

Book Review

cultural geographies

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The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds. By Thom van Dooren. New York: Colombia University Press. 2019. 272 pp. \$35/£30 hardback. ISBN: 9780231182829.

The Wake of Crows writes ecological relations through the thickness and specificity of situated, ongoing encounters. For the geographer, van Dooren offers much for those looking to examine and conceptualise the situated involvement of humans and nonhumans, and the ethical questions they raise. This is also a book that fulsomely advocates the value of fieldwork – done collaboratively with a whole range of traditionally excluded others – as a means of crafting a careful, empirically rich site-attentiveness of the kind resurgent within recent disciplinary writing around place and landscape.

The book offers five accounts of human encounters with crows, characterised as birds that force us to reckon with the lively agency and capacity for response in the nonhuman other. The substantial chapters consider, in turn: the (sub-)urban Torresian crows of Brisbane; the captive breeding of native crows (‘alālā) on Hawaii’s Big Island; the unwelcome presence of stowaway House crows in Hoek van Holland, the Netherlands; ravens predating rare tortoises in the Mojave desert; and, lastly, the fraught future of humans and Mariana Crows (Aga) on the Pacific island of Rota. Each serves to meditate on one of five key concepts – community, inheritance, hospitality, recognition and hope – offered by van Dooren to differently articulate the promise of his multispecies ethic. Inviting the reader into the complex wake of human–crow entanglements, van Dooren engages the trailing threads of their lived historical geographies, the books frames ethics as a practical matter of paying critical, curious attention to the world-making activities, capacities and responses of other beings.

These stories of humans and crows are crosscut by familiar geographical themes: globalisation, urbanisation, conservation, (de-)colonisation and the questioning of dwelling amidst profound ecological upheaval. In Hawaii, proposals for reintroducing captive-bred crows involve efforts to reckon with and build upon historic relationships between islanders, crows and land that are scarred by colonisation. The work of conservation biologists in the Mojave, becomes a question of recognising and negotiation with corvid subjectivity to try to find a way of accommodating both tortoises and their raven predators without recourse to strategies of simply killing birds. In the Netherlands, the eradication of House Crows arriving aboard cargo ships offers an entry point for thinking about the Port of Rotterdam as an ‘engine’ (p. 113) of ecological transformation in the Anthropocene.

Across such accounts, van Dooren avoids abstracting either the figure of the crow, or the question of responding to environmental change. Such narratives are necessarily specific: exploring ‘what it means to craft flourishing worlds *here*, in this place and time’ (p. 10). And yet, by virtue of a shared concern with corvid life, each chapter seeps into and enlivens others. In this

spirit, the work is punctuated by short vignettes elaborating particular corvid behaviours – including stealing, cooperating and gifting – which both thicken the figure of the ‘crow’, while emphasising the difference that abounds within and between such creatures. While the nature and expression of corvid agency remains open to debate, uncertainty need not necessitate taking epistemological shelter amidst mechanical representations of the nonhuman. As van Dooren argues, uncertainty can be an invitation to speculate on the possibility that corvids are *more interesting* than we currently appreciate.

Ultimately, *The Wake of Crows* is about asking a key question of contemporary multispecies ecologies: ‘what else is possible?’ (p. 162). This question encapsulates van Dooren’s ‘restless’ ethical praxis, in which ‘the good must be carefully crafted, in the multiple, again and again’ (p. 13). The intention is not to resolve disputes but instead advocate for ongoing, situated and careful attention to human–animal relations as they occur, and with an eye to the alternative, more liveable arrangements that might be nurtured. And yet, such a focus does not ignore that, in each empirical situation, decisions must be made soon if lives (and worlds) are to continue or be (re) made. A profound tension – between the desire not to advocate a way forward in each case to instead abound in its complexity; and the urgency of the situation facing crows (and others) – haunts the book. Yet, it is clear that the fraught work of making provisional, liveable worlds cannot proceed without the kind of attentiveness practiced by van Dooren here. A range of possible worlds begin to take shape precisely *because* of the stories he tells. Here, geographers and others might take on the task of exploring how such acts of worlding can (and do) occur in the wake of other human–nonhuman relationships.

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