Bearing Witness: Re-storying the Self in Places that are Always More Than Human Made

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Abstract: *This paper argues that through their presence in the places where humans dwell, other-than-human animals challenge the stories people tell about themselves and open up new possibilities for people to be and act in the world. Drawing on literature from narrative therapy, I take a dialogical approach (Bakhtin) to think with autobiographical essays written by Alice Walker, David Hopes and Laura Foreman. I explore how their respective experiences of being witnessed in everyday places by a horse, a groundhog and a coyote led them to alter their stories to live by. These animals become the audiences with which the authors co-construct their narrative-identities and come to provisional answers to the ethical question: 'how ought I to live?' I conclude by arguing that ecological memoirs such as these are public acts of witnessing. Through such essays, readers can imaginatively enter distant and bounded places where they vicariously encounter animal others who call on them to develop stories all species can live by.*

Keywords*: narrative, geography, environmental ethics, literature, memoir*

Look What You Have Done

In the opening essay, 'On the Right-of-Way,' to his collection of essays, *Bird Songs of the Mesozoic*, David Hopes writes of the lives and deaths of the many animals with whom he co-inhabits the suburban places of Asheville, North Carolina. Some of the specific places he writes of are a highway, the 'kind of wilderness' that surrounds the derelict factory where he has his art studio, and the train tracks that run behind this factory. He tells the stories of his encounters with non-human animals, bringing the reader's attention to their presence in those places we routinely think of as the exclusive territories of humans. He brings awareness to the cost borne by those who share our places but whose presence is often ignored or forgotten and who are usually excluded from our moral communities.

David is particularly fond of a woodchuck who has taken up residence in an old pipe in the foundations of the factory. Ruminating one day after sharing his food with this neighbour, David imagines the kind of place that would be produced by a nation that chose the woodchuck as their national animal. He imagines it to be 'somewhere peaceful, some place that curls against the secrets of the earth, a little Belgium of the imagination, tables piled with cakes, the Sunday bells ringing (not too loudly), the light falling on rolling hillocks studded with salad greens' (Hopes 15). He then launches into the following short narrative about another, less peaceful place:

> Years ago I was hiking beside the French Broad when I came to the roadside in time to see a mother woodchuck crossing Route 191 with her three kits. I watched as a truck, veering deliberately to hit them, wiped out the babies. It was a time when I passed that spot regularly, so I was witness to what unfolded, that day and those following. Two of the babies disappeared after the first night, perhaps taken by scavengers or dragged off the pavement by their mother. The third baby lay on the roadside, though, for four more days. Every day the mother was there, too, watching her last baby as though there were some hope for its life. She must have known it was dead. After the fourth day, the sad little body was gone, but the mother was not. For two more days she was at the roadside, lying where her baby had lain. I had thought it was grief, and surely it

> was, but there was something more. The mother woodchuck was bearing witness. To every driver, every boy in a pickup old as himself, to everyone who knew even a little of the story – and there must have been dozens who noticed her vigil at the roadside – her drooping sad posture broadcasting, *Look what you have done*. (Hopes 15-16; emphasis in original)

This incident takes the reader almost, but not quite to the end of the essay. In the final half-page, David reports that the woodchuck who lived under the factory did not survive the summer. He was hit by a train on the tracks running behind the lot. David concludes by identifying his self with the mother woodchuck, using her as a resource for the re-storying of his own narrative-self:

> I feel like the mother groundhog,[1] sometimes: I follow the narrow steel slaughterhouse of the railroad tracks, kicking through the piles of bones, thin now as white hairs, whispering, Look what you have done!
>
> Jack says, 'There'll always be another chuck to take his place.'
>
> I think it's possible to trust too much. (Hopes 16)

The mother woodchuck calls David and other passers-by to witness what one of their human kind has done to her and her babies. David in turn calls on the reader to witness the presence of non-human animals in the places we inhabit, the toll that the pursuit of our own projects in those places takes on these other inhabitants, and the possibility for non-human animals to engage in a form of moral agency through bearing witness.

Introduction

In this paper, I engage with three personal narratives that concern the ethics of encounters with non-human animals in place. David Hopes, Laura Foreman, and Alice Walker meet animals in back yards, at roadsides, along railway tracks, in clear cuts, across fences, in woods, and in their own urban neighbourhoods.[2] Through coming face-to-face with animals in these places, they are each called to re-story their lives. For all three authors, bearing witness becomes an important theme around which they construct stories they can live by (Connelly and Clandinin). These stories of encounter variously position the writer as being witnessed by non-human others and as bearing witness both to the 'faces' and fates of non-human animals.

By thinking with their stories, I will explore the ways in which bearing witness problematises the assumption that it is only with other human animals that we come to co-construct and therefore to know our selves. I will then explore how the production of space can facilitate or inhibit opportunities for bearing witness. Through my dialogue with these ecological memoirs, I will demonstrate that the human production of space is never finalisable because other-than-human animals can break through surface representations and call into question the moral goodness of places and the projects that take place within them. Finally, I will look at the use of writing as a public act of witnessing and at reading storied-lives as an ethical practice of opening up distant and bounded places, and animals whom we have never physically encountered, to the moral imagination.

Storying Our Selves in the More than Human World

Through storytelling we give meaning to our experiences and to our lives (White and Epston). We are called to tell (or write) our stories in answer to the question: 'How ought I to live?' (Frank, *Renewal*; Nelson, 'Context') – a question at the heart of ethics (Lynn). These stories about who we are, what we value and what we might do in the world are co-constructed between tellers and listeners (or writers and readers), even if these audiences are only imagined (Frank, *Wounded Storyteller*). Through the concept of the 'narrative-self', social theorists and counsellors propose that the temporary and ever-changing set of stories that we tell about

ourselves and that others tell about us constitutes our self – that our self is comprised entirely and solely by these stories (White and Epston; Bruner; Gubrium and Holstein; Polkinghorne). The self is, therefore, an intersubjective creation (Nelson, *Damaged Identities*).

This narrative turn has been concerned with intersubjective relations between people and with the circulation of discourses at various scales of human social organisation (Somers). Discussions about narrative-selves in counselling and the social sciences have tended to ignore the possibility that we may also co-construct our stories with more-than-human audiences. At the same time, in the field of literary publishing the number of 'ecological writers' (Schauffler) has been growing. These authors write about the interrelationships of self, place and nature in such a way as to break down some of the traditional divides between them and to open up the possibility of non-human animals being moral audiences to which our self-stories must account (Schauffler).

David Hopes' story, outlined above, strings together a series of experiences into a coherent whole, giving meaning to those experiences while revising his sense of self. Woodchucks play an important part in the experiences he writes about through their living presence, their (at times) unexpected behaviours, and even in their dwindling physical remains. However, the woodchucks play another role as well: that of audience. While David Hopes' story has obviously been written with a human readership in mind, there is a clear sense that he felt called to write it by the mother woodchuck. Through her actions, which David interprets as bearing witness, she becomes the audience that demands an ethical accounting of David's self as a human being.

David makes use of his interpretation of her behaviour to structure his own self-story as also being one of witnessing. Stories like David's are often dismissed on the grounds of anthropomorphism because the author (teller) could not possibly know the subjectivity of the non-human animal other with any accuracy. Used in this way, the term 'anthropomorphic' risks shutting down dialogue about the similarities and connections between humans and animals of other species and denying all possibility for relationships between us. The term has become a valuable tool in policing the boundary that separates humans from all other animals. In contrast to this position, I point out that we cannot ever know with complete accuracy the emotions, thoughts and consciousness of any animal other, including human others. We can only ever

move towards understanding the other from our own stand-point(s); however, ethics demands that we respond to calls to make that move even while recognising the limitations of our own perspectives. The critical point here is not whether David is accurate in his interpretation of the woodchuck's behaviour in an absolute sense (undoubtedly he is not), but that he is called by his embodied encounter with her to attempt to move from his own limited perspective as a human animal to try and understand hers as a woodchuck animal with as much accuracy as is possible.

We each only have direct access to our own experiences and emotions and yet the vast majority of us are able to feel what another person is feeling, a capacity known as empathy (Bondi). Though our empathic connections to non-human animals may at times be tenuous and are all too often undermined by the zealous policing of the borders between humans and animal others, they are there – as David's story bears witness to.

Plumwood (144) observes that the 'master model of the self', which dominates Western societies, is unable to empathise and can only conceive of the Other as resource or obstacle. The ongoing dominance of this master narrative is implicated in the social and environmental crises we face today. Stories like David's offer alternative narrative resources for the re-storying of our relationships with the more-than-human world. Empathy makes intersubjectivity possible. Through her actions and his empathic use of imagination, David intersubjectively co-constructs his self-story with the mother woodchuck. He is changed through his encounter with her.

Storying Places in the More-than-human World

The story David comes to tell about his self through his encounter with the groundhog is entwined with the stories he comes to tell about the places in which he dwells. In this way, the (re)storying of selves is inextricably tied to the (re)storying of places, and ethics are implicated in both projects (Willis). Just as narratives give meaning to experiences, places give meaning to carved off sections of space. While selves are created in answer to the question, 'What ought I to do?', places are created in answer to the question, 'What ought reality to be?' (Sack).

There are many definitions of what constitutes a place, but as with the notion of the

narrative-self, places are almost always seen as the creations of humans. This idea is prevalent both in the Cartesian reduction of territories on Earth to abstract grids and in critiques of such conceptions of space (see for example, Lefebvre; Massey; Sack). 'Place' as a concept is defined through human actions, meanings, and discursive agency. Places are those parts of the universe that humans have bounded off, passed through, connected to and hung meanings on. While not denying an innate (or at least learned) desire in humans to impact upon the world around them, through her witnessing presence, David's story of his encounter with the mother woodchuck challenges the dominant idea that humans create places unitarily.

At best, the rest of the more-than-human world is included in geographical accounts of place-making as a resource, or as the original 'space' that was subsequently parcelled into places (Sack). At worst, the more-than-human world is ignored entirely and space is conceived of as something adequately represented by a blank sheet of graph-paper (see Lefebvre for a critique of this type of Cartesian space).

Even Sack, who argues that place plays a central role in both inhibiting and facilitating moral understanding and ethical action, conceives of place as constructed soley by humans. In his *Geographical Guide to the Real and the Good*, Sack provides a fairly typical imagined account of what space would have been like before the entire planet became riddled with places:

> Suppose we are the first humans in North America … We cross the land bridge, move into the interior, and soon realise that there are no other people. Not only does the land seem uninhabited, it seems unending . . . this vastness, this apparently unbounded expanse … there are mountains, valleys, woods, and clearings, and thus variations in the landscape … there are not yet places. (12)

What is intriguing from the point of view of this paper, is that David Hopes also imaginatively visits a pristine North America in his narrative. However, whereas Sack conjures up such a landscape in order to provide a contrast to his human-centred definition of place and goodness, David Hopes immerses himself in it in order to further develop his understanding of the morality of the contemporary places he frequents.

Near the beginning of 'On the Right-of-Way,' David imagines walking through a pre-human landscape in which he would be at risk of being killed by large creatures pursuing their

own instrumental ends with no regard for him, his life, his needs, or his relationships. He realises that in such a world, he would live in constant fear of a meaningless death. This description of a pristine space where he as a human would possess no intrinsic moral value later resonates with the deaths of the woodchucks, struck down by people in large vehicles, mindlessly pursuing their own instrumental ends in so-called human places.

Despite his failure to extend his moral community to the more-than-human world or to acknowledge the role non-human animals play in co-constructing places, Sack does agree that the morality of a place must not be reduced to its instrumental value. Instrumentally, Route 191 may be effective at enabling the efficient transport of goods and people, but that does not make it a good place, which is, according to both David Hopes and Robert Sack, the more important consideration.

Sack proposes a conception of the good as something intrinsic to reality, as something real and inherently attractive but also as ineffable and never clearly knowable. From this perspective, the biggest barrier to making morally good choices is the all too common practice of self-deception. The antidote to self-deception is to increase our awareness.[3] Depending on their qualities, places can either serve to increase awareness or facilitate self-deception. The surfaces of places, their representations, are particularly important in relation to this aspect of Sack's moral geography.

Places judged as good from Sack's intrinsic perspective on morality are those that 'heighten our awareness' and 'share this awareness openly and publicly' (24). Through writing about his re-storying, David re-creates highways and train tracks as places of awareness-raising encounters with earth others who have intrinsic value and moral agency. Through publishing his essay, David shares his awareness with readers. However, David did not come to this awareness on his own. The re-storying of his self and of some of the places he dwells in is intersubjectively arrived at with the groundhog-witness. In this way, David Hopes' story challenges the human-centredness of Sack's geography of the good. David's story demonstrates that the construction of place by humans is never finalisable because we live in a world that stubbornly remains more than what we make of it. Even on a highway or train track, non-human animals pursuing their own ends can break through human representations and change the meanings of those places and the selves that dwell therein.

Challenging Discourses that Dominate Places and their Inhabitants

The theme of earth others breaking through human representations of place to challenge human self-deception is also prominent in Laura Foreman's essay, 'For the Maples'. In this essay, the social embeddedness of our self-stories and of our acts of self-deception comes clearly to the fore.

While the concept of the narrative-self proposes that each person has a role in co-constructing their self, it does emphasise that this is always limited and bounded by the relationships within which we are embedded and the cultural resources we have access to in making sense of our lives. In order to be intelligible, our self-narratives must draw on the discourses available in the context in which the telling occurs (Bruner; Nelson, *Damaged*). In this way, we are vulnerable to being disciplined by those discourses that circulate through society and even come to dominate its institutions and places (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*). When our selves are dominated in this way, we may be unable to find options for being and acting that match the values and meanings important to us. We may even become deceived about the goodness of our actions.

Counsellors recognise that people can be trapped in stories that limit their options and that may ultimately cause them pain, illness and sometimes shorten their lives (White and Epston; Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*). Places may even be constructed to enhance and support the dominance of particular discourses over people: e.g. concentration camps (Sack), asylums (Foucault, *Madness*), and gulags (DeVerteuil and Andrews). Places may also be used to enable people to continue to deceive themselves about who they are and what the moral consequences of their actions (or inactions) are on others (Sack). However, as the following discussion of Laura Foreman's story illustrates, earth others in these places can break through the surfaces of places, challenging self-deceptions and changing understandings of those places and the discourses that are dominant over them.

Laura Foreman always preferred to story herself as someone who cares about trees. Her memories of childhood and home are coloured by the maples in her neighbour's yard. In her

essay, she writes that the death of those trees led her to study forestry at university. However, once enrolled in the program, she found herself trapped in places dominated by narratives that reduced trees to the instrumental value of their profitability. She tried to bring her own values and meanings into this setting, but was silenced.

During this time, Laura took a summer job working for a forestry company marking 'leave trees' in an Idaho old-growth forest that was scheduled for logging. Her job was to mark the trees to be spared, so that they would re-seed the area with the most profitable species: the Douglas fir. One day, while she and her boss were standing in the heart of the forest, he declared: 'These old-growth forests are just "biological deserts." Old cedars and hemlocks block out all the light. We can't get a thirty-year ROI [return on investment]!' (Foreman 225). In that moment, looking at the diversity of life her boss was blind to and which he thought should be replaced with a monoculture, she realised that she 'could no longer deny the destructive reality of [her] work' (Foreman 226). This epiphany caused her to re-story an earlier encounter she had with a coyote, an encounter she initially deceived herself about:

> I recalled a recent afternoon when I was picking my way through the blackened bones of a recently burned clear-cut. I watched a coyote digging furiously beneath a mound of strewn logs. Catching my scent, she stopped digging and stared at me, panting heavily in the sunlight. Her fur was matted with gray scabs. She paused only briefly and then returned to her frantic burrowing. Recalling her distress, I realised that she must have returned to her den and found it buried beneath the devastation. (Foreman 226)

After being called to re-story herself through her encounters with the myriad of species in the forest including the frantic coyote, Laura was no longer willing to participate in her own or others' self-deception about that place. The narratives that dominated the places in which she studied and worked were no longer intelligible to her. She spent the rest of that summer physically re-storying the forest by spraying all the healthy trees she encountered with the yellow paint that marked them as 'leave trees'—trees more valuable left alive than cut down. In this way she enacted an alternative vision of how that place ought to be.

Laura's experiences of place run counter to the descriptions that her boss recites so dramatically that the business narratives that dominate the forest in which she works become

unintelligible to her. She recognises them for what they are, representations of place that facilitate people's self-deception about the moral goodness of what goes on there. By allowing herself and her actions to be dominated by such stories of place, she was participating in bringing those conceptions into material reality. Through her encounters with earth others who broke through those dominant representations, Laura was able to develop a preferred counter-story about that place, a story both she and the earth others could live by. In this way, at the intimate scale of encounters between a narrating-self and earth others, those narratives that dominate society and its places become vulnerable to being challenged and changed.

Encountering the Face of the Other

One of the ways in which people become vulnerable to being deceived about the goodness of places is through geographical distance and physical separation (Smith). For example, many people in North America and Europe have never had the kind of direct experiences of old growth forests or clear-cuts that could enable them to challenge the dominant narratives that are told about these places. The same can be said for the places in which so-called 'farm animals' are reared; most people do not have direct experience of the places where their meat comes from and so representations of those places fuel our self-deceptions about these places, the animals they contain and the moral goodness of the conditions in which they live out their lives.

As a child, the author Alice Walker spent a good deal of time in relationship with non-human animals, but not as an adult. This changed when she rented a property that bordered a five-acre field in which Blue, a white horse, lived. Her essay 'Am I Blue?' traces the transformation her self-narrative undergoes through her relationship to Blue, whom she can see through the window of her house. She writes of her first face-to-face meeting with Blue:

> I had forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horses' eyes. I was therefore unprepared for the expression in Blue's. Blue was lonely. Blue was horribly lonely and bored. I was not shocked that this should be the case . . . No, I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well. (Walker 4-5)

Alice recognises that through this forgetting, she has left non-human animals out of her moral consideration. Seeing emotion expressed in Blue's eyes, she sees his 'face' (Frank, *Renewal* 48-52); that is, she responds to him as someone to whom an ethical response is owed by simple means of his being the Other in a Levinasian sense (Jones).[4] By acknowledging Blue as an Other to whom she is called to respond ethically, Alice must question the way she has storied her self and interrogate those broader narratives that enabled her to forget animals had faces.

Her response to encountering Blue's face is to visit with him regularly and to bear witness to his life. As she witnesses the conditions he lives in as well as the way he is storied by his owners and by the people with whom he boards, she is drawn to reflect on her own story and on broader historical and contemporary narratives that have denied a face to women and racial others, excluding them from moral consideration just as Blue has been excluded. As narrative counsellors observe, to truly bear witness to another's story is to be changed by that story (White). As narrative counsellors hope, in changing the stories that are told about individuals, dominating narratives are also challenged (Denborough). To tell Blue's story, Alice Walker must re-tell not just her own story but also society's stories.

A year into their sharing of a fence, another horse is 'put' in the field with Blue. Blue no longer visits with Alice as much as before, and when he does, his companion accompanies him. Alice states that she sees 'a different look in his eyes. A look of independence. Of self-possession, of inalienable *horse*ness' (Walker 6; author's emphasis). His companion becomes visibly pregnant and then one day she is taken away. Alice finds herself the only witness to Blue's reaction to this turn of events. She describes the look in his eye when he finally comes to the fence to get apples from her:

> It was a look so piercing, so full of grief, a look so human, I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry) to think there are people who do not know that animals suffer. People like me who have forgotten, and daily forget, all that animals try to tell us. (Walker 7)

As the days pass and the mare does not reappear, the expression in Blue's eyes changes. Alice states that it slowly hardens into hatred. In that hatred, Alice writes, he finally took on 'the look

of a beast' (Walker 8), becoming that which his human masters have storied him to be. Alice cannot know what Blue's expressions reveal in terms of his affective experience. However, the impossibility of fully knowing the Other is not unique to interactions between humans and non-human animals. A great deal of psychotherapeutic thought has been devoted to the obstacles that arise to knowing the Other within human interactions, in particular through the concept of projection. Not having any direct experience of 'horseness' herself, Alice's interpretations could easily be dismissed as projections of her own thoughts and feelings (Ghetie). However, this would miss the significance of the relationship she has entered into with Blue. Imperfect as they may be, Alice's efforts to bear witness to Blue's behaviours and expressions have tangible impacts not only in the re-storying of Alice's self-narrative but also on society through her eventual decision to write this essay.

Because the narratives that dominate Blue's life and place say that he is owned and is adequately cared for, Alice believes she can do nothing more than continue to visit him, to bear witness and to offer him apples. However, in the last scene of the published story, Alice is visited by a friend who had never been to her country house before. Looking out the window, this friend says: 'And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom' (Walker 8; author's emphasis). Having thought at length about how much of Blue's life is dominated by human narratives, her friend's use of him as a symbol of freedom immediately strikes Alice as wrong. Through the contrast between her friend's remark and her experiences with Blue, she becomes aware of another means by which she and society manage to maintain states of self-deception: the reduction of non-human animals to symbols that have nothing to do with their lived lives. She concludes with the following:

> As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite, and spit it out. (Walker 8)

Through her reaction, we the readers experience Alice's re-storying not just at an intellectual level but vicariously at an emotional and visceral one as well.[5]

Surface representations can obscure the lived relations in that place, the depths of that place (Sack). Because she has witnessed the control that humans exert over Blue's life, Alice knows that the image he seems to present – an image of freedom – is a dissemblance. This makes her question all the other representations of happy animals in pastoral landscapes that

circulate through society – often on the labels of meat and dairy products. Because food animals are kept segregated, people do not have direct physical and emotional experiences of the places where they are kept. This prevents them from coming face-to-face with these Others. Without emotional, embodied experiences of 'ethically charged' (Jones 269) encounters with non-human animals, most human animals find it easy to 'forget' that the dominant representations of these places are untrue and they can then deceive themselves about the moral goodness of these places.

Most places are bounded. In-out rules govern what may leave and enter and what may take place within (Sack). With respect to non-human animals, such in-out rules can be understood as distillations of broader master narratives that dominate their lives. The centrality of human in-out rules to non-human animal lives is highlighted by the habit we have of naming them according to the places where they are supposed to be (Jones). Non-human animals are finalised by the places they are confined to, which makes them unintelligible, even unrecognisable when they are out of place. Blue is in a particular place, a paddock, and is therefore a *farm* animal. It is this labelling through placing (and vice versa) that largely determines the parameters of Blue's life and of how people relate to Blue.

Alice Walker, however, comes face-to-face with Blue and cannot go back to thinking of him as one of a type. Instead, she sees him as having a unique story and as having a face, in the moral sense, to which she must respond. However, he remains enough of a representative of *farm* animal that once she has encountered his face, she can no longer see other farm animals as interchangeable producers of food for humans. Through his agency in presenting his face to her, he breaks through surface representations of place and contributes to the co-creation of her new self-narrative. By witnessing lived relations in one such place, Alice learns to imaginatively see through surface representations of other places where non-human animals are confined. Through engaged, reflective writing about herself in relationship to Blue, Alice offers the readers a vicarious experience that is not merely intellectual, but also emotional and embodied, thereby cutting through dominant surface representations of farm places and enabling us to bear witness so we won't forget the animals who dwell there.

Bearing Witness

Through in-out rules distilled from master narratives, the bodies of non-human animals are regulated. Even when they are present, representations of place may render them invisible to anyone who forgets to look for them. Their placing is part of the way in which they are excluded from consideration as members of our moral community. In effect, they are hidden from our moral view. And yet non-human animals refuse to remain where we put them. We are not, nor will we ever be the sole occupants of those places we claim to have created and so occasionally we will find ourselves face-to-face with the Others who dwell alongside us. When we come face-to-face with them, we may find ourselves called to alter the stories we tell about our selves and those places.

In each of the essays I engaged with, the respective author found themselves being witnessed by non-human animals in such a way that they were called, themselves, to respond and to bear witness. In re-writing places as they re-write their selves these authors bring that witnessing into practice. Through bearing witness to these places and these lives, the essays as textual objects can bring those places and their inhabitants into other places where they can impact on the stories readers tell. Through their publication and subsequent circulation in society, ecological autobiographical essays go some way towards shrinking distances (Smith), opening up places that some would prefer to keep closed (Sack), and expanding our circles of sympathies (Murdoch). As empathic readers, through our vicarious sharing of the authors' emotional and visceral experiences, we can be witnesses to what goes on in those places and learn to bear witness in the places we find ourselves in.

But what does it mean to bear witness? How does this differ from the observations of a natural historian? The narrative turn in the social sciences emphasises that our selves are co-created in dialogue. Unfortunately, this is not always true. We are often subjected to monologues about who we are. Such monologuing, often reduced to labelling, is a form of violence that finalises people (Bakhtin), limiting their options for being and acting in the world (Frank, *Renewal*). The example of finalising that is most often referred to is the practice of medical diagnosis, which can have a negative impact on a person's self-story and even on their prognosis (Frank, *Renewal*). However, the practice of labelling animals based on the places we

think they ought to be confined to is an even more compelling example of the kinds of violence perpetrated by acts of finalisation.[6] The difference between finalising monologue and co-creative dialogue is often simplified as the difference between thinking or talking *about* someone and thinking or talking *with* someone. Traditionally, natural history writing has focused on thinking *about* organisms and places. Ecological writing, concerned as it is with relationship and transformation, thinks *with* earth others and places. Bearing witness requires a dialogical approach of engaging *with* non-human animals. In changing their self-narratives (and place narratives) in relation to what they observe of the lives of earth others, David Hopes, Laura Foreman and Alice Walker clearly do bear witness.

The extent to which the agency of earth others and authors in bearing witness can impact upon physically distant others depends in large part on whether readers think *with* these published narratives, or only *about* them. For those who engage with these books through imagination and empathy, their moral community may be widened both in terms of the species they include and the places their knowing penetrates.

While David Hopes' nation of the woodchuck with salad green-studded hillocks may be a somewhat simplistic vision of place-making *with* earth others in mind, it does open up the question of what sorts of places might emerge if we human animals consciously chose to co-create our selves and our places with the other inhabitants of the more-than-human world. If we truly bore witness to the multiple lives that intersect with our own, regardless of physiological difference or spatial proximity, then the goodness of most of the places we have created would inevitably be challenged. However, co-creating our selves and our places with non-human others would also open up a range of ways of being and acting in the world beyond what we can imagine today. If we humans do not find stories that all can live by – humans and non-humans alike – we will find ourselves wading through an ever-deepening pile of bones, as more and more places become slaughterhouses to those we lack the empathy and imagination to embrace in our moral communities.

Notes

1. David Hopes uses the terms 'woodchuck' and 'groundhog' interchangeably to refer to the same species of animal.

2. Out of respect for the engaged, subjective way in which these authors convey their highly personal stories, I have referred to them by their first names. In contrast, and in keeping with academic traditions, I have referred to academic writers by their last names.

3. This conception of the good as something intrinsic to reality, and of humans as inherently able to sense it is a controversial one. However, it is also a concept that has had many advocates over the centuries. In the West, we are so dominated by stories of human corruption, selfish genes and extrinsic value that many people dismiss the possibility of inherent goodness out of hand. Making a case for such an intrinsic understanding against these dominant narratives is well beyond the scope of this article. Those interested should consult Robert Sack's *The Geographical Guide to the Real and the Good*.

4. For a full discussion of Levinas' ethics of encounter in relation to earth others and how it might extend to organisms who may be physically and physiologically much more different from humans than Blue is, see Jones.

5. Research in neuroscience has shown that mirror neurons are engaged while we read, lending support to the idea that we have vicarious experiences through witnessing someone else's story (Oatley).

6. For a discussion of how labeling non-human animals contributes to the perpetuation of racism and violence against human animals, their finalisation, see Elder et al.

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