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LISA JENNY KRIEG

Caring for Strangers

Alterity, Alliances, and Reptile Conservation in the “Gecko Garden Refuges”
in Manapany-les-Bains, La Réunion

ABSTRACT: Commonly seen as either dangerous or unsocial, reptiles represent a kind of alterity that is often deemed categorically different from warm-blooded mammals. In the village of Manapany-les-Bains, however, on the island of La Réunion in the Western Indian Ocean, care for the endangered gecko species *Phelsuma inexpectata* has taken an unexpected turn: initiated by a local NGO, village residents have declared their private gardens a gecko-friendly zone. Engaging concepts of multispecies care and alterity, this article explores what caring for a reptile means. Based on ethnographic field research in Manapany-les-Bains, I will discuss how the gecko’s otherness remains an ambivalent trope, being both reduced and capitalized on, and that new alliances are exclusionary and fragmented.

Keywords: more-than-human geographies, human-animal relations, Indian Ocean, care, multispecies ethnography, otherness

1. Introduction

In a small village in the south of the island of La Réunion in the Western Indian Ocean, geckos and humans share gardens, and sometimes houses. The small colorful geckos, “géckos verts de Manapany”, or *Phelsuma inexpectata*, are a critically endangered species. Their habitat is limited to a small strip of coastal forest in the south of the island, and human settlements take up a large part of this area (Sanchez/Caceres 2011, 6). The members of a local NGO, *Nature Océan Indien* (NOI), have made it their goal to protect the pretty geckos through research, education, and conservation measures. By a stroke of genius, they developed the idea of garden refuges in order to create pockets of habitat in populated areas. Thus, they started the process of translating the ecological and genetic aspects of successful gecko conservation into local practices of care, with educational flyers and gardening advice.

Multispecies and STS scholars have discussed practices of care for endangered species from different perspectives. They point out that care is always a political act that expresses a particular way of being related to the world (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012; Tronto 1993). Care can create hope and community (van Dooren 2015a; Kirksey et al. 2013), but it always has limits: caring for one thing means to exclude something else from care. As such, care has exclusive, and potentially violent, aspects (Benson et al. 2017; van Dooren 2015b).

Geckos are cold-blooded reptiles, strangers to us humans, predators, with big eyes and scaly skin. In many ways, they are stereotypical “others” (Haraway 2003; Leistle 2017). As reptiles, they are perceived as lacking emotions, as cold and aggressive, as different from mammals and birds (Doody et al. 2013). This otherness and strangeness can complicate reptile conservation, as people do not care easily for them.

Our time is sometimes called the “Anthropocene” (Crutzen/Stoermer 2000; Tsing 2017), an age where human influence on the Earth is recognized as a geological force, and simultaneously a time of environmental collapse, where the dependency of humans on nature, and our entanglement with it, cannot be denied anymore. In the face of global ecological destruction and human-induced mass extinctions (Ceballos et al. 2015; Williams et al. 2015), biodiversity protection has become an international policy goal, visible for instance in the international *Convention on Biological Diversity*¹. The global significance of island biodiversity (Whittaker 1998, 33) renders caring for endangered island species especially urgent. New alliances, as Haraway (2016, 102) claims, are necessary in the face of ecological crisis. Humans, she argues, need to expand their notion of kinship and recognize our shared fate with nonhumans, and our kinship as beings on Earth (Haraway 2016). She calls on us to “make kin” (Haraway 2016, 103), to become engaged with our living environment, a call to care even for strangers.

But what does it mean to care for geckos? The garden refuges are a success, and many residents in Manapany-les-Bains have begun to care for the colorful geckos and to share their gardens and houses with them: their alterity has somehow shrunk. Many people now emphasize how pretty the geckos are. But these new alliances are ambivalent, and are still being negotiated. The non-endangered, similarly sized Asian house geckos are excluded from this care. And care for pretty and endangered geckos also has its limitations: when other matters are more pressing, eggs are crushed and geckos forgotten.

On the basis of my ethnographic fieldwork in La Réunion in September 2017 and 2018, I will explore here the ambivalence and interplay of care, alterity, and new alliances. The question of how to care for “others” that are strange, and for animals that are not charismatic, difficult to like, and potentially off-putting, has only recently been discussed by scholars, and is still underresearched (Abrahamsson/Bertoni 2014; Ginn et al. 2014; Rose/van Dooren 2011). I will show that while becoming included in practices of care, the Manapany day gecko’s otherness remains an ambivalent trope, being both reduced and capitalized on, and that new alliances are exclusionary and fragmented.

1 <https://www.cbd.int>.



2. Forests and geckos on La Réunion: an environmental history of flows and extinction

La Réunion, a French overseas department, is a small, mountainous island in the Western Indian Ocean, with large inland forests, steep coasts, an active volcano, and many endangered animal and plant species. Together with Mauritius and Rodrigues, La Réunion forms the island group of the Mascarenes, to the east of Madagascar. The arrival of humans on the Mascarenes in the 16th century caused much ecological destruction (Cheke/Hume 2008; Florens 2013; Walsh 2007). Deeply embedded in trans-oceanic trading relations, people and goods, and with them animals and plants, traveled between continents and islands, often with severe impacts on the native flora and fauna (Fuller et al. 2011). On La Réunion, many species have become extinct since human settlement, mainly due to habitat loss and invasive species. With continuous development today, and increasing participation in global flows, threats to native wildlife have become even more severe, leading to increased conservation efforts (Cheke/Hume 2008; Jones 2008; Sanchez/Probst 2016).

The *Parc national*, a government institution and the only national park on the island, today comprises around 42 % of the island's surface, and orchestrates most of the current conservation efforts.² The park is divided into several zones, with different degrees of control and different regulations, and cooperates closely with various NGOs, municipalities, and other government institutions, such as the *Office National de la Forêt* (ONF), the *Direction de l'Alimentation, de l'Agriculture et de la Forêt de La Réunion* (DAAF), and the *Direction de l'Environnement, de l'Aménagement et du Logement* (DEAL) (see figure 1).

Birds and reptiles are in the focus of fauna preservation on the island. La Réunion is home to two endemic species of *Phelsuma* day geckos. *Phelsuma borbonica* lives in the inland mountain forests, and *Phelsuma inexpectata*, the species to which this article is devoted, is endemic to one small patch of coastal lowland around the village of Manapany-les-Bains (Sanchez/Caceres 2011). The Manapany day gecko, as it is called, or in French, *gécko vert de Manapany*, is vulnerable to extinction due to its very limited distribution and population size. The biggest threats it faces are habitat destruction through economic development, agriculture and the loss of endemic plants; predation by introduced animals such as rats and cats; and competition (and possibly predation) by two species of invasive *Phelsuma* day geckos from Madagascar (Sanchez 2013; Sanchez/Caceres 2011; Sanchez/Probst 2016).

2 <http://www.reunion-parcnational.fr/fr/le-parc-national-de-la-reunion/le-territoire>.



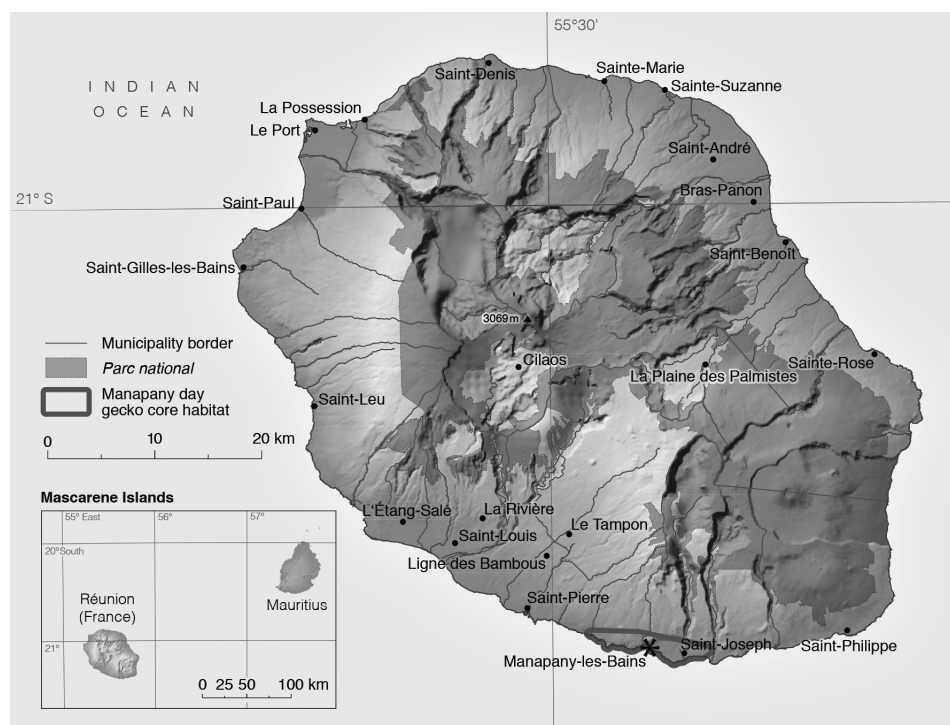


Figure 1: Map of La Réunion³

Day geckos of the genus *Phelsuma* are cosmopolitan animals: globally mobile, they have made new homes all around the world. The small, colorful, red and green lizards with their cute black eyes and friendly demeanor have colonized the Indian Ocean with its many islands – Madagascar, the Mascarenes, the Seychelles, the Comoros – and enjoy protection as an endangered species (Glaw/Rösler 2015, 252). Inside terrariums, they have conquered countless living rooms and cellars in Europe and the US, and elicit care, fascination, and dedication (Andreone et al. 2012). As stowaways or after breaking out of captivity, they have established populations in Florida, Hawaii, French Polynesia (Krysko et al. 2011; Ota/Ineida 2006; Seifan et al. 2010), and on Indian Ocean islands where they did not formerly belong, and are not always received with enthusiasm. On Mauritius, threatened endemic *Phelsuma* populations have been moved to thoroughly cleaned and restored off-shore islands, natural-artificial refuges (Michaelides et al. 2015).

On La Réunion, members of the NGO *Nature Océan Indien* (NOI)⁴ have made it their mission to protect the day gecko of Manapany through a variety of conservation activities. They have initiated citizen outreach and education projects, the creation of alternative habitats in garden refuges, the protection and restoration of the geckos' main

³ Based on data collected by Nature Océan Indien (NOI).

⁴ <https://natureoceanindien.org/association/>.



habitat in the coastal areas, and a fight against invasive geckos (Sanchez 2013; Sanchez/Caceres 2011).

The idea of the garden refuges is to create a network of pockets of habitat for the Manapany geckos in a semi-urban environment, by soliciting the help of the residents and garden owners. In order to become a refuge, residents have to sign a non-legal agreement with NOI that entails the following commitments: 1. To protect the plants that provide a habitat for the geckos, 2. To avoid killing geckos or destroying eggs if work needs to be done in the garden, 3. To avoid using chemical pesticides and herbicides in house and garden, and lastly 4. To avoid introducing reptiles and invasive plants into the garden. Additionally, as voluntary propositions, the agreement suggests that the garden owners should plant favorable plants, avoid leaving garbage outside so as not to attract rats, avoid garden work during the geckos' reproductive period, sensitize the neighbors, give seeds of favorable plants to NOI, and send pictures of the geckos to NOI for identification of individual geckos. NOI, in turn, promises to provide endemic plants for the gardens for free, provide gardening advice and technical equipment if necessary, and help with solving problems concerning the protection of the Manapany day geckos (Nature Océan Indien 2018). The project is a success. Over the past few years, more and more residents have joined the initiative, and started to care for geckos. They show their commitment by putting a refuge sticker on their mailbox (see figure 2). According to an employee of NOI, there are more than 150 refuges today, and they cover around 50 % of the settled



Figure 2: Mailbox with gecko refuge sticker in Manapany-les-Bains (photo by author)

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area of the geckos' habitat (interview 13.9.2018). The geckos also appear on maps for tourists, and on images of at least one Airbnb listing, but their power to attract visitors seems to be limited. Many villagers tell me that visitors from the city and from mainland France find the geckos less pleasant. They have not yet learned to care for geckos.

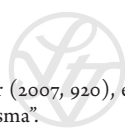
3. The politics of caring for reptiles: alliances, alterity, and exclusion

Care in a world of ongoing relations has been described by Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 198) as “those *doings* needed to create, hold together and sustain life's essential heterogeneity”, and by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher as “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 1993, 103). Care, according to Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 199), has ethical, affective, and practical components “that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences”. Care, thus, is inherent to being entangled in the world, to being mutually dependent on each other. It is a necessary part of relationships. It comprises a state of being affected by each other, but it is also enacted materially: care is *done*, it is performed (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 198). Caring for the environment – and for geckos – is thus an expression of being *related* to an environment that includes geckos, of sharing the same world with them, and of caring for our own world by caring for them. Losing native *Phelsuma* geckos to invasive species is tied to the conviction that a loss of biodiversity will ultimately affect humans.

Caring for one thing, however, means to exclude something else. As such, care always has limitations, and what is beyond can be troubling (Kirksey 2015, 154). By creating suitable environments for some creatures, we make the lives of others more difficult. In the extreme, caring for one endangered species can be tied to killing others, a common occurrence in invasive species management (Everts/Benediktsson 2015; Ogden 2018). Care, as van Dooren (2015b) claims, is often expressed as “violent care”.

But who decides which animals deserve to be cared for, and which do not? Regimes of value, related to biodiversity protection and genetic resources (Chernela 2012; Heatherington 2012), ecological function and biocapital (Helmreich 2009; Robbins/Moore 2013), but also to human perceptions of beauty (Chernela 2012, 30; Wilson 2002), shape such decisions. The question of who ends up on *this* side of care, worthy of caring relations, and who is too strange, *other*, lacks value, and is excluded from care, is also related to issues of similarity and *alterity* (cf. Leistle 2017). Thus, slimy, scaly, and crawling animals, and animals such as insects and reptiles, deemed to be less charismatic and less similar to humans, tend to end up on the other side of care (Ginn et al. 2014; Lorimer 2007).⁵ As Benson and colleagues (2017, 7) point out: “Care not only sustains, but also disciplines and categorizes human and other-than-human bodies, often in ways that are necessarily political”.

5 In some cases, though, as shown by Lorimer (2007, 920), exactly such strangeness and difference elicits fascination through what he calls “feral charisma”.



In the face of our current ecological crisis, multispecies scholars (Haraway 2016; Kirksey et al. 2013) have called for political acts of care, for new alliances with non-humans, and with “unloved others” (Rose/van Dooren 2011). Thus, in a world of climate change and global warming, where all our human and non-human fates are entangled, alliances with pigeons (Haraway 2016, 10 ff.), worms (Abrahamsson/Bertoni 2014), or snails (van Dooren 2015a) are necessary, as Haraway has argued (2016, 4). Care for the small, the slimy, the scaly, and the less-appreciated can thus also be seen as a political act – an act that is meant to contribute to a particular vision of the future by building new alliances in the present. In this context, van Dooren (2014, 293) asks:

“what kinds of emotional, political and epistemic frames orient our caring acts? What counts as care and why? How else might care be imagined and practiced? In short, *what* am I really caring for, *why*, and at *what cost* to whom?”

In response to these questions, I argue that every act of care forms an alliance, and is thus a political choice. Accordingly, Puig de la Bellacasa (2015) discusses the temporalities and rhythms of agricultural soil care as political choices – choices that align the actor with particular modes of economic production and thus with politico-economic ideologies.

Establishing relations of care with other species in a particular environment, for instance with endangered geckos in gardens in Manapany-les-Bains, means caring for and maintaining a distinct, interrelated world, creating “bubbles of comfort” (Kirksey 2015, 154). These bubbles are environments in which animals, plants, and humans are entangled with each other and cared for in particular ways, set off from adverse circumstances on the outside, and from potential adverse effects on those who are excluded.

Here, I will explore how such bubbles are established, and how geckos of a particular species – the small, scaly, cold-blooded Manapany day geckos – have moved into the realm of the relatable, of the cared-for, of the non-other: they have been made kin, in Haraway’s words. As we will see, this process is by no means unambiguous: for some people, the geckos remain strange, repellent others. And other geckos, such as the invasive *Phelsuma* day geckos and nocturnal geckos, have consistently remained excluded, not-cared-for others.

4. Studying geckos and people: an ethnographic multispecies approach

The data for this article was collected in August and September 2017, during a period of multi-sited ethnographic field research on Mauritius and La Réunion, and in September 2018, in Manapany-les-Bains on La Réunion. My research on La Réunion is embedded in a larger research project focused on animal mobilities, and particularly on the global mobility of *Phelsuma* geckos as a terrarium pet, a protected species, and an invasive species. The goal of the project is to study *Phelsuma* geckos (and the humans caring for them) in different sites in Germany, Mayotte, La Réunion and Mauritius, resonating with Marcus’ (1995, 109 f.) take on multi-sited ethnography.

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In order to gain a deeper understanding of the multispecies dynamics in Manapany-les-Bains, I followed a threefold approach. This combined a focus on 1) dominant *conservation discourses* shaping the garden refuge project, 2) *daily life* with the protected *Phelsuma* geckos in the village of Manapany-les-Bains, and 3) *multispecies assemblages* (van Dooren et al. 2016) of geckos and other animals and plants in the Manapany gardens.

To explore *conservation discourses*, I conducted eleven interviews and conversations with experts working in the field of nature conservation in different contexts: independent researchers, writers/artists, and employees of the *Parc national*, NOI, DEAL, DAAF, and Reptiles974. I also visited different sites in the *Parc national*, participated in two volunteering days with NOI to fight invasive plants in gecko habitats, and, as an ethnographic “go-along” (Kusenbach 2003), I accompanied an NOI employee on six visits to garden refuges, where he discussed gardening issues with Manapany residents and gave them free plants. Some of these people were chosen as ‘experts’ and contacted prior to field research, others were chosen during the course of my fieldwork through ‘snowball sampling’ (Noy 2008).

In order to gain insights into *daily life in Manapany-les-Bains* and the interaction between geckos and humans, I spent just over a week in August 2017 with two different families who shared their homes and gardens with geckos, and conducted many informal conversations and observations of daily life. I spent the whole month of September 2018 in Manapany-les-Bains, in a one-room apartment I rented, with its own little garden patch that was home to a number of Manapany day geckos, and an official gecko garden refuge. With this approach, practices of care and negotiations of alterity became palpable, as they played out in many everyday situations that I observed. During this month, I visited eleven private gardens, some of which were refuges. I talked to many more neighbors and garden owners, audiotaped some of the conversations as short interviews lasting between 5 and 30 minutes, and took notes of other conversations. Conversations about gardens, plants, and geckos formed the backdrop of daily life. I conducted all the conversations and interviews in French.

Multispecies ethnography is characterized by its “attentiveness to nonhuman agency” (Ogden et al. 2013, 16), which includes “the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds” (Kirksey/Helmreich 2010, 545). This inclusiveness implies an opening to nonhuman experience and entanglement, being attentive to a “multiplicity [...] of perspectives” (van Dooren et al. 2016, 4), a kind of “engaged witnessing” (Bell et al. 2018). In accordance with this approach, and in line with my focus on *multispecies assemblages*, I paid special attention to geckos, in my own garden and in the neighborhood, trying to understand what matters to them. I observed their behavior and routines, the places, niches and plants they inhabited, and their relations and interactions with other species (including myself). I shared my home with geckos, and spent countless mornings and afternoons observing multispecies interactions in my garden. While I liked *Phelsuma* day geckos to begin with, my relation to them as an abstract genus, or a particular species, changed. In Manapany-les-Bains, I built relationships not only with people who care for geckos, but also with the individual geckos in my garden,

whose routines I got to know intimately. I began to care for them in practice, while my perception of their alterity changed.

Table 1: Summary of fieldwork activities in La Réunion

Field stay	Fieldwork activities	Focus
Two weeks, August/September 2017	– One week as a guest in a family home in Manapany-les-Bains, a gecko refuge – One night as a guest in another home inhabited by geckos – Informal conversations with my two local hosting families – 3 days stay in the <i>Parc national</i> with a biologist – 7 interviews/in-depth conversations with different experts: biologists, NOI, DEAL, Réptiles974, <i>Parc national</i> – Two days of volunteering with NOI	Conservation discourses Daily life in Manapany
One month, September 2017	– Living in an apartment with a gecko-refuge garden – 4 interviews with stakeholders from NOI, Réptiles974, <i>Parc national</i>, DAAF – Accompanied an NOI employee on 6 garden visits – Ethnographic visits to 11 private gardens and conversations with garden owners – Informal conversations with villagers – Regular observations of geckos and cats in my own garden	Conservation discourses Daily life in Manapany Multispecies assemblages

5. Is caring sharing? Conviviality in gecko gardens

Manapany-les-Bains is a quiet village, nestled between steep and densely wooded mountains and the rocky shores of the Indian Ocean. There is a small shop with irregular opening hours, two restaurants, and the ‘*basin*’ – a tide pool where swimming is allowed, which attracts locals and tourists alike, especially on weekends. Swimming in the open sea is forbidden due to sharks.⁶ The houses are pretty and well maintained, the gardens colorful and tended. Big palm trees line the streets, and Pandanus trees, locally called *Vacoas*, a species of screw pines, are omnipresent. Behind the tourist office, a little educational path along the steep coast to an ancient fort, the *Four à Chaux*, features big signs with images and explanations about the endemic Manapany day gecko and its peculiarities. And most Manapany residents, when asked about geckos, will mention this place first: the *Vacoas* trees just opposite the tourist office, where most visitors will

6 <http://www.info-requin.re/espaces-amenages-r87.html> (18.3.2020).



probably encounter their first gecko. I saw geckos here almost every time I passed by, curiously peeking down at me from their trees.

After settling into my tiny apartment on the shore of the Indian Ocean, and getting used to the noise and the constant humidity in the air that caused everything to decay, I also got accustomed to the positive but unexcited attitude of Manapany residents towards their local green geckos. A few people were absolutely fascinated by them, but most met them with a quiet, slightly positive indifference: “Oh yes, it’s very important to protect them”, my neighbors would say, unhurriedly.

In the following sections, I will explore ethnographic encounters with resident humans and geckos in Manapany. Focusing on how relations of care between humans and geckos play out in the face of the geckos’ strangeness, I will discuss how strangeness is bridged and reduced, how it is capitalized on, how it remains, and how new alliances are still exclusionary.



Figure 3: Manapany day gecko (*Phelsuma inexpectata*) in a garden in Manapany-les-Bains (photo by author)

5.1 The ambivalence of strangeness: making kin with geckos

The people’s attitude has changed, people told me repeatedly during my fieldwork in Manapany, due to the immense efforts of NOI during the last ten to fifteen years. While geckos were formerly regarded as pests, as dirty, many people now welcome them in their houses and gardens, and actually design their gardens in ways favorable to the geckos. A couple at whose house I stayed rent a room out through a big online portal, and advertise it with pictures of the rare endemic geckos that can be observed there.

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When I told my landlady in the car, on our way back from the bus station, that I wanted to study human-gecko relations, she laughed and said: “Well, there are no relations!” In spite of this statement, she, like others, was intimately acquainted with the daily rhythms and routines of their gecko regulars. “There are a lot outside in the plants”, she told me on my first visit to her tastefully furnished house. She had also signed the gecko-refuge agreement. “Inside the house, I have three”. This exact number astounded me. She told me that one lives inside the balcony cabinet, one here, and one over there, pointing to different corners. When I wondered out loud how she could tell them apart, she explained to me patiently, as though she was stating the obvious, that their patterns and colors are like human faces and of course she can recognize them.

One morning, I visited the elderly aunt of my neighbor, Lucile⁷, an elegant, quiet lady in her eighties. She moved to the coast from further inland, in order to swim in the *basin* every day to maintain her health. She is widowed and lives alone in a tidy, wooden, white-and-blue house by the sea, but her children and her many grandchildren visit frequently. Lucile has not signed up as an NOI garden refuge, because she has enough to do as it is, but she still likes the geckos. They have such beautiful colors, she says, and are so pretty, “like a small brooch. You could wear them on your dress!” she chuckled. Her grandchildren like to watch them, and to hold the small ones in their hands. She has one big male who lives in her bathroom. “It’s always the same one”, she told me, chuckling repeatedly. “He disappears, and then, when the season arrives, I don’t know, he comes into the house. Into the bathroom. [...] He walks around, I see him all the time” (interview 9.9.2018). And once, she continued, a baby gecko fell from the ceiling onto the plate of her friend: “It was a group from my club, I invited them for dinner. And then there was one, a small one, a really pretty one, it fell onto my friend’s plate [...]. And she said: Look, there is a gecko on my plate!” Lucile was laughing now, and so was I. She continued: “and I said to her, well, it’s not dirty. Let’s wipe it off a bit here, where it fell, but it’s not dirty” (interview 9.9.2018).

A young woman from further up the street knew exactly at which time of the day the geckos would cross the corridor inside her house, in order to move from one area to the other. She was trying desperately to make her large garden greener, and to create pathways for the geckos to cross it, by planting the right trees in the right spots. Some people went even further, and put out fruit and little plates with water. One of the families in the street told me how the geckos eat breakfast with them, how they come to the table and wait for their drop of jam.

In all these cases, geckos seem to be perceived not as strangers, but as relatable living beings. Pretty, and clean, they are different from humans, but their claim to shared spaces in houses and gardens appears legitimate and natural, not something to shy away from. Even my landlady, who argues that there are no relations with geckos, who is very conscious of the difference and thinks it is impossible to relate to a gecko, still sees them as individuals living their legitimate lives inside and outside her house, without posing

7 All names in this article have been changed in order to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

any problems. Lucile refers to her regular gecko as “he”, a recognizable individual with his own habits. Like a response to Haraway’s (2016) call to recognize nonhumans as kin sharing our fate, humans and geckos seem to have entered an alliance here, where difference is no reason for exclusion. Geckos have entered the webs of relations that Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) and Tronto (1993) talk about. While they might still be strange, and different in some ways, they are also seen as deserving of care and attention, as an important part of the environment, a species with value.

I was curious about a colorful house with a wild garden down the street, which I had admired from the outside, and finally I visited my neighbor Rose, who also had a gecko refuge sticker on her mailbox. Everything seemed to overflow in her house, books, paintings, flowers, seeds, and plants. “I would prefer not to cut the trees at all”, she told me, a small, beautiful woman in her early sixties, with sparkling dark eyes and a warm smile. “But my husband wants to, to have a better view of the sea”. The vacoas trees she talked about, just in front of the windows facing the sea, are the geckos’ main habitat. It offers them everything: hiding places, nourishment in the form of nectar, fruits, and insects, and egg-laying sites. One such tree can provide everything for a group of geckos. In Rose’s home, the geckos live everywhere: inside the house, behind the paintings, in the garden, on the buildings, in the trees. They lay their eggs inside the window frames. “We have so many!” She laughs, happily, a little proud, her eyes sparkling. She loves them. The geckos observe her, too, she says. They turn their heads to watch her closely. “It’s like an encounter with the wild”, she says, about this moment of locking gazes. She looks at me, intently, smiling mysteriously, “I enjoy it a lot”. While we sit and talk on the verandah, Rose points out several trees to me, including a big coconut palm which they wanted to cut down because the falling coconuts could hurt someone. Now we see a few geckos sitting on it, and Rose says they might need to reconsider. There are a few vacoas trees outside the garden: together with other neighbors, she had planted many of these trees along the shoreline, to provide more homes for the geckos. She grins mischievously when she tells me that officially, it is not allowed to plant trees in public spaces. We drink the coconut water they just harvested from their garden, and then Rose grows quiet and points to the table in front of her. A small, tail-less gecko is sitting under the glass table-top and looking at her. We wait and watch in silence. Slowly, the gecko comes out, watches us, walks along the table rim towards Rose. Suddenly, he jumps onto her leg. I watch in disbelief, while Rose smiles contentedly. He continues to the back of her leg, and then jumps back to the table. I cannot believe what just happened. While some geckos are curious, I never saw a gecko voluntarily approaching a human. Rose seems unfazed. She recounts how she places water bowls and fruit outside for the geckos, and says she sees them eat and drink. Doesn’t their presence in house and garden disturb her at all, I ask. They poop on the wall, she says, and shrugs. Later, I recount to my landlady in amazement the incredible number of beautiful geckos at Rose’s house, and my landlady chuckles. As it turns out, the woman who cleans both of their homes had told her about the countless lizards hiding in each and every corner of this neighbor’s house, scaring her every time she has to clean there.

Resonating with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2012) description of care as a practice of relation and interdependence, and an acceptance of entanglement, Rose incorporates practices of caring for geckos in her daily life, and accepts the intertwining of her and her husband's life with the geckos' routines. Thus, the spaces behind the paintings in their living room also serve as a gecko habitat, window frames are egg-laying sites, and both geckos and humans lay claim to the trees in the garden. House and garden become multilayered sites, where human and gecko lives play out, offering niches and possibilities for both.

These examples also show ambivalent attitudes to the geckos' alterity: my landlady's words show that she sees the geckos as very different, as strongly "other", in a way that makes them impossible subjects of relation. At the same time, however, she recognizes them individually and accepts them in her house, as fellow inhabitants, individuals with their own claim to corners in her house, not as strangers in her living room, but rather as roommates. Both "other" and "non-other", my landlady and the geckos meet as both strangers and kin.

Rose, on the other hand, relates to the geckos in an open, affectionate way, that seems to reduce their alterity. She talks about their beauty, and how they interact with her: by looking at her, or crawling on her. But not only does she care for geckos, being an ethnobotanist she has much knowledge of plants, and knows which ones are edible and which ones medicinal. During our walks together, she would always point out plants, and explain what they can be used for. She told me that she could easily survive in the wild and live on plants of all kinds. For her, the mutual interdependence between geckos, plants, and humans, of which care is a manifestation (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012), is an important and literal fact: she knows that the nonhuman entities around her provide for her, and she provides for them, by putting out water and fruits for the geckos, and planting trees for them. She emphasizes that we, as humans, are related to nature and all living beings, in much the same way as Haraway (2016). At the same time, her way of relating to the geckos, as fascinating strangers that stand for "the wild", capitalizes on the geckos' alterity: they are cared for *because* of their otherness. Lorimer (2007, 920) calls this fascination with strange animals "feral charisma", a kind of attraction elicited by strangeness and difference, that also feeds into biodiversity discourses and into the terraristic community (Bischoff 2001, 13). This goes to show that alterity is an ambivalent trope in the context of care: alterity and strangeness need to be overcome to move geckos into the realm of care, to make them relatable. At the same time, fascination with the other, strangeness, can, as "feral charisma" (Lorimer 2007), strengthen care and thus be utilized. On the other hand, this discourse of strangeness can also be turned around, and set limitations to how much care for, and relations with, geckos are actually possible and necessary.

5.2 Awkward flourishing: when eggs break and care is exclusive

Haraway (2008) has pointed out in her work on interspecies encounters that caring for another goes hand in hand with being drawn into the historical and ethical entangle-

ments of other species' worlds, making the notion of care ethically more complex. Care always has limitations, and what is beyond can be troubling. Thus, caring for one species means excluding other, less-loved individuals and species (Kirksey 2015, 154), such as, in the case of geckos in Manapany, the Asian house geckos. Creating suitable environments for some makes the lives of others more difficult. In extreme cases, caring for one endangered species can be tied to killing others, a common occurrence in invasive species management (Ogden 2018). Recognizing that care is often expressed in regimes of "violent care", as van Dooren (2015b) calls it, crystallizes the uncomfortable truth that also Benson and colleagues (2017, 7) point out:

"It is important to note that care troubles easy antagonisms: it is ambivalent and never innocent, insofar as it creates and often depends upon unequal power relations. While it can be life-giving and nurturing, it can also be violent and even murderous. We cull for conservation; trap pests in greenhouses but also pets within our homes; we rehabilitate research animals."

While people in Manapany care for the geckos, most of them will only make small concessions. If more urgent matters come up, these small concessions are quickly forgotten or superseded. Care involves unequal power relations, as shown in the above quotation from Benson et al. (2017, 7): care is not reliable, but the geckos' lives depend on it. Care, in Manapany-les-Bains, is fragile, and death is just around the corner.

Marcel, father of three children, lives with his family in Manapany. He and his wife both have jobs, and their lives are more than full. They are, officially, a gecko refuge, but their garden mostly consists of a lawn, with only a few trees lining the border to the neighboring house – not really gecko habitat. "I have to admit", Marcel says, "we have not really played the whole game, but it's because we have three little kids and we are very busy" (interview 6.9.2018). "We mean well for the geckos. Well, apart from that, we are, I would say, minimal ecologists. But really minimal [...]. I'd say that we pay more attention to his [the gecko's] presence, to see if there are more or less. But we mainly let him live. I think he lives well here. He doesn't need us, and we live well with him". They once got a *Palmiste blanc* tree from NOI, but it didn't grow. And that was that.

My landlady, who is also signed up as a garden refuge, also says that she pays attention: she doesn't use chemical pesticides, not even against the cockroaches. "You have to use a shoe instead!" she says, laughing, throwing an invisible shoe. In the season when she cuts the trees, she tries to pay attention to the geckos' eggs. "*Mais oui*", she says, stops, and shrugs. And what I hear, between the lines, is that there is only so much you can do, and that sometimes eggs will break.

Alliances between cats and humans often get in the way of relations with geckos. Almost every house in the village has one or more cats, and they are beloved pets. The cats are too slow, residents tell me, they don't chase the geckos. My landlady also has cats, four of them. "They chose the house", she says. The two old ones have been with her a long time, the two young ones came recently. She knows that cats and geckos are not friends. "They don't hunt much", she waves my concerns away. Seeing Chippie, one of the younger cats, stare into the bushes where the geckos live, I believe they at least try. My landlady's care for geckos has its limits, and takes a certain death toll into account.

What would it mean to care more for geckos than for cats? When Ginn and colleagues talk about multispecies assemblages, they describe these as “awkward flourishing” (Ginn et al. 2014, 114): when multiple life forms are entangled with each other, not all will do well. Most Manapany residents have cats or dogs that they care for; they have children and jobs. One of my neighbors, a retired teacher, was much in favor of protecting the geckos, but his garden was not a gecko refuge. “That would not be honest, I think. When you have cats, you cannot say that you’re a refuge. I would have to kill my cats. But well,” he said, raising his arms up in the air in a gesture of helplessness (interview 4.9.2018). This is a step that he is not willing to take. He would prefer not to have cats in this place, because of the geckos, but he moved here together with his cat, and will continue to take care for her. Killing cats is not a socially accepted option – not for my neighbor, and not for most others, even though nature conservationists are more than aware of the damage done by cats (interview NOI and *Parc national*, 11.9.2018, 21.9.2018). Moreover, relations with cats in Manapany are relations with *individual* cats, while relations with geckos still mostly take the shape of relations to the *species* or a *population*. Despite some people’s ability to recognize individual geckos, as shown above, I did not observe anyone in Manapany naming a gecko – apart from myself. There is a strong tension between relations with individuals and relations with species, and this is associated with different modes of care (van Dooren 2015a, 22; Lorimer 2010, 502). This was a challenging topic for me, as I built relations with both individual geckos *and* cats where I lived. And even though my sympathies lay with the geckos, I cannot deny that imagining the death of my regular cat-visitor, Chippie, was a shocking thought. Maybe the geckos’ smallness has something to do with this? Their appearance as a group, as always ‘many’? Lorimer (2007, 920) describes how difficult it is for humans to relate to insects due to “their radical alterity to humans in terms of size, ecology, physiology, aesthetics, and modes of social organization”. Geckos are bigger than insects, and they are distinguishable from each other. But they still cannot compete with the long, shared history of companionship between humans and cats, of “becoming with” (Haraway 2006, 99).

The death of geckos, from time to time, seemed to be tolerated. When asked whether he would mourn a dead gecko, Manapany resident Peter said that “this is part of nature”. He has a rolling garage door on his property, and the geckos sometimes climb into it. When he closes it, the geckos are crushed. “It happens”, Peter says, and shrugs. “We pick them up. No, well, that’s nature. They are eaten, they live, they die” (interview 14.9.2018). ‘Nature’, for Peter and his wife is an ambivalent trope: it means that they will generously share their house and garden with the geckos, and accept their claim to the space. But ‘nature’ also means that they accept that geckos die, and that they cannot do much about it. But are geckos, cats, and humans all part of this ‘nature’ in the same way? In this respect, what Peter calls ‘nature’ is a very particular version of Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2012, 199) “interdependent existences”, a web of relations in which life and death are different aspects of the same close entanglements – but in which his responsibility for the geckos’ wellbeing is limited. This ‘nature’ stands for an awkward kind of flourishing, that, in the words of Ginn and colleagues (2014, 115), “always involves a constitutive violence.”

While most people agree that the Manapany geckos are pretty, cute, and in need of our care, things look very different for the Asian and Pacific night geckos: they are brown or transparent, a bit smaller than the Manapany day geckos, and live inside houses. They are still considered vermin, and a special poison is sold to get rid of them. Gecko refuges are not allowed to use it, but love for the Manapany geckos is nevertheless not extended to their colorless kin. As an ethnographer, I found the drawing of these boundaries arbitrary, and interesting, but could not help the effect they had on myself. Every day in Manapany, I spend some time in my garden, and I loved to observe the Manapany day geckos living there. Oskar, on the right of the door, was curious and let me come quite close. A shy couple lived on the left side of the door. Seeing these familiar scaly faces made me smile each time I left or entered my apartment through the garden door. Once, however, when I opened the door, I stared directly into the unfamiliar yellow eyes of a small brown Asian house gecko hiding behind the door, with sharp, vertical pupils. Startled, I jumped back, and could not help but feel repelled – a reaction which showed me bodily what it means that some are cared for at the expense of others. All this care had indeed turned the Manapany day geckos into “kin”, as Donna Haraway (2016, 102) puts it: new alliances between people, plants and geckos were flourishing, but some reptiles remained strangers, uncomfortable others, excluded from care.

In other gardens, residents have cut down vacoas trees in order to make space for a pool, or they intend to replant to make up for the missing trees, but they wait for a few months before doing so. “And in the meantime, where should the geckos go?” asks NOI employee Didier rhetorically, between two of our joint garden visits. Many residents are willing to plant trees that are favorable for the geckos, but they also want them to be pretty.

Caring for geckos in Manapany is not always a deep involvement. In Manapany, some people care for geckos intensively, out of a deep sense of entanglement with nature (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012), while others practice only minimal kinds of care that accept geckos as a pretty part of nature that “simply is there” (interview Peter, 14.9.2018). The educational work done by NOI has helped to move the Manapany day gecko into the realm of possible care. As a result, the Manapany gecko has become distinct, more valued and loved, than the Asian house geckos. In multispecies assemblages, as Ginn and colleagues (2014, 115) argue, “some collectives prosper at the expense of others”. Thus, the Manapany day geckos are a little bit more loved, and enjoy a little bit more care – even if this only means being a *little* more aware and accepting. These changes are small, but for the overall population of Manapany day geckos, they make a huge difference. However, these “bubbles of comfort”, in Kirksey’s (2015, 154) words, are small, and things look less good for those on the outside.

Power is distributed unequally in caring relations between geckos and humans in Manapany-les-Bains. Care is always ambivalent, as many STS and multispecies scholars have pointed out (Benson et al. 2017; van Dooren 2015a; Kirksey 2015). In Manapany, care for cats and care for geckos collide, and not all daily routines, such as opening a rolling door, or cutting the trees, can accommodate attunement to the needs of geckos. Who would be willing to take ten times longer to open their garage door every morn-

ing? Who would be willing to kill their cats? Who would transfer every single egg from a tree that is about to be felled? This kind of care is not completely impossible, but it is not realistic. Caring for geckos in Manapany revolves around smaller concessions: welcoming geckos in houses and gardens, paying attention, and planting new trees.

6. Conclusion: hope, death, and the challenges of being small

Hope in the face of ecological disaster, death, and extinction must be modest, as some multispecies scholars argue (Kirksey et al. 2013, 231). Even when species are lost and the environmental future looks grim, new life will flourish in small niches, and new alliances between humans and nonhumans will form. Hope can be found in collective, creative labor (Kirksey 2014, 296), or in small successes, such as keeping a species alive a little longer (van Dooren 2015a, 3). In the context of ongoing habitat destruction, and the proliferation of invasive species on La Réunion, the future of the Manapany day gecko does indeed look grim. The garden refuges are nevertheless a hopeful initiative, one that relies on new alliances. It binds the residents of Manapany together in collective action for their local gecko, and uses private gardens as small niches. There, geckos can still flourish, if the humans care for them just a little bit, and if some of their favorite trees are present.

Maybe geckos and humans exist on scales that are too different to expect more. Maybe geckos, and their eggs, are too small, and thus too vulnerable, and death on their scale must be expected. Other scholars have argued that humans tend to pay more attention to animals that are similar to themselves in size and other bodily characteristics (Lorimer 2007, 917). Gecko eggs, in particular, are barely one centimeter long. They break easily. And as reptiles, no emotionally meaningful relationships with individual geckos can be expected, in contrast to cats (cf. Doody et al. 2013). Human-gecko relations have a different history.

For the species *Phelsuma inexpectata*, the Manapany day gecko, and for NOI, the organization that devised the garden refuge project, the fragile care that has developed in Manapany-les-Bains is a big success. Collectively, the minimal practices of many make a difference. Gecko-friendly gardens are now dispersed all across Manapany, allowing the geckos some mobility, and thus providing some hope in the face of ongoing habitat destruction. When we talk of hope, however, the question is whether this project is viable, or only postpones the inevitable. In van Dooren's (2015a, 12) words: "What should we be hoping for in these times of incredible loss, and are we able to hope responsibly?"

Some small populations of Manapany day geckos that are far away from the core population might have to be given up in the future, as NOI's leading employee tells me (interview 21.9.2018). The gardens, on the other hand, might be viable. The gecko garden refuges might be what Kirksey (2015, 154) calls "bubbles of comfort": environments in which animals, plants, and humans are entangled with each other in particular practices of care. These bubbles, as I have shown, are exclusive webs of relations. Not everyone will be part of them. Care is a choice, and a political act, a way of building a *particular*

relation – at the expense of others. Where new alliances are built and kinship is extended, some will benefit more than others. Thus, caring for geckos is a way to work towards a *particular* bubble that stands for more – it is a political statement of how we see ourselves and others in relation to the world.

Some of these issues and tensions, concerning how strange or “other” a gecko is, and which other species need to be included or excluded from care regimes, are related to the question of our perception of nature: how big is “our world”, in Tronto’s (1993, 103) words, the web of entanglements to which we are related? Considering nature and non-human species as something we are part of, as our world and kin, with many different connections and entanglements, makes it more likely that we will care for them.

The nature of difference in what constitutes “our world” is thus at stake. And as scholars studying human-environment relations, we have to define our own stance in this respect. Can difference be bridged, can it be dissolved, or is it insurmountable, too radical? Or is such “radical alterity”, as David Graeber (2015, 28) put it, “just another way of saying ‘reality’”, because reality is made of difference?

Caring for geckos, to conclude, is political, because it is entangled with larger processes and ideologies. Caring for geckos is part of processes of assigning value to nature, to living beings, and of deciding who deserves to live or to die. In exploring care for geckos, we can see how strangeness can be bridged, and alliances established. When geckos are recognized as pretty and “not dirty”, care practices are transformed and extended to life forms that are not always appreciated or valued. But their strangeness does not disappear entirely. The ethnographic material presented above illustrates how strangeness emerges, and is capitalized on when geckos come to stand for “the wild”, when they are seen as fascinating and valuable, and are cared for *because* they are different. In other situations strangeness erases all value, which is seen most strikingly when the death of individual geckos through cats, or garage doors, is not something to be mourned. Strangeness and difference remain a part of gecko care: always in the background, and sometimes in the foreground, perceptions of strangeness and difference are situational. They are intertwined with practicing care and assigning value, and when they surface, they force humans to take a stance and commit themselves to defining what they consider to be “their world”.

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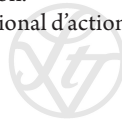
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