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Witnessing Beyond the Human

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The “poetry of witness” tradition ranges from Brecht’s Nazi-era ballads, Paul Celan’s broken German folk rhythms, and Muriel Rukeyser’s documentary lyrics on the Vietnam War to Terrance Hayes’ recent poem on the killing of George Floyd. As important as these works continue to be, with textual gestures that communicate trustworthiness, human-centered witnessing is now coming into question. Climate crisis and pandemic have led to a heightened sense of human fragility and ecological interconnectedness. Witnessing beyond the human can take many forms; when it enters the popular (and even populist) imagination, it holds the possibility of greater empathy for other species.



The poetry ancestors scattered to all parts of the world.
Each family of trees, animals, winds,
stones needed a poet.

Joy Harjo

As populist movements gain traction, their environmental rhetoric tends to fall into two camps: unchecked extractivism for human use and distrust of scientific expertise on the one hand (McCarthy, 2019), and ecofascist fantasies of a “pristine” world without humans (particularly immigrants) on the other (Lubarda, 2020). What links these seemingly contradictory positions is a focus on people, the key element in the term “populism.”

In academic and artistic circles, meanwhile, efforts to de-center the human, in terms of entanglement with other species, build on older models of witnessing to create a sense of truthfulness. Whether these efforts can actually prove persuasive remains an open question, but the work of imagining non-human subjectivities may leak far enough into popular media to reach even those who distrust climate science. This paper describes projects building on the “poetry of witness” tradition and their related popular manifestations, to argue that multi-species thinking can be adapted into mainstream media and cross ideological divides.

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The wax figure of Bertolt Brecht – opening of the waxworks “Madame Tussauds”, Unter den Linden, Berlin on July 10, 2008.

Background: Human Witnessing in Words

During Nazi-era exile in Denmark, poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht responded to his times with sharp-witted ballads and elegies that mixed reportage with biblical rhythms of mourning (Greenstein, 2010: 70). In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Jewish-Romanian poet Paul Celan bore witness to the reverberations of genocide by re-enacting folksong rhythms in his poetry – and at the same time breaking down the German language that had been used in the service of unspeakable brutality (Franklin, 2020).

From the Spanish Civil War through the Vietnam era, American poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote what is now called “documentary poetry” to collect and distill traces of “the first century of world wars” (Huber, 2018). In our own time, Terrance Hayes and others have borne witness to the grief, anger, and activism rising from the death of George Floyd (Hayes, 2020). Though the “poetry of witness” tradition has suffered from white privilege and over-personalization in the US, shifting attention from “atrocities at home and abroad” (Hernández, 2021), it has been a key measure of literary trustworthiness, especially in the “post-truth” Trump era.

Why poetry? As environmental writer Andri Snær Magnason points

out, poetry allows humans to “scale up” language to meet a crisis, since we cannot amplify it the way we can numbers (Magnason, 2021). How can poetry, then, best rise to meet our present crisis on a planetary scale? How to address wildfire, mass extinction, monster hurricanes, ice loss, floods, and ocean acidification, to name just a few of the threats that seem overwhelming today?

A more pressing question might be, how trustworthy is a human poet anyway, when humans – though with varying privileges and complicities in the carbon-industrial complex – have been the agents of a once healthy planet’s demise? Poetic efforts toward de-centering the human “I” to make room for other species’ presences, can foster complex and generous truth-telling. When spread into popular (if not populist) media, they can do at least some of the work of “transcending human-centered exceptionalism” (Demos, 2016: 19).



Build A Bear Lion King display in Arrowhead mall in Glendale, Arizona, USA on July 29, 2019. Photo: E. Murphy.

Making Room for Other Species

In his book *The Media Ecosystem*, Antonio López describes a process of decolonizing what he calls media “monoculture,” in which Disney monopolizes “magic” (López, 2012: 9) and TV “teaches us what is normal by showing us that common people are middle class, white suburbanites” (57). Metaphorically applying princi-

ples of regenerative agriculture and even Bill McKibben's "media equivalent of the farmer's market" (143) can aid in disrupting a hegemonic media landscape, as can learning about Indigenous practices of community ritual and collaboration.

Likewise, a literary geography of well-educated humans writing testimonials of their time on Earth can be a form of "monocropping," too, not only in shutting out less privileged voices but also in assuming that only human perspectives count. Looking to older sources than Disneyfied talking animals, López points out that "[t]races of our ancient past can be found in how children are allowed to play as if animals, plants, or spirits can talk to them" (9). He cites Hayao Miyazaki's films as a strong example of "respectful tales of nature spirits" and "ecological allegories of connection" (9). He also describes do-it-yourself, collage-like punk aesthetics as ways of being "more than a witness" in making "something participatory and real" (29).

Even for environmentally engaged writers and artists, stepping aside to listen to other species does require some DIY resourcefulness – and most of all humility, as humans are just beginning to understand how an octopus, a fungus, or a forest experiences the world. Philosopher Vinciane Despret's attempts to understand animal subjectivity often take the form of questions, as in her alphabet-structured book *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016), because the answers are still piecemeal and contingent.

Donna Haraway, known for her influential thinking on multispecies entanglements, cautions against essentializing groups of animals, humans included. This point is a helpful antidote to right-wing, populist thinking that privileges humans over all other species, either by promoting unchecked growth or by wishing humankind away from an imagined,

pristine "Nature." "Individual critters matter," Haraway writes; "they are mortal and fleshly knottings, not ultimate units of being" (Haraway, 2008: 88).

Because human understanding of nonhuman subjectivity is so difficult, "stories built through layered and disparate practices of being and knowing" (Tsing, 2015: 159) may be the best approach. This can take time and many false starts. Even clumsy reckoning with other species' perspectives can yield a strange, new insight: "[t]he way selves relate is not necessarily akin to the ways in which words relate to each other in that system we call language" (Kohn, 2013: 100).



Photo: Dora Zett

Risking Interspecies Poetics

For all the difficulty and even impossibility of meeting other species in words, poets have tried for centuries to do exactly this. Christopher Smart's eighteenth-century meditation on his cat, "Jubilate Agno," written at great length while in a London asylum, is equal parts biblical cadence and playful invention. The descriptive poem, in which an animal or plant is treated from a distance (and often given quasi-totemic power in a moment of personal realization), has continued to be the most accessible mode of human-nonhuman literary encounter.

In the time of mass extinction combined with pandemic lockdown, the elegiac mode for mourning lost

species has taken on new digital dimensions. The Vigil for the Smooth Handfish project, presented by the Parallel Effect for Lost Species Day in November 2020, was a scheduled online event that featured an animated image of a now-extinct fish that did appear to have hands, along with original poems and songs. The overall goal was to encourage participants to slow down, take time for a contemplative experience amid the confusions of the COVID year, and allow grief even for a small fish most people had never heard of to open a “space for a digital congregation, to contemplate loss, grief, the parameters of care, the interconnectedness of conservation and radical hope, and ‘collaborative survival’” (Parallel Effect, 2020).

Another literary mode of approaching other species is the persona poem, in which the speaker takes on the “voice” of another creature or entity. Not surprisingly, this style of poetry is popular for schoolchildren, as in an Arizona writing program that includes “Poems by Pets” (Grunberger, n.d.), though the fictional mode of “zoopoetics” can be traced through the works of Kafka and into science fiction such as Octavia Butler’s *Clay Ark* (Magnone, 2016). Contemporary poets seeking contact with other species’ subjectivities tend to avoid speaking directly in nonhuman voices, knowing the ethical problems of presuming that “speech” (see Appadurai, 1988: 17, 20).

American Navajo (Diné) poet Tacy Atsitty’s speaker-persona slips obliquely in and out of nonhuman attributes, imagining what a cow needs, licking salt, and needing to be reminded “how I am human” (Atsitty, 2018: 25, 71). Turkish poet Ece Temelkuran takes another side-long approach, in a collection titled “Meadow: The Explorer Encounters the Virtues in the Shapes of Animals” (2010). The poet’s impulse is to wriggle as closely as possible to her mysterious subjects (“I removed/ my eyes, thrust them under the earth,”

32) but she realizes that, in the case of a black swan, “She is none of the stories made up about her” (37).

Some poets test these limits, taking multispecies witnessing as a challenge. On one end of the risk spectrum, Brazilian poet Sérgio Madeiros keeps his words on the page but saturates them “in animist epistemologies that disperse divinity and personhood across a broad spectrum of beings,” such as a soldier in dialogue with a tapir “also identified as an old woman and a cannibal soul,” creating a “pluriverse” informed by Indigenous storytelling, Zen poetry, and avant-garde aesthetics, in an effort to resist human exceptionalism (McNee, 2017).

On the other end of the risk spectrum, multispecies researcher Eben Kirksey has experimented with biopoetic storytelling, in collaboration with chytrid fungi that reproduce with zoospores. Offering “death back to life, by offering bits of stuff to them – bait, like baby hair, pollen, or hemp,” this “composition without a composer or conductor” allows for decentralized creativity in a “cascade of reactions” (Kirksey, 2019). If this approach seems too lab-intensive, too biologically invasive, or too problematic in light of chytrids’ role in Central and South American frog extinctions (Platt, 2021) to work as trustworthy witnessing, there is a middle ground, a poetics of voice that allows nonhuman voices to be heard as well.



Two hooded crows are fighting on the summer lawn. Photo: Oleg Elkov.

US Poet Laureate and jazz musician Joy Harjo (Muscogee Nation) writes in playful relationship with other species, notably the crow. In an intertitle section of her 2015 book *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, she writes, “Humans in this world fall too easily to war, are quick to take offense, and claim ownership. ‘What drama,’ said crow, dodging traffic as he wrestled a piece of road kill,” (Harjo, 2015: 24).

In her 2010 album *Red Dream, Trail Beyond Tears*, Harjo sings with a crow. The song “Urban Crow Dance” emerged after “a crow followed me to the studio the first session,” the poet recalls (Harjo, 2010). With an underlying drone, syncopated percussion, flute, and the crow’s own voice, Harjo speak-sings, “C’mon, crow! Dance!” She counts out the dance beat, lets her voice recede, and banters with the bird (“Be that way, then!”), imitating his call as the song ends. Somehow this interaction sounds as respectful as it is awkward, with two voices meeting in equal, playful author-ity. Harjo’s Native heritage, with generations of human-animal storytelling, gives her the credibility to take this risk.

Recording and interacting with animal voices (as in the many jazz responses to whale song [e.g. Rothenberg and Saarimaki, 2015]) is of course nothing new. Bernie Krause’s *Great Animal Orchestra* project has led not only to the pleasures of multispecies listening but also to groundbreaking research on biophony, leading to the “acoustic niche hypothesis” (Krause, 2016) in which different creatures adjust their frequencies to create individual sonic territories and adapt to other species’ soundworlds. Moths jam bats’ echolocation signals, for example, and in return bats “have managed to figure out what the moths are doing and have adjusted their echoing signal from a loud ping to a soft whisper” in order to “creep up on their prey, drawing to within a wing’s length without being detected” (Krause, 2012: 97).

Scientific discoveries aside, though, the widespread practice of field recording risks artistic extractivism or what Dylan Robinson has called “hungry listening” (Robinson, 2020). From Indigenous perspectives, sound collection can be a form of consumption, of wanting to claim and fix sensory material in place. Likewise, relying only on human emotions as a channel for understanding non-human experience can risk shallow empathy rather than real engagement, as in the controversial work of Peter Wohlleben, whose *Secret Life of Trees* has reached a wide audience by describing botanical “emotions” while sidestepping scientific forestry research and practice (Kingsland, 2018).

Poetry and other art forms that include nonhuman voices are most generous when they allow for the unexpected, for the awkward pause or caw, for a moment of being “beside ourselves” as humans (Kirksey, 2019). An attitude of “guest listening” and of witnessing through conversation rather than monologue (Robinson, 2020: 53, 70-71) can open a space for other species to be at once surprising and less “other” – simply themselves.



Common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*).
Photo: Vladimir Wrangel.

More-than-human Witnessing in Popular Media

While poets, artists, and environmental humanities scholars have been finding ways to imagine non-human subjectivities, scientific researchers with communicative

gifts have entered this stream, too. Suzanne Simard, a silviculturalist or forest scientist, has succeeded where Wohlleben's project, however popular, has fallen short. Her new book *Finding the Mother Tree* draws on decades of research into ectomycorrhizal fungi that form communicative networks under the visible forest, an idea that has gone viral in human parlance as the "wood wide web." Though Simard still uses anthropomorphic terms like "matriarch," her clear and compelling writing helps general readers understand how trees pass information from generation to generation, adapting "energy flow" to changing conditions (Simard, 2021; Slaght, 2021).

In a similar, reciprocal flow between research and art, Maya Lin's *Ghost Forest* uses visual poetry to reach a wide human audience in New York's Madison Square Park. A grove of giant, leafless Atlantic white cedar trees, earlier slated for clearing in New Jersey, has taken up residence in a public space. The towering, lifeless trees speak for themselves witnesses to ecological vulnerability, as actual "ghost forests" appear more and more frequently in US coastal areas (Smith, 2021).

Less charismatic species, such as kelp or mushrooms, have also gained in mainstream awareness – and not only because of their nutritional or psychedelic potential. The 2019 Kelp Congress in northern Norway attracted not only artists and researchers but practically the whole town of Svolvær as well, as citizens marched in a ceremony honoring the kelp that had saved several villagers from a Nazi assault on their town – by providing smelly but effective cover for several days (Johannessen, 2019). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's scholarly book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) may have a daunting title, but it laid the groundwork for such popular projects as Louie Schwartzberg's 2019 film *Fantastic Fungi* and widespread

at-home mushroom cultivation as a "new pandemic hobby" (Matei, 2021).

As for the charismatic whales, elephants, and household pets treated as subjects of popular books and TV shows on "how animals think" or "how animals communicate," this is nothing new; nature documentaries have been reaching mainstream audiences for decades. What climate crisis and the looming sixth mass extinction have added to the picture is a dual sense of urgency and intimacy.

The 2020 Oscar-winning film *My Octopus Teacher* is a human act of witnessing, but one that shows new possibilities of interspecies connection in a rapidly warming ocean environment. Though filmmaker Craig Foster edited the project heavily to create a narrative arc about his own healing from depression through a "love story" with another creature (Thiyagarajan, 2020), the film has reached a far wider audience than scholarly or poetic efforts to come close to a nonhuman "other." Perhaps such projects can shift even a populist imagination away from either a "people only" or a "world without people" ideology.

Conclusion

The “poetry of witness” tradition ranges from Brecht’s Nazi-era ballads, Paul Celan’s broken German folk rhythms, and Muriel Rukeyser’s documentary lyrics on the Vietnam War to Terrance Hayes’ recent poem on the killing of George Floyd. As important as these works continue to be, with textual gestures that communicate trustworthiness, human-centered witnessing is now coming into question. Climate crisis and pandemic have led to a heightened sense of human fragility and ecological interconnectedness. Witnessing beyond the human can take many forms; when it enters the popular (and even populist) imagination, it holds the possibility of greater empathy for other species.

Works that include other species’ sounds are difficult to present without coming across as precious or extractivist. Still, this can be done with playfulness and openness to chance, as in Joy Harjo’s jazz-inflected “Urban Crow Dance.” As artist and activist Olafur Eliasson has put it, “The fastest way to make a populist into a humanist is to listen,” in an artistic experience that encourages openness and empathy (Lauter, 2021). This applies to more-than-human empathy as well.

As I have considered a range of works that de-center human author-ity to make room for other species, I am well aware of the imaginative leap such works require. To return to the Kelp Congress in Norway in 2019, one helpful guide for researchers and artists was a speculative philosophy text by Emanuele Coccia, “The Cosmic Garden”:

“Imagine you have no eyes. There are no colors in front of you. No forms. No patterns. No outlines. The world is not a variety of bodies and intensities of light. It is a unique body with different degrees of penetrability.

Imagine you have no ears. There are no noises, no music, no calls, no language you can understand. Everything is but a silent excitement of matter,” (Coccia, 2019: 17).

The text goes on to ask the reader to imagine having no legs, no arms, no hands, no “movement organs” (Coccia, 2019: 18), only a penetrable and penetrating presence in a fluid world. These words, which do not pretend to “be” an entity like giant kelp but rather press toward imagining its experience, allow the gap between us to remain. This humility in witness, knowing how far the writer is from really knowing how it is to be a plant, is what makes the text trustworthy.

The distance between humans and nonhumans, however inspiring moments of unexpected connection (the crow following Joy Harjo to the recording studio, for example), is no reason for despair. As climate-aware writers and artists test the limits of interspecies poetics, it is helpful to remember “the animal dimension in my own speaking” and even writing (Abram, 2010: 168) as the body leans forward to think through a phrase, and as the voice grows quieter or louder to make an urgent point.

A beyond-human poem, or a book or film or even viral video, can be a kind of kin, too (Robinson, 2020: 95), expanding beyond what populist rhetoric (either human-focused or anti-human) counts as valuable. These varied forms of witnessing in human language, even in the effort to move beyond it, create a system of reaching relations, like tentacles spreading to touch, if not completely comprehend, the pluriverse in which we live.

(*) This article is adapted from a paper presented at the 2021 conference Trust Me! Truthfulness and Truth Claims Across Media, Linnaeus University, Sweden.

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