



# MULTISPECIES FUTURES

New Approaches to Teaching  
Human-Animal Studies

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Neofelis

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Michaela Keck

## Of Birds and Men

### Lessons from Mark Cocker's *Crow Country*

#### **1. Introduction: New British nature writing and the animal turn**

Since the early 2000s, nature writing in Britain has been witnessing a noteworthy renaissance. Readers, critics, and scholars have favorably received writings by Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Jean Sprackland, Richard Mabey, Helen Macdonald, and Mark Cocker – to name perhaps the most prominent new British nature writers. Even though these authors by no means constitute a unified literary movement, they all share a concern for the everyday connection with local and regional environments, and their human and nonhuman inhabitants. Despite their vastly different styles and foci, they are deeply committed to critically engaging with the poetics and politics of their predecessors. On these grounds, their writings lend themselves perfectly to the study and teaching of central approaches, issues, and aims in ecocriticism as well as in human-animal studies (HAS).

When considering the more recent animal turn, Macdonald's prizewinning *H is for Hawk* (2014) immediately comes to mind. In my article, however, I want to direct my attention to Cocker's lesser-known *Crow Country: A Meditation on Birds, Landscape and Nature* from 2007. In his account of years of observing rooks in the Norfolk Broads, those members of the corvid family that are among "the most [...] ubiquitous birds in the British countryside,"<sup>1</sup> Cocker invokes regional animal life in its familiarity and vastness, which is why I consider it a particularly suitable text for exploring the key concerns

1 Mark Cocker: *Crow Country: A Meditation on Birds, Landscape and Nature*. London: Vintage 2008, p. 43.

of HAS. One reason for the scholarly neglect of *Crow Country* may be that it does not feature a traditional British flagship species, such as the hawk. Another reason may be the book's academic reception, which has placed *Crow Country* alongside other environmental non-fiction without evincing much interest in its human-animal relationships. Deborah Lilley's introduction to new British nature writers is a case in point: while she provides brief analyses of "key works"<sup>2</sup> by Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane, Helen Macdonald, Kathleen Jamie, and Paul Farley and Michael Simmons Roberts, she mentions Cocker merely in passing. Stephen E. Hunt and Joe Moran, who grant *Crow Country* slightly more attention, identify the crows as inspirational objects for Cocker's ruminations on the Yare Valley and the larger relationship between humans and the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Isabel Gallegymore's model for an environmental writing pedagogy, although likewise brief in her mention of *Crow Country*, nevertheless indicates its greater potential. In her model of teaching environmental writing, she reads Cocker's "study of one species as a hymn to ecology"<sup>4</sup> in the sense of opening up diverse perspectives, including those of humans and animals.

This chapter's in-depth reading of *Crow Country* outlines strategies for teaching some of the core ideas of HAS. The chapter is divided into two main parts: the first section, "Rooks as social constructs and agents," focuses on the importance and difficulty of understanding animals as cultural constructs *and* autonomous subjects. Here, I will consider the micro level, or individual engagement, as well as the macro level, or larger social human-animal relationships, while also taking into account the text-specific genre conventions and modes of narration. The second part, "Rooks anthropomorphized and reconfigured," tackles the double-edged sword of anthropomorphism, which in literary representations of animals is as inevitable as it is problematic. Furthermore, this second section asks what stories we tell, or do not tell, about

2 Deborah Lilley: New British Nature Writing. In: Greg Garrard (ed.): *Oxford Handbooks Online: Ecocriticism*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2017, pp. 1–18, here p. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.155> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

3 Stephen E. Hunt: The Emergence of Psychoecology: The New Nature Writings of Roger Deakin, Mark Cocker, Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey. In: *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 10:1 (2009), pp. 70–77, here p. 70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2009.10589045> (accessed: January 24, 2022); Joe Moran: A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing. In: *Literature & History* 23:1 (2014), pp. 49–63, here p. 53.

4 Isabel Gallegymore: *Teaching Environmental Writing: Ecocritical Pedagogy and Poetics*. London / New York: Bloomsbury 2020, p. 31. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350068445> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

animals, and what Cocker's story about rooks reveals about personal, social, and ecological relations among humans and other animals. In the conclusion, I will briefly address another related point in the study of ecocriticism and HAS, namely the continued relevance of mourning inherent in the tradition of nature writings like *Crow Country* in the way that the genre broaches the issue of dealing with loss and grief in times of environmental crisis and species extinction.

## 2. Rooks as social constructs and agents

For students of English literary and cultural studies who have been taught about the social constructedness of literary texts – like my students at Oldenburg University – it may seem obvious that the representation of human-animal relationships always involves a human-centered perspective. However, the aim of HAS is, as Margo DeMello puts it, “to understand [animals] in and of themselves,”<sup>5</sup> which requires us to recalibrate our approach and comprehension of nonhuman animals as sentient, conscious, and agentive beings. Kenneth Joel Shapiro even suggests distinguishing “between ‘animals as constructed’” and “animals as they live and experience the world independently of our constructions of them.”<sup>6</sup> This is quite a daunting task in literary and cultural studies since any attempt to know the world through other animals' cognitive or sensual experiences and knowledge is always a cultural translation, mediation, and representation to begin with. Therefore, it is, as DeMello reminds us, “inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power.”<sup>7</sup>

When examining the human-rook relationships in *Crow Country*, students may notice that halfway through the book, Cocker himself insists on differentiating between rooks in and of themselves and their socially constructed and mediated representations:

It's certainly *the black bird of flesh and blood* keeping me out on the marsh until the sun sinks to its rose-tainted grave on an autumn evening, but it's *an entirely different creature that had me scouring through the literature*.<sup>8</sup>

5 Margo DeMello: *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*. New York: Columbia UP 2012, p. 19.

6 Kenneth Joel Shapiro: *Human-Animal Studies: Growing the Field, Applying the Field*. Ann Arbor: Animals and Society Institute 2008, p. 5.

7 DeMello: *Animals and Society*, p. 19.

8 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 107 (emphasis added).

According to Cocker, the type of rook he experiences in the Yare Valley is “anchored in a great body of observed detail” whereas “the rook of our imagination,”<sup>10</sup> the “inner rook”<sup>11</sup> is “more expressive” and “graced with much more magic.”<sup>12</sup> As he concludes:

The two types of birds occasionally mingled, but gradually I began to see this imagined rook of folklore and myth, the rook encountered in poetry and nature writing, as an animal with an independent life and ecology that was every bit as interesting as its real-life shadow.<sup>13</sup>

It seems, then, as if he considers *both* types of rooks, “the real-life rook” and “the rook of the imagination” as valuable and autonomous. Or does he? To better grasp the lives of “the real” and “the inner” rooks, I redirect the students’ attention to one of the core concerns of HAS, namely, critically examining the ways in which animals are shown as individual agents. In what ways does Cocker represent rooks as subjects capable of shaping, challenging, and even altering his understanding of them and their being in the world? Shapiro further elucidates this critical task, helping us assess “the degree to which the author presents the animal [...] both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, Cocker’s “inner rook” is rooted in his personal memories as well as in a larger Western, specifically British, cultural memory. While his childhood memories have been passed on to him by his father, British culture knows the birds in numerous ways, ranging from feathery friends in sentimental children’s classics to the status symbols of the nineteenth-century “landed gentry,”<sup>15</sup> and from uncanny Romantic prophets of death to agricultural pests for twentieth-century farmers. Moreover, the symbolic rooks of British collective culture are steeped in “deeply held [national] ideals about landscape” in contrast to Cocker’s “great body of observed detail.”<sup>16</sup> Even so, students may rightly object that Cocker translates his experience of the “rooks in flesh and

9 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 120.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

14 Shapiro: *Human-Animal Studies*, p. 8.

15 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 116.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 120.



blood” into nature writing and thus into “inner rooks.” Indeed, constructing them from the perspective of the nature-loving rook expert brings along its own set of problems.

According to DeMello, it is the scientific perspective of natural history writing in particular that runs the risk of contributing to a reductionist “objectification of animal[s].”<sup>17</sup> Like other new British nature writers, Cocker carries on the established European-British tradition of natural history writing and its observations of nature and animals – especially birds – seeming to suggest that it is a particularly apt mode of representing the rooks and the Yare Valley. However, scholars like Moran, Hunt, Jos Smith, and Lilley have noted that, alongside their commitment to the “scientific, scholarly observation of nature,”<sup>18</sup> this generation of British nature writers also shows an awareness of the “familiar phenomenological predicament”<sup>19</sup> of the constructedness of nature and culture and, as I want to add, human-animal relationships. Cocker revises, for instance, the use of an impersonal, apolitical, yet authoritative naturalist’s view that is supposedly free from class, race, or gender biases by stressing autobiographical elements in order to make visible his selective vision while he simultaneously creates his own multifaceted authorial persona. He is a son, husband, and “busy father of two with a run-down cottage to repair”<sup>20</sup>; a self-employed non-fiction prose writer without any regular, much less sizable, income; and a “rook-following man”<sup>21</sup> in the Norfolk Broads. Furthermore, he interweaves his various experiences with the rooks and his personal life so that readers can relate to the naturalist of *Crow Country* in an intimate manner. According to Lilley, a “pervasive current of self-consciousness sets ‘the new nature writing’ apart.”<sup>22</sup> This self-reflexivity defines human-rook relationships as much as it defines writing about them. Daniel Weston has characterized this self-awareness as “akin to a certain kind of postmodern metafiction,”<sup>23</sup> which Cocker’s reflections on bird identification aptly demonstrate:

17 DeMello: *Animals and Society*, p. 19.

18 Moran: *A Cultural History*, p. 59.

19 Hunt: *The Emergence of Psychoecology*, p. 72. See also Jos Smith: *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*. London / Oxford / New York / New Delhi: Bloomsbury 2017, pp. 14–15.

20 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 137.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

22 Lilley: *New British Nature Writing*, p. 2.

23 Daniel Weston: *Nature Writing and the Environmental Imagination*. In: David James (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2015, pp. 110–126, here p. 121. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cc09781139628754.009> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

I've come to realise that [...] [the] exercise [of bird identification] [...] carries within it a subtle kind of complacency, a curious intellectual sleight of hand, because every time you pin a label on a living creature it reaffirms a sense of mastery over it. The naming of the thing gives you the wonderfully reassuring illusion that you know it. You don't. [...] In a bizarre way, the process of recognition can actually be a barrier rather than a doorway to genuine appreciation.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Cocker criticizes bird identification as an exercise in human self-absorption and as a pseudo-naturalist authority that lacks any meaningful interaction with, let alone consideration of, the birds in and of themselves. Although he does not use the term speciesism, he reveals bird identification to be a speciesist practice by exposing it as a method of subordination and as a means of devaluating birds as the Other.<sup>25</sup>

Other speciesist pitfalls arise in his observations of rooks in flocks as opposed to, for example, Macdonald's (single) female goshawk Mabel. As an entire flock of rooks and jackdaws, which together often number at least 2,000 birds, the rooks are an abstraction rather than relatable individuals. When watching this assembly in the daily "drama" of their ritualistic evening flight to their roosts alongside other corvids, Cocker admits that he "fail[s] to absorb the trajectory followed by any one individual."<sup>26</sup> In his imagination, they become moving geometrical objects as well as autopoietic cellular organisms, which elicit wonder as well as confusion: "Quite simply I am at the limits of what my mind can comprehend or my imagination can articulate."<sup>27</sup> Moments such as these clearly challenge, even exceed, human consciousness and are therefore useful examples for discussing with students *Crow Country's* potential and its limitations for reflecting on the connectedness and/or alterity of humans and animals, and for interrogating or even "disrupting the human / animal divide,"<sup>28</sup> as advocated by animal studies scholars and animal activists.

24 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 39.

25 Cocker elaborates that the "underlying factor" of the "larger processes of natural history" is the scarcity principle, so that they become quests "for the unusual" (ibid., pp. 39–40). Since, however, rooks are one of the most numerous and commonplace birds in the British Isles, they had "subverted [his] whole approach to birds" (ibid., p. 39) according to the tradition of Western natural history.

26 Ibid., p. 2.

27 Ibid., p. 5.

28 Sam Cadman: Reflections on Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism and Impossible Fiction: Towards a Typological Spectrum of Fictional Animals. In: *Animal Studies Journal* 5:2 (2016), pp. 161–182, here p. 167.

As a contemporary British nature writer, Cocker is perhaps at his speciesist when he describes “the rooks of flesh and blood” as an abstract mass or identifiable taxon, while his comments about the periods he spends waiting futilely in torrential rain or freezing temperatures “until a flock of birds decides it’s time for bed”<sup>29</sup> self-deprecatingly and self-consciously showcase speciesist behavior. Indeed, it is in moments of failure, or near failure, that the rooks emerge as powerful co-actors and agents:

There would be no discovery tonight. No hard-won piece of the jigsaw would drop into place. [...] The whole thing had failed completely and I headed for the car. [...] but on a whim I decided to put off the retreat [...] Just possibly [...] [...] there suddenly were the birds, dipped down below the ridge in a way that meant I might never have seen them earlier. [...] And here I was. And here were they. A long looping windstretched line, mainly of jackdaws, which maintained an irrepressible *jak-jak-jak-jak* conversational merriment. It created its own sphere of joy in that acid-cold night. It was wonderful and I felt exultant.

The wind teased them out into one long rope of birds, perhaps 2000 in total [...] no matter how hard the wind smashed at them [...] they were irrepressible. And back they came.

I watched for ten, fifteen, minutes with this wind caravan of birds swirling and dipping towards me. [...] I wondered if they could see me – a strange illuminated figure looking up into the night from that wet black road, alone, car door flung wide open where I’d leapt out, engine running, headlights still tunneling vacantly into the dark.<sup>30</sup>

In this unexpected sighting of the birds, the centrality of Cocker’s human perspective diminishes alongside theirs, and the birds’ collective flight opens up a multiplicity of relations, sensations, and possible visions.

While this is one of many instances in which Cocker presents rooks as subjects who actively shape his life, his representation of their agency culminates in a moment when their animal vision alters his, when he imagines the “unfolding roost process [...] as seen by the birds themselves.”<sup>31</sup> Importantly, theirs is night vision, which loosens the “visual grasp on the world” as humans know it:

29 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 44.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 53–55.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Suddenly, the Yare valley had become a completely different landscape. It was not mine, it was not even *ours*. It was theirs. I tried to imagine it as they saw it, viewing it through some magical form of heat-imagining equipment. Instead of trees and fields and earth, one saw the place as a sequence of colours. The red areas, the hottest, the most significant spots, were those places loaded with power for rooks, and between them stretched long bright strands, the flight lines that connected a roost with its outlying parish and sketched the routes across the sky. Tunnels of air became causeways as real and palpable as any human path or road, and some of these invisible threads of connection did not just extend through space, but arced through time.<sup>32</sup>

Considering the web of interconnected flight-lines, roosts, and air tunnels, this momentary “rook vision” possesses a remarkable spatial, physical, mental, cultural, and temporal complexity, which reveals that the rooks are indeed subjects in their own right. Although their view differs from that of human animals, the passage nevertheless represents the birds in ways not so different from humans, so that clear-cut species distinctions and ontologies are reconfigured “in terms of processes, dynamics, and relations.”<sup>33</sup>

Both instances – the failure in Cocker’s performance as an authoritative rook expert and his “rook vision” – allow a broader discussion with students regarding alternative ways of watching and interacting with animals, and of examining the ways in which such different perspectives decenter the human. What are the effects of these examples, that is, of the human diminishment, or even lack, of authority and mastery in human-animal relationships? And what are the effects of envisioning other-than-human ways of experiencing and knowing the world? What novel ways of understanding humans and animals do they open up? Which human values do they challenge, and which alternative values can replace them? Questions such as these bring up key concerns of larger philosophical, ethical, and pedagogical debates, involving concepts such as humility and vulnerability, empathy and compassion, as well as a shared bodily experience across species.<sup>34</sup>

32 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 132 (emphasis in original).

33 Cary Wolfe: Moving Forward, Kicking Back: The Animal Turn. In: *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2:1 (2011), pp. 1–12, here p. 3. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2010.46> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

34 For an overview of animal ethics from Peter Singer to Tom Regan as well as more recent thinkers, including Ralph Acampora and Matthew Calarco, whose phenomenological approaches focus on the shared human and animal “experience of living in bodies” as “a new form of interspecies relationship based on shared understanding,” see DeMello: *Animals and Society*, pp. 386–391, here p. 390. Regarding the importance of vulnerability for an ethical

### 3. Rooks anthropomorphized and reconfigured

As we have seen, Cocker's representations of rooks at times hinder and at other times advance an understanding of their lives and interactions with humans, thus emphasizing their subjecthood and agency in varying degrees of human-animal involvement. For example, Cocker's reaction to the rooks' ritualistic nightly descent on their roosts demonstrates at times an involvement that does not envision a human-rook community but rather a connectedness within overarching ecological webs, within which humans and animals seem to occupy separate spheres. Similarly, his critical use of bird identification insists that rooks are a distinctly recognizable unit among other members of the corvid family and hence a distinct species. In contrast, their "jak-jak-jak-jak conversational merriment"<sup>35</sup> and their vision above their night roosts suggest a human-animal continuum and relational connectedness.

The analysis of all of these representations inevitably leads to the vexed issue of anthropomorphism, meaning the application of human awareness, feelings, intentions, or characteristics to nonhuman animals. Ethologists like Samuel A. Barnett and Clive D. L. Wynne, or neuroscientist Mark S. Blumberg, have long criticized anthropomorphism as erroneous and unscientific while also obscuring deeper knowledge about nonhuman experiences, behaviors, and capabilities.<sup>36</sup> The term still carries pejorative connotations, even though ethologists have come to concur that a "careful [and] constructive"<sup>37</sup> or, to use literary and cultural studies scholar Bernd Hüppauf's term, "self-conscious"

history of animals, see Erica Fudge: *A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals*. In: Nigel Rothfels (ed.): *Representing Animals*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana UP 2002, pp. 3–18, here pp. 14–15. On empathy for and in animals, see Ashley Young/Kathayoon A. Khalil/Jim Wharton: *Empathy for Animals: A Review of the Existing Literature*. In: *Curator: The Museum Journal* 61:2 (2018), pp. 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12257> (accessed: January 24, 2022). And on the importance of compassion and humility in human-animal relationships, see Marc Bekoff: *Increasing Our Compassion Footprint: The Animals' Manifesto*. In: *Zygon. Journal of Religion and Science* 43:4 (2008), pp. 771–781. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2008.00959.x> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

35 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 54 (emphasis in original).

36 See Domenica Bruni/Pietro Perconti/Alessio Plebe: *Anti-Anthropomorphism and Its Limits*. In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 9:2205 (2018), pp. 1–7, here p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02205> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

37 Bruni/Perconti/Plebe: *Anti-Anthropomorphism*, p. 7. See also Michal Arbilly/Arnon Lotem: *Constructive Anthropomorphism. A Functional Evolutionary Approach to the Study of Human-Like Cognitive Mechanisms in Animals*. In: *Proceedings of the Royal Society: Series B* 284 (2017), pp. 1–8, here p. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2017.1616> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

(as opposed to “sentimental and naïve”<sup>38</sup>) anthropomorphism can help bring about a better understanding of nonhuman animals while also recognizing their alterity. In fact, in literary representations, anthropomorphism is unavoidable. While there is, as Sam Cadman points out, “considerable uncertainty” as to “precisely what stylistic techniques this idea refers to,”<sup>39</sup> he argues for an anthropomorphism that challenges the human / animal binary, disrupts human practices of dominating and subordinating animals, reconceptualizes human-animal relationships, and promotes animal subjectivity.<sup>40</sup>

Students will be quick to comment on the fact that the rooks in *Crow Country* are clearly different from the fictional talking birds of the ancient fables: Edgar Allan Poe’s famous Gothic raven or Ernest Thompson Seton’s wise old Silver-spot, who commandeers his fellow crows like a well-seasoned human military leader.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, attributions of human consciousness, perspectives, and traits are not prominently displayed in *Crow Country*. Indeed, Cocker repeatedly juxtaposes “the rook of his imagination” with the anthropomorphic projections of other writers, be they poets, songwriters, or naturalists.<sup>42</sup> And yet, an attentive student may remind us of our earlier insight, namely that the rooks in *Crow Country* are represented as agents whose actions are subjectively meaningful and, to some extent, relatable from a human perspective, so that the crows emerge as intelligent, cheery, and sociable beings who follow rituals in their roosting behavior and routinely traverse a sophisticated network of airways.

Significantly, these relatable characteristics result from the actions and behaviors that Cocker – and by implication his readers – observes and experiences in his encounters with them. As Eileen Crist notes, anthropomorphic

38 Bernd Hüppauf: *Vom Frosch: Eine Kulturgeschichte zwischen Tierphilosophie und Ökologie*. Bielefeld: Transcript 2011, p. 28 (transl. M. K). <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839416426.295> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

39 Cadman: Reflections on Anthropocentrism, p. 168.

40 Ibid., p. 178; see also Hüppauf: *Vom Frosch*, pp. 27–28; and Gabriele Kompatscher / Reinhard Spannring / Karin Schachinger: *Human-Animal Studies: Eine Einführung für Studierende und Lehrende*. Münster / New York: Waxmann 2017, pp. 36–53. <https://doi.org/10.36198/9783838556789> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

41 Ernest Thompson Seton, who was born in England in 1860 and who grew up in Canada, is well known for his animal stories and the illustrations he drew from the late 1890s to the late 1910s. “Silver-spot, the Story of a Crow” is included in one of his most popular books *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898).

42 Numerous examples can be found in chapter 13, ranging from his father’s tale of a rook court to various British poets to the New Wave Band XTC to several natural history writers, see Cocker: *Crow Country*, pp. 107–120.

descriptions in “naturalist portrayals [...] do not appear as attributions *in* the writing, as much as they emerge as the effects *of* the writing.”<sup>43</sup> Crist further explains that the latter can be achieved by using active verbs and graphic imagery, so that animals are shown as active subjects of their lifeworld, which mirrors but does not “collapse into”<sup>44</sup> the human world. *Crow Country* makes generous use of this form of anthropomorphism. For example, when recounting three historical nineteenth-century plagues of locusts, caterpillars, and voles, Cocker visualizes the rooks in action, imagining them riding into the devastated regions of Britain “like cavalry to the rescue.”<sup>45</sup> He also describes them as “freebooters on waste tips,” based on his observation, and aesthetic and poetic appreciation of their “glossy iridescence and [...] rainbow sweep of color among the rotting detritus.”<sup>46</sup> And he notices their superior “spadework” with their “stiletto-like bill[s]” as outstripping “the spadework of any professional gardener” when “work[ing] the ground.”<sup>47</sup> Now, what insights and knowledge do we gain about rooks and their lives from such anthropomorphisms?

Here are a few tentative answers: the rooks Cocker presents are valuable and deadly agents in the fight against pests; they are defiant and beautiful adventurers in the face of death and destruction; and they are meticulous cultivators of the soil, accessorized with remarkable extravaganza. They are at once familiar and unfamiliar – familiar, in that Cocker’s anthropomorphisms allow us to relate to the rooks on our terms as forceful soldiers, brazen survivors, and flamboyant gardeners; unfamiliar, in that we see them acting in unexpected ways and contexts. In this way, Cocker shows the rooks as actively shaping his and other people’s lives as pest police, landfill buccaneers, and glamorous cultivators of the earth while underscoring a relational understanding that acknowledges their differences.

Cocker, then, oscillates between varying degrees of human-rook relations. On the one hand, he distinguishes between humans and animals, albeit critically and self-consciously. On the other hand, he underscores species-relatedness. I want to suggest that this species-relatedness at times comes close to Cary Wolfe’s understanding of posthumanism, not in the sense of “that which transcends or escapes the bounds of the human,” but as

43 Eileen Crist: *Naturalists’ Portrayals of Animal Life: Engaging the Verstehen Approach*. In: *Social Studies of Science* 26:4 (1996), pp. 799–838, here p. 831 (emphasis in original). <https://doi.org/10.1177/030631296026004004> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

44 *Ibid.*, p. 807.

45 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 58.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

that which is posthumanist (that which thinks fundamental social and cultural questions outside of or at least askance to the humanism that we have inherited in our philosophical habits, political institutions, cultural and religious conventions, and much else) [...] [and as that which does not] flatter[n] the actual complexity and multidimensionality of what are, in fact, many different ways of being in the world that are shared in myriad particular ways across species lines.<sup>48</sup>

Such a posthumanist stance, I contend, emerges in Cocker's "rook vision." Without discarding the human perspective "of trees and fields, heat-imagining equipment, [or] the human path or road,"<sup>49</sup> he offers a complex and multidimensional experience of being in the world that both humans and rooks share, albeit in different ways.

In my seminars, I ask students what stories our reading materials tell, or do not tell, and how these stories reconfigure our knowledge of and about animals. Indeed, students may have long spotted that Cocker's rook story does not rehash the familiar formulae of crow or raven narratives that, first and foremost, rank them among the most highly evolved bird species due to their cognitive abilities. Without downplaying their intelligence, Cocker stresses the birds' sociable and life-affirming characteristics. "Rooks," he writes,

live, feed, sleep, fly, display, roost, recreate, fall sick and die in the presence of their own kind. Their whole lives are enfolded in the flock [...] a self-perpetuating inner universe of rook sounds and rook gestures that the birds carry with them, like an enveloping microclimate or a bubble of atmospheric oxygen, wherever they go. [...] I've saved the rook's gregariousness until last [...] because it was the aspect of the species by which I was most captivated. [...] That plume of raw energy was more than simply a latch-key to the unconscious; it opened the cellar door beneath my whole interest in birds.<sup>50</sup>

Instead of reiterating the common knowledge of their great intelligence and evolutionary development – which tacitly assumes an evolutionary ranking spearheaded by humans as the most intelligent of animals – Cocker unabashedly adheres to his own predilections. At the same time, he openly acknowledges that, in spite of all his detailed observations, "I don't believe

48 Wolfe: *Moving Forward, Kicking Back*, pp. 2–3 (emphasis in original).

49 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 132.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.



for one moment that I understand even a third of what there is to know.”<sup>51</sup> And he adds: “Nor do I really mind that I shall never arrive at a definitive understanding.”<sup>52</sup>

What is more, and contrary to the traditional popular cultural stories of rooks as uncanny messengers of doom, Cocker’s is a story of appreciation. He values the “fantastic tumult” and “protean swirls”<sup>53</sup> of their evening flights as they generate in him a profound “joy” and “*frisson*,”<sup>54</sup> a term that signifies the thrill and excitement of feeling intensely alive, “engaged [...], absorbed and fulfilled.”<sup>55</sup> Relating to rooks, *Crow Country* suggests, can be “a deeply restorative process,”<sup>56</sup> an idea to which I shall return in my concluding remarks. There is another aspect that I put up for discussion if students do not make the connection: for Cocker, the “scaly” and “reptilian”<sup>57</sup> skin around the rooks’ eyes and their habit of passing on the knowledge about the location of their roosts “from one generation to the next”<sup>58</sup> “speaks of deeper ecological”<sup>59</sup> processes that involve the lives of rooks and humans alike despite the – geologically speaking – fleeting time they reside on earth:

Rooks were dependent upon the westward spread of stock grazing and cereal agriculture from their original Middle Eastern settings to make their own entry into Europe. So when you next pass a rookery remember to stop and listen. Among the spring-summoning cacophony you’ll hear the faintest echo of a Neolithic axe. [...] Yet wherever we’ve replaced trees with grassland or arable, even in the chemical-drenched monocultures of the twenty-first century, rooks make a healthy living.<sup>60</sup>

This means that Cocker is also telling us a success story of rook migration, adaptation, and growth. In fact, between 1995 and 2004, the number of pairs of breeding rooks that he counted in the region of the Yare and the Waveney

51 Ibid., p. 168.

52 Ibid., p. 169.

53 Ibid., p. 4.

54 Ibid., p. 5 (emphasis in original).

55 Ibid., p. 186.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., p. 34.

58 Ibid., p. 50.

59 Ibid., p. 73.

60 Ibid., pp. 61–64.

showed an impressive “rise of 47.3 per cent.”<sup>61</sup> Their ascent, however, means a decline in the numbers of other birds. As Cocker explains, rooks have come into the British Isles and the Norfolk region because of the anthropogenic changes that made the land attractive to them in the first place. By transforming the land into “open grassland[s]”<sup>62</sup> through “agricultural intensification” and “chemical farming,” humans have made some areas “virtually birdless.”<sup>63</sup> The rooks’ success story thus stands alongside a history of bird extinction on the British Isles:

Even in the short period since the first 1968 census – effectively, in my own lifetime – I’m aware that the birds of my Yare have sunk lower. I know it not simply because of the BTO’s [British Trust for Ornithology] work, but because my neighbour Billy Driver told me so. [...] Billy’s diaries [...] serve as a highly magnified and intensely personal prism through which one can observe nationwide changes in bird numbers between the 1960s and the 1980s. For some species, Billy’s counts become imperceptibly smaller [...] until they vanish from his diary altogether. In the twenty years of the journals, species he would once have counted among the most common and typical of the farmlands he worked – grey partridge, snipe, cuckoo, turtle dove, skylark, yellow wagtail, meadow pipit, reed bunting and tree sparrow – disappeared almost completely.<sup>64</sup>

The loss of a formerly diverse bird population takes the form of the familiar story of extinction with its “gloom-and-doom statistics”<sup>65</sup> and “nature nostalgia.”<sup>66</sup> However, even though Cocker mourns the decline of rich, variegated, and aesthetically appealing birdlife in the Norfolk Broads, he also recounts – with great eloquence, enjoyment, and humor – the story of the ascent of a bird population that is neither rare nor endangered nor particularly attractive in appearance or taste. As Ursula Heise puts it in *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, Cocker tells a more complicated story

61 Cocker: *Crow Country*, p. 102.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

65 Peter Kareiva, qtd. in Ursula K. Heise: *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. Chicago / London: U of Chicago P 2016, p. 11. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2018-0029> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

66 Heise: *Imagining Extinction*, p. 11.

about “how biodiversity is currently changing.”<sup>67</sup> Altogether, *Crow Country* oscillates between elegiac lamentations about bygone birdlife in the Yare Valley and exhilarating observations of the rooks’ increasing abundance.

#### 4. Conclusion:

##### **Living with extinction and grief in the Anthropocene**

When studying *Crow Country* alongside J. A. Baker’s classic *The Peregrine* (1967) and Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk*, students will likely consider the latter, with its focus on gender, class, power, and violence, as the timeliest of these reading materials.<sup>68</sup> Notably, all authors, including Baker, a member of the older generation of British naturalists, employ the tropes of death, sorrow, and mourning characteristic of pastoral literature. In doing so, as Heise states, many “popular-scientific and creative writings” about the decline of species and ecosystems tell stories about “an irreversible loss in the breadth and depth of human experience and culture.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, all three writings emphatically link anthropogenic changes with their narrators’ emotional and mental well-being or lack thereof.

*The Peregrine*, which Baker wrote when he himself was “under a possible sentence of death” due to a serious illness, can be called a “requiem”<sup>70</sup> to the British hawks, whose extinction he anticipated as a result of the common agricultural use of DDT in the 1960s. Macdonald’s story of taming Mabel is also the story of the narrator grieving her father’s death by withdrawing from human society. When she finally returns to her Cambridge social life, she has worked through her loss, having gained a new understanding of herself in relation to Mabel and the world. In *Crow Country*, Cocker links his budding relationship

67 Ibid., p. 23.

68 Cocker’s *Crow Country* can, of course, also be fruitfully taught alongside stories of human encounters with animals other than birds as well as students’ own creative environmental writing. Moreover, juxtaposing *Crow Country* with human and animal autobiographies may prove productive, allowing students to explore the diverse ways in which species lines are constructed, maintained, and crossed. Given *Crow Country*’s emphasis on loss and grief, studying it alongside works of such creative non-fiction as Danielle Celermajer’s *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future* (2021) can provide particularly illuminating perspectives on grief as an experience shared by humans and other animals in the face of environmental crisis and species extinction.

69 Heise: *Imagining Extinction*, p. 28.

70 Robert Macfarlane: Introduction. In: J. A. Baker: *The Peregrine*. New York: Review 2005, pp. vii–xv, here pp. x–xi.

with the rooks to his depression. Like Macdonald, he gives a clear reason for his melancholy, which he thinks is the stress of moving house. The distress and sense of bereavement expressed by these writers is an important part of human and nonhuman lives in the Anthropocene, even though anthropogenic disruptions differ greatly across regions, countries, and continents. Indeed, the struggle with the mental and emotional impacts of anthropogenic interventions, destruction, and the extinction of animals and their living spaces continues to pose unprecedented challenges, such as how to deal with individual and collective pain and loss, what rituals to engage in, who to turn to, or how to gain – at least temporary – solace.<sup>71</sup> *Crow Country* addresses these adversities by finding some consolation in the rooks’ “rituals,” a term that Cocker employs repeatedly. Moreover, he also finds comfort in his relationships with the rooks, who emerge as skilled survivors and sociable migrants with an unquenchable joie de vivre, even in times of environmental crisis. Here, then, is one more important lesson to be learned from Cocker’s story: however elusive the rooks’ will to life may prove for humans, it is the engagement with other-than-human animals that provides humans with a corrective to the overwhelming sense of loss and a vital means of staying alive in the Anthropocene.

71 See Ashlee Cunsolo: Prologue: She was Bereft. In: Idem / Karen Landmann (eds): *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*. Montreal / Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP 2017, pp. xiii–xxii, here p. xvi. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1w6t9hg.5> (accessed: January 24, 2022).