

Finding Nature in the Unnatural: Toward a Philosophy of Synanthropy

Sam Froiland

Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

"Standing on bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God." —Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

"The world, I have come to believe, is a very queer place, but we have been part of this queerness for so long that we tend to take it for granted. We rush to and fro like Mad Hatters upon our peculiar errands, all the time imagining our surrounding to be dull and ourselves quite ordinary creatures. Actually, there is nothing in the world to encourage such an idea, but such is the mind of man, and this is why he finds it necessary from time to time to send emissaries into the wilderness in hopes of learning great events, or plans in store for him, that will resuscitate his waning taste for life . . . One must seek, then . . . a natural revelation."—Loren Eiseley, "The Judgment of the Birds"

A city on its outside looks like a fortress of steel, glass, asphalt, and concrete, whose gates seem to prevent to everything non-human from entering. Understandably so, it's easy to conceive a city as the epitome of the Anthropocene, an infringement of *Homo sapiens* upon the environment where an otherwise high functioning, biologically diverse ecosystem may be. Take Chicago, as an example. Once an area filled with wetlands, savannahs, and prairie, is now mostly pavement, monocultural lawns, and buildings. Of course, as much as we like to think of ourselves as the all-powerful fourth horseman, our fortresses are never impregnable. Pigeons, rats, cockroaches, squirrels, crows, raccoons, dandelions, and milkweed, just to name a few, find no problem navigating our trenches. They flock to our dumpsters, the cracks in the sidewalk, the sides of our highways, our sewers, and even our homes. However, these encounters are rarely treated or experienced as encounters with nature. Pigeons in the city may attract bird feeders, cockroaches a scream, a dandelion in the sidewalk may simply be walked over, but rarely are these encounters recognized as being testaments to the vigor of biological entities to persist and adapt, themselves spectacular natural phenomena. For those looking to commune with nature, the instinct is to retreat away from the city to the nature preserve. There is something to be said about such communes and such experiences with biodiversity that we no longer have access to on a regular basis. Few things compare to the grandeur and sublimity of standing in a forest of redwoods or a giant sequoias, but that is not to say that there is not also something to be gained, whether we realize it or not, to become more attune with the natural within the unnatural. That is, within our suburban and urban anthropogenic landscapes that predominate the landscape of the 21st century.

In the everyday life of an urbanite, how often do we conceptualize driving to a restaurant as an experience within an ecosystem? I cannot possibly answer this question for everyone on earth, but the answer for myself, as I am sure it is for many others, is not very often if at all. Much of our life is perceived as navigating through a system of anthropogenic landscapes, whether physical, or more metaphorical such as the schooling system or the professional world, some type of separate world that exists apart from the rest of the ecological world. In many ways this is an accurate way to view the everyday. Humans have altered our environment in such a way that we are omnipresent, whether in a physical sense or by extension, by virtue of our carbon emissions, our radioactivity from our weapons of insanity and energy facilities, our obtrusive structures, our immortal plastics, or any of the other chemical or physical ways humans like to leave their mark. However, what this conceptualization fails to include, is that despite being altered by humans, our environments will never be the sole property of *Homo sapiens* nor will they only contain just us. That is to say, the word anthropogenic does a good job of pointing out a troubling culprit in the environmental and biological destruction readily occurring—*Homo sapiens*—but it also seems to diminish the agency of other organisms. Nature's synanthropes remind us that while it may be the Anthropocene, the agencies of organisms are still alive and well. In this essay I would

like to explore the animals that we usually gloss over, a few of nature's synanthropes—the pigeon, the cockroach, and the crow—in hope of showing that some type of transparent eyeball experience that which Emerson claimed in the woods around Walden Pond, is not only obtainable within environments we perceive as pristine, but also in the everyday life of urban and suburbanites alike. But furthermore, it is the intent of this essay to draw some deeper meanings out of our synanthropic relationships; to show what synanthropy reveals about us, our environment, the way we experience nature, and how prevalent the agencies of non-human organisms are in everyday life. Essentially, to show that the fortress we often perceive to live in is a misconception of our ecological reality and the ability of life to persist and adapt.

Rats with Wings, *Columba livia domestica*

Pigeons, that is the pigeons known to most city dwellers, sometimes called "rats with wings," were originally bred from the rock dove, *Columba livia*. With the help of humans, decedents of the rock doves, given the title *Columba livia domestica*, have managed to establish populations in every major continent on earth except Antarctica, generally flocking around the urban areas. In these environments pigeons tend to rely upon insects, garbage, and food handouts from people. Within this niche, they tend to quite well from themselves. So well in fact, great efforts are imposed in cities to try and deal with pigeons. Culling, pigeon wire, and even legislation to ban feeding are employed to try and keep these populations at bay. They are, of course, not without their fans either. Pigeon people, while not in abundance, still exists in many cities. To these people, breeding and feeding pigeons is a pastime, and the diversity of plumages that are characteristic of *Columba livia domestica* highly admired (BBC, 2007).

Who ultimately is right in this issue? Well it not my intent to stake a claim in the rightness or wrongness of humans dealing harshly with species deemed invasive, health hazards, or even the commodification of these animals, as in the case of pigeons and pigeon people. It is rather to explore what this means to our society. As troubling as pigeons may seem to some, or as beautiful and admirable to others, what does their existence in our cities suggest about reality of our urban landscapes and what natural revelations might they reveal?

In his essay "The Judgment of the Birds," Loren Eiseley brings the reader into his New York hotel room in which he shares with the reader a transcendental experience he had with pigeons. He claims that while city may seem crowded with the human, "Nevertheless, in any city there are true wilderness where a man can be alone. It can happen at a hotel room, or on the roofs at dawn" (Eiseley, L., N.A.). He supports this claim with an eloquent account of his experience with pigeons leaning out the window of his hotel room:

I found I was looking down from that great height into a great series of curious cupolas or lofts that I could barely make out in the darkness. As I looked, the outlines of these lofts became more distinct because the light being reflected from the wings of the pigeons who, in utter silence, were beginning to float outward upon the city. In and out through the slits in the cupolas passed the white-winged birds on their mysterious errands. At this hour the city was theirs, and quietly, without the brush of a single wing tip against stone in that high, eerie place, they were taking over the spires of Manhattan. . . I leaned farther out. To and fro went the white wings, to and fro. There were no sounds from any of them. They knew man was asleep and this light for a little while was theirs. Or perhaps I had only dreamed about man in this city of wings—which he could surely have never built.

In this passage, the reader gains access to a meditation on the meaning of the pigeon within the city environment. In Eiseley's mind, his experience with the pigeons is transcendental in that it allows him to see human society from an outside perspective, effectively bringing Eiseley to a profound revelation. That being, the city is not just a space for *Homo sapiens*, but rather an environment composed of multiple interconnected worlds. In this case, New York is home to humans normally busy by the day, however, up in the cupolas it is home to the "city of wings," the realm of the pigeon.

What is the significance of this realm of the pigeon? For one, as Eiseley points out, this "city of wings" is not one that can be made by humans. Or another of looking at it, the realm of the pigeon that Eiseley reflected on is a testament to the agency of the pigeon, their ability to persist and thrive within the urban atmosphere, and to even create something that they can call their own. Furthermore, the "city of wings" resolves the dualism of man and nature, it allows "the mean egotism" to vanish, and what emerges is the convergence agencies of man and pigeon. Consequently,

the “city of wings,” while itself a romantic metaphor, is realist deconstruction of the city ecosystem. It recognizes the anthropogenicism which is the city, but rightfully inserts the non-human back in the picture. It is the lesson that we may have built New York, but it will never be just ours.

Couch Dwellers, *Periplaneta americana* and *Blattella germanica*

Few organisms can claim that they can experience a hydrogen bomb and live to tell the tale. The cockroach is one of those few organisms. The German cockroach, *Blattella germanica*, can live up to 45 days without food, and over two weeks without food or water. The American cockroach, even more extreme, has been reported to live over 90 days without food and 40 days with neither food nor water. They are true survival machines. At the same time, as far as household pests go, few are as hated or are killed with such vigor and grandeur as the cockroach (with the exception of maybe the Norwegian and black rats, which just so happen to be on the sparse list of organisms capable of surviving nukes as well). In of the 4 billion dollar pest control industry, the cockroach owns roughly 240 million dollars just by itself. Thus in a nutshell, the life of the German and the American cockroach are characterized by constant slaughter, but even better survival. Consequently, these familiar insect continue to protrude their ways into our cities and homes, and more than likely will into the unforeseeable future (Schweid, R. 1999).

What is known as the German and American cockroaches, are names that do not in fact do much justice the actual origin of these animals. The American cockroach is actually thought to have originated in Africa, but thanks to the European slave trade, they became transported across the continents unbeknown to the Europeans who would ignorantly name them. A similar phenomena is behind the name of the German cockroach, which is actually originally thought to be endemic of Ethiopia, but ventured from the region thanks to humans (more than likely Phoenician traders), and established itself across Europe, eventually globally after the Europeans began colonizing. While being used in a variety of laboratory experiments, ranging from medical to pest management purposes (what better way to figure out how to kill something than study its weaknesses in a lab), the cockroach has never been even close to being in the full control of humans. Their swift spread across the world and their continued virulence within human society are testaments to the truly uncanny ability of cockroaches to persist in almost any environment they encounter and to maintain a wilderness within the anthropogenic landscapes that litter the land (Ibid, 72).

How does the story of the cockroach differ from that of the pigeon? The pigeon, unlike the cockroach, flies in plain sight and does carry near the stigma that the roach does. Perhaps only rats could compete with the roach. Unlike the pigeon, the roach must navigate not just outside the walls, but within the most intimates spaces of human society. The office building, the apartment, the house, and even our couches are not safe from these wild animals. Even more so than the pigeon, the cockroach infringes upon the human-nature dichotomy, the one that gives us the false illusion that our everyday is anything other but an encounter in an ecosystem full of dynamism. While we have dismantled the biodiversity that once riddled the landscape, the roach reminds us that this extinction was not absolute and that there are organisms even more capable of us at surviving. When we uncover the sofa cushion to discover an infestation of roaches, we are reminded that even anthropogenic landscapes cannot escape the wilderness. Where we go, the roach goes, and there is only so much we can say about that. Cockroach synanthropy may be the bane of many, but their persistence within our society grounds us in an ecological reality. To ponder the cockroach is to be transcended from the egotism of the everyday.

The Corvid Complex, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*

The American crow, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*, is one of the United States most common birds. With a range that encompasses the entirety of the US mainland and some of the southern parts of Canada, it is difficult to go anywhere in US and not encounter at least one specimen of this species. Unlike our previous species that we looked at, the American crow is native to North America, perhaps for as much as 1-2 million years. Since the first human stepped onto the continent, American crows were there watching our ancestors, observing them carefully, waiting patiently to figure out some way to capitalize on this new mammalian intruder. And capitalize they have (Grade, D., 2005).

The American crow, like humans, tends to prefer open fields with scattered trees. Dense woodlands are not favorable to them and our instead occupied by one of America's other great Corvids—*Corvus corax*, the black raven. Thus the indigenous peoples of the American prairies

were of great help to our corvid companions, as their burnings helped thin out tree stand, but left just the right amount for them to be able to roost comfortably. The same is true for the indigenous peoples of the south and the east whose settlements and agricultural stands provided more than enough space for them to occupy a niche not at odds with raven's. Furthermore, it is specifically the advent of agriculture that would really change things for the American crow, as the fields of corn squash and beans that indigenous peoples grew provided an unprecedentedly easily obtainable abundance of nutrients for the crows to capitalize on. So effective and wide spread were these exploitations of the crow, that indigenous peoples across the United States developed intricate cultural systems to combat them, including a mix of plant poisons, noise makes, and temporary lodges in food fields for designated to keep the crops safe from the winged opportunists (Grade, 153, 2012).

When the Europeans came to America, things were not much different. In fact, things only got better for the crow. With the destruction of the Eastern forests, the crow would start its ascent to unprecedented population abundance across America. Furthermore, the Europeans would also introduce another valuable food source—garbage. Thus for every city and every farm that began to pop up, so did the crow population increase. In fairness to our ancestors, this famous mongrel of agriculture is no pigeon. In fact American crows and their relatives are considered to be some of the most intelligent creatures on earth. Crows possess the ability to both problem solve and use tools. Furthermore, as their change in geographical synanthropy since the 1950s has also demonstrated, the crow is also capable of swift mass social change. While still roaming the countryside, especially around grain elevators in the winter, the crow, like humans, has become increasingly an urban species. Thought to be at a population 100,000, 000 million by the end of the 19th century, the crow population took a sharp decrease over the first half of the 20th century thought to have been the result of the forests coming back in the east and wide spread persecution of the animal in the country side. However, even after the West Nile virus outbreak that came in 1999, their population is still over 31,000,000—well above what it would have been if humans had not come (Grade, 159, 2012).

Being one of the most successful of our native species to adapt to human encroachment on all aspects of the landscape, has not by any means led to being championed as symbol of biological perseverance. Furthermore, while the crow has gained increased academic popularity in the last few decades, while being one of the common birds of the continent is one of the least studied. Is it the commonness itself which has historically made the crow unattractive as a topic of science? Does it in some way seem too human of a subject to be a worthy study of natural sciences? Perhaps this reasoning has some historical truth, but it not that contentious to claim that the crow is often an organism easily passed by, one rarely pondered by most people. At same time, it might be pointed out, it has been used a profound literary symbol, often being a sign of death or darkness. A flock of them itself is referred to as a murder. However, the meaning we have historically placed with the crow—as a varmint of agriculture, as a noisy nuisance, and symbol of darkness—does not do justice to what the crow stands for in an ecological or philosophical sense. While the crow itself often emerges in our reality as a norm within the anthropogenic environments we navigate, it exists there like the pigeon and the cockroach—out of its ability to adapt and persist. Otherwise stated, the crow is part of our everyday because of its own agency. When we pass the crow on the power line, in the oak tree, or in the garbage dump, we can nod them off completely as I'm sure most do, or we can dismiss them as parasites, but what lurks beneath their dark plumage is an untamed wilderness that resist the human. A wilderness that takes the human and capitalizes on it, effectively making their own world out of the one we perceive as our own; it is a corvid complex occupying a realm amidst the pigeons, roaches, and humans of the fragmented anthropogenic landscapes.

The Philosophy of Synanthropy

Synanthropic organisms, by definition, associate with *Homo sapiens*. Part of the consequence of this association, these organisms have the tenacity to get caught up in the fallacious human-nature dichotomy that has been the detriment of much human-environmental interaction over our relatively short evolutionary history as a species. The consequence is that just we like to put ourselves outside of nature, these close associates get caught in this trap as well, effectively becoming biologically othered. This view that is predominate in our society is detrimental, not only for the fallacy that it purports, but for the consequential dispositions that result which tends to place our actions within anthropogenic landscapes as anything

but natural. When we throw trash on the ground in the city, it inextricably linked to the pristine forest. That is, the consequences of our actions appear in nature. Pollution, habitat destruction, and species extinction is a tragedy, but the systems that cause it functions the way it does because we—all living things—are linked dynamic systems and the laws governing are consequential actions are natural. It is useful conceptually to other the destructive tendencies of humans, but it equally useful to understand that the reasons systems collapse is a natural response to shock. To remove the barrier between the natural and the unnatural is to remind us that we part of one environment. Our synanthropic companions, parasite and mutualist alike, remind us of the fallacious divide we get tricked into in many everyday experiences because they are first and foremost a reminder of the agency of non-humans that exists in (in a true sense) and outside (in a more conceptual sense) of our anthroposphere. While immersing one's self to the sublimity of the forest may seem more attractive, the synanthrope can as much of a tool of transparency as these more pristine environments. Given their proximity, they are perhaps one of the easiest ways to discard the egotism of human society, to experience a natural revelation that contextualizes our biological existence within a greater realm of ecological interaction. Thuds the philosophy of the synanthrope can be summarized as such: The next time you walk to the store and see a crow on top of a church, the next time you see pigeons on resting under the heat laps at train stop, or after you squash the unwelcomed cockroach in your house, take time to appreciate the ability of life to persist, to realize that even in our cities we are inherently ecological agents, and that the agency of other things is omnipresent even in our most anthropogenic landscapes of the 21st century.

Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College.

References

- British Broadcasting Corporation (2007), "Why do we hate pigeons so much?" Accessed online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uknews/magazine/6583217.stm>
- Eisley, Loren. "The Judgment of the Birds," as excerpted in The Norton Book of Nature Writing. New York: Norton, 200
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Nature, as excerpted in The Norton Book of Nature Writing. New York: Norton, 200:
- Gade, Daniel W. "Shifting Synanthropy of the Crow In Eastern North America." Geographical Review 100, no. 2, 2010: 152-175.
- Marzluff, J. and Angell, T. In the Company of Crows and Ravens, (Yale University: New Haven, 2005)
- Schweid, Richard. The Cockroach Papers: A Compendium of History and Lore. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999.