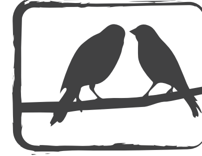

Lively Ethography

Storying Animist Worlds

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Abstract This article is an effort to dwell with the kinds of writing and thinking practices that we have been developing in our research, especially over the past seven years. This is an approach grounded in an attentiveness to the evolving ways of life (or *ēthea*; singular: *ethos*) of diverse forms of human and nonhuman life and in an effort to explore and perhaps restory the relationships that constitute and nourish them. Our aim is to develop "lively ethographies": a mode of knowing, engaging, and storytelling that recognizes the meaningful lives of others and that, in so doing, enlivens our capacity to respond to them by singing up their character or ethos. Most of our work in this area has focused on extinction, but this approach might readily be taken up in a range of other contexts. This article alternates between two types of writing. One is expository and lays out an analysis of ethos, liveliness, storytelling, "response-ability," and becoming witness. The second is performative, offering short ethographic vignettes that enact some of the qualities and approaches we have discussed. Here each of these vignettes is taken from our recent work in Hawai'i, a deeply generative and often fraught field site that has inspired much of our thinking.

Keywords multispecies, ethography, ethics, storytelling, animism, Hawai'i, ethos, worlding, witness

Seals

Unlike the many other seals at home in cold waters, the Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*) has taken to life in the tropics (fig. 1). Members of the *Monachus* lineage, their ancestors evolved in the coastal waters off what is now Turkey and Greece. From there they spread into the Atlantic and the Caribbean and eventually the Pacific, via a waterway that is now closed. Different species of monk seal could once be found thriving in all of these places; today all are in severe decline or extinct. Roughly 1,100 Hawaiian monk seals remain, making the species one of the rarest marine mammals on Earth.[1]

1. "Hawaiian Monk Seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*)," 2013, www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/pinnipeds/hawaiianmonkseal.htm (accessed January 11, 2013).

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Figure 1. A monk seal resting on a beach in Kauai. Photograph by Jared Wong

From 15 million years ago until the early centuries AD, Hawaiian monk seals likely knew nothing of humans. Members of our species were late arrivals in the Hawaiian Islands. The great seafaring Polynesians settled in the main Hawaiian Islands only about fifteen hundred years ago. Having evolved in a world without people, monk seals show almost no flight response in our presence—as long as they are not threatened they stay put. This lack of fear is part of what made them vulnerable to incredible commercial slaughter in the past. It is also part of why they remain so vulnerable on land even today.

Alongside such generalized threats as starvation, entanglement in marine debris, and the loss of haul-out and pupping sites (due to development and beach erosion), today's monk seals are not infrequently subject to deliberate and violent attack by people, beaten to death on the beach. Hauling out of the water is a vital part of monk seal life: it is required for mating and birthing and provides opportunities to rest, avoid predators, and feed young pups. Some beaches are glorious multispecies havens, with seals and humans flopped out and relaxing on the sand. But for some people seals are "out of place" among the main Hawaiian Islands, where they compete with fishermen for fish. Attempts at conservation have become bound up with deeply unpopular restrictions on fishing and other marine activities.[2]

2. Rose, "Monk Seals at the Edge."

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But into this environment of violence and loss some local people are injecting narratives and practices of care. When a seal hauls out on a beach in an inhabited part of the islands, volunteers are called. They go to the reported site and set up a perimeter with stakes and plastic tape; they put up signs of warning, make sure the event is reported, and stay. They are not as much police as educators, so while they make sure that people respect the sleeping seal's need to be left alone, they also answer questions about monk seal biology, history, future, and behavior. Although the official literature does not put it this way, volunteers are ambassadors for monk seals. Their response, their commitment to being there, is in itself an ethical statement.

In the abstract, the idea of hanging out on the beach all day keeping an eye on a sleeping seal sounds great. In actual fact it is both great and not so great. Sometimes it is wet and cold, sometimes sticky and boring. The volunteers need to be knowledgeable, and they need the patience to have the same conversations over and over, day after day. They need to be able to discuss conflicting views about monk seals in a manner that does not exacerbate conflict. It helps to be a good storyteller as well as a good listener.[3]

Through these grounded acts of care, of witnessing and careful storytelling, these volunteers help daily to enact the dream of a flourishing multispecies community on the beaches of Hawai‘i. Unexpectedly, interestingly, compellingly, a seal arrives. The arrival feels like a message from the deep, a statement of vulnerability brought onto land by those who live in the ocean but also need to haul out. In these times of extinction and extermination, this moment is a fissure, a happening that becomes a recursive attractor that announces that maybe, just maybe, other kinds of communities might still be possible.[4]

Ethos

The beautiful word *ethos* (plural: *ēthea*) is not widely used these days, although it holds a place in anthropological discussions of aesthetics, poetics, and performance.[5] In ethnographic usage, Clifford Geertz's definition is a good baseline: "A people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects."[6] Our point of departure from standard ethnography is the recognition that it is not only humans who are known by their ethos.

Ethos, though, is more shifty and elusive than this already open-ended definition suggests. It comes from old Greek, where it meant such things as character or way of

3. Ibid.

4. These short vignettes only gesture toward the mode of engagement that we have been developing in our recent work. For fuller examples see Rose, "Flying Fox"; Rose, "Cosmopolitics"; Rose, "Monk Seals at the Edge"; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; and van Dooren, "Living with Crows in Hawai‘i."

5. Herzfeld, *Anthropology*, 283–84. It also is alive and well in studies of communication and rhetoric and in the scholarly journal *Ethos* (journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology).

6. Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," 127.

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life but also custom and customary practices and places.[7] Homer wrote of the ethos of horses—their habits and habitats. Today it can also mean spirit, as in the spirit or character of a time: a zeitgeist, or an overarching set of values and practices—a style.

Definitions start to become reflexive—ethos is part of what makes a group or kind distinct; we know (or think we know) that given individuals are a *kind* because they are distinct. Dominique Lestel, Florence Brunois, and Florence Gaunet express this point well in their discussion of animals' individual and shared cultures. They conclude that "there will always be a cognitive or behavioral *style* that will characterize chimpanzees as chimpanzees and distinguish them as much from gorillas as from elephants and humans."[8]

And so it is clear that ethos arises through the interplay of sameness and difference. If there were no differences, there would be no background and foreground, no pattern to distinguish, no figure to become meaningful. Ethos involves knowledge, sense of self and other, discernment among kinds.

In short, we are using the term *ethos* to designate broad styles or ways of life. Our interest is in life in all of its diversity. While Lestel and colleagues focus on the "cognitive or behavioral style" of particular animal species, our approach aims to draw in worlds of life beyond the animal kingdom with all of the diverse modes of engagement, entanglement, and cobecoming that this implies. In many of these contexts it does not make sense to focus on cognition and behavior—at least not in their standard (animal, or perhaps human) forms. Myriad other kinds of difference and distinctiveness are to be found: How does a mistletoe plant make its way in the world, attracting and sharing nectar with some and boring into the branches of others? What kinds of relationships do fungi strike up with wind, soil, tree roots, and countless others to shape a world of "intricate but [perhaps] unintended designs"?[9]

Here we are reminded that the wider distinctiveness of ēthea is crafted through relational and participatory intra-action.[10] Ways of being are not formed and sustained in isolation. Each ethos is also a style or way of being and becoming *with others*. Ēthea are not essences but emergent and performative happenings, never isolated or fixed, bleeding into and coshaping one another, and yet somehow maintaining their distinctive uniqueness.[11] This coshaping takes place at multiple levels and across diverse time

7. Thus *ethos* (ἦθος, ἔθος; plurals: *ethe* [ἤθη], *ēthea* [ἤθεα]) is a Greek word originally meaning "accustomed place" (as in ἤθεα ἵππων, "the habitat of horses"; *Iliad* 6.511), "custom, habit," equivalent to Latin *mores*.

8. Lestel, Brunois, and Gaunet, "Etho-ethnology and Ethno-ethology," 171. Although our focus here is general differences at a species (or perhaps population/cultural) level, our approach—like that of Lestel and colleagues—also makes room for individual variability among both humans and nonhumans. See also Lestel, Bussolini, and Chrulew, "Phenomenology of Animal Life."

9. Tsing, "Strathern beyond the Human," 233.

10. On "intra-action" see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

11. Of course uniqueness in this context can be and is gauged in different ways. In some cases it is possible to be curious about how others, human and nonhuman, recognize kinds (their own and others): Vinciane Despret urges us to consider how it is that lions understand lionness, how they decide who is and is not a lion

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frames. In addition, as *embodied* ways of life ēthea are not a cultural element somehow added onto a preexisting biology. Rather, they are the product of the differential biosocial becomings—the evolutionary and developmental intra-actions—of organisms and their species in coconstitutive relationship with others.[12]

Ultimately, our focus on diverse ēthea leads us into an ecological animism. To be attentive to ēthea is inevitably to encounter an animated world, woven through with coforming patterns of responsiveness, attention, desire, and communication. Our approach to animism shares much with indigenous understandings (but we do not explore these similarities here).[13] However, we come to animism via our own worldly encounters, read through the refractive lenses of Western science and philosophy.[14] Our focus is on what Emma Restall Orr has called the "relational awakeness" of the world, an awakeness that resides in the multiple and diverse forms of intentionality—of

("Becomings of Subjectivity in Animal Worlds"). Eben Kirksey pays attention to some of the ways that wasps, fig trees, and frogs distinguish between those who are and are not the right "kinds," developing their own taxonomic praxiographies; see Kirksey, "Species." In other cases we simply do not know enough about what matters to others to ask this question seriously. On species as performative cobecomings see van Dooren, "Authentic Crows." The present article is part of a set of two exploring related themes. The other focuses in particular on ethos and witness and includes a fuller discussion of the way in which distinctions among kinds might be made and problematized: Rose and van Dooren, "Encountering a More-than-Human World."

12. See Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray, *Cycles of Contingency*; Oyama, *Evolution's Eye*; and Haraway, "SF." The modes of sociality of any given ethos are rooted in specific biological capacities. While many animals' social lives are immediately recognizable to us (although their existence has nonetheless often been denied), plants, microorganisms, and various others are also deeply social beings in their own ways, exchanging signs and meanings, communicating in ways that we often underestimate (discussed further below). As one of us has argued elsewhere,

> in this sense, sociality is perhaps a common feature of all life and should not be restricted to those organisms who possess modes of interaction similar enough to those of humans to be immediately recognizable as such. In other words, our being social creatures, as well as the specific forms that this sociality takes, are in important ways features of our biological makeup. At the same time, however, biology has itself evolved within the context of very material processes of intergenerational life in the company of others. . . . There is no sociality outside of its specific biological possibilities; nor is there any biological form that has not been shaped by its own particular social milieu. (van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 163)

It is in this complex space that ēthea emerge.

13. Long histories of indigenous thought have addressed the animated character of the perceptible world, and it is at that scale that people say other beings have culture. Living beings are "culture creatures," and knowledge of this fact is, on the face of it, not at all arcane. See Rose, "Death and Grief in a World of Kin." One sees some birds dance; one hears others sing; one watches them finding their food, making their nests, raising their young—the way of participatory ethos is not hidden. Indeed, given the relational and participatory qualities of life, it could not be hidden—but nor is it always addressed to, or perceptible by, humans. And of course it may involve hiding, deception, and many other modes of communication and resistance. These indigenous animisms are grounded in the recognition, as Graham Harvey has put it, "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (*Animism*, xi). Also see Rose, "Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism." Together we are also beginning work on a larger project that aims to further flesh out this particular approach to animism.

14. On refraction, see Haraway and Goodeve, *How Like a Leaf*; and Metcalf, "Intimacy without Proximity."

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perception, striving, desiring, sensing, adapting, and responding—that we see evidenced all around us.[15]

Moving well beyond the obvious examples of intentional behavior in our close relatives in the animal kingdom, biochemist Daniel Koshland notes: "'Choice', 'discrimination', 'memory', 'learning', 'instinct', 'judgment', and 'adaptation' are words we normally identify with higher neural processes. Yet, in a sense, a bacterium can be said to have each of these properties."[16] In a similar vein, recent work on plant intelligence has increasingly indicated the widespread existence of sentience and agency of diverse kinds. Plants emerge from this work as beings that sensitively detect and respond to their environments in highly adaptive and communicative ways, drawing in resources as well as warding off herbivores, perhaps by synthesizing chemical deterrents or even by releasing other chemicals that provide cues to potential predators of problematic grazing insects.[17]

Ecological animism responds to a world in which all life—from the smallest cell to the largest redwood—is involved in diverse forms of adaptive, generative responsiveness. This responsiveness may happen in the immediacy of the moment (as two albatrosses sing and dance to form a pair bond); it may happen through drawn-out developmental processes (as a plant slowly grows toward the sun), or perhaps even over evolutionary time frames that remake entwined morphological and behavioral forms to better inhabit their worlds. However it happens, though, life is saturated in diverse forms of purposeful attentiveness and responsiveness.[18]

In paying attention to these processes, ecological animism is grounded in *recognition* as a mode of encounter that "aims for the greatest range of sensitivities to earth others."[19] But more fundamental than any specific set of ideas about what plants, bacteria, and others are and do is the cultivation of a kind of openness toward the world. As Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston note, "The kind of practice asked of us is to venture something, to offer an invitation . . . and see what comes of it. We are called, in fact, to a kind of etiquette . . . in an experimental key: the task is to create the space within which a response can emerge or an exchange coevolve."[20] In short, this is a commitment not to assume that we know, that we could know, all of the ways in which our

15. Orr, *Wakeful World*. Others have called this mindfulness. In this context, the point is to move away from a dualistic, Cartesian construction of mindfulness that separates it sharply from the body and sees its fullest expression in abstract forms of rationality. We should not assume that we know what mindfulness is, and certainly not that there is only one proper form of it (that associated with the rationality of the [unmarked] human).

16. Quoted in Margulis and Sagan, *What Is Life?*, 219.

17. Hall, *Plants as Persons*; Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum"; Trewavas, "Plant Intelligence"; Trewavas, "Aspects of Plant Intelligence"; Marder, *Plant-Thinking*.

18. Val Plumwood explores similarly expansive, more-than-human forms of intelligence and sentience in "Nature in the Active Voice."

19. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 177.

20. Cheney and Weston, "Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette," 126.

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world is lively and responsive. Ecological animism is not a doctrine or orthodoxy but, rather, an opening into a mode of encounter.

Lava

The Hawaiian island chain is a place of immense biological diversity. Spending time in the forest or the surrounding seas, one can easily be overwhelmed by the sheer abundance, energy, and vitality of life. But out on the lava fields, surrounded by black as far as the eye can see, other kinds of life, other patterns of coming into and out of the world, are also taking place. They may be harder to see at first glance, but the lava fields of Hawai'i are equally places to celebrate living processes.

The vibrancy of these places starts with the island-forming potential of the lava itself. For many Hawaiian people this is the work of Pele, who both creates and destroys. Pouring out of fissures deep beneath the ocean's surface, lava cools and accumulates over millions of years to build islands that eventually rise above the surface of the water. The youngest member of this island chain, the Island of Hawai'i, is now roughly two million years old. Moving northwest along the chain, we pass through progressively older islands. Geologic processes over immense periods of time birthed these islands from deep within the fertile Earth. This is a different kind of fertility, a geologic fertility—sterile in biological terms but lively and generative in the world of rocks.

Processes of decay operate in this world, too. Traveling out beyond the islands in the main Hawaiian chain, we encounter islands that are just clinging to life and some that are gone altogether with only faint traces to mark their former presence. As these islands move away from the hot spot that birthed them—as a result of shifting tectonic plates—processes of erosion by wind and wave gradually return them to the sea. Far out in the chain, Midway Atoll is now nothing more than an accumulation of sand around coral reefs that once encircled a volcanic island long since disappeared. Here, the biotic holds the geologic, its form and its memory. Different processes of living and dying, of coming together and dissipating, are working themselves out at temporal and spatial scales that vary across diverse geologic, evolutionary, and organismal processes: the life cycles of island chains and that of fleeting coral polyps in intimate entanglement.

But coral and the many creatures—such as monk seals—that form marine communities around it are just some of the biota made possible by these lively rocks. As lava cools it becomes a clean slate in which new possibilities might take root. The lichen are usually the first to take up this offer (fig. 2). Circulating in immense quantities in Earth's atmosphere, most of their spores will never germinate—the numbers are against them. But every now and again, "a spore settles onto a patch of bare rock of the right age and texture and with enough moisture and sunlight that it germinates and, if it is lucky enough to find its symbiotic partner, grows."[21] This symbiotic partner is an alga or cyanobacterium that provides photosynthetic capabilities to a fungus. All lichen are cross-kingdom collaborations of this kind.

21. Flaspohler, "Delicate Web of Life."

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Figure 2. Fern and lichen on lava in Kipahoehoe Natural Area Reserve. Photograph by brewbooks

Over time, lichen growth and death produce the biological material that, in combination with the elemental weathering of rock, produces soil. Plants like *o'hia* (*Metrosideros polymorpha*), expertly adapted to these environments, find cracks in the lava where moisture and nutrients can accumulate and a seed can germinate. As they grow, they contribute to the slow production of soil as their roots further help to break up the rock while their vegetation adds new organic material.

Eventually, bare rock becomes a flourishing and diverse forest full of the incredible variety of lichen, plants, birds, and others that is now found in this island chain. But this is only one life story, or set of stories. From another perspective this is a story about the vibrancy of rock, as successive forests come and go beneath fresh waves of hot lava. But also it is perhaps a story about water, a story that moves from ocean to ocean as islands come and go. Above all, therefore, this is a story of entanglements, of the lively biotic, geologic, atmospheric, and oceanic processes that are our changing planet.

Liveliness

Working from the foundation that our world is constituted out of countless interwoven ēthea, the question becomes, how might we practice and embody this mode of responsive encounter in our own work? Ethnographers try to capture humans' distinct ways of

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being and becoming, writing them up as ethnographies. Might our encounters in the larger-than-human world be brought into written form as ethographies in a way that would give others vitality, presence, perhaps "thickness" on the page and in the minds and lives of readers? This is an approach that might start with Geertz's understanding of man [*sic*] as "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun"[22] but that would quickly insist that humans are not the only beings suspended in such a way and that no one—no group or species—ever spins alone.[23]

The intention here is not to slip into the hubris of claiming to tell another's stories but, rather, to develop and tell our own stories in ways that are open to other ways of constituting, of responding to and in a living world. In this context, stories are powerful tools for "connectivity thinking."[24] Unlike many other modes of giving an account, a story can allow multiple meanings to travel alongside one another; it can hold open possibilities and interpretations and can refuse the kind of closure that prevents others from speaking or becoming.[25] Of course, not all stories do this in practice. Good ethographic accounts refuse to become the kinds of stories that shut out, or normalize, all others—rendering invisible the conditions of their own telling.[26] They are active sites for the ongoing weaving or braiding of stories, efforts to inhabit multiply storied worlds in a spirit of openness and accountability to otherness.

Telling these kinds of stories is an inherently multidisciplinary task, one that draws us into conversation with a host of different ways of making sense of others' worlds. In Anna Tsing's terms, it is about "passionate immersion in the lives of nonhumans."[27] Our particular approach draws heavily on a subsection of the natural sciences

22. Geertz, "Thick Description," 5.

23. We understand these ethographies as part of the broader field of multispecies studies that this special issue explores, populated by a range of related but distinct approaches, including multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich, "Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography"), etho-ethnology (Lestel, Brunois, and Gaunet, "Etho-ethnology and Ethno-ethology"), anthropology of life (Kohn, *How Forests Think*), anthropology beyond humanity (Ingold, "Anthropology beyond Humanity"), extinction studies (Rose and van Dooren, "Unloved Others"; Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, *Extinction Studies*), philosophical ethology (Buchanan, Bussolini, and Chrulew, "General Introduction"), and more-than-human geographies (Lorimer and Driessen, "Wild Experiments at the Oostvaardersplassen"; Whatmore, "Introduction"). For a fuller discussion of this general space, see the contribution by van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster in this issue. The particular approach outlined in this article has much in common with these other approaches, placing particular emphasis on responsiveness, both in the sense of attentiveness to diverse forms of lively activity and ways of life and as an ethical imperative, a response-ability (discussed further below).

24. Weir, *Murray River Country*; Muecke, *No Road*.

25. Smith, "Hermenuetics and the Culture of Birds." For a discussion of the way in which nonhumans might write their own stories in/on the landscape as well as in humans and our stories, see Benson, "Animal Writes."

26. On stories that normalize all others see Haraway, "SF."

27. Tsing, "Arts of Inclusion," 29. Our particular approach takes inspiration from James Hatley's work on narrative and testimony in the face of the Shoah (see Hatley, *Suffering Witness*). Hatley forcefully reminds us of the ethical demands of the act of writing, of telling stories. In place of an approach that would reduce others to mere names or numbers, in place of an approach that aims for an impartial or objective recitation of the "facts,"

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within the fields of biology, ecology, and ethology (animal behavior) but also geology, chemistry, and more. In telling stories informed by these literatures, ethographies invite readers into a sense of curiosity about the intimate particularities of others' ways of life: how they hunt or reproduce, how they relate to and make sense of (or story)[28] their particular place, how they entice pollinators or throw their spores to the wind.

Beyond the natural sciences, ethographies also make use of the detailed observations and understandings of other peoples who, for a diverse range of reasons, make it their business to understand other forms of life: from the knowledge of hunters and farmers, artists, indigenous peoples, animal trainers, wildlife carers, "cat yoga" practitioners,[29] and many others. In each of these cases, as with the insights of the natural sciences, knowledges must be evaluated for what they teach us as well as, with a critical eye, for the particular political and technical architectures of framing within which they are produced. In short, it matters which stories we use to tell and think other stories with.[30]

While an ethography tends to start with, to be provoked by, other-than-human ways of life, the openness of these accounts inevitably draws humans into the frame. To this end, more conventional ethnographic methods are an indispensable component of an ethography. What does the disappearance of flying foxes mean to *this* community of Aboriginal people in Australia for whom the species is kin? How is the absence of vultures in India experienced by the Parsee community that has traditionally relied on these birds to consume their dead?[31] In this way, ethographic work is attentive to other people's ways of life and understanding (including other animisms), to the biocultural complexity of the worlds that we craft with others. In exploring these and other sites of entanglement, ethographies offer important insights into the many different, and consequential, ways in which, as Tsing succinctly puts it, "human nature is an interspecies relationship."[32]

With relationality and openness in mind, ethographies are always about more than a singular ethos in isolation: these are multispecies stories in which entangled

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Hatley argues for a mode of witnessing that is from the outset already seized, already claimed, by an obligation to those whose story we are attempting to tell. In the context of ecocide and many other forms of mass death, this mode of storytelling is particularly important. Along with the work of remaining true to the facts of the situation, witnessing insists on truths that are not reducible to populations and data, a fleshier, livelier truth that in its telling might draw others into a sense of accountability and care.

28. van Dooren and Rose, "Storied-Places in a Multispecies City."

29. For discussions of cat yoga and other fascinating etho-ethnographic encounters with felines, see the work of Jeffrey Bussolini and Ananya Mukherjea at the Center for Feline Studies/Avenue B Multi-Studies Center, City University of New York.

30. Haraway has made this point in conversation with Marilyn Strathern's work on the ideas we think other ideas with. See Haraway, "SF"; and Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*, 10.

31. We have explored these issues in Rose, "Flying Fox"; and van Dooren, "Vultures and Their People in India."

32. Tsing, "Unruly Edges," 144.

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becoming across all of the kingdoms of life is an unavoidable reality. In addition, many entities usually considered to be nonliving are key parts of an ethographic account. The volcanic rock that forms the Hawaiian island chain offers a sense of what is at stake here. This lively rock prompts us to ask questions differently. It draws our attention toward what Kathryn Yusoff has called the "minerality" of the biologic;[33] it undoes any sense of a firm border between the living and the nonliving and throws into question certainty about what this distinction might even mean. And so it is clear that the nonbiotic will always be part of an ethographic account, but we remain deliberately open—prepared to be invited and to respond—to the possibility that the liveliness of such beings might itself become the central focus (insofar as there is one) of an ethographic account. For us, the key issue for ethography is that of taking others seriously in their otherness—whether cultural, biological, geologic, chemical, or something else entirely—and consequently learning to ask and to see how we might be called to respond.[34]

Crows

Tucked away in aviaries on the south side of Kilauea, on the Island of Hawai'i, are some of the rarest birds on earth. Among a range of smaller honeycreepers are some of the only remaining *'alalā*, or Hawaiian crows (*Corvus hawaiiensis*), a species that has been extinct in the wild for more than a decade now (fig. 3). These are big, beautiful birds, and their absence has not gone unnoticed. With so many of Hawai'i's forest birds having already been lost in the last few centuries, it seems that the 'alalā may have been the last remaining seed disperser for at least three plant species: *ho'awa*, *halapepe*, and the *loulu* palms. Beyond simply moving seeds—itself important for plant survival—it seems that some of these seeds germinate better or, in the case of ho'awa, will only germinate if the outer fruit has been removed (something that 'alalā once routinely did).[35] And so it is not surprising that these three plants are in decline: halapepe and the loulu palms are themselves rare or endangered, and most of the ho'awa trees encountered in the forest today are older with a "general lack of seedlings or saplings in the wild."[36] A long and intimate history of coevolution that binds avian and botanical lives is unraveling here, a shared past creating specific and shared vulnerabilities in which coevolution can potentially switch over into coextinction.

In addition to these plants, many local people have also been drawn into the absence of 'alalā. For some (native) Hawaiians, 'alalā is part of the cultural landscape: these birds hold stories and associations in the world. They are an *'aumakua* or ancestral deity for some; and the plants and forests that might disappear or change

33. Yusoff, "Geologic Life."

34. There is a growing body of work on lively materiality beyond the biotic, some of which is likely compatible with this ethographic approach. Also see contributions by Reinert and by van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, this issue.

35. Culliney et al., "Seed Dispersal by a Captive Corvid."

36. Culliney, "Seed Dispersal by the Critically Endangered Alala," 21.

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Figure 3. A Hawaiian crow in captivity at the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center. Photograph by Thom van Dooren.

significantly without their seed dispersal are themselves also culturally significant in various ways. Many other locals are also drawn into this experience of loss, trying in their own ways to reckon with the affective burden of living in a place where crows are no longer present, a place in which (paraphrasing one biologist) we have lost the most intelligent and charismatic component of our forests.[37]

But ʻalalā have themselves also been altered by more than a decade of captivity. There are now suggestions that their once remarkable vocal repertoire—their raucous calls and mournful songs—is diminishing. Perhaps this is because they have less to talk about, or perhaps juvenile birds simply have not been exposed to enough chatter from their elders.[38] Similarly, know-how about predators and how to avoid them may not be passed between generations in captivity, potentially impacting their future survival when they are eventually released.

And yet release itself is also a complex prospect. Getting the birds ready is one part of the story, but the forest and the surrounding communities into which they might return are also vitally important. Plans by conservationists to fence a section of a local

37. Jeff Burgett (US Fish and Wildlife Service), interview by van Dooren, Hilo, Hawaiʻi, December 19, 2011.

38. For further information, see "Hawaiian Crow," www.animal-acoustics.com/current-research-phd/hawaiian-crow (accessed August 21, 2013).

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forest reserve to allow the vegetation to recover as a future release site have been greeted with hostility by some. Fencing itself raises concerns around limited access (concerns that for many Hawaiians are explicitly tied to a long history of occupation and dispossession), as does the proposed removal of pigs and other ungulates that some people hunt.[39]

There are no simple answers here. Crows, plants, pigs, and diverse local people are all bound together in an unfolding story of coevolution, colonization, conservation, and more. Each of these living beings has an ethos; each has a way of life that has emerged and endured in entangled company with others. In a time of ongoing colonization and extinction, these stories call us into response but never in a singular or final way.

Response: Becoming-Witness

It is clear, then, that ethographies do not aim to impartially produce "objective" accounts of the world (whatever these might be). Instead, this approach is grounded in the conviction that making others fleshy and thick on the page, exposing readers to their lives and deaths, may give rise to proximity and ethical entanglement, care and concern. At the core of this notion of storytelling as an ethical practice is the understanding that the stories we tell are powerful contributors to the becoming of our shared world. Explicitly rejecting a simple division between the real and the narrated,[40] we see storytelling as a dynamic act of "storying." As Haraway notes, "'World' is a verb," and so stories are "*of* the world, not *in* the world. Worlds are not containers, they're patternings, risky co-makings, speculative fabulations."[41] Telling stories has consequences, one of which is that we will inevitably be drawn into new connections and, with them, new accountabilities and obligations. In short, these are *lively* ethographies in both message and form—in their commitment to the openness and continuity of diverse ways of life and in their attempt to enact stories as world-making, life-shaping technologies.

Ethographic storytelling is about the arts of becoming-witness, which include both attention to others and expression of that experience: to stand *as* witness and actively to *bear* witness. As we are seized, so we bear witness in order that others may be seized, telling stories that draw audiences into others' lives in new and consequential ways, stories that cultivate the capacity for *response*.

This focus on response enables a more interesting approach to questions of ethics in multispecies worlds.[42] In exploring *response-ability*—the capacity to respond—we move beyond simplistic framings of responsibility as a question of human agency in a passive and inert world. All living creatures, and others too, respond to the world around them. What it means for each being, in each case, to respond is quite different. It is, however, through these responses that worlds are constituted. We are all accountable for—implicated and at stake in—the worlds that our actions bring into being.

39. van Dooren, "Living with Crows in Hawai'i."

40. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 12.

41. Haraway, "Jeux de ficelles." Quote here taken from an earlier English-language draft of this essay.

42. Haraway, "Awash in Urine."

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Here, the line between response and reaction is not an abyssal divide[43] but a site for the ongoing questioning of the various modes of being with others that are open to different forms of life at different times. Similarly, "the human" does not mark the sole site of responsibility in any straightforward way that again separates us from them. To begin with, we must recognize that our responses to others are grounded in our own particular ēthea. These responses arise from long processes of evolution and the development of emotional and cognitive competencies, many of which are shared with a range of other species. Beyond basic biology, all people, and other creatures too, respond in their own particular ways to given worlds as a result of their own life histories, personal developmental dynamics, and the diverse forms of knowledge and truth that they have inherited and been disciplined into. In short, response is always an achievement, the outcome of a complex process that combines a range of elements that are often glossed as biology, learning, culture, and more.[44]

As such, there is no singular "responsible" course of action; there is only the constantly shifting capacity to respond to another. What counts as good, perhaps ethical, response is always context specific and relational. It is always being rearticulated, reimagined, and made possible in new ways, *inside* ongoing processes of call and response and the worlds that they produce. Here, responsibility is about developing the openness and the sensitivities necessary to be curious, to understand and respond in ways that are never perfect, never innocent, never final, and yet always required. Stories are opportunities to test and explore different modes of responsiveness, to "learn to be affected"[45] in new ways, to cultivate the intellectual, emotional, and critical capacities necessary to recognize our own implication in the world, the consequences of our actions, and possibilities for other kinds of futures.[46]

More than this, though, ethographic storytelling is about responding to others as we encounter them *in the richness of their own stories*. While this response is often grounded in immediacy, more demanding forms of responsibility require a curious attentiveness to another that exceeds the given moment so that we might better understand the other in order to make an appropriate response. As Haraway notes, "Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning."[47] This form of response takes an interest in what matters to another rather than reading one's own positioning onto them.[48] From this perspective, responsibility is inseparable from a consideration of ēthea: it

43. Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded?"

44. This situation reminds us that ēthea cannot be neatly mapped onto biological species or any other fixed taxonomy. There are many ways of making cuts within and between what counts as a "way of life." For further discussion, see Rose and van Dooren, "Encountering a More-than-Human World."

45. Despret, "Body We Care For," 131.

46. This project is very much in line with Tsing's call for the cultivation of "arts of noticing" in "Arts of Inclusion" and van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster's discussion of the "arts of attentiveness" in this issue.

47. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

48. Rose, "Recursive Epistemologies"; Rose, "Taking Notice."

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demands an attentiveness to the ways in which others make and live their worlds; it demands ethography.

But, as we have seen, to witness is also to participate in the world in its relational becoming. In this context, our curiosity about and for others must be definitively expansive, perhaps even explosive. Can our awakening response draw us into this particular story and on into encounters with the many others who are bound up in relationships of nourishment, care, meaning making, and more within a broader "ecology of selves"?[49] Responsibility and ethography are delicately and recursively entangled here. Responsibility requires attention to ethographic context, to others' forms of worldly responsiveness, while ethography draws us into new relations and forms of response-ability. In other words, good storytelling is generative—we don't know quite where it will take us.

Much of our own work has brought us into situations where some fateful combination of ignorance, negligence, selfishness, and deeply conflicting values is spelling disaster for individuals and species. Our arts of witness involve turning toward rather than away. The turning toward is a material and semiotic kinesis that seeks engagement with the world of life. Confronting atrocity, we are acutely aware of the prevalent slippage between explanation and justification; our approach refuses to reduce death work to a rational calculation. We are in the most difficult place of witness, where to say nothing is abhorrent and to say anything is already to risk reductions. And yet we "stay with the trouble"[50] because the trouble has seized us, and we cannot turn our backs. An ethics of refusal grounds this work: it is the refusal, following Emmanuel Levinas, to abandon others.[51] Put in the positive, it embraces the ethical call others make upon us in the *meaningfulness* of their lives and deaths.

Storytelling is one of the great arts of witness, and in these difficult times telling lively stories is a deeply committed project, one of engaging with the multitudes of others in their noisy, fleshy living and dying. It is the aim of lively ethographies to seize our relational imagination. It is an engagement with the joys, passions, desires, and commitments of Earth others, celebrating their ēthea in all their extravagant diversity.

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49. Kohn, *How Forests Think*.
50. Haraway, "SF."
51. Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 83.

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