Tracing, Expressing, and Asserting Multivocality in the Multispecies World

Concluding Remarks

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T. H. White chronicles the upbringing of mythical young king Arthur (2012 [1958]) in *The Sword in the Stone*, the first book of his *The Once and Future King*. Arthur's teacher, the wizard Merlyn, knows the boy's destiny and seeks to prepare him for it. White, an agnostic, was himself a naturalist and, as one reviewer wrote: "Notably free from fearing God, he was basically afraid of the human race" (Townsend 1977: IX). Drawing on Sir Thomas Malory's translation of the medieval French *Le Morte d'Arthur*, White develops a world in this first book, where species, at times, seem intermeshed. White's magician Merlyn appears to blend in and cohabit with animals, and while he hears and has them speak, White would seem to be an anthropomorphist in the service of bringing his 20th-century naturalist's knowledge to entertain while communicating the habits and social organization of different species. To prepare Arthur to grow into a wise leader, Merlyn transforms him, in turn, into a fish, a hawk, an ant, an owl, a goose and all manner of animals. Here is young Arthur, transformed into a goose, sensing and participating in the departure for migration:

> [He] began to feel an uneasiness in himself. The dim squadrons about him, setting out minute by minute, infected him with a tendency. He became restless to embrace their example, but he was shy. Perhaps their family groups, he thought, would resent his intrusion. Yet he wanted not to be lonely. He wanted to join in, and to enjoy the exercise of morning flight, which was so evidently a pleasure. They had a comradeship, free discipline and *joie the vivre*.
>
> When the goose next to the boy spread her wings and leaped, he did so automatically. Some eight of those nearby had been jerking their bills, which he had imitated as if the act were catching, and now, with these same eight, he found himself on pinion in the horizontal air. The moment he had left earth, the wind had vanished. Its restlessness and brutality had dropped away as if cut off by a knife. He was in it, and at peace. (White 2012: 183)

As much as Arthur's experiences of animal bodies, sensation and agency are anthropomorphized in this novel, and as much as they serve to teach him to become a wise ruler over difference, they show a deep awareness of other-than-human lives on the planet.[1]

There is also a longing to share in other species' ways of moving, dwelling and living, encountered in the shape-shifting motifs found in oral traditions around the globe. In this volume, Mairéad Nic Craith touches on such transformations as gleaned from Irish narrative tradition. Candace Slater studied the stories of freshwater dolphin transformations into human form in the Amazon region (1994). Kitsune, the woman turned fox, figures in Japanese legends (Iwasaka and Toelken 1994). Swedish legendry knows of forest spirits, half woman half tree or transforming from one into the other, where a present-day reading might focus more on such spirits' protection of forests from men than, as older interpretations emphasized, on their seduction of men.[2] Other tales and legends in vernacular tradition feature the knowledge of understanding animal languages, a gift that those who have it all too easily squander. The animals overheard have a greater knowledge of events to come than the humans who understand them (Johns 2016). Rivka Galchen writes: "Animals have prominent speaking roles in many of our oldest stories. Eve has a memorable conversation with a snake. In Norse mythology, two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, serve as spies to the god Odin, whispering to him the news of the world" (2024). Animals know of hidden treasures or impending calamities, and one could surmise in such stories a latent (or taken-for-granted?) human awareness of the assemblages of perception and knowledge in the multispecies web. The 21st-century scholars, scientists and artists contributing to this volume express this knowledge overtly: they use words such as connectedness, kinship, relationship, relationality, webbing and so forth to affirm and build on the situated as well as overarching evidence of multispecies interwovenness, interdependence, care and responsibility. Much as White engages serious concerns in crafting an example of what is termed the fantasy genre today, some authors in this collection, such as Siobhan Leddy, advocate and practice what Donna Haraway termed "speculative fabulation" (2013), or develop their own variant of a fiction genre, such as Fernanda Haskel's anticipatory narrative.

Working from traditional narratives and reconsidering them under the auspices of a multispecies perspective, as do Nic Craith and Pauline Schuster-Löhlau in this collection, is a powerful means of narrating a multispecies cosmos. There is rich folkloristic research that documents and examines vernacular narrative in emic and etic terms, and offers new readings of how seemingly barren texts[3] allow insights into efforts to link to,

1 T. H. White's *The Book of Merlyn*, intended as the concluding volume of *The Once and Future King*, was published after his death (1977). He engages here still deeper into animal worlds, with Merlyn once more sending an aged and dispirited king Arthur off to learn from animals, hoping that the broken king might regain the strength to lead the world into peace. The text was written during WWII, and White has animals hold court over warfaring humans.

2 They can be found under "Spirits of the Forest" in Bengt af Klintberg's survey (2010). A Nordic comparative survey of these figures, without attention to a multispecies perspective, is offered by Kusela (2020). More on human-plant shape-shifting and vegetal narrating is introduced by Middelhoff and Peselmann (2023).

3 A young audience member voiced in the question and answer session after Nic Craith's splendid keynote in Würzburg how she now finally understood why she had found printed collections of

mirror and mimic the more-than-human world.[4] Yet, it took a long time for scholarly work with indigenous and vernacular narrative to expand from collection efforts and etic attention to narrative categories (Ben-Amos 1969; Jolles 1930) to recognize the interwoven sensibility toward self, place and other encoded in traditional or indigenous narration (Kockel 2014). An early example is Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996); a very recent one goes further, paying attention to the embodied, even material experience of both narrating and listening (Kotašková 2024). Listening, seeing and sensing all require attunement if humans are to perceive other-than-human communication. Furthermore, decentring humankind is in order to acknowledge that our species is not necessarily the addressee of such potential multispecies storying. Humbleness is perhaps the essential quality necessary for our species to attempt to narrate the multispecies world.

The bold tasks set by the conference "Narrating the Multispecies World in Times of Crisis", gathered here on the two-dimensional printed page, are as manifold as the challenges of what its instigator, Michaela Fenske, in her introduction emplaces in the growing scholarship on the polycrisis. A wild and productive interdisciplinary assembly of participants took up the call to narrate in ways that felt, at times, even beyond three-dimensional. Research and imagination exploded further than the parameters imagined by a more classic, discipline-based concept of narrative, encouraging one to go beyond what has been assumed to be an exclusively human skill, as reflected in the term *homo narrans* (Fisher 1984; Ranke 1967). To assess what possibilities were charted by the conference and the selection of papers that found their way into print here, I will, firstly, probe what might be understood to constitute narration and story when working from a multispecies perspective. Secondly, I will address the forms and media chosen through which narrative, broadly understood, is put forth in the contributions assembled here. Behind both perspectives is a goal probably embraced by everyone involved in *Narrating the Multispecies World*: communication and, with it, narration, broadly conceived, are more-than-human facilities. But it is up to humans to use their particular narrative skills to compel members of their often so deaf and blind species to listen to what the multispecies world is capable of narrating.

Communication and (Shared) Sociality as a Foundation of Narration

Humans have gone to great lengths in asserting their superiority over all living things – as Nic Craith noted in invoking the habitual, yet mistaken hierarchies of human views of the environment. In the dominant religions of the Western world, myths as the master narratives of religions characterize humans as the pinnacle of creation, endowed with

tales and legends boring – reduced to context-free texts, as was the custom of folklore collecting deep into the 20th century. Nic Craith's contribution was an eye-opener for many of those present.

4 The major reference work on folk narrative, the *Encyklopädie des Märchens* (Ranke et al. 1977–2015) encompasses all genres of folk narrative; it offers many articles on animal protagonists of stories, but few on plants; it was conceptualized before the human-animal and the multispecies studies turn within folkloristic and anthropological disciplines.

the power to name and dominate over all else. Western science since the Enlightenment, taking for granted such mythic claims, set out to 'discover' and name, observe, dissect and categorize all plant and animal species, habitats and environments, using the very capacities that were seen to constitute 'human superiority', namely, a large brain relative to body size, and language, in all its communicative forms, particularly writing, which enables reflection as well as plotting and planning futures. The plotting and planning has, perhaps, been to the detriment of the planet, and communication and, with it, language, as we have come to realize through studies ranging across many different species, is not humans' gift alone.

Naturalist Lyanda Haupt's monograph surrounding *Mozart's Starling* (2017) also offers a chapter summarizing scientific efforts to claim aspects of language as uniquely human, citing, for instance, Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch's efforts (2002) to establish "recursiveness" as a uniquely human capacity. As recently as 2016, Robert Berwick, together with Noam Chomsky, asserted that in evolutionary terms, it can only be us humans who command language. Haupt's own experiences with raising and caring for a starling she named Carmen led to an opposing view, which she had seen confirmed already in Darwin's work: "Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man* 'The sounds uttered by birds offer in several aspects the nearest analogy to language.' That was in 1871" (Haupt 2017: 168). She goes on to cite Erich Jarvis, a neuroscientist, who mapped the genome of forty-eight different species of birds. He found fifty overlapping genes in humans and birds that correlate with vocal learning. "In birds that were more adept at learning new songs, these genes were more often expressed" (ibid.). In bridging between scientific work and personal experience, Haupt permits herself some astonishment that it took until 2012 for an international consortium of prominent scientists to sign "a document called 'The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness,' in which they proclaimed that animals from birds to mammals to octopuses, possess consciousness similar to humans'" (ibid.: 170). While perhaps leading to higher ethical standards of treating animals, she states:

> I cannot help but think that as an academic declaration, it comes a bit late. […]. Do most of us really need a scientific document to inform us that the animals we live with are conscious beings? I believe that the human sense of connection with the more-than-human world is innate and joyous. It is our truest way of being, of dwelling, of relating. It is not new; it is very old. (Ibid.)

While a humanistically inclined naturalist, such as Haupt, has no difficulty combining her science foundation with an experience-based understanding of, in this case, Carmen's relational behaviours, acknowledging bird song as sentient communication is still considered less scientific in the world of some ornithological research. Yet, in Wikipedia, the most widely used popular reference source, ornithologists speak of bird vocalizations rather than bird song and emphasize such vocalizations' function for mate attraction and territorial defence, as bird song recedes once mating and child-rearing are over.[5] The word song, we are told, is used because those vocalizations sound like (human) music to

5 "Bird vocalization" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird_vocalization> [Accessed 30 July 2023].

human ears, and many scientists do not wish to presume that birds enjoy aesthetic pleasures such as singing. Considered a form of anthropomorphism, different vocabulary is, thus, chosen, and the potential of affective involvement on the part of the researcher is avoided.[6] When searching for 'whale song' – which has long been marketed as music and incorporated into human compositions – Wikipedia also redirects to "whale vocalization". Here, at least, we find sentences such as "male humpback whales have been described as 'inveterate composers'".[7]

Fearing anthropomorphic propensities, natural scientists may also be less inclined to use vocabulary that is derived from language and reflection to discuss support mechanisms among networks of plant and tree roots. However, Stephanie Pappas (2016) summarizes that scientific debates regarding supportive webs among trees in forests, and the propensity to acknowledge chemical and electric interaction as forms of communication has certainly increased and perhaps also indicates a rise of other than Cartesian stances in science (e.g., Jørgensen Hansen 2024). However, it is the interdisciplinary attention, such as Sarah Abbott's work bridging ethnography and science (2021), that is more daring in carrying arguments of sentience and, with it, communicative endeavours among trees into the public realm. And it is literary work, such as Richard Powers widely read novel *Overstory* (2018), that builds on a susceptibility or conviction among readers in favour of arboreal and arboreal-human communication. In doing so, Powers becomes an actor in the growing number of narrators of the multispecies world, much like Haupt, who lobbies not only for Mozart's awareness of the starling's musicality and intelligence, but also the communicative talents of her Carmen (Haupt 2017: 93).

Even with the scientific hesitation to consider communicative and relational possibilities for fear of projecting human characteristics and predilections onto non-human species, we witness a great deal of evidence of non-human communication that asserts sociality. From sociality grows habitus – clearly also not a human prerogative, and possibly a source of memory. Over the course of my lifetime, despite all scientific scaffolding to categorize non-human communication at best as functional for a given species, we have been inching closer to acknowledging communicative skill and agency going beyond stilling hunger, insuring procreation and warning of danger among numerous species. Media report no longer just on smart dolphins but also on smart ravens or, adding emotion, seemingly irritated orcas.[8]

There is, certainly, communication in the form of learned and crafted vocalization in traditionalized animal-human pairings. Think of pastoralism and Sami joiking (Jones-Bamman 1993), the primary or head tone soundings among the Tuva (Levin 2011) as well as herders in parts of Mongolia, alpine yodelling (Schwietert 2007) or "singing the cows

6 Galchen reports, however, that at Tokyo University, for example, there has been an animal linguistics laboratory since 2023, drawing different conclusions than the animal-language deniers.

7 "Whale vocalization" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whale_vocalization> [Accessed 30 July 2023].

8 There were press reports on orcas disturbing sailboats on the Iberian coast in the spring and summer of 2023; a more systematic site has archived such orca-human encounters since 2020: "recorded interactions" <https://www.orcaiberica.org/en/copia-de-interacciones-registradas> [Accessed 13 September 2024].

home" in Sweden (Brorson 1985). All of these are elaborations of the vocalizations employed in wordless, guttural but melodic ways to call in domesticated animals for milking or guide them in other ways. Vocalization is also not the only non-linguistic communication in which humans engage: research on hunting points to other sensory relational dimensions that have been ethnographically documented (Willerslev 2007[9]), similar to those in horse breeding and riding (Eckardt 2023). Human-companion animal research presented at the conference on which this volume is based was full of multisensory communication that respondents did not know how to put into words.[10] As differently as such human-animal relationships may be motivated, once they are felt to be social relationships, actors within them can no longer be indifferent to them (Keane 2024: 81).

A focus on sound opens up further perspectives. Philosopher of science Vinciane Despret employs the concept of "cosmophonic stories" (2022: 31) in her rethinking of birds, territoriality and multispecies relations. Her concept resonates for me with ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's more than forty-year-old work with the Kaluli of New Guinea (1982). In that thickly forested terrain, sound takes on a role outpacing vision. The Kaluli shape their cosmology, ritual and aesthetic expression deeply through their connection with birds, bird song and plant life, integrating themselves on an even plane with the species among whom they live. If we, thus, step away from what *humans* consider language and with it narration, and consider the sensorium, and the sophistication required to use and habitually rely on its communicative role within and between bodies or entities, intelligence turns into something far broader, encompassing the realm of tacit, experiential knowledge. It is not an accident that it has taken a long time to seriously address how we acquire tacit knowledge, such as Michael Polanyi (1966) has theorized it (Bendix 2023). Where body, senses and mind accumulate experience and turn it into internalized skill without necessarily verbalizing it, the comparability of species in learning and acquiring competence can be grasped and the potential for (shared?) understanding of what mastering life entails may open up further, experience by experience. To grasp a multispecies world – instead of a world of many species as perceived by humans – invites, urges and requires attention paid to all sources of communicative skill and knowledge. The non-cerebral is at the forefront, undermining classic nature-culture divides and other kinds of binaries. Embodied learning and communicating undoes categories and acknowledges the individuality of humans and non-humans alike. In their work with grey parrots, Ute Hörner and Vanessa Wijngaarden in this volume build on sensory knowledge as it grows to a communicative interspecies and dyadic history. Ally Bisshop's work is particularly in tune with the thinking outlined here, regarding her grasping spiders' vibrational command as communication. What she terms "sensory smudging between hearing and tactility" is an opening towards linking the sensory with the cognitive in untried ways. Smudging would appear to be a suitably imprecise term and method to find perspectives into multispecies worlds.

9 See also the special issue on senses I edited for Ethnofoor 2005, 18(1) < https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25758079> [Accessed 28 October 2024].

10 Sarah Mönkeberg, Kerstin Jürgens and Markus Kurth reported on a microsociological research project about human-companion animal relations (2024).

To return to the core narrative of old world mythology: Sampling the fruit of the tree of cerebral knowledge was what caused mankind to be kicked out of Eden. Paradise in that story meant to live within rather than outside of the multispecies world. From that perspective, the myth of the fall thematizes the ill use of humanity's cerebral capacity for human supremacy, with its domineering and exploiting stance towards the planet as a whole. Paradise cannot be restored. But once there is the recognition that communication is a facility shared within and across species, once one arrives at accepting narration to be possible, recognizable or, perhaps best, desirable for the sake of rebuilding, at least in patches, a multispecies world, one can turn towards what such narration may look like.

Voice, Form, Medium: How to Narrate the Multispecies World

Sandra Eckardt, when drawing the story of the orphaned chick Daisy in the opening contribution in this volume, employs the eloquence of shape and colour in narrating a little bird's survival in human care. The form and medium chosen, with voice sketched in uneven letters and words in a manner suggesting more-than-human penmanship, all suggest an approximation of witnessing and telling in colour and shape that which might contain Daisy's way of perceiving and emoting. While the book form ultimately enforces working with printed and grammatically correct human language, the presence of art in the contributions bespeaks its centrality as an avenue through which a potentially participatory or collaborative multispecies world can be grasped and narrated.

The visual as a medium is used to offer presence and outline characteristics to communicate differential (co-)existence figures in a number of contributions. Photographer Ren Hang's work is explored by Ahmet Emin Bülbül, who interprets the artist's skill in decentring the human in multispecies portraiture. Hang's compositions aim for a more-than-human sociality, on the one hand, using light and positioning to allow for the non-human entity's qualities to emerge in a dominant rather than background manner. On the other hand, Hang produces liquid depictions of shared space, with non-human and human moving within water or breathing the same air. On the metalevel, classic theorizing of photography is augmented and shifts with the influx of multispecies theorists, such as Eben Kirksey or Anna Tsing.[11] André Krebber and Zhongaho Chen trace the ways in which landscape in its textured constitution found ways to narrate itself through painting, from the brush strokes of a 17th-century Chinese painter all the way to present-day ways of allowing canvas to absorb plant agency before being further worked on.

Andrea Palašti engaged participants in actual movement during the conference on which this volume builds, intended to experience mimetically and three-dimensionally how another species may inhabit space. In the contribution written jointly with Sanja

11 Kirksey most recently coedited with Sophie Chao and Karin Bolender a work that, much as the authors gathered here, combines scholarship with creative work (Chao, Bolender and Kirksey 2022). Anna Tsing, next to her much cited work on the Matsutake mushroom's entanglements (2015), continues to build the gargantuan *feral atlas*, a work that like no other documents and demonstrates the ongoing human impact on multispecies co-existence (Tsing et al. 2021).

Anđelković, it is the lines that mussels draw in movement that are taken as sandy writing, communicating existence, movement and the passage of time. Palzang's use of film documentation distributed over digital social media, reported here by Sira Liang, is almost in an opposite, disembodied direction, yet, clearly effective in its efforts to recover Tibetan grasslands. Digital narrating and witnessing about traditional herders' ways counter ineffective, destructive policy and wins adherents. Martin Abbott, Amy Cheatle and Lissette Lorenz's turn to zine-making and gardening as activities co-constituting one another, for which they coin the term *anthropo-botano-genesis*, is visual and graspable, in a crafty-earthy way.

Multispecies advocacy encourages and warrants this kind of creativity. Yet, the polycrisis we find ourselves in has its origins in our species, and it is, first and foremost, humans who need to hear narratives about and for the multispecies world. Whether it is short stories penned by students (Ilhéu and Valente); personal narratives on roots, houseplants and migration (Alkan); a creative format, such as an ethnodrama, to stage the presence of a tree and its roots in a scene peopled with architects and labourers (Neubert); finding engaging ways to narrate the endangered entanglement of monarch butterflies and milkweed (Tabak); differentiating between the slow collaboration of traditional fruit breeders and apple trees and fast track genetic modifiers (Peselmann); or gathering water's destruction in language, where humans have excessively hemmed in its course (Beneduce): each of these approaches succeeds in drawing attention to a particular angle on the multispecies web and the actors within it, from the everyday to the scientific, the metaphoric to the concrete.

Conclusion

Narrative is a meaning-making practice as well as an opportunity to encourage taking action, or, indeed, to desist from acting. Times of crises require, more than anything, the spreading of insight and assembling of courage to productively and collectively engage in tackling such crises – for we cannot afford to be planet doomers (Solnit and Lutunatabua 2023). One big challenge lies in the dynamic nature of knowledge: both research-based and experiential, knowledge often changes so fast that narrations limp behind or cannot keep up. The COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a case in point with the build-up of knowledge, policy decisions and conspiratorial rumours leading to conflicting stories. Climate change and its effects are so rapid that the same may happen with environmental and conservation stories – both of which require potent narratives to find supporters in the broader public. And, as narrative scholars know, just as every proverb generally finds an opposing companion proverb, so stories pleading for multispecies awareness and practice are confronted by other, rhetorically powerful stories that endorse political values pressing for continued land exploitation, denying the human role in bringing about the melting of glaciers, and endorsing a story of continued economic progress.

Michaela Fenske, in her introduction, endorses Donna Haraway's "staying with the trouble" (2017), that is, taking on the responsibility of retelling familiar or crafting new narratives that recover or build afresh the direly needed multispecies awareness, and, in the process, kindling courage and contributing to repair and rebuilding. Such narratives

will set aside human-made divides between the useful and useless species, respect the differential needs for space and shoulder the responsibility for undoing at least some of the havoc our species has wreaked over thousands of years in securing dwelling and nourishment, first and foremost, for our own species.

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