

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Elusive Encounters With Geckos, Or, How to Cross the Human-Reptile Divide

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In multispecies ethnographies, the question of how to encounter the ‘Other’ is urgent and challenging. Debates about alterity and difference, and different ontologies have informed such debates, and they become even more pressing in ethnographic encounters with nonhuman others, where not only culture and language are a factor contributing to difference, but divides between taxonomic categories. This article focuses on the role of strangeness in encounters for the ethnographer. Interweaving methodological reflections about the nature of alterity in ethnography, biological discussions about the difference between mammals and reptiles, and my own ethnographic experiences in researching human-gecko relations, I will illustrate here how I dealt with the difficulties of encountering *Phelsuma* day geckos ethnographically by focusing on the niches of shared spaces. I will recount how I made small spaces fruitful for my research by tuning into the dynamics of human-gecko encounters that happened there. Politeness, respect, and protocols shaped spaces and encounters, but were always volatile and never fully reliable. As such, encounters were less elusive and could be well accessed ethnographically, and alterity was constantly renegotiated.

"Signification is the Infinite, but infinity does not present itself to a transcendental thought, nor even meaningful activity, but presents itself in the Other; the Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me by his essence qua infinity"
(Levinas, 1979, p. 207).

When I woke up from my nap, my gaze moved to the terrarium on the other side of the room. And at the very front, just by the front glass panel, Zwiebel sat on a branch, head turned towards me, still observing. That was freaky. But not the first time. Sometimes, when I'm sitting at my desk I turn my head towards the terrarium, and I see that Zwiebel has been observing me. I realize this when he is sitting on a spot where he does not usually sit, head turned towards me, what he does not do when

he is resting. That makes you wonder, what thoughts are passing through his head when he sees me. What am I for him?
(Field diary, 13.3.2018)

Introduction

In multispecies ethnographies, the question of how to encounter the “Other” is urgent and challenging. Ethnography has grappled with the issue of encountering and understanding various *human* “Others” since its inception (Malinowski, 1922), with power asymmetries in postcolonial encounters (Ahmed, 2000), and with the epistemological limitations and political ambivalences of representing others in ethnographic writing (Clifford, 1986). Examinations of alterity and difference (Graeber, 2015; Leistle, 2016b; Levinas, 1979), and different ontologies (De Castro, 2015; Erazo & Jarrett, 2018; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017) have informed such debates, and they become even more pressing in ethnographic encounters with nonhuman others, where not only culture and language are a factor contributing to difference, but divides between taxonomic categories. How do we know the nonhuman other across these divides, and how do the places in which these encounters are situated affect the production of such knowledge?

Resonating with early attempts to give voices to postcolonial others (Said, 1978), multispecies ethnography has been characterized by an opening towards nonhuman experience and entanglement, as being attentive to a “multiplicity [...] of perspectives” (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 4). This inclusiveness also implies an “attentiveness to nonhuman agency” (Ogden et al., 2013, p. 16), which includes in its scope “the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds” (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, p. 545). These attempts, however, have epistemological limitations that multispecies scholars grapple and deal with in different ways. “How can or should or do anthropologists speak with and for nonhuman others?” ask Kirksey and Helmreich (2010, p. 554), resonating with the *Writing Culture* debate (Clifford, 1986); and Bell et al. (2018, p. 1) remark, dryly, that “you cannot survey kangaroos about their thoughts and actions, or ask an angophora tree to describe how it feels.” Broadening one’s perspective through engaging with other disciplines (van Dooren et al., 2016), close contact with nonhuman others (Bell et al., 2018), and artistic approaches (Kirksey, 2014) have been ways that multispecies ethnographers chose to tackle these challenges.

My own ethnographic multispecies research about relationships between humans and *Phelsuma* day geckos is characterized by similar difficulties, which, however, play out in a way specific to geckos. As reptiles, geckos have certain characteristics that render interaction with them more difficult, and communication less smooth than with mammals, or even birds (Panksepp, 2004, p. 42). These stark physiological differences accompanying taxonomic distance are amplified by stereotypes of cold-blooded reptiles (Doody et al.,

2013), and contribute to shaping them as “Others.” In addition to the issue of alterity, encounters with *Phelsuma* geckos tend to be elusive, fleeting, and short. Mostly, geckos are not interested in interaction with humans, and prefer to hide. I have shown elsewhere that caring for geckos is possible, that alterity in the interaction with geckos can be bridged, and that the interspecies solidarity and new alliances that Haraway asks for can develop, albeit in a narrowly defined way, as they do in a village in the south of the island La Réunion (Haraway, 2016, p. 102; Krieg, 2020a).

In this article, I will focus on the role of strangeness in encounters for the *ethnographer*. Interweaving methodological reflections about the nature of alterity in ethnography, biological discussions about the difference between mammals and reptiles, and my own ethnographic experiences in researching human-gecko relations, I will illustrate here how I dealt with the difficulties of situated ethnographic encounters with geckos by focusing on the niches of *shared spaces*, what Haraway has called “contact zones” (Haraway, 2008, pp. 208–209). Resonating with the notions of *Folk*, *Knowledge*, and *Place*, I will recount how I made small spaces (*place*) fruitful for my research by tuning into the local dynamics of human-gecko encounters (*folk*) and the subsequent *knowledge* production that happened there. Other multispecies scholars have described such an approach as “passionate immersion” (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 6), or “engaged witnessing” (Bell et al., 2018). I found these shared spaces in terrariums in Germany, and in the houses and gecko-friendly gardens in Manapany-les-Bains on the island of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean. In these shared spaces, the *elusiveness* of encounters, the issue of *alterity*, and thus the *divide* between humans and reptiles, played out in different and similar ways. Differently, because the gecko-gardens are characterized by openness, and the terrariums by closedness. Similarly, because in both spaces, politeness, respect, and “protocols” (Haraway, 2006) shaped spaces and encounters, but were always volatile and never fully reliable. As such, encounters were less elusive and could be well accessed ethnographically, and alterity was constantly renegotiated. In both settings, spatial properties shaped the ways in which encounters played out and influenced the knowledge that humans and nonhumans created about one another.

Researching human-gecko relations translocally

This research is part of a project in which I explore the relationships between humans and day geckos of the genus *Phelsuma* in a translocal context—in Germany and the Indian Ocean—in the performance of care, and the production of knowledge and value. *Phelsuma* day geckos live on islands in the western Indian Ocean as endemic island species, and are a mobile kind. Thus, they travel both on their own accounts, as invasive species, and alongside human infrastructure, e.g., in the context of scientific collections and the pet trade, becoming more or less valuable on the way

(Krieg, 2020b). Being threatened by invasive species (including invasive *Phelsumas*), they are subject to many nature conservation efforts (Buckland et al., 2014; Sanchez & Probst, 2014).

Small and colorful, green with spots of red, yellow, and blue, and with big black eyes, *Phelsuma* day geckos are distinctly cute and attract people. As such, they have long been part of shared human-gecko world-making processes and translocal circulations, e.g., in the context of their early journeys to the North in the context of colonial collections of fauna and flora (Boettger, 1880), in the international collaboration on nature conservation efforts on Indian Ocean islands (Krieg, 2018, 2020a), in the pet trade and gecko tourism (Krieg, 2020b).

Phelsumas have become popular terrarium pets in Europe since the early 20th century, particularly in Germany, reaching a peak of popularity in the 1980s and 1990s (Andreone et al., 2012; Tatzelt, 1912). Occasionally still imported, the *Phelsumas* kept in German terrariums are mostly captive bred stock. *Phelsuma*-friends invest much time, money, and effort in creating suitable glass homes for the little geckos, and in producing genetically diverse offspring (IG *Phelsuma*, 2023). Being keen on learning about and helping their beloved little geckos, German *Phelsuma* friends contribute to translocal circulations by supporting nature conservationists in the Indian Ocean, by exchanging knowledge (and, at times, geckos), and by travelling to Indian Ocean islands to see the wild, even more colorful counterparts of their terrarium pets in their original surroundings (Stapel, 2017).

Encounters with wild geckos, and with captive geckos, encounters in the context of nature conservation, science, and terraristics have been part of the multispecies ethnography in this project, for which I began collecting data in 2017. My data concerning human-gecko encounters in terrariums has several sources. Firstly, it is based on visits to three different *Phelsuma* keepers in 2017 in the area around Bonn/Cologne, who showed me their terrariums, their geckos, and some of their caring routines. Two of those I have met repeatedly, in regional meetings and reptile fares. Conversations during regular regional meetings and on reptile fares are the second source of my data on terraristics. I visited four such reptile fares in 2017 and 2018, five regional meetings of the German terraristics organization, and the annual meeting of the organization *IG Phelsuma* in 2017. In addition to many informal conversations, I conducted five face-to-face interviews with *Phelsuma* keepers, one phone interview with a *Phelsuma* keeper, and three phone interviews with herpetologists working with *Phelsuma* geckos. Apart from face-to-face meetings, online discussions, particularly on one German *Phelsuma* Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/423814297746345/>), have also contributed to my knowledge. A third source of data is my own terrarium, which I set up in spring of 2017 in my office, and which became the home of one little *Phelsuma laticauda* in fall 2017, whom my then two-year-old daughter named *Zwiebel* (engl. “onion”).



Image 1. Manapany day gecko (*Phelsuma inexpectata*) in La Réunion. Author's photo.

The data concerning the *gecko gardens* in Manapany-les-Bains were collected during two periods of multi-sited ethnographic field research (Hine, 2007) in the Indian Ocean: In August/September 2017, I went to Mauritius and La Réunion, and in September 2018, I travelled to Manapany-les-Bains, La Réunion. I followed endemic and invasive *Phelsuma* species over several sites on these two islands – resonating with Marcus' take on multi-sited ethnography as following the story, or the conflict, or in this case, the animal (Marcus, 1995, pp. 109–110). During these stays, I spent around six weeks in Manapany-les-Bains in the South of La Réunion, where the microendemic *gécko vert du Manapany*, or *Phelsuma inexpectata*, lives. There, I conducted eleven interviews with experts working in the field of nature conservation in La Réunion, six interviews with Manapany residents, and I visited thirteen gardens in Manapany-les-Bains, some on my own, some accompanying an employee of the NGO *Nature Océan Indien* (NOI). I stayed at three different houses in the village, in all of which I shared my quarters with geckos. I participated in two volunteering days organized by NOI to restore the habitat for the Manapany gecko, conducted many informal conservations, and spent a lot of time in my own temporary garden in Manapany, observing geckos.

Encounters: Where humans and geckos meet

Multispecies scholars have navigated the methodological challenge of exploring relations between humans and nonhuman “Others” differently. Van Dooren et al. (2016, pp. 7–10) note that besides looking for new intellectual alliances in other fields than one's own, opening up one's methodological toolbox and including creative and artistic approaches, multispecies ethnographers look explicitly for personal encounters with the nonhumans

in question. Besides interviewing and working with *human* natural scientists researching geckos or breeders taking care of them, these personal encounters with geckos are an ethnographic challenge. How can one do justice to, in my case, encounters between geckos and humans as encounters between living, “agentive beings” (Ogden et al., 2013, p. 6)?

Encounters are sites of anthropological research in the context of colonial and postcolonial relations (Ahmed, 2000), transnational capitalism (Tsing, 2005), and human-nonhuman relations (Barua, 2016; Haraway, 2006), and a research focus which attempts to do justice to the production of cultural meaning in everyday practice, meetings, and relationships (Faier & Rofel, 2014). The term “encounter” describes a meeting across *difference* (Barua, 2016, p. 265; Faier & Rofel, 2014, p. 364), a meeting with someone or something “Other.” Facing and acknowledging this difference, encounters are ambivalent and elude control. Encounters “prompt unexpected responses and improvised actions, as well as long-term negotiations with unforeseen outcomes, including both violence and love” (Faier & Rofel, 2014, p. 364).

While radical philosophical accounts doubt that encounters can reduce the alterity of an “Other” (Levinas, 1979, p. 212), other perspectives emphasize how understanding and empathy can emerge in an encounter, as ecologist Stephan Harding describes when he talks about his doctoral research with muntjac deer (Empathy Media & The Fleming Policy Centre, 2017). Harding considers an interspecies encounter as an opening up towards an “Other” on an intuitive, empathic level: “Encounter is when that conceptual structure vanishes. And you actually meet the being, as the being, coming forth from itself, as itself, revealing itself to you in a way that is beyond your intellect” (Empathy Media & The Fleming Policy Centre, 2017). This positive notion of bridging a divide and opening oneself to other forms of sociality resonate with Haraway’s approach towards encounters with other species as “becoming with,” “in regard and respect” (Haraway, 2006, p. 102). This circles around a mutual engagement made possible considering every being’s particular capabilities, politeness, and the need to establish a “protocol” (Haraway, 2006, p. 105, fn14).

What it means to be “self” and “Other” is confused, produced, and renegotiated in an encounter (Barua, 2016, p. 265; Haraway, 2006, p. 110). Encounters are moments and spaces where difference emerges as a moment of potential, where connections can be made or broken. As such, an encounter can also make asymmetries clear, it can be violent (Haraway, 2008, p. 74ff) and accompanied by friction (Tsing, 2005), since both sides are vulnerable in an encounter: “Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves” (Tsing, 2015, p. 20). The learning that can happen in such unpredictable encounters across difference is productive and creative, with beings coming together in unintentional collective orchestrations, what Tsing calls *polyphonic assemblages* (Tsing, 2015, p. 24). In these continuous overlapping encounters of different life-rhythms and temporalities, worlds are made and spaces shaped.

In the case of companion species, animal ethnographers have sought out specific opportunities of structured human-animal encounters, such as horse-riding lessons (Maurstad et al., 2013) or dog agility sports (Haraway, 2008). If such loci are hard to come by, ethnographers have attempted strategies termed “engaged witnessing” (Bell et al., 2018) or “passionate immersion” (van Dooren et al., 2016), focusing on the embodied and attentive presence in the same space. Thus, Bell (2018, p. 4), in attempting to understand the role of large monitor lizards in an Australian national park, reverted to changing her walking patterns with respect to the movements of the monitors, in order to get a sense of their routines. She writes that she became “vulnerable to being ‘moved’ as I allowed myself to act in a response-able way by being taken off course by the movements of the lace monitor (...). The agency of the lace monitor was rendered perceptible” (Bell, 2018, p. 4). Similarly, Hayward (2010) uses the sense of touch in her ethnographic work with corals and scientists, and Schroer (2018, p. 83), in the context of falconry, emphasizes the need to become *attuned* to the bird’s mood, one’s own emotions, and the weather, as a practice that transcends the body into the environment. All these approaches towards multispecies encounters illustrate how scholars “find creative ways to work around unknowing,” as Buller (2014, p. 379) phrases it.

Brevity, elusiveness, and the difficulty to understand each other across difference characterize my own encounters with geckos, and those of others. Geckos are small and evasive animals. They are not keen on encountering humans, and have no interest in interacting with them. Even more – often they actively avoid humans, and possibly fear for their lives. Offering food can postpone flight for a moment. A big part of encountering *Phelsuma* geckos, however, is spent with *not* encountering them. The following paragraph describes such a non-encounter, when I was looking for geckos on Ile aux Aigrettes, Mauritius, with a knowledgeable park ranger:

We spent today’s afternoon looking for Guenther’s geckos (*Phelsuma guentheri*). But in vain. Boy that was so exhausting. I think we spent two hours walking around, on the whole islet, back and forth, and of course NOT on the paths, but through the thicket and the undergrowth and over rocks [...]. We saw many of their eggs, or old hatched eggs, but not the geckos themselves. I was so fed up. It was so exhausting. Everything looks the same, same trees, same paths, same rocks, I had zero orientation, absolute zero. Walking a few steps, then looking up at the trees where they like to sit [...]. R. knew a few trees where they certainly live, but nothing worked. He said that sometimes they are hard to find, but it never happened to him before that he didn’t find them at all. (Field diary, 25.8.2017)

Here, the elusive geckos remain invisible and are only encountered indirectly: through eggs, eggshells, and the knowledge that *this is* where they live, somewhere on *this tree*. This lack of encounter is frustrating, and in this case, it kept three people busy crawling through the underwood for two hours. But even in the limited space of an enclosure, encounters remain elusive, as we can see in this description of my routine of spraying water for increasing humidity in the terrarium of my office mate *Zwiebel*:

If I spray water, which is actually the thing I do most in the terrarium, several times a day, it goes as follows: I take the sprayer [...], and approach the terrarium slowly with it. I keep my arms close to my side, in order not to cause too much movement. Then I stand still in front of the terrarium and search the spots where he could sit, only with my eyes, without moving. If I don't see him, I move a bit to the side, to check if he's on the back side of the branches. Just now, he sat on the backside of the big branch. A short look in small black eyes, and zzzzppp he was gone. It's not like he is running through the whole terrarium in panic, just far enough so I won't see him. (Field diary excerpt 12.7.2018)

In my spraying routine, I attempt to be polite and accommodate *Zwiebel* by not causing him too much stress and inconvenience. I move slowly, I don't spray water directly at him. The encounter, still, is short, a mere second probably, where our eyes meet, before the gecko decides to quickly move away.

Sometimes, our encounters last a few seconds longer. Sometimes, I and other *Phelsuma* keepers can watch the geckos we care for in awe, admiring their colors and their swiftness, while they quickly snatch a cricket from the tweezers we are holding, until they inevitably disappear behind a plant or branch. So, are these elusive moments encounters? They are certainly different from playful encounters with a dog, or from riding a horse. Interaction with geckos is subtle, and not much is exchanged. This makes researching human-gecko encounters ethnographically difficult. How are you supposed to encounter someone – also an animal – who does not want to be encountered at all? How to discuss interactions that only seldom actually occur? How to research a relationship that barely exists, or is mostly one-sided, while the other part constantly fears for their life?

Exploring shared spaces

Challenged by the elusiveness of *Phelsuma* geckos, I found a way to explore encounters between geckos and humans in the few and limited shared spaces, or “contact zones” (Haraway, 2008, pp. 208–209). I found these niches, the small spaces and short moments of encounter in terrariums (mine, and others), and in the houses and “gecko-friendly gardens” in Manapany-les-Bains, in La Réunion. In these shared spaces, I attempted to immerse

myself and tune into the dynamics of encounters, to “find creative ways to work around unknowing,” in Buller’s (2014, p. 379) words. My approach focused on learning, protocols, and interspecies politeness. Learning from biologists/ecologists, a strategy suggested also by other multispecies scholars (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 11), has been very helpful to me for understanding the basic biological needs and behavior of reptiles in general, and specifically of *Phelsuma* day geckos. Learning from experienced reptile and *Phelsuma* keepers has helped me to gain insights into routines and protocols of encounters, of how communication across the human-reptile, or rather human-gecko divide becomes established. And finally, I was trying to learn from individual geckos themselves, by sharing space with them, immersing myself attentively and opening myself up to their lifeworlds, as other multispecies scholars have suggested (Bell et al., 2018; Haraway, 2008; van Dooren et al., 2016).

Opening gardens and houses: The gecko-friendly gardens in Manapany-les-Bains

In this section and the following sections, all names of the human research participants have been changed.

The habitat of the micro-endemic *Phelsuma inexpectata* consists of a thin strip of coastal forest approximately eleven kilometers long, around Manapany-les-Bains and Petite-Ile in the south of the island of La Réunion (Sanchez & Caceres, 2011, p. 7). The nature conservation organization NOI puts much effort into protecting the endangered gecko, by protecting the few uninhabited coastal forests, and by educating the region’s inhabitants and sensitizing them for the need to protect this unique, endemic species (Sanchez & Caceres, 2011, p. 81). An initiative to create pockets of habitats in private gardens aims to weave a net of refuges for the gecko also in settled space, so-called “*refuges à gecko vert de Manapany*” (Sanchez & Caceres, 2011, p. 68). Such garden refuges are conceived in cooperation with NOI. The underlying principles are to plant trees that provide habitat for the geckos, to avoid chemical pesticides and herbicides, and not to disturb the geckos too much (Nature Océan Indien, 2018). Today, a little over 150 garden owners had become gecko protectors in compliance with NOI’s rules, covering thus around 50% of the settled area of the geckos’ habitat (Interview 13.9.2018), and earning themselves a sticker for their front door (see image 1) – a showcase example for interspecies solidarity (Krieg, 2020a).

When I came to Manapany, the gecko was a notable presence. Grégoire, the husband of the couple renting out the room I lived in was an almost-retired biology teacher with a big love for Réunion’s endemic species and animals in general. He kept turtles in a little pool, and guinea pigs in a garden shed. Their garden was a gecko refuge. He showed me on which trees the geckos lived, and told me that they planted two Vacoas trees especially for them. I often managed to spot some of the pretty, colorful lizards on the sunny leaves of the big trees, or basking on the wooden garden doors. Even



Image 2. Sticker labelling this garden as a gecko refuge, in Manapany-les-Bains. Author's photo.

though they refrained from using chemical pesticides, their neighbors did not, Grégoire complained, and thus the geckos did not use the area adjacent to the neighbors' garden. His wife Audette told me that NOI had done much work to educate everyone in Manapany about the geckos, and that nowadays people know about the geckos and respect them, but that this has not always been the case. She herself thought that they are pretty and unique and should be protected, but earlier, she admitted, people thought that geckos generally are a nuisance, a pest – and some still do, she added, awkwardly.

Her son Domenique, who was visiting, took me to the house of friends, a colorful and chaotic house facing the sea, where you could hear the big waves from the verandah, crushing on the rocky shore. "They have geckos in the house!" He told me, jumped out of the car, and made me come in. Camille, a medical doctor, and Pascale, an architect, lived there, their son away for his studies in France most of the year. Camille showed me a small room at the end of the corridor. A bunk bed and piles of towels and clothes took up most of the room. Camille pointed upwards, to a bookshelf with folders, the paint crumbling off the wall next to it. This is where they live, she told me, in this corner, in the folders. When I come again, I should bring my camera, she said,

and we'll have a closer look, and Dominique suggested, "maybe you can sleep here with them one night!" So I came back, the other day, with my backpack and my camera. Camille seemed to be happy to have an excuse to disturb the geckos and give in to her scientific curiosity. She took down some of the folders, and scared the geckos into jumping away in different directions into the far corners of the room. Inside the folders, we found many old hatched eggs, and numerous new ones. Camille was not especially careful with them, and finally one broke. It revealed a small, pink, curled up gecko embryo, almost ready to hatch, but not quite. I was shocked, and sorry, because the little gecko was thus doomed to die. We killed it; my being there had caused a death. But Camille, all medical, utilized this opportunity to have a closer look at the embryo. She said this had happened before, once, and she had just put it on the shelf, and when she came back later, it was gone. I thought to myself that probably the adult geckos had eaten it. Camille told me that they had not opened these folders for fifteen years, which I could not believe. But she said, "did you see the house?" Indeed, it was not particularly neat. A little crab lived in the shower, as I learned later – while showering. Back in the kitchen Pascale added that the houses here are partly open to the environment, and not completely closed from the outside, so you cannot really be too fussy about geckos going in and out. In the mornings, Pascale and Camille said, they sometimes put a little bit of jam for the geckos on the table outside. "And then they have breakfast with us, every morning. In the mornings, they sit outside on the balcony, in the sun. Then we put a drop of jam on the table. First it was a bit further away, and then closer and closer. Maybe this far away," Pascale tells me, and shows a distance of about 50 cm. "Once we sat there, and then a small gecko head peeked over the edge of the table. That was really cute!"

In Manapany, humans and geckos encounter each other regularly, in homes and gardens. These shared spaces, in which encounters happen, are small: *specific* trees in Grégoire's and Audette's gardens, an old shelf in an unused room, a breakfast table. These are specific places where humans and geckos have built habits over the course of years, where protocols have been established, have grown over time. You cannot encounter geckos at every breakfast table, not in every old shelf. These are small spaces that are ethnographically interesting, "contact zones", as Haraway (2008, pp. 208–209) calls them, where, after a decade or more of encountering each other, humans and geckos have reached a certain agreement, have learned to accept, or at least tolerate each other – even "across difference" (Faier & Rofel, 2014, p. 364), by adhering to an "interspecies etiquette", as Warkentin (2010) calls it.

Still, these protocols, as the examples above have shown, can be broken. Encounters between humans and geckos indeed hold the potential for unexpected outcomes, both violent and caring (Faier & Rofel, 2014, p. 364). In one such inquisitive encounter, we broke an egg, and a gecko died. Compared to a voluntary encounter at the breakfast table, the kind

of joyful “becoming with” that Haraway (2006, p. 102) argues is necessary and possible, this seems like a drastic outcome. And admittedly, our empathy was limited. Is the potential for violence and death simply part and parcel of human-gecko relations? Are the geckos too different to care?

Audette pointed me to a small botanical garden and café a bit further north, where Manapany geckos live outside of their original habitat. I could not spot them there, even though I checked every single plant and spent half an hour standing in front of the Vacoas trees at the entrance. I moved slowly from tree to tree, stood still and stared, knowing that this should be their habitat. They remained, as so often, elusive. So I went inside, instead, and had a cup of the coffee that they are roasting there themselves. I asked the people working at the counter about the geckos, and they affirmed that they got here somehow, probably inside plants, that they mainly live on the Vacoas trees at the entrance, and can be seen at certain times of the day. Sometimes even their babies, one person said, happily. When I asked about the bigger, invasive Phelsumas from Madagascar, one woman’s face grew grim. “No, we don’t have them here. They are very dangerous!” She looked at me earnestly and concerned. “They kill other geckos. It’s terrible. I saw it once, how one of them killed a smaller gecko. Horrible!” She was looking into my eyes with an intense stare, still in shock, as though this horrible scene kept replaying in her head.

Here, something interesting happened. The death of an endemic gecko, as trivial as it was for Camille, who broke a gecko’s egg, was a horrible observation for the woman in the botanical café. Even though countless small animals, countless lizards and geckos, die every day, in gardens and houses, killed by cats, rats, snakes, and humans, this scene she witnessed, of an invasive gecko predating on an endemic gecko, moved her, made her empathize. Something had happened to her that made the endemic geckos’ otherness shrink, that made it possible for her to relate. Certainly, if she could care for a small reptile in such a way, I, as an ethnographer, could find a way to do the same.

Ethnography and radical alterity

The problem of successful interaction and communication with “the Other” is not new to ethnography, quite the contrary. Since Malinowski (1922), ethnographers have grappled with the challenge of gaining trust, building relationships, and establishing communication with “Others” who at first have no reason to do so, and who might actively distrust and avoid the ethnographer (Magolda, 2000; Beer, 2008). Is a gecko, a “reptile Other”, simply another stranger whom we encounter on an ethnographic mission? Am I, as a female human ethnographer, a warm-blooded mammal, too different from these small reptiles, to imagine an encounter? How should I think about our differences? Is this *human-reptile-divide* a deeper and more significant divide, a *difference in kind*, compared to the separation and difference between every two individuals, between every *me* and *other*? Do reptiles constitute a “radical alterity,” an “Other” that is absolute that can

never be fully known (Leistle, 2016a, p. 6; Levinas, 1979, pp. 39, 194)? Or is it rather a *difference in degree*, like between humans of different languages and cultures?

There appear to be two approaches towards the quality of such alterity. The first perspective does acknowledge lines and divides between groups of selves and others that cannot be crossed. As absolute or radical alterities (Leistle, 2016a; Levinas, 1979, p. 39), or different ontologies (De Castro, 2015; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017), these lines separate categories of existence, forms of life, or lifeworlds, too different to consolidate. Such lines of difference can be conceived between humans of different cultures (De Castro, 2015), or between living beings and beings of stone (Reinert, 2016). Thinking from this point of view, one would argue that reptiles live in a world inherently different from our human world, built on instincts, needs, and senses entirely alien to ours, and any attempt at understanding their world would invariably be based on our inadequate, non-reptile, human experience.

A second perspective, however, doubts the existence of such lines or divides between groups of people or beings, stating that while difference between individuals and species is real, it is simply a characteristic of reality that it can never be fully known, also within the group considered as ‘self’ (Graeber, 2015). As such, it does not make sense to assume groups of beings that can be fully known as opposed to groups of ‘Others’ that cannot (Govindrajan, 2018, pp. 12–13; Graeber, 2015). Thinking with this approach, the difference between humans and geckos is simply a manifestation of a reality built from difference, not more or less meaningful than any other difference.

Leistle (2016a, p. 3) sees a dialectic relationship in anthropology between an “*empirical Other*” encountered in ethnography, and “the Other in a philosophically radical sense, that is another which cannot be experienced.” Similarly, while I kept and keep grappling with the question of how radical a reptile’s alterity is, I kept encountering individual *Phelsuma* geckos, which I came to know better, and I kept meeting people who encountered geckos on a regular basis, geckos with whom they became familiar. These people build protocols, interspecies agreements, with the actual, empirical geckos living in their terrariums, their houses, in their gardens – not with an abstract taxonomic category whose difference might be overwhelming. “The subject matter of anthropology is the Other as other,” Leistle (2016a, p. 3) argues, and my take on the geckos’ alterity resonates with his perspective. I accepted their alterity in a philosophically radical sense, but still attempted to get to know them individually, and thus encountered both empirical and philosophical geckos.

As reptiles, a gecko’s way of being, of communicating, is radically different from ours as humans and mammals. Geckos are predators, lay eggs, and are poikilothermic (unable to maintain a steady body temperature). Reptiles appear to many as cold-blooded, as devoid of empathy and emotion (Doody et al., 2013, pp. 2–3). The emotional bond that shapes so many human-

animal relations, especially with pets, is certainly difficult with reptiles. In many ways, reptiles embody a certain “Other-ness,” strange and unknowable, potentially poisonous or dangerous, associated with instinctive fear as a reaction to reptile characteristics: no facial expression, unmoving eyes, long periods of sitting still, scaly skin (Landová et al., 2018). Are reptiles too strange and alien to really be encountered? In the following section, I will turn to evolutionary biology for clarifying some of the underlying physiological differences between reptiles and humans/mammals.

Evolutionary and ethological differences between reptiles and humans

Reptiles seem to be more intelligent than assumed in the early days of evolutionary biology (Gleisberg, 1861, p. 76). Thus, new research showed that crocodiles use tools, and smaller reptiles can learn how to open doors by watching a video (Dinets et al., 2015; Kis et al., 2014). Intelligence and the ability to learn does not seem to set reptiles further apart from humans than other animals. The emotional life of reptiles, and animals in general, is discussed controversially. During the last two decades, research has started taking animal emotions seriously, what was formerly considered as non-scientific (Bekoff, 2000, pp. 866–867; Panksepp, 2004).

The main difference between reptiles and humans seems to be tied to a brain structure responsible for complex social emotions called the limbic system. Reptiles and humans share what is called the “*reptilian brain*” (Panksepp, 2004, p. 42), a brain structure responsible for motoric coordination, for fear, anger, and sexuality. The limbic system, however, is developed only rudimentarily in reptiles, but strongly in mammals. It is supposed to be responsible for the complex social emotions that characterize mammals: various forms of bonding and play, the avoidance of separation, and parental care (Panksepp, 2004, pp. 42, 223). Some reptiles do care for their young, especially crocodiles, but this is more of an exception than the rule (Panksepp, 2004). Some biologists, however, argue that a dichotomy between social and solitary species is too simplistic, and that considering reptiles as non-social does not do their complex behavior justice (Doody et al., 2013). They claim that social behavior in reptiles is understudied due to stereotypes and a lack of affinity towards the animals that are “scaly” and use unfamiliar forms of communication, e.g., through chemicals (Doody et al., 2013, p. 2). Thus, differences in the limbic system seem to account for some differences in the sociality of mammals and reptiles. However, also from the perspective of evolutionary biologists and ethologists it is not entirely clear if the difference between mammals and reptiles is a deeper divide than differences among reptile species, or among other mammal species.

Enclosed by glass: Geckos in the terrarium

For herpetophiles - reptile lovers - who keep and breed animals in terrariums (glass enclosures for terrestrial animals), reptiles are fascinating. Herpetophiles are not afraid of the reptiles’ presumed alterity, but rather drawn to them. Geckos of the genus *Phelsuma* are popular terrarium animals.

They are kept as pets in artificial enclosures all over the world, but they have a particularly active and committed fan community in Germany. German *Phelsuma* friends founded the organization *IG Phelsuma* (2023) in 1992, uniting people who care for these geckos. A big variety of *Phelsuma* species has been imported to Germany from the Indian Ocean during the 1980s, when no laws existed yet to make such activities illegal (Interview H. 15.10.2017). They reproduce easily, and a stable captive population has developed outside the Indian Ocean for many *Phelsuma* species.

The many knowledgeable *Phelsuma* keepers, an assortment of mechanics, tradesmen, and biologists with (or without) PhDs, impressed me with their knowledge of gecko physiology and genetics. These gecko lovers spend much of their free time with building enclosures for their pets, breeding insects for feeding them, growing plants, and caring for eggs and baby geckos. Among *Phelsuma* friends, it is common knowledge that geckos are not to be encountered like dogs or cats, that they do not like handling, and that in many ways, they are different from your regular pet (see also Berghof, 2008, p. 27). But nevertheless, keeping geckos in a terrarium “brings people joy”, as one herpetologist told me on the phone (Interview G. 20.2.207), and people are fascinated by the colorful, pretty reptiles.

“I just really fell in love with them,” Mathias told me, when I interviewed him on the annual meeting of the *IG Phelsuma* (Interview 14.10.2017). He built an extravagant terrarium for his first couple of *Phelsumas*, with everything terrarium technology had to offer. He was intrigued by the geckos, and got himself more and more different species (Interview M. 14.10.2017). When I visited Claudia, to buy my little *Phelsuma laticauda* *Zwiebel*, whom she had bred, she showed me around her terrariums. The *P. nigistriata*, she told me, are the most fun, because they are really beautiful, active, and curious, and *present* themselves a lot. The *inexpectatas* bring her less joy, because they are so shy and panic easily, even though they are beautiful. I watched her feeding routine. She put a couple of small crickets into a bowl, spread a bit of mineral powder on them, shook it well, and then put them into the terrarium of the shier animals. The female *P. laticauda*, the mother of *Zwiebel*, got her powdered cricket from the tweezers. It took a few minutes, while Claudia held the tweezers still. Suddenly, the small gecko jumped at the tweezers, snatched the cricket from them, and disappeared in the plants. Judith, whom I visited later, had a whole room for her geckos, and two big display terrariums in the living room. She has seven big terrariums in the gecko room, with different species of *Phelsumas*, most of them breeding couples, and several rows of smaller terrariums for the juveniles. Judith told me that she likes the *P. hielscheri* best, even though they are not impressively colored. They are very social, and she can leave the offspring in the enclosure with the parents, a rare thing with *Phelsumas*, where the adults would usually devour the baby geckos, even their own. Right now she has two juvenile geckos in the terrarium together with the parents, and she enjoys it most to watch them all together, sitting side by side on a branch. As opposed to this,

P. astriata, one of the rarer species in captivity, brings her much less joy. She used to have a breeding couple, and they got along well with each other for three years. One day, however, she entered the room and found the male *P. astriata* dead on the terrarium floor, covered in blood and badly mutilated. The female had killed him, suddenly, and did not get along with any male afterwards. Judith now considers giving the female away in order to produce a breeding pair somewhere else.

Among German *Phelsuma* friends, the alterity of the geckos is recognized, but does not appear to be a hindrance for relating to them. It does, on the contrary, lead to curiosity, and to learning about their demands, behavior, and the necessary care. Knowing these differences, and adapting your expectations as how to interact with a gecko resonates with Leistle's take on the *philosophical Other* (Leistle, 2016a, p. 3), an abstract idea of the gecko and its alterity. But these ideas about the limitations of interaction might play out differently with the empirical geckos, the actual pets: these are the geckos that are encountered, that are cared for on a regular basis, over time.

And for some people, not for everyone, the joy of keeping a gecko lies in exactly this relationship, in building protocols, and in finding ways to relate, as impossible as it might seem at first. Sometimes relating works by focusing on similarities, such as mammal-like social behavior (e.g., *hielscheri*). Sometimes it works by building a protocol, an etiquette, that makes an encounter possible, that accommodates different needs, different ways of being in the world, both human and reptile. In these relationships, alterity can shrink, because people get to know their actual geckos, learn to read their behavior. Over time, and over repeated, regular encounters in this defined niche, the shared space that the terrarium presents, *Phelsuma* friends build protocols and agreements that made the human-gecko relationship work, and at the same time accessible ethnographically for me as a researcher.

But alterity is a difficult trope: it can break through, emerge suddenly, shockingly, and remind people of the *philosophical other* (Leistle, 2016a, p. 3), the alterity of the gecko, its reptilian nature, the theoretical impossibility of understanding it: thus Judith, for example, focused on the geckos' social behavior, that brought her much joy. But when her female gecko suddenly killed the male, she was shocked, and taken aback, unable to accept what happened.

The feeding routines I watched *Phelsuma* keepers perform, and finally established myself with *Zwiebel*, are based on politeness, the establishment of "protocols" (Haraway, 2006, p. 105), and mutual learning. They include moving slowly, announcing yourself, decreasing distance one step at a time, in an expected order. Other protocols circle around habituating the geckos to tolerate a certain level of activity around and in the terrarium, such as cleaning, caring for the plants, and spraying water. A great example for a human-gecko interspecies protocol is a video of a feeding routine, uploaded to YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwcWsNQxnT0>) by one of the more active users of the German *Phelsuma* community's Facebook

page. In this video, the human and the geckos obviously understand each other. The human knocks on the terrarium doors with metal tweezers, making rhythmic, metallic sounds. Upon hearing this, the geckos come out towards the door, waiting. The human then opens the doors, and either feeds the geckos an insect directly from the tweezers, or he puts it into a small bowl on the ground. Either way, the geckos are quick to capture it and keep looking at him/the camera for more.

Encountering empirical geckos: Observing protocol and doing ethnography in established niches

Irrespective of how deep the divide between human and reptiles, and whether they should be considered a radical alterity that can never be fully understood, whether their world constitutes a different ontology, irreconcilable with human worlds, or whether they are different from humans because we live in a reality of difference, I moved forward in my attempt to encounter geckos. Encounters, after all, have repeatedly been described as meetings *across* difference (Barua, 2016, p. 266; Faier & Rofel, 2014, p. 373).

Encountering the elusive *Phelsuma* day geckos, these reptile ‘Others’, and ethnographically observing interaction between geckos and humans, became possible for me by finding established niches, contact zones that had grown over time, shared spaces, in which protocols had been put in place long before my arrival. The two niches on which I focused were different in some ways, and similar in other ways.

Characterized by openness, and a welcoming of other forms of life into the private sphere of house and garden, encounters with geckos are less elusive in Manapany-les-Bains. Accommodations were made for geckos to feel at home, too. Trees were planted, pesticides avoided, some corners of gardens and rooms were left alone, a bit of jam provided. The geckos were allowed to enter, a protocol established. These small accommodations did not cost the humans much, but they meant the world to geckos. In these gecko-friendly houses and gardens, humans and geckos shaped space together, the needs of both taken into account. A certain politeness and respect were common, resonating with Haraway’s (2006, p. 102) description of polite encounters between species who share worlds:

To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem: all of that is tied to polite greeting, to constituting the *polis*: where and when species meet. To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where, who, and what are, are precisely what are at stake.

For ethnographic research, the gecko gardens represented the perfect field site. They offered many opportunities for voluntary gecko-encounters, and for observing human-gecko interaction. Due to their openness, the gecko

gardens are a space that provides the geckos with options. In comparison to the terrarium, geckos had more possibilities to live out their own lives and to make their own decisions in Manapany. While geckos were not often looking out to interact with me, they did get used to their regular humans who put a bit of jam on the table. A protocol that worked for geckos and humans. The elusiveness of encounters shrank, as I shared spaces with geckos.

Differently from the gecko-gardens in Manapany, the terrarium is based on the principle of closedness. Where in Manapany gardens and houses are opened for geckos to enter, the terrarium seals off space in order to prevent the geckos to leave. As such, they also create spaces where encounters happen. They render the gecko encounter-able, closely observable, and visible. Offering hiding spots is considered important in the community, and bamboo and plants are placed in the enclosure for that reason. At the same time, however, glass walls serve the goal of visibility. Thus, terrariums render geckos visible and encounterable, while at the same time accommodating them and offering an environment where they can live well enough.

There is, of course, coercion at play in order to encounter captive geckos. Respect and politeness are possible, and practiced, but they are not necessary. Geckos cannot be forced to interact, as they are too small and quick, but they can be pestered, forced to leave a hiding place, and disturbed in order to provoke them into showing themselves quickly. Thus, Judith clearly had a polite feeding routine with her *Phelsuma grandis*, who took a cricket out of her hand. At the same time, she moved plants and branches around inconsiderately in the *P. hielscheri*'s enclosure in order to make them come out so I could see them, not minding their panic.

In spite of the closedness of the terrarium, and the limited space, encounters with geckos in the terrarium are often based on polite protocols. Geckos can be forced to present themselves in a limited fashion, but they can still be quick to disappear. Some individuals, like Claudia's *Phelsuma inexpectata*, remain shy and are not interested in sharing a protocol, and encounters with them remain elusive. Others, like Judith's *Phelsuma grandis*, and like the *Phelsumas* in the video, happily participate in established protocols in which they receive food, and can be encountered in polite ways. As an ethnographer, I had plenty of opportunities to watch and participate in encounters with geckos in the terrarium, and I learned how to manage elusiveness through protocol and politeness. These are particularly important in asymmetric power relations, where glass walls make flight impossible. They create predictability and a sense of security for the geckos, but they do not make their position less vulnerable.

In continuous care and encounters surrounding the terrarium, the alterity of geckos is constantly renegotiated. Fascination for the incredibly bright colors and the agility of the animals inspire awe and love in *Phelsuma* friends, arguably a fascination founded *on* difference, on an encounter with a nonhuman Other (Lorimer, 2007). Simultaneously, those more social *Phelsuma* species, like Judith's *P. hielscheri*, are very popular. Encountering

reptiles as families that care for their young makes them less strange, more relatable, and brings the human caretakers much joy. Death, however, is still always around the corner, when formerly harmonious *Phelsuma* couples suddenly kill each other, and their gecko alterity catches up with their human carers.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed my difficulties as a multispecies ethnographer in researching encounters between humans and *Phelsuma* geckos. Other multispecies scholars, such as Kirksey and Helmreich (2010, p. 545), have asked how a nonhuman can be spoken with, and for, and many multispecies scholars have found their own approaches of how to encounter nonhumans (Bell et al., 2018; Haraway, 2008). Here, I have asked more specifically how a small *reptile* can be spoken with, and for. The elusiveness of these encounters, as well as the alterity of the geckos as reptiles were the main issues posing challenges to my research. Turning to *shared spaces* or “contact zones” (Haraway, 2008, pp. 208–209) in terrariums in Germany, and gecko-friendly houses and gardens in Manapany-les-Bains, I found niches in which to participate in and observe encounters between humans and geckos. In order to find ways forward, I turned away from the verbal in my gecko encounters, and immersed myself in a multispecies world at a smaller scale. Ultimately, despite the impossibility of *speaking* with geckos, there are many ways of being together that “work around unknowing” (Buller, 2014, p. 379).

The elusiveness of encounters with geckos decreased the more I learned about politeness in spaces shared with geckos, and protocols (Haraway, 2006). They made encounters possible and expectable, and mutual learning about needs, preferences, and possibilities developed in such encounters. Asymmetries of power, however, also became obvious in encounters in which protocols were breached and politeness discarded. Thus, when humans had other interests, eggs were broken, and geckos darted away in panic, or died.

The question of alterity had me grappling with the divide between humans and reptiles. Is there an unsurmountable divide between humans and reptiles, or is this simply a difference in degree, similar to any difference that constitutes reality (De Castro, 2015; Erazo & Jarrett, 2018; Govindrajana, 2018; Graeber, 2015; Leistle, 2016b; Reinert, 2016)? Inspired by Leistle (2016a, p. 3), I accepted the co-presence of geckos as “*empirical Other*” that can be encountered, and geckos as Other in a “philosophically radical sense.”

In this sense, what the multispecies ethnography with geckos and their humans can illustrate is that instead of asking “Can geckos be encountered?”, it makes more sense to ask “*How* can geckos be encountered?” Because indeed, for species like *Phelsuma* geckos, there is no long-grown tradition of interspecies interaction in myth and legend that would enable the kind of “Intimacy without Proximity” that Metcalf (2008) describes for human-grizzly bear relations, and no known history of co-domestication or coevolution synchronizing behavior and hormones as in the case of dogs (Nagasawa et al., 2015). There are not many blueprints for encounters. New

protocols have to be established. As multispecies ethnographers, we should set out to find those people who are working on establishing such protocols, and learn from them, and we should find the niches that enable such a process, the existing contact zones, even if they are small.

Of course, in multispecies ethnography, and in personal encounters with nonhumans, goals and expectations have to be appropriate. Establishing protocols and immersing oneself in gecko worlds is not going to ‘decode gecko language’. But I agree with Buller (2014, p. 379) that it is important to reduce the “unknowing”, and this will inevitably happen by opening up oneself to nonhuman worlds.

In repeated encounters with humans and geckos in terrariums, houses, and gardens, I watched how the alterity of geckos was constantly produced and renegotiated, how it could grow, shrink, and change. What was self, and what was Other, was created anew in encounters. Differences did not disappear, but their prominence shrank. Instead, protocol, politeness, and time proved to be more important. If there is time, protocols can grow in shared spaces, even with geckos.

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