beach to catch the barge back to the mainland Parkhurst saw a dingo in the distance.

When she told her father it was Kirra he asked her how she knew. She said, ‘I know her. That’s her.’

They were in a different car, with a different smell. Parkhurst told her father to close his window because she didn’t want Kirra to smell her or come near, or to start hoping that she had come back.

‘But,’ Parkhurst told me, ‘she knew. She came straight over to the driver’s window and just looked up at me and I wound down the window and I wanted to get down and greet her properly and rub her nose and tell her I loved her. But I just had to be content with knowing that I was seeing her.’

Kirra stared at Parkhurst and her father – with tears pouring down his face – said, ‘She knows you.’

The barge was approaching. Her father told her that they needed to go, she needed to say goodbye. But Parkhurst could not drive away. She could not say goodbye. All she could do was continue to tell Kirra she loved her.

As Parkhurst put it, Kirra ‘was the first to walk away’. She got up, walked off down the beach and sat down. Parkhurst interpreted that as ‘her way of saying to me, You’ve got to go.’

So she drove off. When she turned around Kirra was gone.

We were coming to the end of our interview. The dark around us vibrated with the sound of crickets. Grief for many losses lives in the story of Parkhurst’s and Kirra’s last encounter – including Kirra’s loss of her 2008 pups and Parkhurst’s loss of her mother, who died relatively young. To me the sadness felt bigger than Parkhurst or me, and the dingoes on K’gari. I was sad about humans’ loss of connection to and lack of willingness to understand, on their terms, animals like dingoes, some of whom who are curious and sociable.

Why were Parkhurst and I so interested in dingoes? What did we seek to learn? Dingoes’ sense of their selves is different from our human sense of our selves; they are connected to their environment and each other in ways we humans are not. I admired their cooperation with each other, and qualities that I perceived as generosity and a capacity to forgive.

‘They forgave me for a lot of stuff,’ Parkhurst said. ‘I’m really grateful to them for that. And they show forgiveness, too. Kirra would have to chastise the pups. She has to, that’s her job, she’s the mum, but after she would always give them a kiss, saying, I’m sorry, sweetie. So they do have this big capacity for forgiveness and love.’

For a long time I underrated forgiveness. Perhaps it is a coincidence but it was only after I had children that I realised that forgiveness is a gift both to the one who is forgiven and to the one who forgives. Nevertheless, I don’t know whether, in what circumstances, I am capable of forgiving.

Parkhurst described Kirra’s forgiveness as a maternal quality. Was Kirra asking for forgiveness as well as forgiving her pups? It’s a big generalisation, but are maternal bonds capacious enough to allow effortless forgiveness? Perhaps. Maybe. I don’t know. I think of my mother, who was much more forgiving than my father.

I did not realise I would fall in love with my children. I did not expect to feel such euphoria about their being in the world, to enjoy their company so much. Not that it is all euphoria, of course, but the euphoria is one of the miracles, one of the things that is good to think about. The freedom of forgiving might be like this joy. A good thing. Like the pleasure I feel when I am with my dog, whom I trust because I believe she is always honest. If she acts happy, she is happy.

* * *

The day after our interview Parkhurst and I visited the island. In the afternoon we saw two young male dingoes jaunting down the beach. We watched as one of them approached a man who was perhaps collecting pippies on the wet sand near the water line. The man took no notice of the dingo following him. As the young dingo stood calmly by the man's vehicle we nicknamed him Bold. Parkhurst said, 'He's too social to survive.'

The two dingoes continued to travel down the beach until they disappeared up a track into the scrub. I was about ten metres away from our vehicle photographing their footprints in the sand when Bold emerged from the dunes and came up to me.

I stood still and tried to keep a cool mind while hot blood thumped around my body, to my temples and the back of my head. He extended a paw slightly. I looked down at his scrawny rump and thought I saw him flinch, as though he might run away. It made me think he was as nervous as I was, which reassured me. He walked clockwise around behind me, looked up at my face, extended his nose forward to sniff my shoe, but did not touch me. I stayed still. He came anticlockwise back around to look up at my face again. It was as if he was addressing me, asking, 'Have you got any food?'

Despite my heartbeat, I tried to communicate firmly, kindly, to him with my eyes that I was not scared. I was thinking, 'I am not here to dominate you,' though if he had acted aggressively I might not have continued with that line of thought. Before he walked away from me of his own accord, with his tail in the air, he did what might have been the beginning of an almost imperceptible play bow, a last split-second attempt to get me to do something interesting. As it was I was the right kind of boring.

Three months later, on 16 August 2015, after many interactions with people and nipping two tourists, Bold was killed by QPWS. Afterwards Parkhurst and I talked on the phone about him. We went through the photographs Parkhurst had taken and discussed how dingo behaviour can be interpreted differently by different people. I felt great sadness about his death. Parkhurst was sad too, but she was also angry and frustrated about how predictable this outcome was.

The lead Bold took in our encounter and the way Parkhurst was submissive, allowing dingoes to set the terms of her relationships with them, remind me of another reviled animal upsetting human-centred ideas of agency. In Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novella *The little prince* (2005) a fox asks the prince to tame him. If the prince tames him, the fox explains, they will create ties, they will need each other. The wheat fields that they both can see mean nothing to him, the fox says, because he does not eat wheat. But, he observes, the boy has golden hair, the colour of wheat. If the boy tames him, the fox says, 'The wheat, which is golden, will remind me of you. And I'll love the sound of the wind in the wheat ...' (pp 59–60).

The fox explains how first the prince needs to sit some distance away and the fox will watch him out of the corner of his eye. Day by day the boy will be able to sit a little closer. So the prince tames the fox but when he has to leave, the fox tells him he will cry. The prince points out that it was the fox who asked to be tamed and says, 'Then you get nothing out of it?'

'I get something,' the fox replies, 'because of the color of the wheat' (p. 61).

The fox takes such initiative in his relationship with the boy, I wonder who tamed whom. And who was taming whom when Parkhurst spent time with Kirra and her pack or when Bold came to meet me on K'gari?

The famous sentences – 'One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes' – are the fox's secret, which he tells to the prince (p. 63).

I asked my children what it means to see with the heart. How is it different from seeing with the eyes? They didn't hesitate. One told me that to see with the heart is to truly believe in something. The other told me that it means you take something in and you really like it and you can relate to it. Seeing with the heart is different from seeing with the eyes, one said, because with the eyes you might not take it in and you might not like it. The other said, 'You believe it. You feel it.'

Parkhurst needed to believe in Kirra's forgiveness and love. I, too, need this love that changes everything, this energy and space: light to refract anger; air to move grief. It is a form of seeing with the heart. Coolooloi. It sings with the wind through the cypress pines. It fills the colour of the wheat. It lives in the forgiveness of animals.

Research statement

Research background

The interview is a hybrid form, with origins in journalism and literature. Interviews fulfil different functions in scientific, literary and popular discourses (Masschelein et al. 2014, pp 18, 16). ‘Coolooloi’ is a hybrid literary response to issues that are commonly confined to separate spheres of science, conservation or cultural studies. In responding, one interview led to another: my interview with Jennifer Parkhurst led to Bold’s interview with me, a further interview with my children and an interview with myself. As an ongoing collaborative process of exchange, clarification and contextualisation takes place while an interview comes into being as a performance and as a text, my research questions are: how do I trust the authenticity of interview participants? How can my narration of interviews allow readers to contribute meaning to the text (Adelaide 2007)?

Research contribution

‘Coolooloi’ is adapted from a longer work of creative non-fiction/personal essays with the working title ‘Dingoes and people – a personal, partial, eclectic and emotional history’. These essays are informed by Dale’s (2014) and Garner’s (2004) construction of non-linear narrative from interviews and other sources; Didion’s (1993) and Lopez’s (1999, 2004) integration of interview and other source material to form implicit arguments; and Sebald’s (1998) and Dyer’s (2012a, 2012b) deployment of narratorial consciousness to explore textual and external worlds. This writing aims to extend this tradition to interspecies relationships.

Research significance

Publications drawn from this research include essays ‘Head of a dog’ (Lennox 2013a), which has been taught on the Advanced creative writing (Docu-fiction) course at the University of NSW (Dubrau 2014), and ‘Apex predators’ (Lennox 2014a), discussed on the *Knowing Animals* podcast (O’Sullivan 2016); and blog posts for *Meanjin* (Lennox 2013b) and the Australian Animal Studies Association (Lennox 2016). Other outputs include animal studies (Lennox 2015), literature (Lennox 2014c), and environmental history (Lennox 2014b) conference and workshop presentations.

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¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all subsequent direct quotes from Parkhurst are from this interview.