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Piers Locke

Interspecies Care in a Hybrid Institution

It seems the Anthropocene is upon us, not merely as a proposal for a geological epoch defined by the terraforming agency of human civilization, but also as a newly minted concept gaining traction throughout our cultural and intellectual industries. This seductive and productive neologism is now all around us: in museum exhibitions, in musical compositions, as a term of nihilistic dismay, and of course, as a discursive concept not just for the earth sciences, but also for the social sciences, for literary studies, history, architecture, the sonic and visual arts, and more besides. On the one hand, it seems that diagnosing our phenomenal power to reconfigure the biogeochemical systems of the planet in life-threatening ways can only serve to confirm a grand narrative of anthropogenic environmental domination and despoliation. On the other hand, it is just this moment of fateful realization that is pushing some to rethink the intellectual architecture of Western modernity implicated in bringing us to the brink of total ecological crisis. For many, the root of our problems lies in a world in which nature and its nonhuman denizens were made conceptually “other,” and consequently expedient to our whims. From a renewed engagement with this realization, fertile possibilities are emerging for undoing the tragic anthropocentrism of our global civilization, as the thoughtful reconsider the restrictive boundaries that have developed between different forms of disciplinary knowledge, how human and nonhuman lives are lived together, and how we might yet learn to live well with nonhuman others.

In the discursive age of the Anthropocene then, care for life and care of the planet can no longer be dismissed as the sentimental preoccupation of animal rights activists, Galian hippies, or other relatively marginal constituencies. Instead, such concern for care, in a sense exceeding merely managerial instrumentality, has become the legitimate concern of multispecies thinkers who are challenging the limiting analytic separations produced by the dualisms of Western thought. No longer restricting the social to the human or segregating the cultural from the natural, this cohort of researchers is concerned with life’s capacity for mutual world making, with relations between the bio and the geo, and the possibilities and responsibilities that arise from them. Anna Tsing, for instance, reminds us how the metabolic activity of microbial life made the atmosphere breathable for vertebrate life, sustained by the life processes of plants that

live on soil made by fungi digesting rocks, producing landscapes that humans modified with the use of fire, which made room for other species to flourish alongside them, opening up new possibilities for companionable living.¹ Crucially, by reminding us of multispecies world making as constitutive of life as we actually live it, variously shaped by dynamics of competition, cooperation, predation, and symbiosis, again it becomes thinkable to remove ourselves from the humanist pedestal that elevated and isolated us, and that led to such care-less relations with life and land.²

Such moves toward undoing human exceptionalism,³ and toward redoing our accounts of life as collaborative, caring ventures, inform my own concern with humans, elephants, and the lives and landscapes they make and share together.⁴ As I learned during ethnographic research with cohabiting humans and elephants in Nepal, interspecies encounters have the power to change our orientation to the world in fundamental ways. My apprenticeship as a mahout (or elephant handler), involving myself with embodied, communicative interactions with sentient nonhuman partners, was integral to this. That such an intimate experience—attending to elephants as companions—was so revelatory for me is surely indicative of the isolating state of exception I had grown up in, the product of what Giorgio Agamben has called “the anthropological machine” of Western thought.⁵ More specifically, my interspecies encounters with elephants challenged the presuppositions of an anthropological education that had delimited ethnographic research in narrowly humanist-cultural terms.

Upon embarking on a project to investigate practices of captive elephant management in the lowland Tarai of Nepal, I had conceived my task as a study of the human use of elephants in which the latter would be ancillary to the former. However, such a set of analytic priorities became untenable as I realized the importance of attending seriously to elephants as world-making partners to their mahout companions. My cultivated disposition as an anthropologist was to practice ethnography in a way that excluded nonhumans as subjective agents. However, as the intimately conjoined and

1 Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at The End of the World: On The Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 22.

2 See Dominique Lestel and Hollis Taylor, “Shared Life: An Introduction,” *Social Science Information* 52, no. 2 (2013): 183–86.

3 See Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

4 Piers Locke and Jane Buckingham, eds., *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human-Elephant Relations in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

5 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

mutually constituted life-worlds of humans and elephants became apparent, such an approach seemed both limiting and impoverished.

Therefore, I had to redo this research in terms of interspecies care. Here I must mention someone who changed my life—Sitasma, 20 years old, a young mother, part of a community dominated by females and attended by men, who welcomed me as a new companion in her life. Yes, one of the most crucial relationships of my field research was with an elephant! With Sitasma as mentor, I experienced the kinesthetic union of human and elephant bodies operating together, traversing the forested, riverine landscapes of Chitwan by day and residing in the *hattisar* (or elephant stable) by night. But this cooperation was the product of more than merely bodily coordination; it was only possible by virtue of a social relationship of amity, with all the implications of consent, communication, and understanding that such relations entail.

Conducting research by participant observation in the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center at the edge of the Chitwan National Park, I had joined a community of men and elephants. Together, as specialist units of collaborative labor, they play a key role in the apparatus of protected area management, helping to manage space dedicated to the care of nonhuman species and environments. This particular, government-run elephant stable is notable as the location of Nepal's captive breeding and training program. Free-roaming elephant populations are now too diminished to sustain wild capture, necessitating an alternative strategy for replenishing the working elephant population that helps the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) fulfill its functions managing biodiverse habitats in lowland Nepal. Thus, I found myself studying caring relations between species as institutionalized in the context of a broader endeavor of caring for lives and environments kept apart from surrounding territories of human social and economic activity. In other words, the custodial care of humans for elephants served the imperatives of environmental care enshrined in the state-sanctioned, legally regulated organizational arrangements for managing national parks.

The methodological implications of learning to study life lived with elephants were profound. I was forced to rethink the assumption of human exclusivity upon which ethnography is implicitly based, adopting instead a perspective that allows for the incorporation of nonhumans as active subjects constituting a social world made and shared with hu-

mans. Encountering a space where elephants are variously treated as animals, persons, and gods by the mahouts most immediately affected by them,⁶ it became evident that producing an account of captive elephant management that treated elephants as little more than animate objects for human appropriation and deployment would be an act of gross misrepresentation. I had become witness to a social world of interspecies engagement in which human and nonhuman lives are deeply entangled through joint activity, reciprocating relations, moral dependency, and mutually affective impact. Ethnography-as-usual would have demanded a disregard for elephant agency at the ontological starting point that distinguishes cultural humans from natural animals. Finding myself immersed in social relations traversing the species boundary, the immediacy of the field made such a starting point untenable. So it was then that, to properly understand and represent the social space of the elephant stable, its principal human and nonhuman actors, and the relations of care among them, I had to reconceive humanist ethnography as interspecies ethnography. With its focus on the subjective agency of a particular species interacting with humans, we may consider interspecies ethnography a subset of the broader field of multispecies ethnography, which can also be concerned with the network effects of multiple species, as well as with life-forms that exceed the anthropology of human-animal relations, such as plants, fungi, and microbes.⁷

Key to an interspecies ethnography that negates the isolating human exceptionalism of Western intellectual thought was the idea that the object of my inquiry was not so much the activity of particular living entities, but rather the relations produced by their dwelling together, irrespective of species designation. Here Dominique Lestel's concept of hybrid community is crucial in that it reminds us that meaning, interests, and affects can be shared by humans and animals living together,⁸ just as I found for the humans and elephants in the Chitwan stables. This was a kind of community that exceeds the minimal ecological definition, usually applied to nonhumans, of interacting individuals occupying the same space. Instead, it was of a kind rather more like the sociological idea of moral community, typically applied exclusively to humans, and involving social integration and shared obligation.

6 Piers Locke, "Animals, Persons, Gods: Negotiating Ambivalent Relationships with Captive Elephants in Chitwan, Nepal," in *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence*, ed. Piers Locke and Jane Buckingham, 159–79.

7 Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76; Piers Locke and Ursula Münster, "Multispecies Ethnography" (added November 2015), in *Oxford Bibliographies in Anthropology Online*, ed. John L. Jackson Jr., doi: 10.1093/OBO/9780199766567-0130.

8 Dominique Lestel, "Ethology and Ethnology: The Coming Synthesis, A General Introduction," *Social Science Information* 45, no. 2 (2006): 145–53, in particular see page 150.

I remember realizing that humans and elephants dwelling together produce a shared moral community when I learned that the relationship of custodial labor that bound me to Sitasma marked me as her human for the other elephants. This made me subject to a similar pattern of like and dislike expressed toward her by the other elephants, which I was able to explore by asking my mahout colleagues about their elephants' histories of shared encounter. The evidence of some inter-elephant animosities was inscribed on Sitasma's body in the form of wounds, dictating which elephants I myself should avoid. I also remember realizing the significance of interspecies loyalty as I listened to mahouts blame their human rather than their elephant colleagues in cases of human fatality involving elephants. That they could demonstrate an allegiance to their elephant colleagues that could trump that toward their human colleagues suggested their social world could only be adequately understood in not-just-human terms. Although the *hat-tisar* may be understood as a space of command and control in which elephants (and humans) are made subordinate to human purpose (in which we may consider both elephants and mahouts as subalterns), this does not preclude the possibility of a human-elephant moral community, as indicated by the cross-species dispositions and solidarities reported here. With a moral community exceeding the species boundary then, the elephant stable may be characterized as a hybrid institution of interspecies care.

Finally, though, we must address care itself. In the context of the elephant stable, interspecies care may refer to a complex variety of behaviors, dispositions, and practices enacted through multiple modes of relation that include companionship, domination, and veneration.⁹ Consequently, it is crucial to embrace an expansive understanding of care that includes affection, supervision, and responsibility, exercised through love and will. These differing modes of relation, variably emphasized according to context and contingency, seem contradictory at times. While mahouts talk about the need to love your elephant, to establish relations of trust and reciprocal care, they also talk about the need to discipline elephants, to bend them to your will. They also talk about the need to worship the divinity of a living god kept captive. Indeed, it seems the intrinsic contradictions of loving, worshipping, and controlling elephants produces an existential dilemma that is resolved by asserting multiple, coextensive forms of status whereby elephants are seen as animals, as persons, and as gods. Only by conceiving of elephants in this multiplex way can the tensions of loving and forceful care be reconciled.

9 Locke, "Animals, Persons, Gods," 159–79.

While I found that the care of captive elephants presents troubling ambivalences for their human custodians, its morality is of course politically contested, with some advocating its abolition and others advocating its improvement. Absolutists demand the end of all forms of captivity, lauding the virtues of the elephant as a thinking, feeling, social mammal, and decrying as travesty the fact that humans perpetuate what they can only consider as suffering and enslavement. The pragmatists, similarly appreciative of the capacities and qualities of elephants, tend to take a more nuanced view regarding the various forms, conditions, and purposes of captivity, even willing to concede the moral validity of this interspecies relationship. Some work to minimize suffering and improve the conditions of captivity, advocating some forms over others, while others note the welfare crises that can result from the wholesale abandonment of captive elephant employment, as with the 1989 logging ban in Thailand. Yet others point to problems afflicting the mahouting profession, and the need to reinvigorate its occupational culture, arguing that mahout welfare is integral to elephant welfare. These are complex issues to which I merely wish to allude. For me however, there is perhaps a rather more fundamental (and controversial) question of care at stake. And that question is this: Can an elephant develop a meaningful, consenting relationship of care with a human, and if it can, should we deprive life of this interspecies possibility?