

Natural History Lesson: Cairns
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A simple cairn gives presence as it cuts through the open space of the horizon. It's top most rock balanced carefully calls us to attention as we become aware of how its form occupies space. Its weight and balance hold it to its task throughout time and weather. The inhuman heat of the sun bears down upon it. Cold winds cut across it. The cairn remains standing out amid the surroundings. The cairn marks space. It makes us aware of the space and the rocks themselves.

Placed there at some point in the past for passers-by to witness (in their 'now') and holding forth into a future, the cairn is a technology of social signaling. Cairns are antennae between their ecological surrounds and the social. Or they are beacons of transmission and reception linked across space and time. They are born of geological time, stand currently within a human present, and then will tumble again into a geological time beyond the human. The grouping of rocks is more-than-human technology as the more interesting cairns call attention to the rocks themselves as an animate geological presence. These rocks are best explained as what the Nayaka people call devaru.

The hunter-gatherer Nayaka in South India are animists who consider some rocks, trees, and animals as "devaru" or non-human persons and individuals (a person constitutive of relationships) in a community. Theirs is a different mode of valuation. The anthropologist Bird-David explains "Wherever there are Nayaka, there are also devaru, for Nayaka want to have them and always find them." These individuals are a "constitutive part of Nayaka's environment, born of 'affordances' of events in-the-world."

As one member of the community notes, not all rocks are devaru but some are. Those that are call out and the humans of the community heed the call. When a devaru is found, it may be brought home or gathered in a hut. Once a year the gathered devaru are all celebrated. During these celebrations, human members of the community hold conversations with the congregated devaru—this is not a speaking at or speaking for but a speaking with the nonhuman persons. Most of the conversation is about care: are the humans caring sufficiently for the devaru and the devaru caring for the humans.

[Huts for our devaru. Calendar times for recognition and conversation. Awareness and Care. Otherwise said: how can we create experiments-experiences with rocks?

<http://pica.org.au/show/radical-ecologies/>]

Japanese "[Tsunami Stones](#)": "High dwellings are the peace and harmony of our descendants," the rock slab says. "Remember the calamity of the great tsunamis. Do not build any homes below this point." The stones are a warning across generations. "It takes about three generations for people to forget. Those that experience the disaster themselves pass it to their children and their grandchildren, but then the memory fades."

[Can we make stones or "stones" for the Anthropocene? Ones that are sensitive to changes in heat over time or carbon emissions or simply rocks (or "rocks") that provide an eco-geological presence in themselves. Or is compressed plastics the stones and warnings of our age? Aside: a séance with oil?]

Aside: In the Superstition Mountains outside of Phoenix, geopolitics of mining and Native American territory and sacred spaces jockey with one another. The rocks bear witness and forget nothing. In Joshua Tree National Park, just beyond the Salton Lake and Desert Center iron

mines, what do the rocks have to say and who is listening?

“We do not dislike everything that shines, but we do prefer a pensive luster to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in a stone or an artifact, bespeaks a sheen of antiquity.” –In Praise of Shadows



neighborhood rocks (tempe arizona)



Joshua tree national park (at jumbo rocks)



Joshua tree national park (near skull rock)



Joshua tree national park (pinto peak)



neighborhood cairn at door threshold (tempe arizona)