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Thom van Dooren

Making Worlds with Crows: Philosophy in the Field

Ubiquitous in their global presence, crows (genus *Corvus*) can be found almost everywhere that people are. From abundant urban species finding new ways to exploit dense and changing cities like Tokyo, to critically endangered island crows just hanging on in the forests of Rota, some of these crows are cared for and conserved by dedicated people while others are the targets of eradication programs. Across the globe, crows draw our attention to a range of instructive sites for exploring the challenges and the possibilities of living well in a more-than-human world. My current research takes these charismatic birds as guides into the complexity of our current period, exploring shifting human/crow relations in six case-study sites within the context of escalating processes of globalization, urbanization, extinction, and climate change. In each case I am thinking about human/crow relations through the lens of specific keywords, most of them concepts with long histories in Western philosophical and scientific thought. From community to hospitality, from inheritance to recognition. But rather than going into depth about any of these crows or these key terms, this short paper is an effort to flesh out the general approach that I am working with here. Specifically, to outline what I take to be the core of a kind of “field philosophy.”

This approach is situated within the broad, emerging field of “Multispecies Studies.” Under this general umbrella we find work in areas like multispecies ethnography, ethnography, anthropology of life, anthropology beyond humanity, more-than-human geographies, as well as in extinction studies. Despite their differences, all of these approaches are united by a common interest in better understanding what is at stake—ethically, politically, epistemologically—for different forms of life caught up in diverse relationships of knowing and living together. At their core, each is grounded in what Anna Tsing has referred to as “passionate immersion in the lives of nonhumans.”¹ Drawing, often critically, on the resources of the natural sciences, but also on a range of other knowledges—from artists, hunters, indigenous peoples, and more—this work pays close attention to the “ways of life” of nonhuman others and their consequential entanglements with larger worlds, from the laboratory to the city, the farm to the protected area.

1 Anna Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom,” *Australian Humanities Review* 50 (2011): 5–22, quote on page 9.

Scholars in this area are developing many new approaches to this kind of “immersive” knowledge. Beyond engaging with relevant academic literatures, beyond conventional ethnographic methods and collaborations with local communities, scholars are finding new ways to practice an attentiveness to, to spend time in, and ultimately to learn about, the “other worlds”² that are nonhumans: from experimental art practices, to attentive vermicomposting and collaborations with natural scientists.³

I am a philosopher by training and so, in a way that is perhaps only possible for a philosopher, I am still thoroughly excited by the novelty of getting out into this place we call “the field” and talking to people, participating, observing—what our less armchair-bound colleagues call “ethnographic research.” In conducting this kind of research, I am particularly interested in what the field *does* to our philosophy. I have borrowed the term “field philosophy” from the independent work of both Dominique Lestel and Robert Frodeman, drawing on their accounts of what this kind of philosophy might be, but ultimately taking the term in my own direction.⁴ At its core I understand field philosophy as an effort to interrogate the structures of meaning, valuing, and knowing that shape our worlds—often in unacknowledged but profoundly consequential ways: What do particular ways of understanding and inhabiting *do*, how do they help to enact, to *make* worlds? In taking up this broad topic we might, somewhat crudely, consider three key questions about our modes of philosophical inquiry: *how* we know, *what* we know, and *why* we know.

I’d like to say a little more about each of these questions in turn, interspersed, of course, with some illustrative encounters with crows. My aim, in doing so, is not simply to describe various forms of human/crow encounter and relationship. These examples, and this project as a whole, are woven through with questions of care. I explore these sites of interaction for the various possibilities for *responsible cohabitation* that might be, and in many cases are already being, opened up. Ways of knowing and relating help to make and remake worlds. The challenge is to do so responsibly, to do so

2 Barbara Noske, *Humans and Other Animals: Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology* (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

3 For a fuller discussion of multispecies studies and these various immersive knowledge-making practices, see Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016), 1–23.

4 Robert Frodeman, Adam Briggles, and J. Britt Holbrook, “Philosophy in the Age of Neoliberalism,” *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 26, no. 3–4 (2012): 311–30.



Figure 1:
Carrion crows
(*Corvus corone*) at
dawn in Munich,
Germany. Photo-
graph by author.

with *care*—mindful of the fact that caring is itself always a partial and compromised practice.⁵ As Dimitris Papadopoulos notes, making is not about autonomous production; “We make as we coexist in ecological spaces.”⁶

I was drawn to Hawaiian forests by their disappeared and disappearing crows. Extinct in the wild, the Hawaiian Crow (Corvus hawaiiensis)—known locally as ‘alalā—can now only be found in two small captive breeding facilities. Today, a handful of birds taken into captivity in the late 1990s and early 2000s has been successfully bred to produce

5 I have written about violent-care and other forms of compromised care elsewhere. See, for example, Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, Critical Perspectives on Animals: Theory, Culture, Science, and Law (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Thom van Dooren’s entry Care, in “The Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014), 291–94.

6 For a fascinating discussion of “making,” see Dimitris Papadopoulos, “Generation M. Matter, Makers, Microbiomes: Compost for Gaia,” *Teknokultura* 11, no. 3 (2014): 637–45. “Making starts from what is there. Intensive recycling. Immediate caring. Generation M lives in a terraformed earth: climate change, toxic environments, the 6th extinction, soil degradation, energy crises, increasing enclosures of the naturecultural commons. It encounters these harmful life thresholds with response-ability for the limits of productionism. Production does not characterise generation M’s mode of life—co-existence does.” Quote on page 639.

over one hundred ‘alalā, and conservationists are ready to start releasing them back into the wider world. But they are facing an uphill battle in the effort to find suitable forests. “Restoring” habitat to a condition suitable for these birds will require fencing and the eradication of pigs and other ungulates within large areas of land. However, some local people, including some native Hawaiians, want to be able to continue hunting these animals. As a result, this conservation project—like many others in the islands—has become deeply divisive. Some Hawaiians oppose it; others support it and see it as part of maintaining the diversity of living beings at the heart of their culture. Long and ongoing histories of colonization come to matter here in the working out of the future of this crow.⁷

Rethinking *how* we know is, quite simply, about expanding and enhancing our approaches to knowing others and their worlds. This involves engaging with a wider range of literatures, perhaps especially the natural sciences, but also getting out into the field: observing, spending time with crows in captive facilities, talking to everyone from conservationists and hunters to artists and activists. In this way we might come to understand and appreciate this disappearing way of life in new ways: what it means to the forest, to the plants whose seeds these crows once dispersed; what it means to people now coming to terms with a world in which, as one local put it, “we have lost the most charismatic component of our forests.” But also, what efforts to conserve this species might mean for various living beings, how conservation might challenge and even upset possibilities for life.

Through this work I’ve discovered that getting out into the field in this way is not just about drawing on new empirical resources, new data points; it is also about the learning of a kind of humility, about the impossibility of an understanding that is not “situated,”⁸ grounded in the specificity of actual placetimes. This is a good lesson for many philosophers to learn. In places like Hawai‘i, grappling with diverse understandings, values, ways of being and of knowing—in short *multiplying* perspectives—radically changes *how* we philosophize, how we are able to imagine, and dare to propose

7 I have explored the conservation of the ‘alalā in a range of articles and chapters. The most detailed discussion of these specific dynamics is in Thom van Dooren, “Spectral Crows in Hawai‘i: Conservation and the Work of Inheritance,” in *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*, ed. Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

8 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” chap. 9 in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

what might be possible. As a person who is, at heart, an ethicist, this approach to philosophy is reworking what I do. This is about the difference between an “applied ethics” that is formalized and prepackaged in the armchair for later use, and a genuinely “emergent ethics” that grapples with the specificity and complexity of the lived world. This is an ethics that refuses the calculable, refuses to produce a fixed set of rules, but rather aims to hold permanently open the question of “the good,” to ask, again and again, how we might respond *well*.⁹

In 2014 I was drawn to the coastal town of Hoek van Holland by a desire to understand the Dutch government’s recent decision to begin killing a small population of roughly 40 house crows (Corvus splendens) that had been living in the area for about 20 years, since their parents arrived, likely as stowaways on board a cargo ship. Arriving in the area my planned research was immediately hijacked by the site, by its specific contours. Directly across the water from town, right in my face, was the Port of Rotterdam, Europe’s largest port. This place is both the center of a massive transportation network and home to a broad range of chemical factories and refineries taking advantage of the easy access to global markets. In short, it is an engine of the “Anthropocene”—the proposed name for a new geological epoch in which “humanity” is taking on an increasingly significant role in the shaping of Earthly futures.

And so, I realized that coming to terms with this little group of crows required me to think through this port, as the vector of their arrival and the sometimes catastrophic movement of many other “introduced” species around the world, but also as a key site of contrast to explore the incredible inconsistency in the way in which some “environmental problems” (like crows) are actively and lethally managed while others (like the Port itself) are instead celebrated as paths to a better, more “developed,” future.¹⁰

9 Of course there are great existing theoretical resources for this kind of approach. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 96–119; Donna Haraway, “Sharing Suffering: Instrumental Relations Between Laboratory Animals and Their People,” chap. 3 in *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

10 This work has been published in Thom van Dooren, “The Unwelcome Crows: Hospitality in the Anthropocene,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 21, no. 2 (2016), 193–212.

This site is, for me, an example of the way in which the field might reform *what* we know. This is about the kinds of questions that we ask; who determines the scope of an inquiry, who decides what is important? In getting out into the world and thinking with others—not just drawing on their opinions as “data” but collaboratively engaging—a field-based philosophy also ends up being steered in its focus by the concerns and questions of others: What do they struggle with, what matters to them? This can happen in all manner of ways as local people respond to changing environments in their own, usually diverse, ways. But, of course, the “others” that are relevant here are not just humans: they might be crows or any number of other species. Or, as in this case, it might be the place itself which seemingly calls out, reframing the focus of the study. The Port of Rotterdam surprised me; it intervened to pose new questions. As a result, doing philosophy from the field requires a kind of *responsiveness* that can redo *what* we thought we wanted or needed to know, something that good ethnographers have always known.

In the city of Brisbane, Australia, the local Torresian crows (Corvus orru) have taken to living in larger numbers than they do anywhere else. One of the results has been complaints from local people about large roosts that are noisy in the morning, but also about the daily, often messy, activities of crows. As part of my effort to understand this situation I am collaborating with a biologist who has been studying the crows and other urban wildlife in the area for many years. We're bringing ethnographic work into dialogue with behavioral biology and field ecology to think about better approaches to urban cohabitation. At the same time, though, we're keen to engage local residents in a “citizen humanities” project that encourages people to become urban field naturalists, paying attention to crows, learning about why these birds do what they do, and sharing their insights online.¹¹ We're interested in whether knowing more might, in this case, make cohabitation easier, or at the very least more interesting for both parties.¹²

11 For an interesting discussion of “citizen humanities” as a tool for the environmental humanities see Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén, “Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene,” *Ethics & the Environment* 20, no. 1 (2015): 67–97.

12 Fieldwork for this project has begun but the “citizen humanities” component is still only in the planning stages.



Figure 2:
A Torresian crow
(*Corvus orru*) in
Brisbane, Australia.
Photograph by
author.

This example brings us to the *why* of knowing; what is the purpose of our research? Do our modes of knowing make a difference, what kind of difference, and for whom? My own work, much of it a collaboration with Deborah Bird Rose, has thought about this issue through the lens of a lively “storying.”¹³ We understand story here as a verb: a way of *doing* the world. We are interested in telling stories that draw others, including ourselves, into new forms of curiosity and understanding, new relationships and so new accountabilities. Our storytelling is an inherently ethical project: not just because it explores questions of responsibility, but because it takes up the work of telling stories as an act of response, an effort to craft better worlds with others.

With this in mind, a philosophical approach grounded in the field seems to also require modes of communication, of storytelling, that are—at the very least—widely *accessible* and *engaging* both within and beyond the academy. This is about how we write, but also where we publish: from newspapers and blogs, to the role of open access publishing. Beyond writing and questions of accessibility, this might also be

13 See, for example, Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, “Lively Ethnography: Storying Animist Worlds,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016), 77–94; Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren, “Encountering a More-than-Human World: Ethos and the Arts of Witness,” in *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Ursula Heise, Jon Cristensen, and Michelle Niemann (London: Routledge, 2016).

about genuinely *collaborative* storytelling approaches in multiple media, something that I am just beginning to explore in my work through community anthologies, radio documentaries, and the aforementioned citizen humanities project. All of these projects might be understood as part of a broader, emergent, “public environmental humanities.” In this context too, the field has the potential to question and reshape our philosophical practices.

I don’t think that every piece of scholarly work that each of us develops needs to tick all of these boxes or push the envelope in each of the broad areas that I’ve sketched above as the how, what, and why of knowing. As a broad space of inquiry, however, these are some of the questions—perhaps the *demands*—that doing philosophy in the field opens us to. Each of these core dimensions of field philosophy is compatible with much of the work going on in multispecies studies, but might also push some of that work in interesting new directions. In short then, multispecies studies as field philosophy is about paying attention to the ways in which we are always already making worlds with others, and asking how we might do so with care.