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## Ethical complexities and interdisciplinary pathways for animal studies

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**Book Review: Thom van Dooren (2019) *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds*. New York: Columbia University Press.**

With its painstaking attention to the lives of birds struggling at the ‘dull edge of extinction’ (2014: 11), Thom van Dooren’s *Flight Ways* (2014) played an important role in the emergence of the academic field of extinction studies. Throughout, van Dooren drew together an array of interdisciplinary resources to enact an ‘ethics of storytelling’ (2014: 9). Each chapter narrated the plight of a particular species of bird – from Laysan Albatrosses slowly dying after ingesting ocean-borne plastic to the mingling of care with violence in Whooping Crane conservation – in order to pose difficult questions about how to respond to the loss not just of individual birds but species-specific ways of life. Due to structural similarities between *The Wake of Crows* and *Flight Ways*, it would be easy to read van Dooren’s recent book as more of the same: which is perhaps no bad thing. Again, he traces the stories of five species of birds – this time all corvids – facing life or death situations. These stories are used to both draw attention to the plight of particular species and ask (sometimes difficult) questions about how to find less harmful ways of collectively inhabiting the world. To read *The Wake of Crows* as merely a corvid-focused extension to van Dooren’s previous work, however, does the book a disservice and fails to capture the more subtle ethical and methodological issues that are posed by the text for different strands of animal studies.

In ethical terms, like other prominent work in extinction studies and the environmental humanities, the text appears to be situated more in relation to so-called ‘mainstream’ as opposed to critical animal studies (CAS). Van Dooren’s arguments are grounded in Donna Haraway’s commitment to situated knowledges, which lend support to what he terms a ‘restless ethics’ (13) that refuses to make universalizing claims about how relationships between species should unfold.

Chapter 4’s discussion of ravens in the Mojave Desert, for instance, traces how the birds’ propensity to consume young tortoises (themselves an endangered species) has resulted in a range of measures to deter such behaviors. Recent interventions include the use of ‘techno-torts’ – 3D printed tortoise shells that spray artificial grape flavoring (a chemical disliked by ravens) when attacked – or the use of drones and lasers to unsettle the birds. Though technological deterrents might be preferable to killing crows (the approach advocated by groups with commercial interest in the region), the development of such technologies has, as van Dooren puts it, an unknown social and ‘psychic toll’ (169) for crows pushed out of their normal territories and forced to live in less hospitable desert spaces. Securing the flourishing of crows on the small Mariana island of Rota is equally complex, for very different reasons. Here, imperialist conservation policy from the US, designed to preserve crow habitat, has had disastrous socio-economic consequences for local people: many of whom have been held in a decade of limbo over land rights, in part due to nesting endangered birds. The effect of top-down conservation policy, in this context, has resulted in people removing the birds’ primary food source – almond trees – in order to discourage them from nesting and overcome this legislative bottleneck.

While these carefully rendered case studies lend weight to van Dooren’s point that ‘there is never a situation in which everyone wins’ they also underline that ‘actions must still be taken’ (9): echoing *Flight Ways*’ refrain that – in an era of mass extinction – it is often important to intervene in favour of some worlds and not others (2014: 60-1). While certainly not grounded in the normative ethical commitments of CAS, then, *The Wake of Crows* will nonetheless be of interest to those exploring how questions of action and intervention can be reconciled with work in animal studies that has emphasized the entangled

relationality of more-than-human worlds (although the path forward might still feel a bit fuzzy for those with more critical commitments).

Where I found the book most provocative, though, was its approach to thinking *across* disciplines. Interdisciplinary approaches carry well-known dangers: notably the problem of research within the humanities and social sciences cherry-picking and decontextualizing studies from particular scientific disciplines, or failing to recognize when the different knowledges being brought together clash. Despite these risks, interdisciplinary engagement with the life sciences has become increasingly central to animal studies of different stripes. *The Wake of Crows* offers an informative sense of how to engage with material gleaned from the laboratory without falling into commonplace pitfalls. Rather than just integrating the odd study from, for instance, neuroscience or zoology into the main body of chapters, ethological insights about specific corvid behaviours (experimenting, stealing, cooperating, fumigating, gifting) are given their own space as short (4-7 page) stand-alone preludes to longer chapters. Insights raised in these sections then recur as refrains throughout the main chapters themselves, where they are brought into dialogue with van Dooren's field sites and well-established concepts in cultural theory (such as hospitality, inheritance and hope). For instance, the ability of crows to cooperate with one another – as revealed by a number of cognitive studies that are discussed in the section 'cooperating' (95-102) – is followed by an expansive chapter 'Unwelcome Crows' that charts humans' inability to live alongside crows in Rotterdam. The book is thus structured in a way that enables van Dooren to carefully situate and contextualize knowledges from other fields, drawing attention to differences between modes of knowledge production rather than flattening these differences. Moving forward, then, *The Wake of Crows* holds scope to instigate much-needed discussion about how to engage in interdisciplinary work, while maintaining a sense of pluralism that ensures insights from the field don't become subjugated or inadvertently undercut by appealing to authority from the lab.