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Poetry, Animals, and the Imaginative Ethnographies of Creaturely Lives

The pesky fly, the stolid donkey grazing in a field, a lowing cow, the turnstile effect of rushing whirlpools, striving salmon swimming upstream, a gentle breeze whispering against our eardrums, the nanosecond, the deep time of millennia, the light years of transit of a dim star's midnight glow finally reaching our gaze –

For two decades now we have been stretching our academic work in the humanities to embrace the intellectual challenge of conceiving our objects of study more expansively – as humans as part of vibrant, more-than-human worlds – and terming this work the “Animal Turn,” “Post-Humanism,” or the “New Materialism,” among other names. Each of these takes a different route towards the questions of decentering “the human” as our locus of value, and each approach (whether anchored in such disciplines as literature, humanistic social sciences, science and technology studies, feminist studies, post-colonial studies, ethnic studies, or cultural geography) foregrounds its own stakes, modes, and objects of analysis. Each offers analytical and political affordances – highlights some issues while backgrounding others. But, taken together we can see a striving to conceive of relations that place human experience and cultural production in larger relational frames, all the way up to the emerging field of “planetary studies.”¹

In this article, working from an anthropological point of view of the more-than-human, I bring into conversation the notion of social science's multi-species ethnography and literary studies – especially an examination of poetic forms. I am interested above all in what poetry can do – that is, its *cultural work* – as a mode of helping us articulate human relations with non-human animals, and how it might engage not only our creative imaginations but our potential for empathy.

I focus on the capacity of creative writing to offer us so many viewpoints

about how to be in the world and how to encounter it, name it, imagine our futures and reimagine our pasts. Recent studies have argued that literature can actually improve our capacity to experience empathy – a much needed capacity in times of cultural conflict sharpened by economic pressures (see Chiaet; Kaplan). Unlike non-fiction, which pretends to simply render that which is supposed to be “true,” creative work embraces the inability to know, the multi-perspectival nature of knowledge, and the multiple and even contradictory meanings that accrue to any act of representation – whether verbal or visual, performative, or material. Embracing complexity and connotation, literature demands a deeply engaged interpretive act from ourselves as co-creators, not simply as textual consumers.

This multiplicity offers us the opportunity to imagine differently and in so doing can potentially be liberatory. It can chart new paths to the unknowable, like the lives of beings physically quite different from ourselves – like fungi and biomes, lichens, mountains and comets, root systems and trees, and that category of living beings we designate as “animals.” As anthropologist Anna Tsing notes, “[m]aking worlds is not limited to humans” (22). However, becoming aware of those multiple ways of making worlds requires attending to beings and phenomena beyond the human, what Tsing terms developing the “arts of noticing”: “Twentieth-century scholarship, advancing the modern human conceit, conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered and conjoined projects that make up worlds” (22), she says. Working against an ahistorical notion of “natural history,” Tsing argues that “[n]onhuman ways of being, like human ones, shift historically. [...] ways of being are emergent effects of encounters” (23). To see these other lifeworlds, she suggests, we have to learn to “look around, not just ahead” (22) – in other words, we must work to notice. In this one phrase she subtly references not only our own front-facing binocular vision and our visual-centric way of encountering the world, but also invites us to see the lives going on around us – including those animal lives with different visual and sensorial systems.

Of course, who and what falls in and out in this category of “animal” is culturally and historically specific, as an entire strand of work in human-animal studies demonstrates. “Animalization” – an association of certain populations, like the enslaved, or females, with animals, as a

denigrated category somehow “below” the human – is a concept with long roots in European cosmologies. It underwrote concepts of “civilization” and “barbarity,” providing a rationale for colonization from the fifteenth century onward. Its legacies continue to provide substrata for violence and disenfranchisement, as recent works in literary studies by Zikkiyah Iman Jackson and Alexander Weheliye have argued.

And within the “animals” category, species differentiation is mapped onto culturally specific valuation. Consider attitudes toward insects, the most prevalent animals on the planet, yet largely ignored – most often seen as pests not pets. Mark Twain, a particular focus of nineteenth-century American literary studies, deserves an appearance here. Shelley Fisher Fishkin has gathered a treasure trove of Twain’s writings about animals in *Mark Twain’s Book of Animals*. Sometimes of course, as we see in children’s stories and fairy tales, the animal is a stand-in for the human, enabling some things to be said metaphorically that might not be sayable directly. As Fishkin notes: “Twain found that making fun of animals for qualities that showed them as all too human could be a useful strategy for mounting genial critiques of human behavior” (8). And he was often critical of human cruelty towards animals, including publicly rejecting vivisection. Yet at other times we get the feeling that Twain is really homing in on his relationship with a particular species of animal, offering that relationship as a broader sketch of human relations with the “natural” world, a distinction between the natural and the cultural that only humans make of course, and then only some of the time. Of all the species that Twain wrote about, the common house fly seemed actually to vex him most. In his 1906 essay “The House Fly,” noting that over time humans have established dominion over the lion, the tiger, the hippopotamus, the bear, the whale, and so on, Twain remarks: “There isn’t a single species that can survive if man sets himself the task of exterminating it, the house fly always excepted”; nature, he writes, “cannot construct a monster on so colossal a scale that man can’t find a way to exterminate it. [...] Nature cannot contrive a creature of the microscopical infinitesimality and hide it where man cannot find it – find it and kill it;” only the fly can escape, it seems to Twain, and thus begins the battle of wits, technology and kinesthetics as he describes flies sneaking into airtight screens, outdancing slapping towels aimed at them

and skittling off, smiling, in Twain's words, "that cold and offensive smile which is sacred to the fly, and man is conquered and gives up the contest" (182-83).

The playful attribution of the smile to the fly may be fanciful, but it begins to imbue this enemy of humans with a sense of personality. Finally, this passage continues until Twain describes drowning flies in a washbowl, pushing each under the water to drown it with his fingertip, and then marveling as they escape and traipse up the side of the bowl, surging onward toward freedom only to be pushed back underwater by Twain again. In this mini-narrative of torture, escape, and ultimate triumph, Twain recognizes his own moral quandary of killing a being so determined to live, no matter how noxious the animal seems and how injurious to human pride. Finally, he writes, "the pathetic spectacle gave me pain," and he sent the flies, exhibiting "pitiful signs of exhaustion and despair" (184), down to their ultimate demise.

There are so many ways to read this essay – as a critique of bumbling humans outsmarted by a creature with a brain the size of a grape pit, or as a backhanded acknowledgment of the co-extensive lives of beings so unlike us yet enmeshed literally in our worlds, buzzing around our bedroom pillows on sultry nights or getting caught up in the butter at our picnics outdoors. Yet, we could also read this short essay as a sort of, at times, playful "multi-species ethnography": a record and analysis of relations across the species barrier, of lives lived at least in parallel and often in concert, and oh so closely observed, even in jest.

Even Langston Hughes, although he did not write about animals as often as Twain, gives us a glimpse of what attending to lives other than our own might be – about the empathic power of creative writing to render a more than human world. Consider this passage from a short piece penned during World War 2, February 3, 1945, printed in the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, and titled "The Animals Must Wonder." Noting that newspaper men report from the front that farm animals run crazed through the streets he writes:

Animals, of course, do not know the difference between Nazis and Allies. To a gentle old plow horse deserted by his fleeing owners in the Aachen sector of the Western Front, the guns of both sides must sound like the very roar of hell

itself. To a herd of sheep whose pasture is suddenly invaded by flame-throwing tanks, it must seem as if the world has gone mad. [...] To suddenly be deserted in an empty house on a day when the very air explodes like thunder, [...] left-lonesome cats and dogs and birds in cages must think the end of time has come. (134-45)

These animals, literally caught in the crossfire of human fear and aggression, are unlikely to have any concept of an “end of time,” as that temporality is a human trope, but incomprehension and terror as their daily lives are literally pounded to shreds in front of their eyes is surely not far off the mark. To recognize the impact of our war-making on animals is one small act of the larger challenge of rewriting history with a multi-species eye, as historians like Erica Fudge have suggested.

Multi-species Ethnography

Over the last decade or so, in anthropology we have seen calls for “multi-species ethnography” as a new methodology, a way of adapting that defining stock-in-trade of cultural anthropology – ethnography – to the reconceived notion of who is an agential subject. Traditionally of course, ethnographic studies of groups or communities, whether medical workers or artists, rural communities, working class neighborhoods, or urban elites, have tried to capture something of the ways in which contemporary communities create their worlds, ascribe meaning, and apportion access to goods and power. What happens though when we widen that definition of a community to include both human and non-human entities?

Building on the work of theorists like Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich in their 2010 article, “The Emergence of Multi-species Ethnography,” Thom Van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose invite us to consider the challenges and possibilities of creating “lively ethnographies,” of storying worlds beyond the human; to do so, they argue, “demands an attentiveness to the ways in which others make and live their worlds, it demands ethnography” (91); such writing can be a form of witness, they

assert, and rest on a sense of responsiveness and responsibility, to “seize our relational imagination” (91).

The notions of responsiveness, a mutually effective and affective relationality, and on-going becomings between the human and more-than-human, echoes across several disciplines, discourses, and communities from the New Materialism to Indigenous Studies. Jane Bennet, for instance, urges us to understand the world as filled with “vibrant matter,” so that we do not simply see the world as a backdrop for human action. Indigenous theorists, like Sisseton Wahpeton, Oyate scholar Kim TallBear and Metis anthropologist and artist Zoe Todd, have noted that a wider kinship-based notion of how humans relate to the non-human world, and the attribution of vitality to those worlds, is also a long-standing part of some native cosmologies and epistemologies. The “new materialism” is not really so new, they assert, except that it is now located in Euro-American derived epistemologies.

While these larger discussions of the “more than human” often include plants, lichen, the weather, geology, and so on, for those of us in “animal studies” or “human-animal studies” this notion of seriously engaging the lives of the more than human means focusing on the category of “animal” and how humans define themselves with, against, and in relation to non-human animals. Langston Hughes and Mark Twain use narrative forms like the essay. But here I want to focus more specifically on poetry to argue that, with its power of condensation, its demanding use of sound, line breaks, diction and metaphor, which affect us on both the linguistic and non-linguistic level of assonance, consonance, and meter, it can be an extremely effective and affective way to limn these observations and to create lively multi-species artistic ethnographies.

At the heart of this discussion lie questions of the power (and limits) of representation and articulation, which I will return to at the end of the article. But for now let me underline two points. First, this article focuses solely on forms of verbal representation, and within that delves most deeply into poetic forms to think through what poetry might offer as a mode of connection and empathy across human and non-human animals. Other art forms, like dance, visual arts, and music each offer their own possibilities and limitations (see Desmond “Moving Across”). Secondly, I

start from the presumption that all human created forms of representation are necessarily, by definition, anthropocentric, in the specific sense that they can only articulate our responses to the world as we encounter it as historically and culturally situated humans. Imagination is the tool that enables us to attempt a bridge across species-specific world creations. This attempted bridging is always an in-process practice, always imperfect and incomplete, and necessarily so.

However, I argue here that *poetic forms* may be especially powerful modes of imagining other-species-worldings. First, because such works can evoke empathic responses, as noted above, but secondly because the specific work demanded of the reader of poetry, with its gaps, links, sonic emphases, and suspended line breaks that call the mind to creative work, may be especially powerful as a mode of provoking not only attention but empathy and connection across species lines. While other literary forms such as the essay or novel also call on the reader's imaginative skills, they typically provide more guideposts in terms of description, narrative structure, contextualization, and explications.

Why Focus on Poetry?

Poet, teacher, and critic James Logenbach, discussing lyric poetry, calls this “not extractable knowledge, but what feels like a form of thinking that transpires in the time it takes to read the poem” (153). In other words, for the reader, encountering poetry is a highly demanding performative act. Of course, this performative engagement – the reader's response which both completes and enlivens the text (see Tompkins) – is the case for all forms of artistic representation whose multiple meanings are activated when they meet their audiences. But with poetry this engagement of active construction and connection by the reader is highlighted as a core part of the encounter. It is in fact a structural demand and a valued aesthetic technique. When less is given on the page, more is required by the reader to “fill in the gaps” suggested by sound, metaphor, the conceptual gulf of line breaks and symbolism. If this is so, then we might also say that the work that poetry requires of us has the potential political power to render

cross-species connections as something urgent – as worth bringing into the public realm. That is, a poetry of animals is also potentially a politics of multi-species relations.

Poet and teacher Mary Oliver thrusts us towards just such an understanding of the emotional power of poetry (and its resultant political power), when she concludes her book on how to write poems, *A Poetry Handbook*, by saying that poetry “has a purpose other than itself. [...] poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pocket of the hungry” (122). Just as the reader must create and recreate an imagined cross-species relation, we are called upon to articulate the role of those relations, their politics, their ethics, in the public sphere.

Yet, surprisingly, poetry has, as yet, received little attention in animal studies published in English, and most of that quite recent – in just the last few years. There are some exceptions. Cary Wolfe endeavors to bring Derridean deconstruction to meet the biological ecology of our time, underlining the role of epistemologies and representation (see *Ecological Poetics*). Onno Oerlemans, noting and agreeing that the conception of “the animal” is at the heart of so much of the social delineation of “the human” and who/what falls within that vaunted category at a specific time and place, and, following Nicole Shukin, as making animals consumable, makes the case for poetry as a genre that, above all, might do the Derridean work of actually coming face-to-face – of charting moments of recognition including those when (like Derrida’s cat) we see the gaze returned (7).

Michael Malay contributes to this idea when he writes that: “we need to examine [...] animals in particular, so as to develop forms of analysis that respect the singularity of their lives as well as the strategies poets have devised to represent them”; but even this is not enough, he says, because “even the most nuanced categories continue to offer *conceptualizations* of the animal. We reify animals in the process of speaking about them, by representing their otherness (a reality that exceeds language) through speech”; but the process can be partly resisted, since to recognize the partialness of our words enables us, as Malay asserts, to treat those words in provisional and ironic terms, that is “to hold our descriptions of animal lives at a wry distance” (27). He continues:

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida makes a similar point in his use of “*animot*,” a neologism which literally translates into ani-word. For Derrida, “animot” is a way of insisting that we keep two things in mind when we talk about animals: first that the term “animal” is nothing more than a concept of word (a “*mot*”), and second, that our generalized word for the “animal” subsumes an incredible plethora of beings into a single category (“*animot*” sounds like the plural for animals in French, “*animaux*”) The pun thus calls to mind everything we elide when we deploy the word “animal” [...]. (27; italics in the original).

Derrida’s explication gestures towards the epistemologies that articulate the conceptual and political categories of “the animal” and “the human.” But it falls to other scholars to delineate the historical specificity and material consequences of these epistemologies. Donna Haraway’s critique of Derrida begins to lead us toward a more explicitly culturally and historically anchored analysis, when as she states: “Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another” (4).

Such knowledge across species is, as I have been arguing, impossible. Yet the incompleteness and inadequateness of methods is a core part of the project of charting the potential of poetic works. The ethnographic practice of close attending to, and of acknowledging, that other world views and structurings exceed our own, whoever that “our” may be, can be a crucial starting point for a poetic practice that struggles with the unknowable of other-species worlds. It can help us use the affordances of a particular artistic form – poetry – in the service of attempting to bridge or at least gesture towards that gap of unknowability across species.

Trans-species Imaginative Translation

This theoretical explication reminds us of what we know so well if we stop to think for a moment – that the worlds animals inhabit are at times so radically different from our own in terms of their own sensoriums as to be nearly incomprehensible. Consider elephants who “hear” sound through

their feet, and hummingbirds who see flowers in the UV range, and spiders who sense prey not through vision but through vibrations on their webs. Even those mammals who may be closer to our own sensoriums live in different worlds – the dog can map their world through smell in a way that leaves us in the dust.

New discoveries about animals' sensoriums and cognition reveal our gulfs of shared worlds, and yet even so, the process of trying to *represent*, as what I would term a process of *transspecies imaginary translation*, can, perhaps, best be served through poetry, with its combination of sounds, rhythm, formal structures providing cohesion to metaphoric and symbolic associations of signifiers and signifieds. This can result in an always imperfect imagined ethnology, buttressed and electrified by the way in which poetry condenses text and simultaneously multiplies meaning through its semiotic complexity. Take, for example, a small poem of acute observation by contemporary regional poet Ann A. Philips. Titled simply "Two Cows," it is from her first chapbook of poems, self-published in 2018, and titled *Keep Your Animal Eye Open*. The ambiguity of the book's title – is the "your" of the title a reference to us, or to the animal? – directs us to the difference between sight and seeing. In each poem, she trains her eyes on the daily lives of animals, directing not only our eyes but more fundamentally our *attention* to lives so unlike our own. By valuing this attention, by elevating it to the genre of poetry, of art, the poet pushes us to become observers finely attuned to the more-than-human world around us. This giving of attention – Tsing's attending to – is, I suggest, a *political* act of valuation and of validation, a politics of seeing. It both recognizes the agential lives of non-human animals, and the differences that separate their worlds from ours. Like Langston Hughes, Philips dignifies the lived experience of farm animals, but unlike him, who wrote about the apocalyptic effects of war, she strives to capture quietude, the usually unremarked, and the truly unremarkable, daily life of interactions between two cows – a duet, a performance of mutual care, an intra-species "friendship," as she calls it, rendered in the public scene of the field:

Between her friend's
Forelegs the dewlap
Lifts and falls

Under her tongue
Lifts and falls
The muscled tongue
Spreading out
Bringing back

Smells of her friend
On each spot licking again
Moving up the chest
To rub at the skin
Of the throat
Her friend standing still
Now going at the muzzle
Up the side of the black jaw
Smoothing leaning in
Pressing her weight
With her tongue
Against the weight of her friend

In their corner of the field
Her friend lowers
Her head just a little
For tongue on fur
[...]
Behind the ear
Up the forehead
Working the cowlick
In the center, again,
[...]
Turning the left of their heads
Black and white
Down to the grass.
(n. pag.)

Philips deliberately casts this act of grooming as something passing between “friends,” a term she uses in the very first line, and several times thereafter, to alert us to her categorization of these animals as capable of

forming selective bonds of affection. Through that anthropocentric word choice – “friends” – she articulates, and *claims*, an interior emotional life for animals. This is especially unusual because these animals – cows – are so often undifferentiated – crowded into barns of hundreds, turned into living factories of milk production, identified only by an ear-tag number. Philips, however, contradicts that de-individuation by focusing on a pair of cows, a pair formed by choice, responsive to each other. In the expansive freedom of a field, they choose proximity – and touch.

Consider the kinaesthetics Philips writes about in this observational poem that appears merely to record actions, not to create them. By removing the human observer from the poem (there is no “I” of the human here), and instead recording cows’ actions only – “Her friend lowers her head, just a little, for tongue on fur” – she thrusts us into a world of bovine intimacy which, we are led to believe, exists outside and independent of human affordances.

Phillips thus offers us a creative bovine ethnography – a poetry of an intimate mutuality, harnessing the anthropocentric notion of “friends.” In naming the relationship, the poet moves from detached observer/recorder of animal actions to interpreter of their meaning – rendering the social relation of these two cows legible in terms we can understand, and implicitly positing an interior emotional life for these beings most of us rarely encounter, except in the form of their bodily products: milk and meat.

Philips draws our attention to farmed animals and narratively places us in their scene as unobserved observers, but we remain outside of their interaction. Yet, even this evocation is substantially different from two other sorts of animal poems in English: the ones that use the animal as symbol, and those that use the animal as metaphor. These approaches utilize the animal as figure, as a means to talk about the human world, and not as entities in their own rights with worlds beyond our sensory or even intellectual comprehension. The majority of poems, I would suggest, “use” animals in this way. For example, Emily Dickinson’s “‘Hope’ Is a Thing with Feathers” is a wonderful poem and part of the Euro-American literary canon, but it is not really about avian lives. Consider this first well-quoted stanza:

Hope is the thing with feathers –
 That perches in the soul –
 And sings the tune without the words –
 And never stops – at all –
 (116)

But other poets focus instead on the moment of eye-to-eye encounter between human and non-human animal. These poets craft an “ethnographic moment,” we might say, that captures the collision between worlds, and the potential outcomes – for both parties – of that multi-species encounter. I want to move into the final part of this article now with a consideration of boundary crossing between humans and non-human animals across the mutually uninhabitable worlds of water and air.

Take for example this relatively short poem by Native American novelist, essayist and poet, Linda Hogan, who is a member of the Chickasaw Nation. “Song for the Turtles in the Gulf” is from her book *Dark. Sweet.: New and Selected Poems* (2014). In his podcast “Poetry Unbound,” Padraig O’Tuama called this poem a praise song that is simultaneously a lament, veering towards a prayer. For many Native American or First Nations communities, turtles hold a special place of honor. While each group’s cosmology is distinctive, turtles are often associated with notions of the origin of the earth, or of North America (called “Turtle Island”). In some tribal communities, the turtle may be associated with highly valued qualities like healing, wisdom, spirituality, and patience, or in others, with long life and fertility, as Akwesasne Mohawk journalist Vincent Schilling has noted. This poem was published just a few years after the British Petroleum Deep Water Horizon massive oil spill in the Louisiana waters in 2010, considered the largest marine oil spill in history, the effects of which have lingered for years. It commemorates loss on multiple levels.

We had been together so very long,
 you willing to swim with me
 just last month, myself merely small
 in the ocean of splendor and light,
 the reflections and distortions of us,
 and now when I see the man from British Petroleum

lift you up dead from the plastic
 bin of death,
 he with a smile, you burned
 and covered with red-black oil, torched
 and pained, all I can think is that I loved your life,
 the very air you exhaled when you rose,
 old great mother, the beautiful swimmer,
 the mosaic growth of shell
 so detailed, no part of you
 simple, meaningless,
 or able to be created
 by any human,
 only destroyed.
 How can they learn
 the secret importance
 of your beaten heart,
 the eyes of another intelligence
 than ours, maybe greater,
 with claws, flippers, plastron.
 Forgive us for being thrown off true,
 forgive our trespasses,
 in the eddies of the water
 where we first walked.
 (348)

Calling us into relation with other living beings, the speaker also acknowledges the specificity of the life lived by turtles as distinct from that of humans – a being who swims in the gulf yet must surface to breathe air, as do we. She makes us consider, too, this specific turtle as a unique sentient being – its life and death – “you / burned and covered with red-black oil, torched / and pained.”

For many Native American or First Nations readers sharing knowledge of Turtle Island, the poem may also read on multiple levels of devastating loss and critique that extends beyond the damage of the Deep Water Horizon disaster and the marine lives it extinguished, into the very trespass of human arrogance onto the sacred – invoked by phrases like

“another intelligence than ours / maybe greater,” and “old great mother,” from whom the speaker in the poem asks forgiveness, deploying the Christian phrase, “for our trespasses.” Unlike the Dickinson poem where the image of the bird (“a thing with feathers”) serves merely as striking metaphor for a human emotion (“perches in the soul”), in Hogan’s poem a shared lived relation with a specific turtle (“you willing to swim with me / just last month”) coexists with the cosmological significance attached to turtles, making them not just a metaphor, but a unique co-presence that simultaneously shimmers with layers of cosmological significance. The poetic condensation of the scene, the acute observations sharply etched, and the rhetorical power of speech genres of prayer all combine to render a tiny ethnographic moment of cross-species encounter that resonates with layer upon layer of meaning.

Writing from a phenomenological perspective, Tirza Bruggemann considers cross-species relations by drawing on an approach rooted in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to argue for poetry’s capacity to elicit empathy across human and non-human animal boundaries. She suggests that “it is not a question of being alike enough to establish empathy. It is rather a question of how to train the senses to be able to see this wholeness. In finding a route to accomplish this, poets can serve as a guide” (13). Here we see echoes of Tsing’s “arts of noticing,” and Van Dooran and Bird’s “storying lives” coming together. The farther from our own physical selves an animal is, the greater the breach to be bridged in generating such empathy. Poetry’s combination of condensation of meaning, where each chosen word carries weight, and expansion (the connotative values of the words selected) can shorten that bridge across species through imaginative engagement.

From amphibians, to reptiles, to fish, some of our leading poets in the USA have drawn our attention across the species line to the non-mammalian, the obviously “other” in physical terms, and to the issues of knowability and unknowability that subtend our attention, in some ways just as an ethnography produced with human collaborators is always incomplete and can only be crafted from the position of the writer/researcher, no matter how carefully s/he tries to understand the lived reality and cultural frameworks of another individual or community. But a fundamental difference in this

multi-species border crossing is that embodied sensoriums are not shared, or only partially so. While Ann Philips's cows are mammals like ourselves, described from a position of the external viewer, Hogan's gulf turtle is a reptile with which the speaker shares the watery swim. Yet fish are different – able to submerge but still inhaling oxygen for life as do we, fish live their lives entirely under water, an environment usually beyond our vision, our hearing, and impossible for us to survive in without mechanical aid – truly an alien world. Yet even this world has been captured in what we might read as an ethnographic encounter in Elizabeth Bishop's well-known 1946 poem, "The Fish." This poem is so popular, so anthologized, that is included in the national exams in Ireland, but I am not pointing to the eloquence of language here, but to the poet's close observation, for while this poem may or may not actually be about a specific fish, the act of close observation tells us of fish-ness in the orb of the eyes and the rake of the scales. It details a piscine body with exceptional detail – a deep ethnographic looking and imagining of a life lived under the sea – a life inscribed on the fish's body, giving it a unique history, and revealed only in the moment of encounter between human and animal.

I caught a tremendous fish
 [...]
 I looked into his eyes
 which were far larger than mine
 but shallower, and yellowed,
 the irises backed and packed
 with tarnished tinfoil
 [...]
 I admired his sullen face,
 the mechanism of his jaw,
 and then I saw
 that from his lower lip
 – if you could call it a lip –
 grim, wet, and weaponlike,
 hung five old pieces of fish-line,
 or four and a wire leader
 with the swivel still attached,

with all their five big hooks
 grown firmly in his mouth.
 [...]

I stared and stared
 and victory filled up
 the little rented boat,
 from the pool of bilge
 where oil had spread a rainbow
 around the rusted engine
 [...]

the gunnels – until everything
 was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
 And I let the fish go.
 (Bishop n. pag.)

These two beings come eye to eye, although their eyes are so different, one with binocular vision, staring ahead, and the other with the piscine side-to-side vision of more than 180 degrees, and both with lips that can sense the cutting slice of pain. The human holds the cards, again, as the many hooks in the fish's mouth tell the life history of human encounters, and of winning freedom again and again. We can read this history, this life narrative, off the body of the fish, scarred, and marked, and pierced. The human speaker, assessing one life against another, lets the fish go. This moment of transcendent affect, marked by radiant rainbow colors turning the mundane boat with its spilled oil and creaky oarlocks, into a technicolor hyper-real, marks the empathetic bridging of life-worlds.

We could read this poem in so many ways – for meter, for syntax, for imagery (the hanging strips of skin like peeling wallpaper), or the rhymes “irises backed and packed,” or for sound (the alliterative “t”s of “tarnished tinfoil,” the shouting joy of repetition in “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!”) – but I read it as an imaginative ethnography, a detailed description of two lives entwined, caught together in fishing line, a slim filament of tensile strength, bringing us eye to eye with the more than human world, if only we take the time to see, and hear, and track the heartbeat of that multi-species entanglement.

The capacity of art and language to exceed the literal empowers us to

render non-human lives we can never know, bodies we can never truly imagine being in, and ways of sensing, tasting, feeling, smelling, and knowing the material world we share that are quite unlike our own. This ultimate unknowability makes all the more urgent what I would call literature's capacity for *imaginative ethnography*.

Closing Remarks

Like other progressive dimensions of cultural studies "animal studies" engages scholars who not only want to understand the world better, but to change it for the better. Sometimes that involves direct action and sometimes that involves longer term changes – like changing the literary canon, or changing what counts as a subject of inquiry, or a framework for analysis. Multi-species ethnography is one such way of working for change by changing a methodology. Another is to try to understand the work that literature or any art form *does* in the world, the subtle ways that representation shapes interpretation and ultimately action in the more than human world (Desmond "Moving Across"). Literary scholar Susan McHugh puts it this way: "Representational forms and the material conditions of species life must be connected" (qtd. in Bartosch 233). But how to do this?

Since meaning is produced in the encounter between the reader and the text, this becomes our next frontier – to understand how literature and the arts more broadly do or can shape perceptions of the more than human world and ultimately acting acting acting on it. There is no simplistic one to one correspondence, of course, but neither is there a total disconnect. Representations help create the horizons of our imaginations and the taken-for-granted ideological presumptions that shape our interpretations, our ethics, and our actions. Taking animals seriously means taking writings about animals seriously, not simply with well-known poets such as Linda Hogan and Elizabeth Bishop, or the perspicacity of regional poets like Ann Philips, but all those children's stories couched in animal characters, animals in cartoons and comic books, in designs on textiles like Winnie the

Pooh pajamas, and even in the market for stuffed animals. And yes, even on those endless numbers of cat videos on *YouTube*.

Roman Bartosch and Dominik Ohrem's edited book *Creaturely Lives* asks us to take up this question of what it means to write creaturely lives, the lives of creatures unlike ourselves. This is a challenge for poets and novelists, for artists and academics. Bartosch urges us to look to the myriad ways that fiction can engage our emotions, not just in the big arcs of literary narration but in small moments of sudden comprehension and affective connection. We see these small moments, like Roland Barthes's *punctum*, studded throughout Bishop's poem. Consider these lines: "While his gills were breathing in / the terrible oxygen". That is, the earth's air that is life-giving for us can mean terrible death for a water-living creature. In that moment of co-presence by the side of the boat one is living and the other is dying. "I thought of the coarse white flesh / packed in like feathers, / the big bones and the little bones", Bishop writes. Here we acknowledge the potential of converting a living being to dead flesh – to food – underlining the oscillation of living and dying, of killing and letting go.

Surely this, like the performance of mutual care captured in Ann Philips's poem about two cows in a field, is "creaturely writing" – writing to render the lives that we can never fully comprehend. These are bodies that both resemble and dis-semble our own: not only eyes and bones and flesh, but also gills and fins and scales. Beings living in mutually incompatible worlds of air and water. Beings entwined in life and death, and as entangled as that fishing line, if only we can learn to render these creaturely encounters – with the passion of Bishop's cry of transcendent acknowledgment when she says "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow."

Notes

¹ See the Planetary Imaginaries Initiative of the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory – University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (<www.criticism.illinois.edu>).

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