

Becoming Beyond the Anthropocene: Thinking and Writing Our Animal Selves

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Abstract

Without intervention, the Anthropocene portends a certain telos. From this, and from liberal humanism, I make a timely ontological detour and provoke a different future to what is looking predictable; a post-human, metamorphic future — one with no end in sight. My PhD comprises a dystopian/magical realism novella (set mainly in Japan) and an accompanying critical essay, both of which engage aspects of the growing field of critical animal studies with particular focus on insectoid metamorphoses. I present a short theoretical paper informed by my thesis and an excerpt from my novella-in-progress, *Order of Our Lady Cicada*. Both will explore that which exceeds representation; the corporeal, by unsettling the notion that “nothing is beyond the text”, with provocation to a more embodied, metamorphic encounter with it, particularly in the exchange of energies between the acts of reading and writing. Through critiquing transcendence in metaphor, in the tradition of Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari and Braidotti, my presentation also reclaims embodied metamorphoses in the context of the Anthropocene, as distinct from simply positioning animals as Others or mere metaphors, as has been the tendency of liberal humanist authors and scholars since the Enlightenment. In de-centering the western liberal construct of mind, I am calling for a corporeal literary practice which simultaneously transgresses the discipline, becoming too, a cornerstone of a new “post-humanities”; un-doing and de-colonising so we can think and write our animal selves immanently, in any discipline, during and beyond the present epoch.

Keywords: embodiment; metamorphoses; Anthropocene; creative writing; practice-based research; immanence; insects; critical animal studies

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Introduction

In this paper, I am presenting a short theoretical discussion and an excerpt from my novella-in-progress, *Order of Our Lady Cicada* (a component of my doctoral dissertation in creative writing). With these I am exploring what it is to think and write our animal selves. My paper attempts to recuperate and reclaim embodied metamorphoses in the context of the Anthropocene and late capitalism, as distinct from simply positioning animals, insects in particular, as Others or mere metaphors, as has been the tendency of liberal humanist authors and scholars since the Enlightenment.

Implicit in naming the present epoch the Anthropocene is a sense of meta-temporality and of transcendence, as though it is being articulated by future scientists looking back; as though we have surpassed ourselves somehow. Some say we should actually call this era of melting ice sheets, extreme weather events, mass extinctions and displacement, the capitalocene — signifying “capitalism as a way of organising nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.” (Moore, 2017)

Tom Cohen theorised recently, not without irony, that we are now in the Trumpocene era and that the Anthropocene is “a shiny-toy word-name to chatter as distraction about while *tipping points* pass.” (2018) In my activist days, I would surely have argued ‘capitalocene’ was most apt, because not all humans are equally responsible for the present rate of biocide; that “capitalism’s drive towards extinction” (Moore, 2017) is clearly culpable. I have not completely jettisoned my activist self who worked for a time towards redressing environmental injustices, attempting to remove power around those most responsible and making them/us repay ecological debt. I continue to hold at the tip of my tongue the friendly reminder by Utah Phillips that: “The earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses.”

Through my practice-based doctoral research I have apprehended a more nuanced approach to questioning what the constructed “Anthropos” or human might be, and what its legacy has been — including capitalism. I agree with Morton, who observes, “the lineage that brought us slavery and racism is also the lineage that brought us the anthropocentric boundary between human and non-human.” (2015) Yet it is not the remit of this paper to be overly fixated on the right names for epochs or to impose grand linear answers to the problems we are facing in this epoch, whatever we decide to call it. The actual task of the paper instead seeks affinities, flows and nomadic subjectivities (Braidotti, 2002) around un-thinking and un-doing, as well as far smaller stories; insect-sized ones, still holding fast to anti-capitalism as part of a post-humanist analysis. As Braidotti articulates, “nomadic subjectivity critiques liberal individualism and promotes instead the positivity of multiple connections. It also eroticises interconnectedness, by emphasising the role of passions, empathy and desire as non-self-aggrandising modes of relation to one’s social and human habitat.” (2002)

Beyond the human habitat, my research looks at non-human thinking and writing. This is distinct from the kind of thinking and writing which extends from the lineage of liberal humanism, which as I have already mentioned, I charge with culpability for the anti-life epoch we appear to be in, whatever we want to call it.

My research owes a great deal to critical animal studies — a skein of a wider post-humanist fabric — which problematises false categories of the human and the animal,

simultaneously understanding that the body and mind were never two, despite the legacy of Descartes. According to Cohen and Colebrook “there never is and never was the human” (2016) Indeed, the construction of the “human” as the metaphoric liberal humanist subject, was by European men of the Enlightenment, who appointed themselves human as a separate category from anyone who was not them, including so-called “animals.” They then invented systems of capital and control founded upon this notion of their own so-called humanity and rational agency. This metaphoric human necessitated not only a constructed cleaving off of the Other — animal, vegetal, women, people of colour, people with special needs — but also an attempt to cleave off the body from the mind; as though this was actually possible. It was as if the mind forgot it was intrinsically imbricated with the body, and also, merely a tool to receive and transmit information. The constructed liberal humanist mind seemed to decide that it was a solitary entity capable of creating knowledge; of living in a transcendent world entirely comprised of metaphor. Fast forward several hundred years, and we are in the Anthropocene, or whatever we decide to call it.

My doctoral dissertation is on (non) representations of metamorphoses, tricksters and insects through seven stories. In it I am critical of metaphor and of representation, whilst also recognising that we may never truly be able to escape them. One of the stories I look at in the dissertation is my own novella-in-progress, entitled *Order of Our Lady Cicada*. I will read an excerpt from this later in the paper.

But first I wish to explore some methods for thinking and writing our animal selves, predicated on my concern that trying to think ourselves out of the present trouble we are in (in disembodied, metaphoric, humanist ways), is not working. In other words, if we can accept that the present trouble was created by disembodied humanistic minds prone to overly metaphoric thinking, therefore, perhaps it is not wise to assume that we can think our way out of it in the same way. Of course, informed action is required to reduce greenhouse emissions, but in the context of “hyper-objects” (2013) like climate change (Morton), the drive towards techno-fetishistic “solutions” like carbon capturing is an example wherein creating more territory from more of the same framework that made the problem, is not the answer. Un-doing and un-thinking seem to work together with un-consuming, rather than creating so-called adaptive territory to try to fortify a dying logos, aka humanism.

Donna Haraway, a post-humanist scholar herself urges us to “cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge” (2015). Indeed. But how? Let us keep problematising the imposition, the false category of the human and do as Haraway encourages and “stay with the trouble” (2016). Then, consider, what will epochs which replenish refuge look like? What will they feel like? For me, in part the process involves beginning in silence. From there, we can begin to become aware of what is unfolding; what is beyond humanist thought.

Finally refers to the “transformative power of writing” and guides us to begin re-searching in silence, and seeing things afresh. In my experience, one way to do this, is to notice the representational mental chatter. I would argue that the self who notices the representational chatter, is the animal or the post-human self. The self who identifies with the chatter, is the humanist self; “*my head chatters, therefore I am.*” The more aware of this I become, the quieter the chatter, and the stronger the animal self

can grow.

The next axiom that I base the process, thinking and writing my animal self on, springs from Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. In this, they liberate Kafka from the transcendent humanist metaphors and interpretations which have been imposed upon his work. In other words, they postulate that Gregor Samsa's becoming an insect far exceeds such metaphors as "capitalist alienation" or Oedipal triangulations, instead arguing that the text itself is an act of the actual, of transgression (1986). I share their immanent approach to the text, and have attempted to write in the same way; with the work privileging neither the virtual nor the actual, provoking and invoking more the friction point of the two; the trickster insect at the crossroads. Indeed I have attempted to make the creative part of my dissertation a work of metamorphosis that is deeply imbricated with the theoretical part, rather than a symbol of it. And in its transmission, from the writing to the reading of it, is something which I hope defies easily encapsulated meaning. I also hope to encourage other scholars to undertake creative practice as a means for knowing/un-knowing, recognising its potential for finding out that which is beyond the limits of other phallogocentric research methods in an attempt to grow in touch with post-human or animal ways of knowing.

But returning to comparatively more traditional epistemologies for a moment, and certainly not rejecting them outrightly, Thomas Nagel asks "What is it like to be a bat?" as a way of exploring the relation between mind and body. He explained that he chose "bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all." (1974)

Another foundation for my work has been intentionally choosing to travel further down the phylogenetic tree, to insects, for a few reasons. Firstly, insects are powerful bioindicators for levels of pollution and the health of ecosystems. Also, according to Braidotti, they are "powerful indicators of the de-centring of anthropocentrism and point to post-human sensibilities..." (2002)

So I chose to look at them, partly *because* of Nagel's reason for not choosing them. It felt to me like an important intervention, yet it is outside of the ambit of the paper to address in any depth what scientists are now saying about insects and consciousness; in other words that they have it. (Barron and Klein 2016)

Rather, now I will turn to an excerpt from my fictional novella-in-progress, *Order of Our Lady Cicada*, to hopefully demonstrate a metamorphic work which attempts to trouble the categories of human and non-human, body and mind, waking and sleeping, virtual and actual, creative and theoretical. I will also mention that this story and in fact the entire topic of my doctoral research initially emerged from silence.

To give an overview of the story, Magda is living in a western port city of Australia. In the realm between her waking and sleeping, she is often assailed by an insectoid being. These encounters drain her and she feels she must make a change but is not sure how to. She meets Kyoko who offers her an opportunity to travel to Japan to undertake a transformative process. Once there, Magda carries out part of the *Ohenro* death ritual/pilgrimage on Shikoku Island. Throughout, she comes in contact with na-

ture spirits as well as the ever-present insect being. Her encounters with the land and the beings which inhabit it, provoke her to question her perception, as do her relations with other initiates. Towards the end of her time on Shikoku she also participates in an initiatory ritual with a plant spirit sacrament. The excerpt I have included here centres on this plot turn.

Excerpt from *Order of Our Lady Cicada* by Michelle Braunstein:

Now, instead of revealing itself as shadowy impressions or watermarks in my peripheral vision, the insect was more real than ever before. Its limbs were sinewy and shone in the candlelight. Its eyes were prominent, bulging and set wide apart. The wings which sprouted from its golden green exoskeleton were stretched tightly, membranous. Shimmering, it hovered over me. I lay still, in admiration and stone cold terror at once.

‘Hello Magda,’ it uttered, breaking the silence.

‘What do you want?’ I managed to yell telepathically. At this it threw back its head and laughed.

‘What is so funny?’ I demanded. But again, I faced a wall of silence. Waiting for my answer became a stricture which I felt wrapped in. Eventually, I grew bored with this tension and the disquiet. Annoyed with the insect for withholding, I began to think about Daisuke instead, and whether I might ever hold his hand or kiss his face. Because of this I became startled, painfully so, when the insect finally roared:

‘You know what I want!’

In response I gulped several large breaths and unloaded a magazine of rapid-fire questions.

‘Do you want to hurt me? Do you want to steal my energy? Do you want to punish me? Do you want me to die? Which is it? I have never known.’

Each of my queries was animated by a question mark which materialised in the space between us. They resembled silver hooks which floated away at first, before doubling back and attaching themselves to the scaly torso of the insect, who flinched as each one pierced its body.

When its shiny black eyes started morphing, at first I thought I was imagining things. Little by little, like coral bleaching in sunlight, they changed through shades of dark to lighter brown, eventually settling on a deep red hue. At this point it began to shake, and I had to wonder, was it enraged by my insolence? Had I, in my growing strength or stupidity, provoked it to end things once and for all? Or would it spare me? All bets were off.

I turned to look at Michiko who lay on the futon beside me. Her expression was pained and several tears slid down her cheeks. I supposed it would’ve been wrong to call on her when she was in her own moment of difficulty or possible release. But I

did it anyway. 'Michiko! Help me!' I hissed.

She turned to look at me and something transferred between the two of us that I couldn't have named if I'd have tried. It was more than understanding, more than silent mutual compassion.

Feeling fortified by this unspeakable connection, I managed to return my attention to the insect. Still trembling, its bright red eyes flashing like soundless sirens, it dribbled a slick of saliva from its proboscis onto my bare foot. A sick panic wanted to swell in my stomach but I refused to energise it. Instead, I waited and watched as the insect's trembling became more violent, like a seizure. Its metallic limbs clanged together like eight sets of cymbals played discordantly for an art noise experiment. Torrents of silver tears began streaming from its ruby eyes and great rasping sobs wrenched from its chest. Tears dripped down its face to the floor, forming puddles of mercury. Over its wails, I could hear the sounds of liquid lapping at the walls. My futon left the floor and looking over its edge, I realised I was afloat in the creature's wretchedness. Was this another trick? I couldn't be sure. But as I watched, a crack formed in its chest. This grew into a large split revealing its heart which also began to break open before my eyes like a ripe pomegranate, thousands of tiny beads of crimson plopping into the waves of silver. i

'Are you sad?' I demanded, as I bobbed up and down in its tears. It nodded. I couldn't help but feel sorry for it, but only to a point, for its display bordered on maudlin. 'Why?' I asked, softer now.

And then the insect formed words which were not language in the usual sense. They came in rhythms, colours, emotions and energies that I could read. It said with no actual words:

'I made you to remind me, and I've been here so you'd forget. And we are sorry.' And in a flash of blinding light the entire experience imploded. My futon hit the floor with a *whump*. Then, once again without words or pictures or sounds, I was made aware that the insect and I were never not one and the same.

I lay in complete stillness and emptiness. Time ceased to be a thing. But eventually, into the abyss entered a kind of soft howling sound, like wind whistling through a petrified tree. I had never heard a person make such a sound. Somehow I knew it was Daisuke. I held him in my heart until he became quiet again. Then I must've slept.

Conclusion

The Anthropocene/the sixth extinction event calls for the undoing of the transcendent thinking which created the present scenario; for a new relationship with ourselves. Thinking and writing our animal selves is an intervention to the humanist tendency to othering and instrumentalising animals as metaphors. Creative/immanent writing, or writing our animal selves, can construct knowledge which is metamorphic.

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