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GSML 505: Grad Seminar in Research II
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December 10, 2019

Squirrealism and The Great Silence

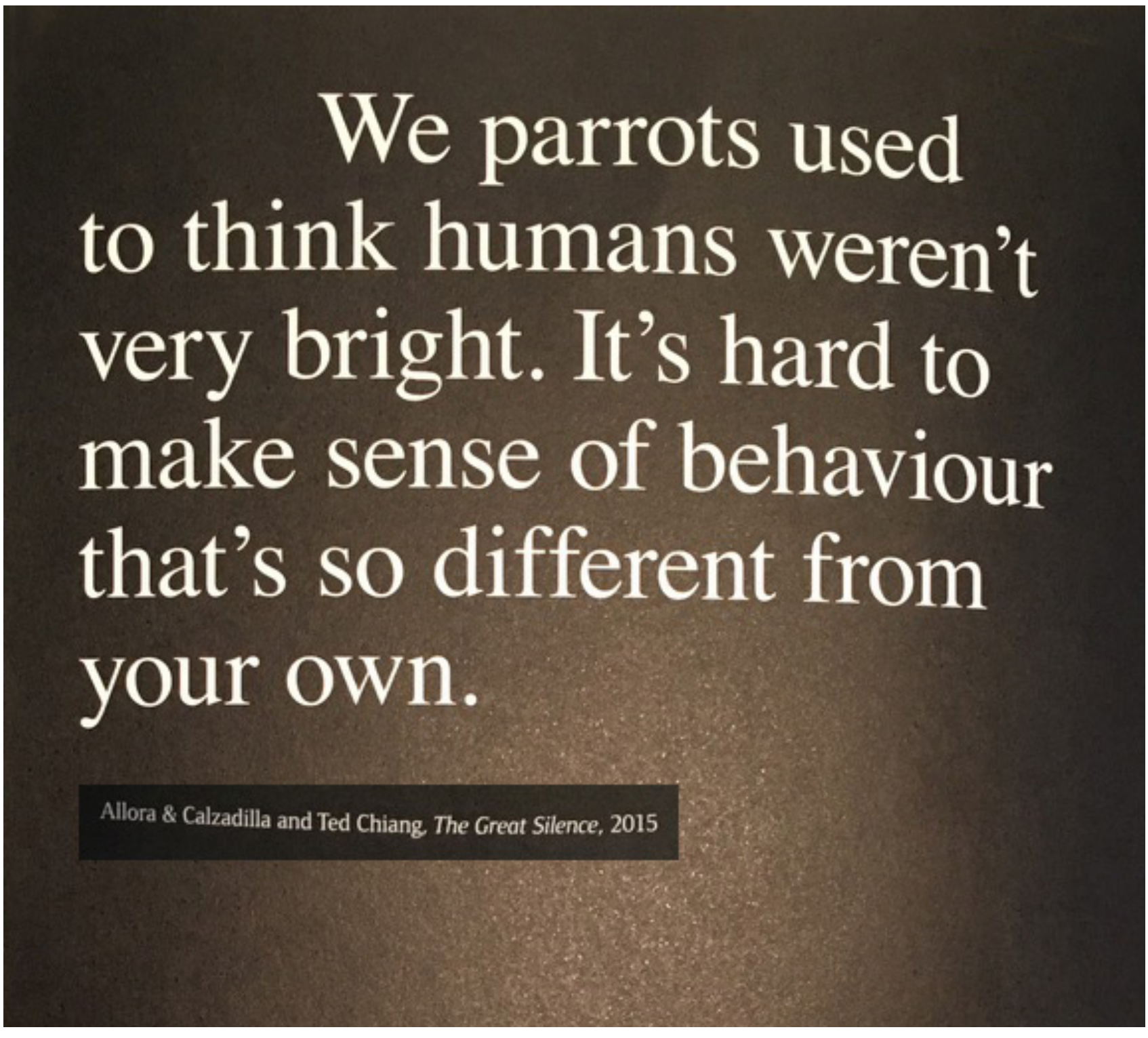

Fig. 1. Allora & Calzadilla and Ted Chiang, The Great Silence, 2015. Animals,
Documents of Contemporary Art. Ed. by Ramos, Filipa, Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2016, p 6.

Introduction

"We parrots used to think humans weren't very bright. It's hard to make sense of behaviour that's so different from your own." This subtitle quote is from *The Great Silence (2014),* a 3-channel HD video by Allora & Calzadilla (in collaboration with Ted Chiang). Their work attempts to identify why humans are seemingly incapable of comprehending animals. I first read the quote as a text image in *Animals*, edited by Filipa Ramos (2016). *Animals* is a compilation of essays that invites readers to observe how humans can dialogue with nonhumans and look beyond anthropomorphic attributions and anthropocentric representations. ”By considering animals, humans can not only regain the lost animality of their senses, muscles and instincts, but also conceive expressive means beyond conventional verbal communication" (Ramos 14).

The Great Silence uses subtitles to narrate the story from the parrots' perspective while examining the complicated relationships between the human and nonhuman, and the terrestrial and cosmic. "The film focuses on the world's largest single-aperture radio telescope, which transmits and captures radio waves to and from the edges of the universe. Located at the Arecibo Observatory in Esperanza [Hope], Puerto Rico, the site is surrounded by the Rio Abajo forest, home to the last wild population of critically endangered Amazona vittata parrots” (“The Great Silence, 2014”). Parrots are vocal learners. The first-person subtitle text of the parrot explains how sound plays a vital role in the creation of mythologies and origin stories. While humans scan for signs of life amid the vibrations of deep space, the parrot reflects on the end of their kind and the subsequent disappearance of their language, rituals and traditions on planet earth. "Human activity has brought my kind to the brink of extinction, but I don't blame them for it. They didn't do it maliciously. They just weren't paying attention" (Allora & Calzadilla).

But human activity can be malicious. Throughout occidental history, we have categorized humans as more-than-animal, and created boundaries and hierarchies in pursuit of so-called civilized society. We have been hailed to believe in the uniqueness of our humanity and we’ve been interpellated by ideological state apparatuses to think that Homo sapiens are supreme because of body and reason, self-awareness, justice, and language. The dominant white Euro-centric power has been arrogantly defining what it means to be human since Aristotle’s basic classification schema placed the human male at the top of the hierarchy of natures’ perfect image, “and the rest of the animal kingdom forms a downward ladder, from women to sea urchins” (Cox 19).

I selected the subtitle quote for my GSML 502 Thought Paper as a vehicle to research the human/nonhuman relationship in order to build a valid theory of experience in my art practice. My paper will research the boundaries between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, and animate and inanimate. The subtitle quote infers that parrots have made progress in understanding how human behaviour works and their efforts to understand us has given them insight. Humans however, have been too busy searching for life outside of our planet to realize the nonhuman relationship they yearn for so much is waiting for them right here at home.

My research into the structures of power and division between humans and nonhumans starts with an investigation into the colonial history of Beacon Hill Park in Victoria BC. In September, I wanted to mimic the seasonal behaviour of the Eastern Grey Squirrel by collecting and burying Garry oak acorns. A walk through Beacon Hill Park (Victoria BC) led me to find a Garry oak meadow that pre-dates colonial times. While foraging for acorns beneath the trees, I noticed several dropped peafowl feathers, and it made me ask: How did the Indian (blue) peafowl, a species native to the Indian subcontinent, end up living in the park? It was by following this line of enquiry that I learned about the role that Western history has played in the nature/culture divide.

Beacon Hill Park is the site of an ancient Indigenous cemetery and is sacred to the Songhees (Lekwungen) Nation. After forcing the Songhees Peoples to relocate, it was set aside in 1850 as part of a British government plan to establish an 'ideal society' in the new colony of Vancouver Island. The Beacon Hill Park zoo began in 1889, and the "first animals were six deer, a bear, a wolf, sheep, an eagle, two young swans and pheasants." (Ringuette, The Zoo). Internationally, the marginalization of animals in captivity coincided with the period when animals started disappearing from daily life as humans relocated from villages to form city centres. In the case of the blue peafowl, the capturing of animals was also "…a symbolic representation of the conquest of all distant and exotic lands" (Berger 21). The existence of peafowl in Beacon Hill Park is evidence of the historical tie between the British colonization of both India and Vancouver Island. Park records detail how the settlers' desire to put 'wild' animals on display meant the captured animals were in constant need of protection. Victoria residents and their dogs continually harassed, injured and killed park birds and animals every year. "Humans shot arrows into mallards, stoned swans, poked bears with sticks and decapitated peacocks decade after decade…the records show no fewer than five deer have been killed by dogs." (Ringette, Double Rescue).

The purpose of a zoo is meant to offer a collection of animals that can be looked at, observed, and studied in an effort to get to know the other. But nonhuman animals trapped in inhumane cages do not provide any behaviours that are present in their natural habitat. "…you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal" (Berger 26). And while the zoo offers an opportunity to look at the animals, it does not offer an opportunity to be seen by the animals. "At most the animals gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a central place in their attention." (Berger 28). In his now-famous text, "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (2006), the philosopher Jacques Derrida criticizes the prevailing lack of philosophical sensibility toward animals; "there are those texts signed by people who have no doubt seen, observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal, but who have never been seen seen by the animal. Their gaze has never intersected with that of an animal directed at them. If, indeed, they did happen to be seen seen furtively by the animal one day, they took no (thematic, theoretical, or philosophi- cal) account of it.." (382). Historically, the idea of interacting with a nonhuman animal by the Euro-centric subject was one of objectification.

The architecture of domestication through enclosure with its' bars, cages, and partitions was supported by the classification of the species of natural history, organizing taxonomies, and

naming categories. A new type of relationship and separation between humans and nonhumans occurred by "turning nature into a figure, that is to say, the object of a representation: zoological gardens are the places in which the animal is installed in the modern cosmography that is taxonomy." (Normand 3). The animal is then subjected to the apparatus of scientific observation, and zoos participate in the contemporary act of division and separation. Add in technological inventions such as film and photography whose tools further act to objectify the nonhuman animal. "Thus accompanying the 19th century scientific invention of mechanical objectivity, using tools of "epistemological conviction' (film, photography), the zoological garden is the framework in which a capture gradually organizes itself; the objectification of the animal figure" (Normand 3). None of these dominant ideologies helped bridge the gap between nature and culture.

Our relationship to nonhuman animals existed before film and photography. Still, mainstream cinema created another boundary with anthropocentric archetypes of animal actors and animal simulations as human characters that were either intrinsically good or terrifyingly bad. "We immediately recognize animal allegories for human characteristics, good or evil, brave or cowardly, generous or greedy…" (Jeong 139). Disney, for example, sent animators to The Griffith Park Zoo (1912 to 1965) to observe animals behaviours and to "better understand their anatomy and movement" (Pierce). The binary opposition deepened as a simulation of the nonhuman animal became full of human-oriented meanings and not the animal itself. "This anthropomorphic tendency works according to what Fredric Jameson calls hermeneutic 'depth models': dialectic, psychoanalytic, existential or semiotic - the hierarchical dichotomy that there is a latent meaning, essence, signified below the appearance of manifest signifier" (Jeong 141). Anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in film and media helped create differing cultural beliefs that nonhuman animals are responsible for our human emotions, thus creating a blind spot to the nonhuman animals themselves.

Euro-centric ideologies throughout history have drawn structuralist boundaries between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, and animate and inanimate. Humans are constantly thinking about their own existence concerning things either inside or outside of themselves. Linnaeus, the founder of modern scientific taxonomy, tried to build a bridge with nonhuman animals when he dismissed the Cartesian theory in *Systema naturae* (1735-58) that apes for example, lacked a soul, or were "automata mechanica" (Agamben 23). Descartes, thought animals were "simply machines or automata, capable of complex behaviour but lacking a soul, reason or feeling" (Cox 28). Psychoanalysis and Lacan's symbolic language broke a different bridge when he opposed the Cogito or the Cartesian conception 'Cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am), because he believed language comes first before thinking. He theorized that you need language in order to think. "Language thinks me, therefore I think, therefore I am and so are you" (Pauker audio slides). Religions such as Christianity and Judaism, and the development of human sciences and politics where the use of language is imperative have also not been helpful in developing kinship between human and nonhuman animals. "For 100 years the Vatican forbade the use of sign language…it was unthinkable that languages could exist that

were not Latinate." (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, Assemblages). Contemporary political policies continue to maintain broken bridges as it directs humans on how to think about nonhuman animals. France, which is considered a progressive country by many, made amendments in 2015 that deemed animals owned as property are sentient, but "wild animals and ownerless domesticated animals are not covered by this recognition of sentience" ("France: Recognizing animal protection"). Deleuze and Guattari also made this segregation for non-domesticated animals because for them pets "are the only type of animal psychoanalysis understands" (Laurie 160).

A renewed interest in animals in art, empathy, and awareness prompted discussion about how anthropomorphism is an anthropocentric approach of projecting human qualities onto a nonhuman subject/object to explain how nonhumans experience the world. Anthropomorphism is subjective though, because there is no universal view of what makes a human, biologically or culturally speaking. It can also reinforce or challenge stereotypes. For example, some humans see or hear and use language, and some do not. Decentering subjectivity, however, is not the same as decentering the human from the equation. "Guattari brings about a decentering of subjectivity in separating it simultaneously not only from the subject, from the person, but also from the human. His challenge is to escape from subject/object and nature/culture oppositions, which makes man the measure and the center of the universe, in making out of subjectivity and culture-specific diver-sions (differences) between man and animals, plants, rocks, but also machines and mechanics" (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato 97). It is possible to extract from this, that subjectivity is not always seen exclusively as a human characteristic, but there's still a need to find the middle ground between the nature/culture divide.

Up until the eighteenth century, language was not the sole characteristic of humans according to prevalent thought of the day. "…language - which would become man's (sic) identifying characteristic par excellence - jumps across orders and classes, for it is suspected that even birds can talk" (Agamben 24). Kristeva's theory of semanalysis disrupting the 'symbolic' can be used to explore non-verbal semiotics as a way to better understanding nonhumans. "Thus poetic language making free with the language code; music, dancing, painting, reordering psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems and thus renewing their own tradition" (Kristeva 79). Working in this way, semanalysis and semiotic symbols (such as tail flicking, and vocal calls of the Eastern Grey squirrel) or semiotic silence (non-vocal Black-tailed deer) can be seen as devices for interspecies communication.

From Copernicus to Darwin, we can draw from history to discuss how humans are not the centre of the universe, or show how we are not separate from other animals. The anthropocentric view of nature/culture felt a reprieve when Darwin declared that natural selection works by difference and mutation and that species differentiate becoming new species. Anthropocentrism then leaned in to embrace monstrosity, animal oddities and hybrids. "Though the discourse on monstrosity is wildly heterogeneous, this cultural-defining property is constant from ancient Greek, Babylonian, and Roman reports of monstrous races to contemporary discussions of animal and human cloning, stem cell research…" (Cox 21). Darwin did, however, provide an opportunity for the Euro-centric boundary to become porous. He noted the importance of 'monstrosities' because evolution was the process by which species 'become other' through

becoming and difference, or perhaps différance. Just as Derrida uses différance as “the alternative to and escape from the logic of a transcendental signifier,” it could be said that Darwin uses difference to destabilize the structuralist boundary between humans and nonhumans (Hendricks 5). For Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of ‘becoming-animal’ put forward in *A Thousand Plateaus*, all entities including human beings are constantly “engaged in relations of becoming” (Cox 23). Deleuze and Guattari believe that we need to engage with as many becomings as possible and expand beyond those that are characteristically human to achieve the greatest number of connections to other things. In doing so, they theorized that we alter ourselves in the process, which opens us up to other modes of existence. “Becoming animal does not mean imitating an animal,” it is “to be drawn into a zone of action or passion that one can have in common with an animal” to “enlarge the scope of one’s relationships and responses to the world” (Cox 23). This provokes questions about how we cross human and nonhuman boundaries to examine the subjective reality of our own senses and better imagine their worldview.

So what it is like to be a parrot? My query begins with a look at philosopher Thomas Nagel's reflection on mind-body limitations and the subjective nature of experience in his classic essay, “What is it like to be a bat?” (1974). We can assume that bats have experience through echolocation, for instance, but in trying to know what it's like to be a bat is limited to the resources of our own minds. “Conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon. It occurs at many levels of animal life, though we cannot be sure of its presence in the simpler organisms, and it is very difficult to say in general what provides evidence of it” (Nagel 436). This reminds me of Donald Rumsfeld's “Unknown Unknowns.” There are things we don't know, that we don't know. It is certainly possible to believe that there are facts about bats that we will never comprehend, but technology is making strides in helping humans devise methods for experiencing things outside of ourselves like sonar, for instance.

So what is it like to be a squirrel? In my own work, I self-coined the term Squirrealism to describe how our lives and the lives of other species biologically, culturally and politically intersect. For example, one of my outcomes includes using video processing technology to simulate the colour vision of the Eastern Grey squirrel. Squirrels have dichromatic colour vision that is mediated by blue and green cones, which effectively makes a tree squirrel red-green colour blind. Nagel says that “an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to *be* that organism - something it is like *for* the organism” (436). In another example - tree squirrels show evidence of arranging their nuts using ‘chunking,’ which is “a cognitive strategy in which humans and other animals organize spatial, linguistic, numeric or other information into smaller more manageable collections such as subfolders on a computer” (University of California - Berkeley). Studies have shown that tree squirrels have favourite nuts and will organize them by nut species. Similar to when you place your favourite chocolate bar in a special cupboard. Researchers have also discovered that tree squirrels deliberately deceive other squirrels (and human researchers) if they feel they’ve been watched burying a nut, and that they may have their own regional tendencies. The deception techniques of tree squirrels in Pennsylvania were “more likely to go through a whole burying sequence, but walk away with the nut still in their mouth and then bury it somewhere else” whereas “tree

squirrels in Connecticut were more likely to cover up an extra place after actually burying a nut" (Central Connecticut State University). We are still relying on human imagination to extrapolate what it might be like to be a tree squirrel, but by observing their natural behaviour in their own territory, we begin to break down the boundaries between us.

But not everyone agrees that traversing a boundary is necessary. For Rande Cook (Kwakwaka'wakw), the "idea of boundaries between humans and animals is a Western idea; it is a colonized ideology." Cooks' family origin stories are not myths or metaphors. He knows them to be the true story of human creation and his animal ancestors. According to anthropologist de Castro, an Indigenous theory says "the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world - gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts - differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves" (228). For example, nonhuman animals have highly organized social systems, "organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties" (de Castro 132). They also see their fur and feathers as decoration and bodily instruments. de Castro's research furthers that "this 'to see as' refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts…" (132). For many Indigenous cultures, animals are people covered by fur and feathers which conceals a human form. There is a spirit or soul group to which each species of a nonhuman animal belongs, "an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable…in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask" (de Castro 132). Many would agree that there are parallels between a mask-wearing animal, and what it's like to be human.

It is possible to make an argument for the virtues of anthropomorphism as a tool through traces of animism. "We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism - the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature - to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world" (Bennett 16). However, animism is difficult to bring into a place of exhibition because the "relations cannot be exhibited; they resist objectification" (Franke 11). An assemblage of ontologies is needed to work through the details. There are both 'western' and globally diverse philosophical traditions and labels describing anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. Eduardo V. de Castro says that "Western popular evolutionism, for instance, is thoroughly anthropocentric but not particularly anthropomorphic. On the other hand, animism may be characterized as anthropomorphic but definitely not as anthropocentric" (231). For David Abram, animism allows him to experience meditation and shapeshifting as a way to gain knowledge as a bridge-building tool. "Move into the bird…keep your eyes open" (256).

Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* uses the term 'sympoiesis' or making-with, rather than auto-poiesis, or self-making, as a way to remove the hierarchies between human and nonhuman and decentre the human in the equation. For example, Haraway uses speculative fabulation to tell the tale of five generations of human children in a 'symbiogenetic join' with monarch butterflies. This bond enables the human child to feel or 'see' as the butterfly can in order to create kinship, empathy, and connection. The role of the animal in the symbiosis is to teach. "People knew it would not be simple to learn to live

collectively in intimate and worldly care-taking symbiosis with another animal as a practice of repairing damaged places and making flourishing multi-species futures" (Haraway 146).
A symbiogenesis between humans and nonhumans in shared space suggests a way to challenge human exceptionalism, and ground ourselves by collaborating together.

My artistic practice often draws from an urban garden I share with a host of animals who have adapted to urban living. This includes tree squirrels and deer whose territory surrounds my home. Black-tailed deer have lived here for literally thousands of years as indicated by the Songhees Nation records. They have not given up their territory in spite of dogs, cars, loss of habitat, angry gardeners, loud equipment, street lights, and municipality imposed immuno-contraception. A herd of nine deer live in our garden and a small meadow next door.
On November 24, 2019, a doe who we fondly refer to as 'Herself' - and identify by her unique ear cuts - suddenly collapsed and died in our garden while her fawn stood by. I heard a thud, and when I went outside to look, she was dead on the ground. The fawn and I stood there staring at each other. Her mother's death appeared to be from natural causes. It was traumatic for me, the human. I could tell it was confusing for the fawn. She kept her distance initially, then slowly began sniffing and licking at her mothers' body. It was a surreal experience - to stand by quietly in the presence of the deceased doe and her surviving fawn.

Soon afterward, another doe showed up and sat down on the grass nearby. She let out two big bleats which are low cow-like sounds. I'd never heard a doe do that before. And while the situation was one of loss and sadness for me, the whole environment was also joyful. The sun was shining. Songbirds sang enthusiastically nearby and delighted themselves with a vigorous bath in the fountain. A hummingbird flew over the does' body which distracted both the fawn and I for a moment. Three squirrels chased around the garden but kept their distance. I pulled up a chair and continued to sit with deceased deer, her surviving fawn, and the watchful doe. The three of us looked at each other. I was seen seen by them. I saw the fawn react with surprise when I stared deeply into her eyes. We were communicating in a way that can only happen over a shared experience, by being drawn into a zone of compassion, empathy, connection, and silence.

Conclusion

"According to Bruno Latour, the division of nature and culture, and the subsequent purification of the two domains of subjects on the one side, and things on the other, is only possible by a repression of the middle ground, the meditation that connects subjects with objects in multiple forms." (Franke 26). Life and death is a middle ground shared by all the inhabitants of planet earth. Once we start paying attention, how can humans build bridges between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, and animate and inanimate? How else can humans explore new ways of collaborating with other forms of life on earth? How do we free up this middle ground and better consider and comprehend our nonhuman animal neighbours?

Move into the deer…keep your mind open.

Fig 2. ‘Herself’, June 29th, 2018, Photo by Anonymouse. RIP: Nov 24, 2019.

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