3.4 Different Media in Mac McClelland's "Delusion is the Thing With Feathers" (2017)

In "Delusion is the Thing With Feathers" (2017),[1] Mac McClelland tells the story of a trip that she undertook with the two bird conservationists, Tim Gallagher and Martjan Lammertink, as well as a photographer to remote parts of a Cuban jungle in order to prove the existence of an exotic bird; namely, the ivory-billed woodpecker. McClelland reflects the different ways in which her female sex and gender strongly affect her experience of the dangerous expedition and her ultimate portrayal of both Gallagher and Lammertink. In the piece, McClelland describes the experience of the trip as an extreme physical and psychological performance that was driven by two determined scientists cultivating a self-sacrificing masculinity. McClelland juxtaposes the starkly diverging interpretations of the experience by herself and the scientists. She lays bare different levels of mediation as she communicates her self-awareness as a writer who intentionally produces disturbing experience in order to create a public representation of the work of two ornithologists. All the while, the scientists, in turn, intentionally produce experience to publicly assert the existence of a likely extinct bird.

McClelland was an award-winning freelance reporter whose work appeared in outlets such as *Mother Jones*, *Rolling Stone*, or *The New York Times Magazine*. Apart from the various features for which she garnered three nominations for The National Magazine Award, she was also known for the investigative undercover reporting she undertook in an Amazon warehouse, as well as the emotional exploration of her post-traumatic stress disorder after

1 The story, a finalist for the National Magazine Award in Feature Writing, was originally published in the May/June 2016 issue of *Audubon Magazine* and is available online under a different title. McClelland, "Can the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker Be Found in Cuba?"

witnessing another woman's rape in her memoir *Irritable Hearts*.[2] As detailed in a 2019 feature in *GQ*,[3] McClelland began a sex reassignment therapy in 2018 and consequently identified as the male freelance reporter Gabriel Mac. In October 2021, his personal website read: "He formerly published under the byline Mac McClelland. He appears in a multitude of photographs online as a good-looking lady."[4] I herein stick to Gabriel Mac's former female identity as Mac McClelland because it is highly significant for the analysis of his text and because, in fact, the text was published under his former female name.

Mac McClelland's work has hitherto largely evaded the attention of scholars, much like John Jeremiah Sullivan, Michael Paterniti, and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah. However, there are reviews of and interviews about her work that discuss its specificity as perhaps the unusually brave work of a female reporter who consciously experiences emotionally and physically difficult situations and addresses them with an uncompromising confidence and sincerity. In one discussion of McClelland's book on her PTSD, her former editor Ann Friedman calls her "badass":

> It's rare to look at someone whose chief qualities are measured thoughtfulness and open emotionality and declare her a total badass. As women carve out careers and comfortably adopt traits that were once considered "masculine," there's strong social pressure on them to mimic the stoicism that men have traditionally been expected to maintain in the face of hardship.[5]

By fearlessly acknowledging difficult experiences, and their physical and emotional consequences, Friedman argues that McClelland exemplarily emboldens other women (her readers) to act similarly. McClelland herself has admitted to consciously allowing herself to react emotionally to difficult experiences. Reacting to her characterization as "badass", she rejected the idea that this implied a repressed emotionality stating: "if you are doing these hard things but having feelings about it and processing it and like moving through it and moving on and admitting that you have vulnerabilities, I think that's more badass."[6] Elsewhere, McClelland stated: "When it comes down to it, everyone struggles,

2 McClelland, "Bio."
3 Mac, "The End of Straight."
4 Mac, "About."
5 Friedman, "On Being a Badass."
6 Gordon, "Love in the Time of PTSD: Mac McClelland's Irritable Heart."

so the fact that I'm saying it publicly isn't an issue if you have any sense of humanity or compassion."[7]

McClelland researched and wrote the story about the trip to Cuba on the basis of a commission by *Audubon Magazine*, where it was published in May 2016.[8] Her original assignment was to profile the two ornithologists. She was told beforehand that they would camp for five days and spend the rest of the nights in bed and breakfasts, which turned out to be untrue. Furthermore, the unsafe conditions on the reporting trip triggered a post-traumatic stress syndrome that McClelland had suffered from a previous trip to Haiti. Both the uncomfortable lodging and unsafe traveling contributed to a serious disagreement between Lammertink and McClelland who at one point seriously considered leaving the party.[9] In an interview, McClelland said: "I believe I'm generally considered cooperative and not that hard to work with, but when I'm disrespected in terms of very basic safety, because it is my life at stake, we argued a lot."[10]

Lived Bodies and Self-Sacrifice

In her text, the writer establishes her self-reflexive subjectivity in part against performed masculinity by exploring the tensions between the performativity of gender and physical realities not necessarily related to sex. Analyses of gender's fundamental contingency are typically based on the premise that gender is a construct that is deeply affected by social circumstances. In her landmark study *Gender Trouble (1990)*, for instance, Judith Butler described individual gender as primarily the result of a repeated performance whose substance is only apparent: "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief".[11] This socially mediated individual performance of gender nevertheless always occurs in connection with the physical reality of an individual body. Therefore, sex and gender, material and symbolic categories, have

7 Savchuk, "Annotation Tuesday! Mac McClelland and 'Delusion Is the Thing With Feathers.'"

8 Gravitz, "Mac McClelland Tails Extreme Birders Through Cuba."

9 Gravitz.

10 Savchuk, "Annotation Tuesday! Mac McClelland and 'Delusion Is the Thing With Feathers.'"

11 Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 192.

recently been conceived as integrated within the human subject. Iris Marion Young for instance, has argued that Toril Moi's concept of the lived body might be more useful for analyses of gendered identity construction because it constitutes a unified idea rather than a binary. As idea, a lived body is: "a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific socio-cultural context; it is body-in-situation."[12] On the one hand, this subject is always faced with the material realities of his or her body. On the other hand, it is also always actor in a specific social setting featuring certain constraints and a freedom to act. In this conceptualization, gender becomes a feature of social contexts rather than individual subjects. As such, it is, Young argues: "a particular form of the social positioning of lived bodies in relation to one another within historically and socially specific institutions and processes that have material effects on the environment in which people act and reproduce relations of power and privilege among them."[13]

In McClelland's reportage, the context in which lived bodies interact is scientific field research—a historically deeply gendered activity marked, made and accompanied by masculine privilege.[14] For instance, in the 19th century, discoveries and explorations of nature turned the latter into gendered spaces made accessible by way of specifically masculine scientist subjectivities.[15] Towards the end of the century, exploration became an iconic undertaking in which real men iconically countered the growing popularity of civilized urban lifestyles and mechanization by way of embodying a certain ideal of natural manliness.[16] However, this reactionary ideal of masculinity was at odds with scientific inquiry when it emphasized manly competition—in particular in polar exploration.[17] Michael Robinson has documented how the concepts of antimodern manliness and scientific inquiry had to be carefully connected and mediated by explorers. For example, in order to support the claim that he was the first person to discover the North Pole in 1909, Robert Peary contracted the female journalist Elsa Barker as a ghostwriter to tell his story more convincingly.[18]

12 Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," 415.

13 Young, 422.

14 Milam and Nye, "An Introduction to Scientific Masculinities."

15 Reidy, "Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain"; Robinson, "Manliness and Exploration: The Discovery of the North Pole."

16 Robinson, "Manliness and Exploration: The Discovery of the North Pole," 94–95.

17 Robinson, 90.

18 Robinson, 99–103.

Conversely, science and manliness were also connected in the crafting of the figure of the self-sacrificing explorer. Fearless men's long, precarious forays into untamed wilderness were thought to foster a deeper kind of self-knowledge of humanity at large. For instance, following his first attempt at climbing Mount McKinley, the mountaineer Robert Dunn claimed in 1907 that explorers were:

> human beings tamed by the centuries, then cast out to shift for themselves like the first victims of existence—they must offer the best field of all to help this knowledge of ourselves. He knows life best who has seen it nakedest, and most exotic.[19]

This shaping of an ideal masculine subjectivity in the service of a greater human cause required a great deal of sacrifice. As science had become professionalized by the last quarter of the 19th century, exploratory methods that caused physical or material suffering gained traction in scientific circles. The popular method of exploration among male scientists, Rebecca Herzig has argued, entailed: "an ability to suffer social isolation, financial impoverishment, even physical pain."[20]

Importantly, for white men, suffering also served an epistemological purpose. As the documentation of discoveries proved insufficient or even fallible, concerns with explorers' sincerity and trustworthiness grew, and their bodies stepped in as evidence. "The visible evidence of the experience of physical hardship", Herzig writes, "helped to assure the trustworthiness of the explorer and generate assent to his assertions."[21] Although, in large parts, it might have been constructed reflexively, the subject of the self-sacrificing discoverer, then, was never constructed independently. Still, it is one of McClelland's main points that self-sacrificing scientists are unique enough subjects—and the specificities of their performed identities intriguing because they also carry a potential for change.

19 Dunn, *The Shameless Diary of an Explorer*, 3–4.

20 Herzig, *Suffering for Science: Reason and Sacrifice in Modern America*, 71.

21 Herzig, 79.

The Different Professional

McClelland establishes this perspective in part via the tensions with her own subjectivity. As the grim natural environment constantly reminds the party of writers and explorers of their shared humanity, McClelland distances herself from the two scientists as she asserts her own subjectivity as female writer. In this self-positioning, however, her different sex is secondary as it appears only as a feature of her, more generally, different body in a specific situation shared with other bodies. This construction of an alienated subject is emphasized in the text in which McClelland even self-distancingly she refers to herself in the third person. She makes the conditions of her produced experience transparent, reflects on her eventual writing about the experience and distinctively sets herself apart as the party's only female member. Taken together, these facets of her distinct professional subjectivity create the impression of a particular human medium, different from the scientists producing experience in order to eventually communicate it in written text. McClelland characterizes herself as having a clearly defined assignment and, consequently, as producing the experience intentionally. However, she is not alone in having the job to document the two birders' actions. As she repeatedly mentions, McClelland is accompanied by a photographer. At one point, she even explicitly refers to herself and the photographer as "the media".[22] Occasionally along with the photographer, McClelland describes the media as carrying out a job that is markedly different from that of the two scientists. For instance, she narrates how her preparation for the trip differed from theirs when they were preparing to camp at the Cuban national park's visitor center in Taco Bay:

> Everyone, even the birders, hated the bathroom, a multiperson outhouse that did not enjoy much in the way of maintenance. When the supply of potable water they'd hauled in ran out, the writer taught herself how to use the $ 250 worth of water-filtration and UV-sterilization equipment she had bought before embarking (she and the photographer, who are accustomed to hardships but of a different kind, have discovered they are wearing matching new pairs of technical wicking antimicrobacterial quick-drying underpants). Gallagher helped her purify water for the group, impressed with how much more convenient it was than a camping straw, which filters

22 McClelland, "Delusion Is the Thing with Feathers," 8.

> bacteria one sip at a time and does not filter viruses and which was all he carried in his bag[23]

By detailing how the water filter she brought on the trip was different from Gallagher's device, she communicates the professional awareness that she expected the trip to be a particular kind of work that required certain equipment necessary to performing the job. Furthermore, the mention that she brought the same pair of underpants as the photographer associates her equipment needs with his. Together with her aside, which they both were accustomed to a different kind of hardship, her selection of equipment characterizes herself as having a profession with distinct requirements. This self-characterization is sharpened by McClelland's more personal interpretations of her professional role. For instance, McClelland explicitly ties her judgment of the travel conditions in the group's rental car to her job:

> At breakfast the writer again expressed her wish that there were seatbelts, which she generally tries to secure on work trips when she is in charge of logistics; while the photographer kindly validated her feelings by saying this was a normal human desire, Lammertink did not deign to respond.[24]

Similar to her comment about the equipment, McClelland here mentions her desire for certain safety measures in order to counteract the trip's uncertainty. As she mentions that she generally secures seatbelts on work trips, she also hints at the potentially hazardous nature of her job in general. As the photographer shares her concern, while Lammartink ignores it, their belonging to separate professional camps is established.

McClelland further marks her subjectivity as professional with the different types of research that she performs. Apart from the trip to Cuba, she also produced material relevant to the story through various reporting activities. For instance, she visited the Cornell Ornithology Lab, where Gallagher and Lammertink provided several stuffed ivory-billed woodpeckers: "for the writer to inspect before heading to Cuba."[25] She also mentions that she talked to other expert ornithologists.[26]

23 McClelland, 6.
24 McClelland, 4.
25 McClelland, 9.
26 McClelland, 14–15.

However, McClelland also explicitly characterizes herself as a writer whose job it is to process experienced reality in ways different from the scientists whom she accompanies. When the group spends a rainy night in a Cuban military outpost, McClelland comments on the connection between experience and storytelling:

> 'This will be a great story to tell later,' he [Gallagher] keeps saying. He's been saying this for six days. He will continue to say it for eight more. But the writer is in no mood to agree with the principle that a good story is better than a good time, partly because she has become afflicted with diarrhea – the group has concluded that there must have been an accidental ingestion of a drop from the Bahia de Taco vat of river water – but also because people (read: men) who constantly tell stories of bad times are tedious, and she is basically certain she could write an equally compelling scene if this Cuban restricted-jungle military outpost in the mountains above Guantánamo had turned out to be home to a team of scrappy dogs attired in miniature formalwear and trained to serve cocktails – which would be a good time[27]

What stands out in this passage is McClelland's clear differentiation from the researchers regarding the basic component of her job, namely storytelling. The writer McClelland makes clear that she does not share the premise that only bad experiences make for good stories. On the one hand, she associates this rejection with confidence in her storytelling skills as a writer who is supposed to turn all kinds of experience into a compelling textual product. On the other hand, she also explains her stance with her sex and gender as she associates the penchant to put oneself in danger in order to brag about it with a certain kind of masculinity that is connected to the ornithologist's professional identity. Ultimately, it is the combination of professional conventions, personal role interpretation, and physical difference that clearly characterizes McClelland's lived body as being different from the male researchers whom she accompanies.

Mediating Body and Mediated Bird

As her concern with safety indicates, McClelland describes their human experience on the birding trip as physically wrested from the natural environment.

27 McClelland, 14.

This physical act is performed by the human body, which assumes presence in a particular place and consequently endures its conditions. In the narrative, this physical presence is rooted in the performing subjects' physical strength and willpower. Importantly, however, McClelland does not scrutinize the particular physical mediation of the human body through its sensory organs in these moments of endured presence. She appears more interested in the mere willingness to experience, which occupies the text's central focus. Hence, she narrates how the physical difference of her female body potentially affects the mediation of experienced reality, given that her mere willingness and capability to experience reality differ from the birders' experience. In addition to the human body, however, reality is also described as mediated by media technology, which offers further possibilities to objectify nature by way of storing and reproducing experience. This is demonstrated via the ultimately unfound bird, whose potential existence can—apart from the oral testimony of human witnesses—mainly be accessed through photographs, sound, and video recordings.

As hinted at above, McClelland characterizes her writer persona as having a different body, which results in her perceiving reality as being more precarious or dangerous. This difference is established in an early scene in which McClelland lays out the driving conditions on the trip. After having expressed her desire to wear seatbelts, as discussed above, McClelland is made aware that she has different physical needs by Gallagher.

> Gallagher, maybe a bit tipsily, had slapped her knee and laughed about it the night before as their young driver sped the proto-jeep away from the airport around the proliferation of horse-drawn carts on the street in the dark. Now, as they prepared to drive the first three of the many, many hours they'd spend on Cuban roads over two weeks, Lammertink invited the writer to cram herself into the only place she would fit, between him and the driver. 'It'll just be much more fatal in an accident,' he said of sitting in the front, then laughed [28]

McClelland, being laughed at for her differing safety demands, describes herself as subject to the paternalism of Gallagher and Lammertink, the men in power. Consequently, as she suggests here, her femininity might not be the only reason for her craving of seatbelts, but also the very reason for why her

28 McClelland, 4–5.

demand is not met. She further designates her body as less resilient than her travelers' bodies as she is the only member of the group who comes to suffer from diarrhea.[29] Partly, this leads to her particular need for privacy when she observes that their place to spend one of the first nights, a simple room in a military outpost, contains: "a toilet that in addition to being The Worst has no door to separate anyone who's using it from her comrades."[30] McClelland further designates the diarrhea as the cause for a further weakening of her body. She narrates that, following the night at the military outpost, the: "writer, who has been ingesting food but has effectively not eaten in two days because of the diarrhea, becomes too weak to stand; they put her on a mule."[31] Despite the reality of her female sex she, nevertheless, rests at observing a mere difference in resilience or tolerance for suffering between herself and her co-travelers. This difference is never explicitly attributed to her difference in sex. Moreover, it is due much more to the scientists's performance than McClelland's. Simply put, they appear much more masculine than McClelland female.

In contrast to her own body, McClelland paints the bodies of her male co-travelers as resiliently enduring hardships imposed on them by nature. These characterizations result both from observations on the trip itself and from historical episodes relayed to McClelland. On the trip itself, McClelland explicitly refers to the birders' physical strength. Sixty-five-year-old Gallagher is characterized ambiguously. On the one hand, McClelland paints Gallagher as enduring when she describes his behavior on the drive to Farallones. In the car, she writes that he: "bounced his old bones about in the back with zero complaints and inhuman patience". On the other hand, she also notes that, just like herself, he had to be put on a mule because he was "growing increasingly tired".[32] McClelland only alludes to Lammertink's physical condition once, towards the end, when McClelland notes in passing that he: "can endure almost anything but cannot abide an unshaven face".[33] In general, both scientists appear to be more physically resilient, and thus capable of producing different kinds of experience, than McClelland herself.

These personal observations of male physical resilience are supported by narratives of male suffering, as McClelland tells historical episodes of the two

29 McClelland, 14.
30 McClelland, 14.
31 McClelland, 16.
32 McClelland, 16.
33 McClelland, 19.

birders' research trips. For instance, as they have told her themselves, they both took a birding trip to Mexico where they managed to both enter and exit an area violently dominated by a drug cartel virtually unscathed.[34] Furthermore, they also once went on a trek in Argentina where they were bit by mosquitoes carrying botfly eggs. McClelland relays:

> Lammertink said nothing about the pain but Gallagher caught him flinching once as one crunched away at the shoulder tissue under his skin. (Gallagher himself finally reached a breaking point and dug his infestation, and his skin and thigh tissue, out wholesale with a knife.)[35]

McClelland also notes that Gallagher has repeatedly suffered from diarrhea and, once in Mexico, even contracted Hepatitis A.[36] A "partial list of untreated-water tragedies" for Lammertink even includes the death of a field assistant from diphtheria.[37] Taken together, these episodes make the two birders appear to be almost heroically resilient. However, McClelland marks this resilience as a narrative construct only partially rooted in reality. Although never directly asserted, the sources of these episodes have to be Lammertink and Gallagher themselves. Through the narration of their experiences McClelland hints at the possibility that their remembered physical resilience is not a future given but, more likely, a psychological necessity. To make this case, she invokes another researcher, Saul Weidensaul. With reference to the dangerous night hike that they undertake in Cuba, he argues that: "part of that just becomes if you've gotten away with it in the past, you assume you're gonna get away with it in the future".[38] Seen from this angle, the past heroics Lammertink and Gallagher reveled in offer them justifications for taking risks in the present. Their bodies then, while being real physical media that make experience possible, are also contingent objects of narrative construction that inevitably differ temporally and qualitatively from their real referents.

This is also true for the object of their physical efforts itself, the ivory-billed woodpecker. In the evident absence of its real existence in Cuba, the bird is only present as a sign whose mediated relationship to its referent is utterly

34 McClelland, 6–7.
35 McClelland, 7.
36 McClelland, 6.
37 McClelland, 16.
38 McClelland, 15.

uncertain. There are, for instance, the several initially promising human witnesses who each ultimately turn out to be highly unreliable.[39] Even the different technologies used to objectively prove the species' existence carry the inherent uncertainty of media products. For example, McClelland observes that Martjan Lammertink has become doubtful of the hitherto most certain proof of the bird's existence in Cuba, namely photographs:

> But maybe, he thinks now, the birds weren't there then, in the few remaining patches of pine forest where American researcher George Lamb *definitely* saw (and obtained photographic proof of) them in 1956, the last such universally accepted records on Earth.[40]

The main tension in this passage rises from the juxtaposition of Lammertink's doubt with the italicization of "*definitely*" that suggests absolute certainty regarding the other researcher's early sighting. McClelland marks the truth regarding the sighting in the absence of concrete physical experience as necessarily contingent upon subjective belief in the photograph's authenticity. This is also the case for a sighting by Gallagher captured on video, which McClelland describes as being: "highly contested as proof"[41] and as a: "catalyst of the highest-profile birder fight in modern history."[42]

However, not only is the mediated bird the inevitable harbinger of uncertainty in the text, but it is also a means to access the possibly real woodpecker. This is illustrated in the researchers' use of Lammertink's hand-built double-knocker and a recording of the bird. After imitating the sound of a woodpecker with his device, Lammertink also plays a recording over the speakers.

> After ten double-knocks, he put the dowels down, picking up his MP3 player and speaker. He scrolled through his playlist, then pressed play, holding the speaker aloft as the recording of an ivory-bill, the only existing recording of an Ivory-bill, from 1935, played, underlain by heavy static. People say it sounds like a horn. Or a baby goat. *Kent. Kent-kent.*[43]

39 McClelland, 18.
40 McClelland, 10.
41 McClelland, 9.
42 McClelland, 21.
43 McClelland, 11–12.

McClelland describes the recording of the bird, although used as the most authentic means to attract a live one, as highly inauthentic partly because it carries an interfering trace of mediation. However, if mediated representations of its call cannot accurately represent the almost certainly extinct bird, this of course carries an upside. For there "have been times", McClelland explains:

> when Lammertink used the double-knocker in places where he knew for a fact *Campephilus* woodpeckers [a slightly different species] were nearby (-slash-existed), and they didn't respond. To get one to do so on this trip in a territory this large, he conceded to the photographer, would be very lucky. To not get one proves nothing.[44]

In the above passage, then, even technical mediation is described as inevitably ambiguous and contingent. It can itself neither fully prove nor exclude the existence of a bird because it can only function as a sign of the bird, not as the bird itself.

Consequently, the body of a human subject remains the main producer and mediator of experience. It is a human subject who exerts the agency over the technologies of mediation mentioned. It is a human subject who chooses to acknowledge or to discard their authenticity. It is a human subject who willfully exposes his or her body to the perils of the real world in order to create experience in the first place. In the text, then, the concrete qualities of human bodies matter precisely because there is nothing beyond physical human presence over which to assert knowledge. When Gallagher returns to McClelland's hotel room after unsuccessfully questioning the last witness, McClelland describes him as devastated: "I mean", he says, "I'm the most optimistic person in the world, and it was just … inescapable to me. And I almost felt guilty, as though, like, me giving up made it so."[45] As long as there are no humans in Cuba to witness their existence, their hypothetical existence does not matter.

Between Cynicism and Necessity

More collective ethical concerns move into focus as McClelland anchors epistemological and ontological concerns in the individual human subject. The main

44 McClelland, 12–13.

45 McClelland, 20–21.

difference between McClelland and the birders as media is not the one between their bodies, but between their willingness to push their bodies in collective action. Consequently, one of the narrative's main tensions is located in the interpretation of the group's actions in Cuba. McClelland, on the one hand, describes her writer persona as reacting with cynicism to the birders' actions. The birders, on the other hand, initially view their actions as normal and necessary and only gradually open up to sharing the same grains of the doubt held by McClelland. McClelland is between the two extreme positions of necessity and incomprehension and by simply exhibiting this, she offers readers a potential sense or meaning in the group's efforts in Cuba.

Despite her inability to make sense of the two researchers' disregard for basic safety, McClelland's writer persona does not directly condemn their behavior. Instead, she expresses her disagreement in cynical passages that distance herself from the birders. Following the disagreement on the use of seatbelts mentioned above, for instance, she asserts her own position:

> Lammertink invited the writer to cram herself into the only place she would fit, between him and the driver. "It'll just be much more fatal in an accident," he said of sitting in the front, then laughed, the fact that car accidents cause the most American deaths abroad being funny.
> Ha!
> But of course, this is *birding*. Go dangerous or go home.[46]

McClelland here shows her disagreement with Lammertink's quip by first ironically laughing herself and then, again ironically, suggesting that birding is inherently dangerous. Thus, she questions the overall endeavor in which she nevertheless takes part because it makes her feel unsafe. However, McClelland also distances herself from behavior that only threatens the ornithologists' own health. When Gallagher helps her filter water, for instance, she notes how he was:

> impressed with how much more convenient it was than a camping straw, which filters bacteria one sip at a time and does not filter viruses and which was all he carried in his bag, though he has neither a naiveté about waterborne illness nor an ironclad digestive tract. A partial list of places where Gallagher has suffered severe gastrointestinal distress includes:

46 McClelland, 5.

> Mexico, Costa Rica, and Peru. In Mexico, he also got Hepatitis A. Which is a virus.[47]

Here, McClelland cynically expresses her non-comprehension about Gallagher's lack of concern with his own health by simply juxtaposing his use of a straw filter, which is unable to filter viruses, with the fact that he had once contracted a virus. He appears simply unwilling to sufficiently care for himself.

Her cynicism also extends to the entire group's collective actions. When their jeep gets stuck, despite the warnings of national park staffers that it might not be able to complete a portion of their trip, they have to violently force oxen to pull the car out of the mud:

> After a couple of hours of this, Gallagher turns to the writer and remarks, "This gives you a little idea of how hard it is to study these birds. And why nobody's doin' it."
> It grows dark.
> It starts to pour.
> Really, she has no idea.[48]

McClelland here again reacts with irony to Gallagher's statement which, in the context of the predicted difficulty of the passage due to the jeep's apparently bad condition and the bad weather forecast, appears misplaced. Commenting on the same scene, McClelland even more explicitly questions the group's actions by way of the photographer. As they are witnessing the treatment of the oxen, the photographer asks her:

> "Do you ever wonder if this is all worth it? For a bird?" The two of them snickered darkly. Just moments before, a chunk of wood had cracked off an ox-beating club as it broke over the animal's hide and shot past the photographer's head, missing him maybe by an inch. "One that almost definitely doesn't exist?"[49]

The question of the entire project's meaning looms large over all of the cynical passages and throughout the entire article. It expresses the main tension

47 McClelland, 6.
48 McClelland, 8.
49 McClelland, 14.

in McClelland's narrative. However, McClelland, with her irony, cynicism, and explicit distancing only raises the question without answering it and contrasts it with the two birders' largely uncompromising, determined actions.

In much of the text, Lammertink and Gallagher appear as archaic figures similar to the supposedly historical self-sacrificing explorers. They seem driven, almost obsessively, to find the ivory-billed woodpecker in Cuba. They seem willing to do whatever it takes, even risking their own lives. For instance, this is illustrated in their decision to make a dangerous hike downhill after the jeep has broken down:

> That night, after hours of human pushing and oxen pulling, the jeep is freed. And with more pushing and pulling, it is rolled backward, and pop-started. But it cannot make it up the now rain-slicked mountain rock, though the driver tries for a terrifying twenty minutes with all the equipment and group again loaded inside. There is a Cuban military outpost a ways back down; the group makes its way there in the downpour, in the dark, and begs a patch of concrete floor to sleep on in a dwelling containing what Gallagher will refer to for the rest of the trip and maybe the rest of his life as The Worst Toilet in the World.[50]

On the one hand, McClelland here only dryly describes the dangerous, albeit unnecessary in hindsight, collective actions of the group based on decisions made by Lammertink and Gallagher. On the other hand, she also breaks the hitherto painted image of Gallagher as an unfeeling, at times even unreasonable, research machine by showing that he hates the toilet. Even the birders, despite their obvious difference from McClelland, can appear aware of their own needs as humans. At this point, however, McClelland nevertheless reacts with irony to the birders' display of self-awareness. After a mule dies, McClelland describes Gallagher as tracking back his earlier claim about birding: "'This is not what normal birding is like,' Gallagher clarifies at some point to the writer, in case this has been lost on her."[51] She ironically acknowledges that Gallagher shares her interpretation, but she still distances herself from him. However, her distancing does not carry the pessimistic quality of much of her earlier cynical passages. Ultimately, when Lammertink admits to the riskiness of some of his work, adding that: "it's always for some kind of conservation project, and if

50 McClelland, 13–14.

51 McClelland, 16.

something goes terribly wrong, at least in my last moments, I know it was for some greater cause,"[52] she refrains from commenting at all, simply acknowledging his self-reflection.

While Lammertink and Gallagher ultimately appear more aware of themselves as humans, and are dedicated to a cause bigger than themselves, the distance that McClelland takes from their actions by showing her own ways of interpretation nevertheless opens a wide gap between the subjectivities of the female writer and the male researchers. This divergence between two kinds of aware subjectivities, with different ways of internal mediation sharing the same experiences, works to create a sense of sincere indeterminacy. After all, while criticizing the birders' concrete actions, McClelland never openly condemns their effort as being totally useless, but ultimately cautiously admits that the: "birders' passion does bring maybe balance but certainly conservation successes sometimes to this planet."[53] Furthermore, the divergence between the writer's and the scientists' subjectivities also works on the communicative level with readers, given that it marks the respective positions as ambiguous and utterly dependent upon both context and social interaction.

Productive Difference and the Possibilities of Delusion

Consequently, and despite the occasional cynicism, the difference that McClelland exhibits between herself and the birders, as two different kinds of human media, attains a productive quality throughout the text. It is precisely this difference that opens the possibility for mutual future understanding and acknowledgment as it sheds light on both subjectivities and marks them as both fluid and changeable. Despite their differences, MacClelland's self-reflection as medium also suggests basic, but clear similarities, between herself and the birders anchored in their shared humanity. Just like McClelland performs a specific kind of subjectivity to tell the public about the scientists' work, they themselves put in an effort to perform specific subjectivities affected by the conventions of their professional roles. McClelland merely acknowledges this similarity in difference. Elsewhere, she makes this point even more explicitly: "Nobody's right but nobody's wrong. People are just different. I think humans

52 McClelland, 19.

53 McClelland, 22.

are the most interesting thing of anything",[54] McClelland states in the interview on her birding story.

In the penultimate paragraph, McClelland writes that the photographer and writer: "don't understand, haven't understood, the risks the birders take. But one could argue that the writer and photographer do—that they are on this very trip doing—the same for their own work."[55] What is central here is her interjection "haven't understood", which signals the preliminary nature of the incomprehension that she claims for herself and on behalf of the photographer. Her awareness of the always only preliminary character of her own comprehension explains the site at which she draws parallels between her own work and that of the researchers. Just as the birders have not yet managed to ascertain the existence of the woodpecker, she herself has not yet been able to understand their actions. However, as Gallagher clarifies, invoking a fishing metaphor,[56] this does not mean they cannot succeed in the future. More existentially, the possibilities that are inherent in temporality apply to all of the text's reflexively produced subjectivities. Despite all of the irritation it begets, for McClelland, the masculine ornithologists' self-sacrifice is only a temporary trait of their reflexive identities that is not naturally connected to their bodies, but is an expression of their will to transform material reality. This interpretation of MacClelland's experience is further illustrated by the story's original title, which refers to a poem by Emily Dickinson. "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –", written in 1862, uses the bird as a metaphor to illustrate the aspiring character of hope.[57] With its reference to the poem, the title of McClelland's text suggests similar qualities in Gallagher and Lammertink's delusional undertaking. On a larger level, then, McClelland suggests that their temporary delusion carries the possibility of and signifies hope for a different future.

54 Gravitz, "Mac McClelland Tails Extreme Birders Through Cuba."

55 McClelland, "Delusion Is the Thing with Feathers," 22.

56 McClelland, 21.

57 Vendler, "314," 119.