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PROJECT

The Habit of Life

What began as a study of the cognitive ecology of animacy – how our habits of classifying the world into animate and inanimate are shaped by our strategies for keeping body and soul intact – has grown into something at once more expansive and more personal.

In *The Habit of Life*, I offer an exploratory account of what it is to experience another presence as a “familiar” – and what kind of ethos, what kind of “habit of life,” takes form when we attend to the role of the senses in mediating this experience.

Starting with my own experience as a monaural hearer, I formulate an ecology of the senses that emphasizes the resonant properties of the Earth and our bodies and the role that sound and other field phenomena play in bringing us into contact with other presences living and geospheric. In contrast, say, to vision, for the mechanosensory (acoustic, tactile, proprioceptive, interoceptive) senses, we are rarely in a position to blockade or orient the organs of sensation. In our encounters with the mechanosensory world, we are confronted with our permeability, not to say our impermanence. Recovering an awareness of our impermanence, I propose, is the key to formulating a habit of life that resists the urge to view our situation as one of permanent crisis.

The Habit of Life draws together strategies of inference from cognitive and linguistic anthropology and the philosophy of the evolutionary sciences. It represents the culmination of a ten-year effort to formulate a critical approach to the study of niche construction – a way of reasoning about our strategies for accommodating bodily need that attends to how these strategies become saturated with value.

Recommended Reading

Berson, Josh. *The Meat Question*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.

—. *The Human Scaffold*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021.

Envelope

The idea for this book came to me in September 2017, halfway through an artist's residency in Onishi, Gunma prefecture. The monsoon had come late, and the heat and humidity militated against vigorous activity of any sort. I spent much of my time lying on the floor of my room, trying to recapture the sleep that had eluded me the night before. In the late afternoons I'd go around the corner to my studio and listen to procedural iterations on a recording I'd made in the local elementary school. I'd split the recording into overlapping half-second segments that I then resequenced according to their spectral features and concatenated to form something new. The outcome was repetitive, shot through with the school attention chime that sounded halfway through the recording. I could not help but hear similarities to the stridulation of the long-horned katydids that sang in the grass all night. I seemed to have stepped out of the timeline of my ordinary life and into an oppressively humid waking dream.

If you pressed me for an account of what this book is about I might say: the sensory ecology of sound and its implication in the apprehension of animacy.

This is something this book could be said to be about in the sense that it is something I've had in mind as I've worked on it. But there's a second kind of aboutness that attaches to made things, an aboutness of process. If you pressed me for an account of what this book is about in this second sense I might say:

Paring back connective tissue.

Stripping away explicit argument.

Allowing oneself to dispense with metadiscursive expressions of the form "what this book is about."

Yielding to the urge to be nonintentional.

Stripping back one's defenses.

A more encouraging image: Scraping as an act of fashioning—as late Pleistocene Tasmanians scraped the inner face of wallaby pelts with faceted stone tools to make them fit to wear (see Berson, "The Human Scaffold," chap. 2).

Or: Scraping as in "gua sha", the evoking of petechia. Encouraging something to bloom in the skin.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOWS' LIBRARY

Berson, Joshua (Berkeley, CA,2021)

The Human Scaffold : How Not to Design Your Way Out of a Climate Crisis

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1789710944>

Great Transformations ; 2

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1789710944>

Berson, Joshua (Oakland, California,2021)

The human scaffold : how not to design your way out of a climate crisis

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1736822136>

Great transformations ; 2

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1736822136>

Berson, Joshua (Cambridge,2019)

The meat question : animals, humans, and the deep history of food

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1743307373>

Berson, Joshua (Cambridge, Massachusetts,2019)

The meat question : animals, humans, and the deep history of food

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=167078357X>