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**Stef Rozitis, Dante DeBono, Anne Brady-Clark, Evan Jarrett,
Amelia Walker**

Towards post-human storytelling: Pushing boundaries in decentring the human

Abstract:

Can storytelling be(come) post-human? If so, how? This article shares creative insights from a collaborative inquiry at the intersection of queer, neurodivergent, and ecological writing. Writing from the fringes of our various disciplines and levels of precarity within the academy, we came together as a collective of researchers who share an interest in creative methods and an orientation towards storytelling as “a political and heuristic tool” involving “human and nonhuman” processes (Wiame, 2018). We made use of new materialist and posthuman perspectives as we grappled with an empathy that neither anthropomorphises nor objectifies the nonhuman Other, and seeks to portray the agency of a world that does not centre on the human, or not only the human. We sought to rewrite the human as marginal. This work, informed by theories of writing and artmaking as ways of knowing, engaged in poetic inquiry and co/autoethnography. Responding individually to shared creative prompts, we explored possibilities of writing as nonhuman entities. We then compared our writings, observing rhizomatic connections and branchings-out to explore the challenges and possibilities of post-human storytelling. Our article describes these insights and signals unfolding directions for ongoing inquiry and the challenges of storytelling from the margins of the human.

Biographical note:

Stef Rozitis, a Master’s student researching early childhood educators, is an educated bogan, a casualised academic, a single-mother, and a queer tree-hugger. Their varied experiences and fluid social identity have led to a passion for transformative knowledge production. Stef enjoys writing climate-centred or post-human stories based on classics such as *Alice in Wonderland* as well as poetry that is heavy on wordplay and anger. Stef’s previous research explored what is “valuable” university learning to students as well as a discourse analysis of a video promoting single-sex boys’ schools. Stef’s interests are social justice, the environment, critical sociology and especially gender.

Dante DeBono is a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia with the goal of promoting social inclusivity and equality through work focused on diversifying queer representation in research and creative outputs. Her current thesis is focused on the queer potential of revisionist adaptations in fiction through screenwriting-based practice-led research that has seen the development of a queered modernisation of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. She has been on the central committee for the Gender, Sex and Sexualities Conference since 2021, and is an advisory team member for the UniSA Oral History Hub.

Anne Brady-Clark (she/her) works at UniSA College teaching into the enabling programs and the Aboriginal Pathway Program. Anne holds a Master's in Arts (Writing and Literature), Graduate Certificate in Professional Writing and a Graduate Certificate in Education Research. Anne has published almost 70 novels (1995-2018) with HarperCollins (Harlequin), which have been translated into over 20 languages. She has commenced her Ph.D. in Education Research at Deakin University.

Evan Jarrett is a writer, researcher, and an Honours Candidate at the University of South Australia. Born and raised in South Australia, his work currently focuses on how the emerging genre of climate-fiction can explore the multitude of impacts that climate change has on places, and all those who exist within them, from the perspective of working-class communities. He is particularly interested in how such communities experience changing places, both in terms of environment, and society.

Amelia Walker is a poet who lives and works on Kaurna Yerta, also known as Adelaide, South Australia. She has published five poetry collections and three books of poetry writing activities for educational and community settings, based on her extensive work as a poet in schools and with arts-health projects. She currently lectures in courses on writing and literary studies at the University of South Australia, and is managing a research project that facilitates partnerships between poets in different countries to promote intercultural learning and connectivity through the arts. Her most recent poetry book, *alogopoiesis*, is available through Gazebo Books.

Keywords:

Post-humanism, creative inquiry, storytelling, ecosophy, eco-philosophy

In writing this article, the productive thought we engaged in, our reading, workshop, collaborative conversations, and most of the writing occurred on Kaurna Country in what in the language of Empire is called South Australia. We acknowledge continued Kaurna sovereignty over these lands and waters and our own complicity in colonisation—though we wish to undo this. We pay our respects to Kaurna Elders past and present and realise that there are key pieces of lore that we may be lacking in struggling with the post-human. We also acknowledge the privilege of having presented our draft thoughts and engaged in conversations with others at Otakou Whakaihu Waka (Otago University).

This article shares creative insights from a collaborative inquiry at the intersection of queer, neurodivergent, and ecological writing. It represents thinking in process and a snapshot of writing done in a short workshop under time pressure. In its very ephemerality, it makes a contribution to thinking beyond and outside the human as we live in a time when the suffering of other animal and plant species, waterways, and even places is becoming clear and as our connectedness to these more than human others reveals a too long ignored closeness. Hecq's (2005) observation that poetry is inherently marginal and interstitial speaks to us of the precarity of ourselves as human beings on a heating planet, as workers in academe which undervalues creativity, and our contingent ability to make it to collective workshops around the academic year of work. Thus, writing from the fringes of our various disciplines and levels of precarity within the academy, we came together as a collective of researchers who share an interest in creative methods and an orientation towards storytelling as “a political and heuristic tool” involving “human and nonhuman” processes (Wiame, 2018). In this article we briefly contextualise this inquiry in its origin as a workshop for the Critical Creative Reading and Writing Collective (hereafter CCRWC), with reflexivity for our individual and collective standpoints. After this we examine some of the theory and ideas which have provided food or perhaps “compost” (Haraway, 2016) for our thought. Finally, we examine two themes that emerged from us in our writing and discussions of our post-human workshop—the question of anthropomorphising the other-than-human subject, or indeed the other-than-subject. Using Le Guin's notion of the “carrier bag” of fiction, we stop to ask what we found in our own carrier bags that helps us push against the closing off of questions (Le Guin & Haraway, 2019). We acknowledge our inability to speak for all life, or even for all humans, but by resisting a “hero-narrative” we merely forage for the next nutritious soup, the next meal, the next story, a task which despite exhaustion must be performed daily. In doing this, we think together in metaphor with ingredients gathered by each. Thus, we reclaim what is in our modest “carrier bags” as wholesome and worth sharing, mindful that poetry is not a luxury (Lorde, 1985) but that poetical ways of meaning-making are staples of a worthwhile existence and nurture possibilities for healed futures.

Background: Meeting to experiment with post-human writing

CCRWC is a reading group of which members “share interest in creative arts research methods and methodologies, particularly for researching complex socio-political and ethical challenges including those of privilege and marginalisation, ecological sustainability, and more” (Walker & Vargas-Downing, 2023). Our collective meets each month to share insights from reading

creative scholarship and other interesting texts, to critically engage with our readings as provocations, and to engage in brief writing activities that are designed as boundary-pushing experiments related to the readings and our thoughts. This is a “community-of-practice” rather than just a group for reading and feedback, and we use arts-based practices to engage in inquiry together (Sandford et al., 2024, p. 6). As a collective, we take turns facilitating these vibrant workshops with the shared goal of uncovering innovative ways of knowing and being within the neoliberal academy through our creative practice.

The post-human workshop used Wiame’s (2018) “Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway on fabulating the earth” as a shared reading, and a song by Melbourne band Orbweavers (2017), called “Invertebrate City” as a provocation. The song considers damage wreaked on a box of letters and photos by an infestation of silverfish but moves to calling into question whether human worlding is actually more important than the drive for existence by silverfish and termites that, oblivious, destroy human endeavours. It portrays invertebrates as literally eating up human endeavour, both writing and also architecture, only for the little creatures to “inherit it all” (Orbweavers, 2017, n.p.). This song was chosen as a provocation because it disallowed neat fictions of easy coexistence among all species.

Workshop participants engaged in two writing activities. The first involved generating a list of binary attributes that attempted to define human and exclude non-human. Following a discussion on how this was challenging or problematic, we engaged in a second activity using these difficult questions about boundaries to write from a non-human perspective—either choosing a more-than-human body to imaginatively inhabit, or attempting to objectively move back to view the world without a human consciousness. Due to time constraints, there was no editing, our writing remained raw, but participants who wished to added reflections to a shared folder and the co-authors of this article continued our conversation about whether it was possible to step outside of the human self when writing, while in Jarrett’s words “mak[ing] that story appealing, relatable, and understandable” (n.p.). Raw as our workshop writing remains, we have found it to be a rich source of thought and discussion that develops our storytelling.

Reflexivity

Not silent or ignorant to our own places in society and our precarity within the academy, we are “subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse ‘being’ where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject.” (Halberstam, 2020a, p. 126). Through queer, mad, neurodivergent positionings, some of us also experience a denial of self-actualising liberal “being” by circumstances we do not always choose. In our experience, some identity categories such as non-binary genders or bisexuality, are framed as inauthentic in a world where you are expected to “pick a side”. However, the recognition and validation of others at any cost is also not necessarily our aim. We would not choose to conform to a “hero story” (Le Guin & Haraway, 2019) that depends on our becoming self-actualising in line with capitalism and accepting the subsequent exploitative ways of being as inevitable. We live in a late Anthropocene time and way of thinking (Salleh, 2016); we see a necessity in choosing to story otherwise.

Nor can we ignore our complicity in that which we would want to change. Reflecting on our work through Rosier et al. (2020), we came to see that there is a gap in our thinking where we began by drawing too much from white theorists and seek to push our thinking further through engagement with decolonial ontoepistemologies and multiverses. We were initially stymied by the difficulty of doing this in a genuine way. Bignall et al. (2016) tell us that “indigenous philosophies of existential interconnectivity resist simple incorporation into the Western “post”-humanism that they in fact precede by millennia” (pp. 457-8). Thinking with Bignall et al. leads us further to see that losing the “self” is a disingenuous exercise, instead they advocate for understanding that humans must take responsibility for action in interconnection within “three interconnected ecologies of self, society and nature” (Bignall et al., 2016, p. 458).

We do not delude ourselves that as descendants of settlers, people who live in what is still a colony (Watego, 2021), we have adequately taken on board Indigenous thinking, nor are we choosing to cop out of learning more. Instead, we acknowledge this as a gap in our work and continue our efforts to broaden our understandings of decolonial knowledges. Nonetheless, working with Le Guin’s metaphor of carrier bag storying and philosophy, or hoping to learn *ecosophy* (Bignall et al., 2016), we know we do not need to be the hero or saviour in this situation but merely bring fresh ingredients to be incorporated in knowledge-making with others. For us, post-humanism is not the answer to a question but is a site to forage.

The Compost: Combining our thinking with the literature

Our collaborative writing in our workshops is not polished pebbles or pieces for publication; rather, month after month, we achieve “steaming compost piles” (Haraway, 2016, p. 4), something that flows together that we can draw on to fertilise our creativity between meetings. Similarly, we take as compost the philosophies and, hopefully, ecosophies (Bignall et al., 2016) of others. Thus, rather than a liberal-rational “literature review”, this section may be considered a compost pile of useful thoughts and offcuts of thoughts that we mulch down and try to grow from. However, we strive to do this composting rigorously. Unintentionally, this has resulted in a mixed metaphor, not only foraging in the wild but also tending a garden of knowledge, but as Halberstam (2020b) shows the wild is an inhospitable, violent place of self-delusion. We skirt the edges of wild being and thinking; we do still want to find a place of collaboration and safety in the academy, if only where we create our co-thought compost heaps. We choose to engage in serious play (Di Niro et al., 2020; Gou et al., 2021) to do something meaningful, enjoyable, or “activist scholar” lest we lose our reason for being here (Rozitis, 2024). This fits with Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of smooth and striated spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The academy for us is not a completely smooth space where we can say and do whatever we like, but neither are we prepared to accept it enclosing us in a striated space. We work with the striations to find smooth places, better stories. We learn to call out *wrong story* (Yunkaporta, 2023) as we become aware of it in our own work and other places. On this occasion we were storying with Aline Wiame and the Orbweavers.

Aline Wiame uses Haraway's idea of "fabulation" as a form of speculating and storying toward new worldings as yet unthought possibilities for being (Wiame, 2018). Specifically, Haraway seeks to move this fabulation toward "multispecies storytelling, multispecies worlding" (Haraway, 2016, p. 5). While Haraway's thinking, along with "Invertebrate City" (Orbweavers, 2017), led us towards animals who are not human, we also had Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "rhizomes", growths of thought that spring up, weed-like, out of order in any direction, unlike arboreal thought which can be organised into neatly splitting and hierarchical tree shapes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). With a mischief that Deleuze and Guattari would no doubt join in with, we could forget the rules of philosophy for long moments and take metaphors more literally, seeking not only to think with plants, but to think as plants and other entities. In doing this we push against easy definitions, binary categorisations, and a stable sense of self. We unmask to reveal "further masks" ad infinitum (Deleuze, 1994, p. 106). We do not commit to making our metaphor literal, we pull back from this idea at will; our thinking is nomadic (Braidotti, 2008; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) aimed not at stable ways of thought but finding new sources of nourishment for ourselves and others.

In serious play and making metaphors that are real, our location in geography as well as the positionality discussed above matters. MacGill (2019, p. 408) instructs us to incorporate into creativity "an attunement to hearing the spaces we occupy". Considering the beautiful Magill campus of the University of South Australia that hosted our gathering to think together, our place in the shadow of Morialta Falls, and the run-off from those falls flowing past our writing and meeting room, our minds easily moved to water. In our bodies we are watery beings in any case, we accept Neimanis' (2017, p.1) certainty that we are literally "bodies of water". As we are learning to expect, the stable categories break down in accepting this and as we embrace the idea of amniotics (Neimanis, 2017), we are caught up in gestating new ideas amongst ourselves. Many first drafts which were shared in the workshop but not for further analysis centred on bodies of water, as does Walker's piece discussed below. I would argue that those of us who referenced animal life also touched on water, whether we intended to or not. The writing exercises appear to delineate a "mine" and "yours" but in conversation these ideas have flown between us, we have heard each other and channelled, resisted, or diverted each other's flows which permeated our writing. These collective musings have a flow on effect to other projects we undertake together or separately.

Returning to Halberstam (2020b) to consider wilderness, we are not exactly seeking to escape or to broaden our horizons. We are not even seeking to allow the destabilising, mourning, violent dispossessions in embracing a queer wildness (Halberstam, 2020b), but rather to acknowledge that the violence of wildness was always hidden in capitalist world-buildings, the microfascisms that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) dubbed the *State*. We must refuse to embed such violence in our own world-building, but also refuse Deleuze and Guattari's offer of an alternative which is to "become animal" (p. 233), which fits with Halberstam's reluctance to see in wildness a queer project of liberation. There are no easy answers, the resistance to "the State" after all is the "war machine" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 352), and both are still part of the masculine order that Le Guin (2019) seeks to replace with something more conducive of

life. If ever we have needed such a shift in thinking, then on the brink of environmental disaster on a war-ridden globe in 2024, the time is more than ripe.

As a collective, we are not the rugged loner of masculine fantasy, trying to exist “in the wild”. We are not bringing down big, infallible answers to questions, but rather finding a cosy place to build a fire, within or on the edge of the academy to gather in the sense of being together and co-informed by each other, but also to gather in Le Guin’s sense. The affective work of this gathering, the critical and creative intellectual labour we engage in mutually is for us an “ethic of care” (MacGill, 2019, p. 409) or a “politics of care” (Tronto, 2010, p.162). We care for each other; we self-care; our projects are caring projects. We resist presuming to speak for everyone, we accept social anthropologist Susan Wardell’s (2020) advice to look for localised responses even as we know ecological crisis is, in spoken and unspoken ways, a crisis for everyone. Being settlers on Country (as opposed to First Nations[1] people), we must be careful of what we gather and where we step. The ground does not belong to us but nonetheless we must build nurturing communities. Accordingly, we hone our ability not only to imagine but to listen. Especially in a post-human way of thinking, we are camping; we are somewhere that we don’t live and don’t completely belong. Some of us are also always *camping* in the queer sense, unable to write straight. This is neither the State nor the time-honoured and recognised faux resistance of the war-machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This is not another hero-journey, we are unashamed to need our community which nourishes rather than saves us.

Finding common themes in our writing

In our collective reading, discussions, and writing exercises, two main themes came up for us in seeking a post-human voice. The first was a question of identity. This is best summed up with a section from Jarrett’s reflective journalling:

[How far to anthropomorphise is] ...an issue that is quite literally keeping me up at night at the moment. The exercise where we had to list human/non-human binaries (the What makes a human *human* and vice versa) I think play into this as well. It all raises questions of how one tells a non-human perspective in a story, when they themselves are human, and how to make that story appealing, relatable, and understandable for a human reader [...and] the academy.

While Jarrett set this down in the journal, it was an issue we kept coming back to as we participated in the workshop tasks. The second theme was closely intertwined with the first and asked about human values—whether there was even a common set of human values we could write from, but also to what extent we could portray other lives (or non-lives) as having the same motivations or values as ourselves.

In this vein, DeBono expressed ambivalence about anthropomorphising in her creative piece about a cat:

Stealing food is illegal. Supermarkets have guards.
Domesticated cats don’t often eat their kills.
Little feline predators, hunting in the suburban landscape.

They enjoy it. It's instinctual. They go home to eat their processed food from the supermarket shelf.

Traceable in DeBono's work is an unresolvable conundrum. Should we even be reading cats through a lens of human morality? Is it possible to do otherwise? The life of a pet cat is entangled with humans in a way that cannot be undone and that confers "no innocence" (Haraway, 2016, p. 114). DeBono speculates that cats may be "greedy. Selfish. Destructive. Demanding," and that they can feel "guilty / anxious / love" (n.p.). She is moving between portraying cats as amoral, not subject to human values, but the possibility of values returns as emotion.

While speculating that perhaps cats "enjoy" things that would be deemed crimes or immoral acts by humans, DeBono has problematised the idea of human morality and law for humans:

Crime of hunger.
The crime of the hungry.
Stealing food is illegal.
...
Death is a part of life,
and killing is commonplace,
but murder is a human word.

Stealing and murder are portrayed as immoral acts but there is a question around whether this morality is relevant outside of a human context. Through considering cats and attempting not to anthropomorphise them, we can begin to see that the anthropocentrism of assuming that only humans think and feel with complexity is akin to human exceptionalism (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2016) and equally problematic. Cats are not human because they do not see taking food from a corporation as a crime. By this logic, some humans are also less human or questionably human. This is not just a matter of wordplay, human history abounds with examples of people being classified or treated as less than human (MacKinnon, 2007; Truth, 1851). As Hannah Stark (2016) points out, liberal humanism assumes that the most rational is the most human and the most rational is always already male, and we could add white. She elaborates, "While the social contract is about freedom, it is premised on the oppression of women" (Stark, 2016, p. 14). "Freedom" for Stark and "crime" for DeBono are both human or perhaps humanist values. These bear examining further as they depend on categories that can slip and hierarchies that we have been taught to think of as natural and meritocratic. These hierarchies, in fact, are codified ways of constructing and defending inequity.

Brady-Clark went even further with her workshop writing, retreating from subjectivity altogether. She explored the concept of "haecceity" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 262-263), meaning zooming out from a discrete thing or human subject to the whole "thisness" of a moment which is precarious and has fluid boundaries. Haecceity is not objective but has a greater distance than and fails to recognise subjectivity. This was a concept introduced in the workshop, Brady-Clark wrote about what we would look like, gathered in the room engaged

in CCRWC activities in the absence of a context of our humanity, understanding, or even a purpose for being there.

She writes,

Shapes make up the world. Shapes make sense. They are stable. A rectangle is a rectangle ... on top of the bags of mostly water is a two-dimensional aspect with two (generally) almond shaped shapes. In between is a sort of trianglish shape and beneath the trianglish is a squarish oval. The squarish oval moves, opens to reveal more shapes of rectangular yellowish-white inside. (n.p.)

At first sight this is completely dehumanising, there is nothing recognisably human or subjective about her view, but Brady-Clark cannot resist adding flourishes of beauty:

filled with bursts of glittering stars. The almond shapes are shining, also creasing at the corners. The resonance and vibrations produce a newness, a sense, a feeling, an ... emotion. (n.p.)

Where there are just shapes, Brady-Clark finds a beauty always already present that does not depend on intention or agency. More surprisingly, writing this way leads her to discover or reinvent “emotion” by deducing it from “resonance and vibrations”. Where subjectivity is not, it may come into being. Brady-Clark relates this writing to her own consideration of the idea of “haecceity” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). She seeks to bring Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of precarity and fluid boundaries to bear on seeing us as if from a distance. Her affective and relational agenda is one she returns to. This was one of our insights: we have an ethical desire for the connectivity of our humanness, even when grappling with the valid dignity of the more-than-human.

While Brady-Clark has explored the effect of seeing humans stripped of humanity, her insight perhaps lends itself to helping see the agency that Jarrett also cannot resist writing:

It had yet to release all its pollen. A flood of stress chemicals was responding, spreading down its supple stem into its shallow roots where it made contact with the minuscule mycelium threads that spread between it and the Eucalypt that stood tall over it, and beyond, to all the other plants that stand within its proximity, which ends, who knows where.

Titled “The soursob and the gumtree”, this piece ascribes agency and knowing relationality to plants. This piece was unique in that the human was wholly absent and the only interaction within it was by more-than-human species. It connected to Jarrett’s broader work of creative writing that centres a tree over multiple generations. This is an example of the way that individual projects by group members leak into CCRWC for the enrichment of the whole group whilst being a space where we can work through our own research knots, or at least acknowledge their existence. Thusly, Jarrett is led to journal:

this is an issue that is quite literally keeping me up at night at the moment ... It all raises questions of how one tells a non-human perspective in a story, when they themselves are human. (n.p.)

We returned to this question again and again in our discussions. If we do not centre the human, then how do we avoid imbuing something else with human attributes for the sake of character? How do we make a story engaging without humanness? Is this even possible? What are stories for? As with Barad's notion of intra-action (Barad, 2007), we found it was actually not possible for us to take ourselves out of the frame completely; this could at best be a disingenuous exercise. Even when seeking to move out of the human we are left with the need to confront our presence in the world and our guilt for being that which is harming other beings, the toxicity of the Anthropocene for all living – and perhaps some unliving – things. As we have learned from Povinelli (2016), unliving things also exercise agency and the potential to transform us also to non-life.

We return to Bignall et al. (2016) to help inject some ecosophies into our sense-making. In confronting the place of the human in the more-than-human world we experience guilt as a knee-jerk reaction and a desire to respond better than with denial. However, Bignall et al. (2016) do not allow us to erase the self in considering the other; instead, they ask that we see ourselves embedded in the landscape and carrying responsibilities towards other beings. It is important to note here that living on Kurna Country, in what is sometimes called the Adelaide Plains, we live adjacent to Ngarindjerri Country, which each of us visits, so that Ngarindjerri thinking is also geographically pertinent to us. Without being Aboriginal ourselves, we may not “speak as Country” (Bignall et al., 2016, pp. 467-474), and yet we must learn to be informed by such ecosophies. Somehow, we too must learn to listen to Country, to tell stories that make each other listen or to know when not to tell a story. In this endeavour we story lightly, reminding ourselves that First Nations stories will have more weight than ours. If stories are carrier bags (Le Guin & Haraway, 2019), then we need more than one or two. So, we acknowledge that our stories are partial and need to become informed by older stories. We resolve to world carefully without erasing that which is still needed.

Walker finds yet another way to move out of humanness. Humans and more-than-humans both share an experience of embodiment. Humans create language, stories, words. As far as we know, clouds do not speak:

The clouds are not speaking. Yet they bear messages: messages they do not carry, but are. They are both the messages and the carrying. They are carried, have come through places where storms are now clearing, risen off waterways and from the veins of morning leaves. ... the earth is all ears.

Walker's ontology moves away from isolated features and acts like *having* ears and *producing* messages and returns to simply being as a whole entity. In places, Walker's words are *disorienting* in Ahmed's (2020) sense of the word. We experience a crisis of knowing. Clouds do not carry water, they are water; however, Neimanis (2017) would say so are we. What we see them do is merely what they are. The messages by clouds (that are clouds)

are kinds of cramps. Gasps. Twisting. Hurting. Being emptied out. Stolen from. Left hollow. Fragile. Hurting. (n.p.)

Embodiment is messy, it comes with affect of discomfort. “Left hollow. Fragile” the clouds are portrayed as being less for having spoken/messed. There seems to be a menstrual connotation too in the idea that aspects of the life cycle that involve leaking can also be painful, “cramps” (Walker, n.p.). When some natural bodily functions are deemed taboo – particularly those associated with the cis-gendered female body as it exists under patriarchy – the sociocultural implications constructed by human (western) notions of cleanliness, shame, and civility reveal themselves to be tied with structures of power and hierarchical domination. If menstruation is to be hidden, we only further isolate ourselves from the nonhuman beings with whom we may share experiences of pain and reproduction.

Finally, after listing many things that “hear” the message through being rained on, Walker too returns to the human who is not at the centre of this celestial pain and emptying. She writes, “drivers squint through thrashing windscreen wipers, turning radios to even louder” (n.p.). Thus, the Western, non-ecosophical human, having been reduced to a “driver”, defends himself from the great dramas of the world, out of touch with communications that are bodies and involve discomfort or pain. Unlike humans, the clouds in this piece know they are their bodies – water and only water. Mind and body cannot be unpicked when the message is the body.

Rozitis returns to the imagery of silverfish in “Invertebrate City” (Orbweavers, 2017). In the song, silverfish (small insects) infest an archived box of letters and photos. Rozitis thus references black-out poetry in writing back from the silverfish who are plaintively asking why humans do not value their work:

human life of words and words and words and words and words
and dogeared picture photos
silverfish ...
behind the baseboard
closeted ...
like silver but you do not love us
nuisance pests not pets
you mourn us eating your words
as if
you were never forced to do the same ...

making lace of missives
dear becomes ... ear
you are in my ... oughts
contractions
in action
“you were”
“hat time”
“ember the part”

the sense is lost (n.p.)

The wordplay in the second stanza asks us to guess what letters were chewed away by the invertebrates. The fragility of these letters that have been framed in-text as memories seems to speak to the material values of much human life, the importance placed on objects as physical signifiers, as lasting evidence of the ephemeral. The silverfish eat away at these materials, questioning the importance of such memories that have been separated by the embodied sensation of remembering, that can so easily disappear and yet offer nourishment in their consumption – perhaps a more valuable use for the papers that sees them re-enter the life cycle they have been so long removed from having once been trees.

As with all the writings we produced, human affect creeps in. Silverfish want to be understood and valued. The abject silverfish are “closeted”, a link to queer abjection which is seen as destructive of culture and social mores. In some way, this is the other side of the coin to DeBono’s recognition that cats are not humans. For DeBono, considering the lack of applicability of human laws to cats casts human values equally into question for themselves. We asked which humans are human laws made for, as they do not serve everyone the same? Conversely, Rozitis is ascribing a conscious agency to silverfish that strays close to anthropomorphic subjectivity. They do not value the artifacts of human culture, such as the written word, but the silverfish in Rozitis’ writing seek to defend themselves. They eat human words while humans are forced by life to double back and eat their words, be held accountable, refresh if not reconstruct or certainly recreate stories for new times and new contexts.

Considering we are five co-authors who habitually engage with provocations together and discuss our thinking for mutual learning, it is surprising how different our written approaches to an other-than-human perspective emerged. We did not resolve our various views into one, seeing this as a smaller scale example of *pluriversality* (Vasconcelos & Martin, 2019), and knowing it is in our proliferating thought we contribute something, not in a consensus that we could synthesise for neatness.

Yet, as we discussed in our workshop, where does a mountain end? We struggled even to define a human together. Walker mused:

A human is a thing that holds human rights (except some humans don’t, and the rights vary depending who / how /where you are)

She went on to make four more statements, or attempts at definition but each time an “except” or a “but” came in. It is interesting how in speaking of humans in the third person, she slips into second person “where you are” (n.p.). If Walker, along with the rest of us, is not clear precisely what a human is, she is nevertheless clear she is speaking to a human. We find a blurriness at the edge of categories and a failure for labels to encapsulate an essence we can all identify as human or otherwise. Our carrier bag intention is reassuring at this point as we know we do not have to heroically solve the problem of humanity—what it is, how to influence it, what are the needs of other beings that we could paternalistically meet—but instead we can

mingle complex ingredients, even ones we are not yet sure what to do with, in our carrier bags. We have foraged enough for more than one story and stories we know feed us and others.

Our identity as human seeps through our explorations beyond humanity but we reclaim it more humbly (we hope) as a species in relation with the environment rather than as the only way of seeing. We did not set out to write about values but in all our writing there are traces of values, of relationality, of emotion, of considering that one being affects another. DeBono's musings on her cat pushed hardest against the idea of values, but even then, there is an affectionate tone toward her cat, and in her reflective notes she acknowledges a "responsibility of being human and viewing ourselves as human" as we strive towards a "just, equal, environmentally conscious world" (n.p.).

Grains from our carrier bags: Five premises

Having adopted Le Guin's (2019) notion of a carrier bag and traversed our individual writing together, the first thing we identified was contradictions with proliferating exceptions to any rule we could propose to what it means to be "human". Grounded in our reading of Wiame (2018) and listening of the Orbweavers (2017), these contradictions seemed to infest our compost of thoughts so that initially we could not be sure we would gather anything of value.

We were dismayed feeling we uncertain of the possibility of persisting at what we felt to be an important project, that of centring the more-than-human. We wondered if doing post-humanism right, would necessarily lead to incoherence? It seemed at first almost arrogant to persist in weaving coherent stories as we wondered if our logocentrism, our prioritisation of linguistic ways of thinking, was part of the problem of humanity's abuse of everything else. However, no emancipatory project can ever be complete, or free of problems. If Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have prompted us to deterritorialise, we need to slow the process of reterritorialising in familiar or new certainties. The process of gathering could not be solved with a map or a fence or by insisting on settler ways of knowing boundaries. Instead, with Deleuze (1994) we assert a right to problems and insist on keeping open questions we perhaps set out to answer. The beauty of working with fiction is any answers or "truths" can be more contingent and fluid than is generally admitted elsewhere. This ability to be contingent, even playful could benefit other areas of thought, creative writing becoming a means of gathering serious ideas as well.

So what if we are making ourselves significant by making up stories and narratives about how we don't hold our cat to the same standard as ourselves, or about how there is a glow and beauty to us even pre-understanding? So what if we cannot really know the thoughts of a soursob and its relationship to a tree, or if we interpret clouds as angst since their work is literally pouring themselves out and winking out of existence? Perhaps we are as significant as silverfish living lives as narrow as a shoebox, eating the meaning-making of another species and leaving our ordure on our habitats. We face this quandary, and we "deface" this subjectivity (Chaudhuri, 2018, p. 500) looking for a molecular possibility beyond hard categories like male/female, human/nonhuman, coherent/incoherent (Chaudhuri, 2018; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Stark,

2016). We call out the arbitrariness of the human, but we are unapologetically human ourselves with all the contradictions that entails.

Attempts at “speculative fabulation” are needed because “we need new worldings, new accounts of what we are making to and with the earth” (Wiame, 2018, p. 532). In trying to move past a human story, we have ended up reasserting the importance of story for humans, which has allowed us to speculate on what sort of humanity is nourished by different kinds of stories. In “articulating new encounters”, our contribution to the contemporary crises we see and face (Sandford et al., 2024) continues to think about the value of our story for more-than-humanity, through the entanglement of human readers and writers with the other. As Christ et al. (2022) have observed,

It’s not just about knowing ... it’s about ontology, producing ways of becoming and doing in this world. It’s not that we come to a singular way of knowing. How it produced or changed our ways of be(com)ing researcher(s). (p. 55)

We found we were caught between different demands on us in attempting to make our stories less human centric, less heroic, less linear. We still had to achieve something that was recognisably “story” that would reward the reader with some level of sense or enjoyment. We also have to achieve a level of coherence recognisable by the academy.

When digging over the surprisingly rich compost of our writing and workshop notes, we found we had proposed several premises for the worlding we write together:

- Human ethics are important but cannot be defined in absolute terms
- Even without subjectivity there is something beautiful about humans
- Other-than-human things have importance and dignity
- Humans must shield themselves from the larger dramas of the elements which are unaware of humans
- There are parts of nature which by existing work against humans

The first three are important ethically but perhaps easy to accept. The final two propositions together spell out that nature cannot be considered primarily a resource, or source of resources for humans. Humans need to rediscover their place in a network of being, where their lives too might become resources for other species. The sense that other species might need humans has been discussed by Anna Tsing (2015). Just as it is a fallacy to see humans as an evolutionary or otherwise pinnacle of the animal kingdom, so centring ourselves as the villain is also a mistaken philosophy. We may have changed the world, but so have many other creatures in small or large ways. Just as we depend on multiple forms of life and non-life, multiple species depend on us. Yet we are also at times at cross purposes with other species. To embrace post-humanist creative thinking as remediation for the hubris of Western (phal)logocentric thought does not have to mean eliminating the human from our thinking, our storying, or most especially from our care. At times self-care has a melancholic element (MacGill, 2019) but the

goal remains making kin of “other” (Haraway, 2016) and living “life-in-the-plural” (Neimanis, 2017).

Future foraging

Thus, we have brought in the contents of our carrier bags to combine it with other writers and thinkers who wish to move away from and back to humanity as a reference point, a dance that is post-human but is not abandoning our being human. In an ecosystem or an ecosophy, kinship does not depend on homogeneity. We have shown that post-human writing is difficult, is akin to foraging, composting, being water, considering ethics, playing, being written out and in again, and the fear of being defeated or dying. We have rejected the extinction of humanity as an answer and we have found beauty, albeit not certainty. Our context for playing with post-human voices is a catastrophically injured planet. We resolve not to forget this as we seek collaborative, thoughtful engagement with impossible contradictions which in tripping us up do not silence us, except in increasingly intentional pauses which we use for listening to other human, and more-than-human voices. These conversations, attempts, questions, and silences are crucial to find more zoecentric (life-affirming) ways of thinking and being. We will continue and invite others to explore post-human and ethical human writing and carrier-bag thinking as a means of nourishing ourselves and transforming thinking.

Note:

[1] “First Nations people”. As Luke Pearson (16 Jun 2021) explains in “Appropriate terminology for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – it’s complicated”, Indigenous X, accessed 12 September 2024, <https://indigenoux.com.au/appropriate-terminology-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-its-complicated/>, there is no easy “right answer” for what language to use collectively for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In line with one of the options, he suggests we are using in this context “people” to mean “individuals” as opposed to “peoples” which could be taken to mean “nations”.

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