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Animal Collectives

There are numerous literary works narrated by a singular animal, a first-person nonhuman "I". But there are very few texts spoken by an animal collective, that is, by a "we" who speak as a multitude. Why is this? And what does it tell us about the political unconscious of animal narration? This essay sets out to develop a critical understanding of the prevailing analyses of nonhuman narratology. By examining how different genres construct nonhuman narratives, I will argue that the lack of an animal collective voice within fiction is symptomatic of the novel form's individuating logics, which prioritise and produce a particular conception of bounded personhood that is coded as ontologically human. At the same time, I turn to other literary genres, such as poetry and short stories, which offer paradigmatic experiments with nonhuman multitudes.

Animal studies has long been committed to teasing out fiction's narrativisation and representation of animal lives. As a strategic intervention into the often unacknowledged humanist presuppositions of literary scholarship, animal studies draws attention to "the near omnipresence of nonhuman animals in literary texts" (McKay 637) and stresses "the ways in which animals appear in texts, are represented and figured, in and for themselves and not as displaced metaphors for the human" (Simons 6). As an analytical project of literary criticism that is gaining in methodological coherency, animal studies also thinks through the "demands animals place on literary representation" (Ortiz-Robles xi), and increasingly analyses the ways in which the writing of nonhuman animals itself calls into question the underlying generic and formal logics of the literary. And as a pro-animal political project, whether its politics are articulated implicitly or explicitly, animal studies not only explores how literature participates in the ongoing ideological production of species difference, but it also argues that literary representations and narrative forms can both challenge and reimagine human-animal relations.

Recently, the field has approached the phenomenon of literary texts that are narrated *by* a nonhuman subject, and in turn offered a more sustained stylistic encounter with nonhuman voices. Animal stories are perhaps as old as literature itself. So too are fables, satires, epics and poems narrated by animal subjects. In modernity, the era of the novel, numerous prose works have experimented with nonhuman narrative. From the minimal nonhuman narration of Laska the dog's focalising asides in *Anna Karenina* (1878) to the maximal nonhuman narration of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877); from the modernist style of Virginia Woolf's cocker spaniel memoir *Flush: A Biography* (1933) to human-porcupine hybridity in Alain Mabanckou's *Memoirs of a Porcupine* (2006) – there is a rich history of animal-narrated fiction across world literature. But how do we make sense of the specific narrative methods, innovations and implications of the animal voice? How do these methods, innovations and implications change according to the shifting circumstances of time, place, and subject position? In other words, what do animal-narrated fictions tell us about the prevailing ideologies that undergird human-animal relations? And how – if at all – does nonhuman narration contest dominant modalities of anthropocentric thought?

These questions have been taken up in the developing field of nonhuman narratology, which includes the 2013 edited collection *Speaking for Animals* and the recent 'Animal Narratology' issue of *Humanities*. Yet the strongest theorizations of nonhuman storytelling so far have come from three particular sources. First, Frederike Middelhoff's work focuses on how writers assimilate and reshape both the poetics of autobiography and the discourses of zoology by narrating from an animal's perspective. Middelhoff calls these homodiegetic narratives "literary autozoographies" (2), arguing that such stories "may import moral messages and satirize social phenomena; they may challenge a reader's perspective, produce sympathy for nonhuman beings, or argue on behalf of those considered 'dumb' or 'speechless'" (339). Second, Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck's article 'The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators' develops the argument that nonhuman storytelling produces a "double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization". By this, they mean that "non-human narrators prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, readers 'empathize' and 'naturalize'); at the same time, readers have to acknowledge the otherness of non-human narrators, who may question (defamiliarize) some of readers' assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness" (69). Third, David Herman's book *Narratology Beyond the Human* (2018) offers a granular narratological analysis of multispecies storytelling. Herman focuses, successively, on human-narrated stories which open out towards cross-species relationality, human-animal hybrid narrators, multispecies storyworlds in graphic narratives, animal biographies and autobiographies, and "storytelling at a species scale" (260). For Herman, while many of these animal-centered narratives may well "shore up, reproduce, and even amplify human-centric understandings of animals and cross-species relationships", multispecies storyworlds nevertheless have the "potential to alter understandings of our place within a more-than-human world and hence of what constitutes or defines the human" (4). Each of these three contributions foreground the idea that nonhuman narration offers a generative estrangement of literary forms *and* of anthropocentric life. They suggest that, despite the potential ambivalences and human-centred ends of animal-narrated fiction, animal stories can nevertheless open up a space for readerly compassion towards our animal neighbours.

We can trace these two currents throughout a recent, popular instance of nonhuman narration in world literature: Yoko Tawada's novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, first published in German as *Etüden im Schnee* (2011) and translated into English by Susan Bernofsky in 2017. The novel is paradigmatic of animal autobiography insofar as it reads simultaneously as an allegory of the migrant experience in the transition from the Iron Curtain to German reunification *and* as a literal animal narration, that is, as a story of three polar bears who commit their lives to paper. Because of this, *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* is animated by a productive tension between the real and the fantastic, and what emerges out of this tension is a kind of "critical irrealism", to use Michael Löwy's term (196), in which the perspectives of three polar bears put pressure on the anthropocentric conventions of both twentieth-century society and of literary forms themselves. The novel's polar bear narrators comment not just on the "spooky activity" of writing (4), but also on the inadequacies of human rights for

sentient animal beings: “human rights weren’t a primary concern of mine … The concept of human rights have been invented by people who were thinking only of human beings” (54), the unnamed Grandmother says in the novel’s opening chapter. As I have argued elsewhere (O’Key 2017), *Memoirs of a Polar Bear’s* irrealism thus becomes “critical” in the sense that its animal-narration engages with and reflects on social reality from the other, animal side.

Despite the many insights of animal studies’ analysis of nonhuman narration, almost all of this scholarship has been written under the sign of the first-person dramatized narrator – the “I” who is not just a story’s narrator but also its principal protagonist. What, then, about the “we”? What about nonhuman narratives that are not voiced by one charismatic animal subject, but by animal collectives? It is important to foreground this question when reading *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, which in spite of its English-language title is in fact not a biography of a single polar bear, but an intergenerational narration, a collective memoir that focuses on three generations of polar bears – grandmother, mother, and son – who negotiate the Soviet Union’s and later Germany’s emergent, dominant and residual attitudes towards bears. For while the grandmother and mother are both circus bears, the son becomes a zoo animal. Reading *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* as a collective narrative therefore deepens the novel’s literal and allegorical meanings: at once, the novel stages a societal transformation in which zoo conservation – rather than circus performance – becomes the dominant mode of animal spectacle, while at the same time asking us to “translate” this into a language suited to consider the life of a human, migrant memoirist, who is treated by the publishing industry as a kind of circus performer and then later endangered species.

Even though Tawada’s intergenerational novel is a collective narration, a situated family tale that can be read metonymically as both standing for and defamiliarizing the polar bear as a species, it does so only through the individual subjectivities of its homodiegetic narrators. Like many other animal-narrated novels and short story collections, such as Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone* (1998) and Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals* (2014), *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* can only be described as a weak or loose we-narrative, without a we-voice proper, housing a triplet of “I”s who each speak sequentially. These texts therefore develop what Susan Lanser would call a “communal voice” in “a sequential form in which individual members of a group narrated in turn” (21). But as Lanser notes, there are other formal possibilities with the communal voice: “a singular form in which one narrator speaks for a collective, [and] a simultaneous form in which a plural ‘we’ narrates” (21). The former category is occupied by texts like Franz Kafka’s short story ‘Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk’ (1924), in which an unnamed member of a community of mice meditates on the dwindling star-power of a mouse-singer. While the story opens with an implicitly we-narrated line, “Our singer is called Josephine” (360), and while the narrative voice speaks *for* the community throughout the story, the voice is not ultimately the community itself, but an individual “I” who expresses “personal opinions” [“*meiner Meinung*”] that distinguishes them from the “we”. But what about this latter, simultaneous form of the we-voice? What, then, about “those narratives that rely predominantly on the plural person of the narrator and exclude singular narrators”, as Natalya Bekhta puts it (170)?

Poetry offers compelling and innovative experimentations with the plural person voice. In Margaret Atwood's cycle 'Songs of the Transformed' (1974), for example, Atwood writes as a crow, a pig, and a rat. In 'Song of the Worms', Atwood narrates as a collective of annelids. The poem's anaphoric phrasing emphasises this collective voice throughout: "We have been underground too long, | we have done our work, | we are many and one" (261). Against the anthropocentric "philosophy of boots", the worms plan an insurgency against the human "foot": "when we say Attack | you will hear nothing | at first" (262). While Atwood's 'Song of the Worms' adopts a unified voice in order to denote organisation and strength, Les Murray's animal poems – published as *Translations from the Natural World* (1992) – often draw on a we-voice in order to dramatise animals' vulnerability under intensive industrialized farming practices. But importantly, Murray also adopts pluralised animal subjectivities in order to estrange the we-voice itself. In 'Pigs', for example, Murray writes not with the "we" pronoun but as an "us" who have a collective memory of a time before factory farming:

> Us never knowed like slitting nor hose-biff then.
> Nor the terrible sheet-cutting screams up ahead.
> The burnt water kicking. This gone-already feeling
> here in no place with our heads on upside down. (Murray)

And in 'The Cows on Killing Day', Murray's cow speaks for the entire herd as an "all me": "All me are standing on feed [...] All me have just been milked." In 'The Cows', "All me" becomes a mode of paradoxical lyric narration, as it delivers both first-person introspection and a collective extension which pluralises the "I", as the speaker identifies with the other cows who are "crumpled", become "feed":

> Looking back, the glistening leaf is still moving.
> All of dry old me is crumpled, like the hills of feed,
> and a slick me like a huge calf is coming out of me. (Murray)

Both poems therefore differently defamiliarize the collective voice, cultivating a kind of nonhuman solidarity in opposition to the violence of intensive animal agriculture. Unencumbered by the pressures of developing a coherent narrative voice, Atwood's and Murray's poems present short articulations of and experiments with nonhuman we-expression.

The short story form also accommodates animal collectives, not least because of the genre's tendency towards reiteration and patterning, its negation of naturalising realism, and its short, episodic intensity, which according to Charles E. May confronts a "crucial event or crisis rather than slowly developing over time" (181, 176). Karen Joy Fowler taps into the short story form's patterning and intensity in 'Us' (2013), a we-narrative which opens by addressing a second-person "you":

> We're not the record keepers you are. When we find your records, we eat them. Some of us think you carry a grudge about that, but you've made good use of our hunger over

> the years. On our side, there's no ill will. We're in this together, always have been. (481)

'Us' is something of a Russian-doll narrative, but not in the usual sense of a story within a story. It is a text that reveals more and more about its narrators' collective identity as each paragraph leads to the next. While the story's opening paragraph makes deliberately ambiguous its "we" and "you", readers soon understand that the story is being narrated by rats addressing their human counterparts: "when famine came [...] we took off together, boarded your ships and sailed in all directions. Our DNA is a map of your migrations" (481); "Any admiration you'd ever felt for us vanished. You spoke of infestations. Swarms. Eradications. You killed us in your stories, danced us to our death with songs" (482).

Like Atwood's poem 'Song of the Worms', 'Us' offers a collective speaking-back to humanity. In doing so, Fowler's "we" tells of centuries of "raticide" (482), domesticity, and the professionalisation of pest control. But here the narrating "we" contracts somewhat, and in doing so differentiates itself from "wild" rats: "We are not those rats. We've learned that it's best to please you. You like us tame better than wild, docile better than savage. You like us fast and clever in the mazes, but not in the sewers" (483). The narrating "we" of Fowler's story is thus revealed to be lab rats, test subjects who view themselves as reluctant "partners in the great and final battle on the frontiers of medical progress" (483). More specifically, these lab rats identify themselves as "Berkeley Rats", prized research subjects not to be confused with the "Yale rats" who "respond only to food cues" (483). Even more specifically, the speaking "we" reveals on the final page that they are "hybrids: us, only with a bit of you thrown in. Millions currently in production." (485). Thus the story culminates with the prospect of human-rat hybrids developing thoughts which "sound like" human ones: "We would like to think this: that in the end it is ourselves we are saving. Already we don't know if this is our thought or yours. But it sounds like you" (485).

Thus despite being a we-narrative, 'Us' is positioned *against* its "we". By this I mean that Fowler's we-narrative provides the rhetorical basis of the story's argument against the instrumentalizing and standardizing logics of scientific research. The rats deplores the fact that they have "become data", and that their "genetic variation has been minimized in the attempt to eradicate the noise of individual personality" (485). Thus the central contradiction of 'Us' is that its politics are antagonistically interrelated with its we-narrative form. 'Us' resists the depersonalizing logics of "our uniformity of production" (ibid), and it therefore advocates against the very "we" voice that it speaks from. In other words, although Fowler's story adopts the we-voice so as to contest institutionalized violence against nonhuman animals, it does so by investing politically in the assumed sanctity of "individual personality". For Fowler, the collective remains undesirable.

To my knowledge, Fowler's short story is one of the only works of prose fiction that narrates from the perspective of an animal collective. For all of the animal autobiographies that exist, I do not know of a single long-form narrative voiced by an animal collective. This is surprising considering the fact that billions of animals live out a collective species life, in flocks and herds and swarms. But it is also not that surprising: long-form prose fiction,

especially the novel form, is fundamentally invested in the subjectivity of the person. Ian Watt's foundational study revealed how the novel form, emerging in light of Lockean and Cartesian philosophies of individual sensory perception on the one side and the marketplace capitalism and imperial expansion of eighteenth-century England on the other, produces a particular notion of the autonomous individual (17–18). As John Frow writes in his study of literary character and personhood, the novel form utilises "the affective and moral technologies of self-shaping inwardness that […] inform much of our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a person" (x). Indeed, literary critics have developed a dialectical understanding of the novel as an apparatus that, first, recognises types of subjectivity which were never before politically counted, creating a new 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 3), while at the same time shaping particular ideas about a 'universal' human subject, and thereafter guarding this rhetorical figuration of the human as if it were the only type of subjectivity available, "invalidat[ing] competing notions of the subject" (Armstrong 3). The central subject of the novel is, Fredric Jameson suggests, the "centred subject" (182). Indeed, the third chapter of Tawada's *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* performs this centring of the subject, in which a dramatic perspectival shift from third- to first-person narrative enacts a narrative and ontological individuation. During the chapter's first half, the narrator refers to himself in the third person as "Knut". But after a Malayan sun bear announces to him "You call yourself Knut? A bear speaking in the third person? I haven't heard anything that hilarious in a long time. Are you still a baby?" (208), the narrator begins articulating through the first-person "I" as a sign of his development: "Clearing my throat, I spoke the word 'I' for the first time: 'I am Knut, in case you don't know'" (209). Soon, Knut is "using the first person like a champ" (221). This narrative individuation, codified as a movement towards personhood, is in tension with the ways in which the rest of the text disrupts novelistic motifs of character development.

By bringing these critical understandings of the novel form into conversation with animal-narrated first person (plural) fiction, I want to conclude by suggesting that the absence of we-narratives proper in animal-narrated fiction has a lot to do with the formal and generic logics of the novel, which pressurize multispecies storyworlds into adopting a sole authorial "I". More than this, I want to speculate that another reason for this writerly reluctance to experiment with we-voices might be explained by these texts' investments not just in the individuating tendencies of novelistic literary forms, but in the underlying liberal politics of individuated personhood itself. Pro-animal thought remains divided between the liberal model of extensionism and the more radical and transformative model of liberation. While liberal accounts suggest that moral consideration and legal protections should be extended outwards to include nonhuman persons, liberationists contend that because these moral and legal considerations are both fundamentally anthropocentric and already insufficient for billions of humans across the planet, it would be not just inadequate but also actively detrimental to simply project current conceptions of, say, human rights onto our nonhuman neighbours. As Cary Wolfe theorizes it, the "pragmatic pursuits" of extensionism operate squarely "within the purview of a liberal humanism in philosophy, politics, and law that is bound by a quite historically and ideologically specific set of coordinates" (*What is Posthumanism?* 137). Extensionism, being bound by the exclusions and paradoxes of a

liberal humanism that is compatible with capitalism, would therefore replicate these exclusions and paradoxes if applied to nonhuman lives.

Are the first-person animal-narrated fictions I have discussed here texts of extensionism or liberation? Viewed in light of critical positions towards the novel form, the loose genre of animal autobiography begins to appear as if caught within the anthropocentric metaphysics of presence its critics have suggested it deconstructs. Could it be the case, then, that literary autozoographies participate in a kind of liberal extensionism? If so, then these animal-narrated fictions might well be at odds with the very posthumanist horizon they are often tasked with making intelligible. They would reproduce the tenets of a hegemonic anthropocentric ideology that they aim to at best escape or at least undermine. A reluctance to take on the "we" would thus be redolent of a politics which prioritises the sovereignty of the subject.

At both a literary and political level, animal autobiographies extend the realm of narrative possibility to the animal. This affordance of first-person narration imaginatively contests our current anthroponormative order. But it also risks de-collectivising animals, thereby foreclosing the liberationary horizons that animal studies critique makes possible. For all the advantages of animal autobiographies, they risk becoming fictions of individualization. "We" must therefore help make space for future we-narratives that realise a collective subjectivity without possessive individualism. Indeed, Barbara Foley once wrote that the collective novel "opens up possibilities for voicing revolutionary politics because it engages the reader in a procedure of critical totalization" (441). Collective novels, Foley argued, not only bypass a number of the problems generated by the individualistic premises of dominant novel forms, such as the *Bildungsroman's* fetishization of heroes and villains, but they also promise to disperse narrative subjectivity in order to "produce a knowledge of social relations that does not depend solely on what individual characters 'learn'" (441). Foley is, of course, speaking of the human collective. Hers is a study about proletarian literature and revolutionary subjects. But as I see it, liberatory aesthetics must not be the preserve of the human species alone. The creatures, too, must become free.

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