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Silencing/Unsilencing Nature: A 'Lupocentric' Remediation of Animal-Nature Relationships[1]

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Abstract: This article is theoretically grounded in a reflection on the discursive-material knot, which uses a macro-(con)textual approach to discourse, but also allocates a non-hierarchical position to the material, recognizing its agency. The article uses the ontological model to further theorize the discursive-material struggles of, and over, nature, and in particular of non-human animals. These theoretical frameworks are then deployed to reflect on the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project (and its diverse subprojects). This is an arts-based research project which aims to unpack the discursive-material relationship between humans and nature, and how nature often has been silenced, focusing on the position of the wolf in the zoo assemblage, and how these animals are discursively and materially entrapped. At the same time, the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project investigates how this situation can be changed, and how their voices can still be made audible, gain more strength and become further unsilenced.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism; speciesism; discursive-material knot; arts-based research; photography.

INTRODUCTION

The relations between human and non-human animals[2] are interlaced with highly complicated power dynamics. For instance, Derrida (2008, p. 24ff) argues that a political struggle has been waged over the past two centuries between the age-old practices of violence toward animals and the ethical-political efforts to reduce this violence. The argument raised in my article is that these struggles are, in part, discursive struggles, with different discourses allocating different meanings to humans, animals and, their relationships. Especially when we define

1 This article uses text from Carpentier, 2021b.

2 The reader will have to forgive me for using 'human' and 'animal' as shortcuts for 'human animal' and 'non-human animal'.

discourses in macro-(con)textual ways, which implies that discourses are positioned at the same level of abstraction as ideologies, we can, as an initial example, mention the struggles between anthropocentric and ecocentric discourses.[3] At the same time, a reduction of the human-animal power dynamics to discursive struggles is all too problematic. There is also a need to incorporate more materialist perspectives, entangled with the realm of the discursive because these perspectives open up more spaces for acknowledging animal resistance.

Nevertheless, humans do exercise substantial control over animals, partially because of the formers' capacity to generate discourses that provide meaning to the world, but also through their ability to manipulate the material world. This structural power imbalance has enabled the age-old practices of violence toward animals mentioned by Derrida (2008), which has caused significant suffering. There are many possible responses to this power imbalance, ranging from approval over reluctant acceptance to critique and activism aimed at change, which is integral to the above-mentioned discursive struggle. In addition, if the need to redress the structural power imbalance in human-animal relations is acknowledged then a variety of tactics is at our disposal to support this change.

This article focuses, from a discursive-material knot perspective (Carpentier, 2017), on the tactic of unsilencing, which consists of the development and deployment of a set of respectful and emphatic signifying practices. After theorizing this tactic, and the model of the discursive-material knot, in which this tactic is embedded, the article discusses an interventionist, change-oriented, and arts-based research project, entitled "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*", using an auto-ethnographic procedure.[4] This project, organized by the author of this article in collaboration with many others, illustrates the possibilities and desirabilities of producing signifying practices that give nature (and in particular wolves) more of a voice in the human world, thus attempting to contribute to a change in the power relations between humans and nature. Simultaneously, there is also the need for a critical analysis of the limitations of this experimental project, which is performed through a discussion of the project's problems related to the logics of representation – in both its political and cultural meanings. As it will be argued, these problems know no easy solution, but they might still be overcome in order to further unsilence nature.

3 In short, this is a struggle about discursive-material centrality, articulating either humans as the main reference point, or what is referred to as nature.

4 In this type of qualitative research method, "personal experience (auto)" is "systematically analyze[d] (graphy)" in order to understand "cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2010, para. 1).

A DISCURSIVE-MATERIAL APPROACH TO NATURE AND HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS

Discourses are the indispensable and powerful tools that give meaning to our social realities; they are the frameworks of intelligibility that structure humans' relationships with the world, through the provision of meaning. While discourses are often defined as almost-synonyms of language, in this article, they are approached from a macro-(con)textual perspective (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007), as structures "in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed" (Laclau, 1988, p. 254). Discourses are, in other words, defined as knowledge structures that consist of systemically articulated signifiers that together form reasonably stable entities. As providers and generators of meaning, their role is indispensable, as there is no way to signify, comprehend and communicate social realities without them.

This stability is not total, permanent or taken-for-granted, even though discourses still aim to protect internal stability and achieve external domination, and thus fixate social reality. Discourses are not outside the realm of the political (in the broad sense of the meaning of the concept of 'the political'); their meaning can always be contested and altered through political struggle. Moreover, discourses engage in political struggles over hegemony with each other, and even the most hegemonic discourses are subjected to the continuous threat of dislocation originating from counter-hegemonic forces.

These discursive struggles over hegemony affect all realms of the world, also including what we refer to as nature. Nature, in its vast diversity and with its many overlaps with the world of human activity, has been discursified in an equally wide variety of ways, with many of these discourses engaging in intense struggles over hegemony. For instance, as Corbett (2006, p. 26) argues, there is an entire spectrum of what she calls "environmental ideologies", that range from unrestrained instrumentalism, over conservationism and preservationism, to transformative ideologies that aim to radically move away from anthropocentric frameworks and embrace ecocentric perspectives.

These discourses all give meaning to the relations of humans with the environment but always do so in distinct ways. Moreover, these discourses do not operate in isolation but engage in almost permanent discursive struggles. Importantly, some of these discourses[5] are, as Stibbe (2012, p. 3) considers, destructive, because they "promote inhumane treatment [of animals] and environmental damage". Instrumentalism, an ideology that articulates nature as a resource to fulfill human needs, is one example, but also speciesism, or the "systematic discrimination against an other based solely on a generic characteristic – in this case, species"

5 Stibbe's analysis, or any other academic reflection, is not outside these discursive struggles.

(Wolfe, 2003, p. 1) is an example. Both are discourses, which have a strong potential to damage (and destroy) through the combination of classification, hierarchization, and inferiorization, ignoring what Derrida (2008, p. 41) has called the *animot*, the "irreducible living multiplicity of mortals".

As mentioned earlier, in the discourse-theoretical approach used in this article, discourses become defined as fundamentally distinct from language. They are structures of meaning communicated *through* language, which functions as their material carrier, allowing for meaning to be condensed. In other words, discourse is not text, it is what is behind the text and is communicated through the text. As language still might be (at least potentially) too restrictive to capture the wide variety of communicative practices, the notion of 'signifying practice' is preferred here, in the ways that Hall (1997) uses the concept. Signifying practices are the tools that are used in order to refer, directly or indirectly, to social reality, and to exchange meanings about it. This distinction is important because it generates space for the argument that signifying practices are not limited to humans. Non-human animals also have the capacity to generate signifying practices, as Kohn (2013, p. 9) writes: "Life is constitutively semiotic." In other words, language is not a human prerogative, and "the idea that only humans have language as informed by *logos* and that other animals do not is untenable [emphasis in original]" (Meijer, 2019, p. 6). Also Derrida (1991) argues:

> the idea according to which man is the only speaking being, in its traditional form or in its Heideggerian form, seems to me at once undisplaceable and highly problematic. Of course, if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. (p. 116)

At the same time animals cannot construct discourses, at least not in the way that the concept of discourse is defined in this article. It is important to add that individual humans cannot produce discourses either, as the construction of meaning at this level is a social and not an individual process, even if individuals can identify with particular discourses, and can construct their subjectivity through these discourses. The absence of animals, not to mention other living beings, and abiotic matter, from the realm of discursive production (and from institutions, the signifying machines that play vital roles in the transformation of signifying practices into discourses), generates a structural power imbalance that is hard to remedy. Arguably, this is one of the key causes of the domination of the non-human world by humans.

One more, crucial element still needs to be added to this equation, namely the material, whose role is often underestimated in more constructionist perspectives.

This negligence of the material is beautifully captured by Latour (2005), when he writes that:

> Objects are nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt. They exist, naturally, but they are never given a thought, a social thought. Like humble servants, they live on the margins of the social doing most of the work but never allowed to be represented as such. (p. 73)

As I have extensively argued elsewhere (Carpentier, 2017) the material cannot be seen as a second-rate component of social reality. In contrast, the material must be approached as an integrated and substantive part of social reality, intimately knotted and entangled, and in permanent interaction with the discursive. Moreover, to avoid the implicit perpetuation of the domination of the discursive, it is vital, as new materialist approaches argue, to acknowledge that the material has its own agencies. Barad's (2007, p. 54) re-conceptualization of agency illustrates this argument: "Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements."

This acknowledgment of material agency affects the power positions of animals. An important starting point for this discussion is Meijer (2019, p. 129) who writes: "it is not up to 'us' to grant 'them' political agency – other animals already act politically, whether humans choose to recognize it or not." Humans are still keen to engage in this (signifying) practice of granting agency while maintaining the attribution of "differential agencies" to "charismatic species" (Lorimer, 2007, p. 912). By contrast, animals[6] through their bodily practices, can exercise their agency to at least recalibrate their power relations, in order to compensate for what they are denied in the discursive realm. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, p. 114) refer to this type of argumentation when they write animals can be "by their sheer presence […] advocates and agents of change." An example that Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, p. 114ff) discuss, and which is still uncomfortably close to the instrumentalization of animals, is Wolch's (2002) analysis of urban dog park activism. This example involves the owners of large dogs deploying them to dissuade people (who they consider undesirable) from frequenting a particular park. In other cases, animal agency becomes more disconnected from human agency, for instance, when animal bodies (e.g., malaria-carrying mosquitoes – see Mitchell, 2002) migrate unexpectedly, or when animal bodies refuse to perform as expected or demanded. Hribal's (2010) work on animal resistance, for instance with zoo and circus animals, documents not only their refusals to have their bodies perform but also their attempts to escape.

6 Also, the abiotic parts of the world can exercise agency, e.g., soil trembling and moving.

This last example shows that animal materiality (and its agencies) should be regarded as articulated within the discursive-material knot, where animals are more than mere bodies, and where they, for instance, have the capacity of "negotiating the terms of coexistence with their human companions" (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, p. 120). But this example also shows that the human domination of animals is deeply material, for instance, through the creation of assemblages that structurally restrict the freedom of animals. The resistance that Hribal (2010) mentions, is very much a response to the material enclosure of animals in zoos and circuses. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, p. 283) strongly argue: "Capturing animals and putting them in zoos is a violation of their basic individual rights, and a violation of their rights as members of sovereign communities". But in this extensive footnote on the complexities of zoos, they argue some species "may be trapped in a tragic dilemma […] unable to re-wild, yet also unable to flourish in the sort of confined spaces that even the most 'progressive' sanctuaries provide" (ibid.).

THE UNSILENCING OF NATURE

The inability of non-human living beings to produce discourse, despite their ability to produce signifying practices, generates tactical questions very much in de Certeau's (1984) meaning of the word 'tactics' (as resisting hegemony). These questions, and some of their answers, are (arguably) not dissimilar from the discussions on the subaltern in postcolonial theory, where Spivak (1988, p. 284) argued that the "irretrievably heterogeneous" subaltern cannot speak. Obviously, the subaltern can produce signifying practices, but the difficulty lies in the transformation of these signifying practices into discourse. Interestingly, one of the key answers to this conundrum is produced in postcolonial theory, through Said's (1994, p. 260) emphasis on – *writing back* – , a tactical replacement of dominant imperial narratives "with either a more playful or a more powerful new narrative style."

The silencing of non-human living beings is at least as intense. Their position is, though, not helped by their inability to produce discourses. In some cases, with painful similarities to the cruel treatments that colonial subjects were exposed to, the silencing was literal and physical. For instance, non-human predators, when competing with humans over territory and resources, have often been subjected to species extinction, which Beirne (2014) terms "theriocide". But symbolic violence has also been extensively used towards non-human living beings. To return to the example of predators, and in particular wolves (see also Robisch, 2009; Carpentier, 2021a): Derrida (2011, p. 12) describes how these demonizing articulations, entextualized (condensed and made material in text)

feature in fairy tales like *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Three Pigs* and *Peter and the Wolf*, using the following terms: "the devouring wolf is not far away, the big bad wolf, the wolf's mouth, the big teeth of Little Red Riding Hood's Grandmother-Wolf ('Grandmother, what big teeth you have'), as well as the devouring wolf in the Rig Veda, etc."

This sometimes structurally oppressive and violent relationship between human and non-human living beings is not easy to remedy. Said's tactics of writing back are, for instance, not something that can immediately be transferred to this context. Non-human living beings have, through their material bodily practices and through their signifying practices (even though humans do not always easily comprehend them), resisted human attempts to dominate them. But in addition, also different (human) voices have been writing back to these oppressive practices towards non-human living beings, defending the interest of non-human living beings and nature in general.

Literature, science, and popular culture have all engaged with this discursive struggle, in a variety of ways, with the animal-takeover-fantasy as one of many examples. For instance, the apes in the *Planet of the Apes* and the mice in the *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* are shown to exercise political agency through their resistance against, and eventual domination over, humans. Environmental movements and activisms have been, for decades and more, countering the silencing of nature, resulting in a variety of political translations of these discourses. For instance, animal rights have been engrained in legal frameworks, which institutionalizes these representational logics, a practice that has been extended to non-living components of nature, with, for instance, rivers having been granted legal rights (see Kang (2019) for a discussion). These tactics share the principle that nature needs to be further unsilenced, facilitating the transformation into discourse of signifying practices that empathically speak on behalf of, and that defend the interest of, nature.

TACTICS OF UNSILENCING NATURE: THE "SILENCING/UNSILENCING NATURE" PROJECT

The need to actively counter the still hegemonic anthropocentric and speciesist discourse(s), and to contribute to the respectful unsilencing of nature can be translated in a variety of tactics. One rendering is the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project, which consists of a series of interventions (or subprojects). The author[7] of this article, who took the hybrid position of artist-academic or "artademic" (Sinner, 2014), conceived and created the project. This hybrid

7 As always, this creative process was enabled by the help and support of many others.

position was important as this project deployed arts-based research methods to produce signifying practices that critically analyzed the discursive-material construction of nature (and in particular wolves) and that strengthened the unsilencing of nature. Arts-based research methods have proven to be highly suitable for these kinds of objectives. As Leavy (2015, p. ix) wrote, arts-based research is "a set of methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation [original emphasis removed]." Still rooted in academia, arts-based research consists of a search for various communicational modes to communicate academic knowledge, or as Leavy (2015, p. 11) explains, it "advances critical conversations about the nature of social scientific practice and expands the borders of our methods repository."

This implies that there is a wealth of artistic communicational repertoires at our disposal. Leavy's (2015) overview gives an initial idea of the possibilities:

> Representational forms include but are not limited to short stories, novels, experimental writing forms, graphic novels, comics, poems, parables, collages, paintings, drawings, sculpture, 3-D art, quilts and needlework, performance scripts, theatrical performances, dances, films, and songs and musical scores. (p. ix)

It is particularly important to emphasize that these artistic practices are integrated into the processes of knowledge production and that they are not a series of post ante practices that are then used to "translate" academic knowledge. Moreover, the artistic practices bring in the idea that knowledge is, or expressed more modestly can be, embodied. To use Cooperman's (2018, p. 22) more poetic formulation, "Arts-based research is a research of the flesh where our source material originates from the closeness and collaboration of the bodies and voices of one another."

The "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project included various interventions (or subprojects). Chronologically, the first intervention, entitled the "*Wolves at the Prague Zoo Assemblage*" consisted of a series of wolf-and-cat-face collages (see Carpentier, 2020). These collages were produced for a special issue of the Czech photography magazine *Fotograf*, entitled "*Living with Humans*" and aimed at rethinking (and re-imagining) human-animal relations.[8] The first layer of the photographs consisted of a series of close-ups[9] (portraits) of the four wolves

8 https://fotografmagazine.cz/en/magazine/living-with-humans/

9 In addition to these nine photographs, the series also included the photographs of a stuffed wolf in the museum shop, and a slightly troubled Yorkshire Terrier in the arms of a visitor to the wolf enclosure.

living in the Prague Zoo assemblage.[10] The wolves were then combined with cat-face filters, as a second layer, signifying the ways that humans had brought the four wolves into an enclosure that mostly served human needs, allowing these animals to become exposed to an endless chain of human gazes. At first sight, this disrespectful and ethically problematic second layer also touched upon the complexity of the cat-face filter, where humans use the perceived cuteness of domesticated animals to signify their own cuteness, without becoming animal.

Here, we have to be reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) positive, even utopian, approach towards becoming animal, exemplified by their description of what it means "to become animal", which they argue:

> is to participate in movement, to stake out a path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold […] to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. (p. 13)

The aspect that needs to be added, though, is that this rejection of anthropocentrism and speciesism, the transgression into the affective world of animals, and the abandonment of the certainties and comfort of human signification (and thus 'civilization') can produce deep anxieties. These only stimulate the performance of rituals where humans can become only a bit animal, and where they can stay on the 'safe' side of the human-animal divide. The cat-face filters exemplify this only very partial transgression, which removes any potential for radical rearticulation of human-animal relations. By implicating the (photographs of the) wolves in this protective strategy, the animals not only become anthropomorphized, but their position on the 'wrong' side of the human-animal divide becomes symbolized (and simultaneously critiqued).

The third layer of the wolf-and-cat-face collages consisted of hand-written questions, superimposed over each of the photographs. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that photographers, such as the North American Duane Michals (see Benedict-Jones, 2014) started using this technique, not necessarily using it as a caption but as a hand-written text to add layers of meaning to the image. Nowadays the technique is more accepted, think of the work of the visual artist Shirin Neshat, making it more of a disruption of the saying that infers a picture is worth more than a thousand words. In this particular instance, the hand-written text introduced, at least symbolically[11], the voice of the wolves. Through a 'lupo-

10 Ironically, the enclosure of the four wolves in the zoo assemblage also facilitated the production of these photographs.

11 Obviously, this remains a human intervention.

centric' re-positioning of the (human) author, the wolves are seen to ask tough theoretical questions, which are related to the cultural phenomenon of animal silencing, thus giving voice to the wolves and unsilencing them even more. Some of the questions they posed were: "Am I only material?", "Can I resist material enclosure?" and "Do I control this space or does it control me?"

The "*Wolves at the Prague Zoo Assemblage*" was expanded within the framework of the broader Lyssna! project, which is a collaboration between three Swedish arts centers: Färgfabriken, Skellefteå Konsthall and Virserum Konsthall. Lyssna! comprised the creation of "a forum where young people, researchers, and artists can explore and relay their experiences and feelings in relation to climate and places."[12] Selected by the arts centers, small groups of youngsters, aged between 15 and 21 years, teamed up with artists and scholars, for a variety of activities. The Lyssna! team's original plan, to organize a face-to-face "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" workshop for the youngsters, could not materialize due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions. This practical obstacle led to the development of an educational package, called "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*",[13] that could be autonomously deployed by the arts centers' collaborators and teams of youngsters. Structured by a detailed, 40-page script, this educational package included an introductory video, four theoretical video-essays (supported by a series of exercises in the script), two assignment videos, and an epilogue video.

The four video-essays offered a series of more theoretical reflections, at various levels. First, there were two more general-theoretical essays about the discursive-material knot and its connections to the construction of nature ("Part 1: Discourse" & "Part 2: The Material and Entanglement"). The third essay discussed how wolves are integrated into the disciplining zoo assemblage, also highlighting their capacities for resistance ("Part 3: The Wolf Assemblage"). The fourth essay used the "*Wolves at the Prague Zoo Assemblage*" subproject as an example (see Figure 1), to explain the tactics of unsilencing ("Part 4: Unsilencing Wolves").

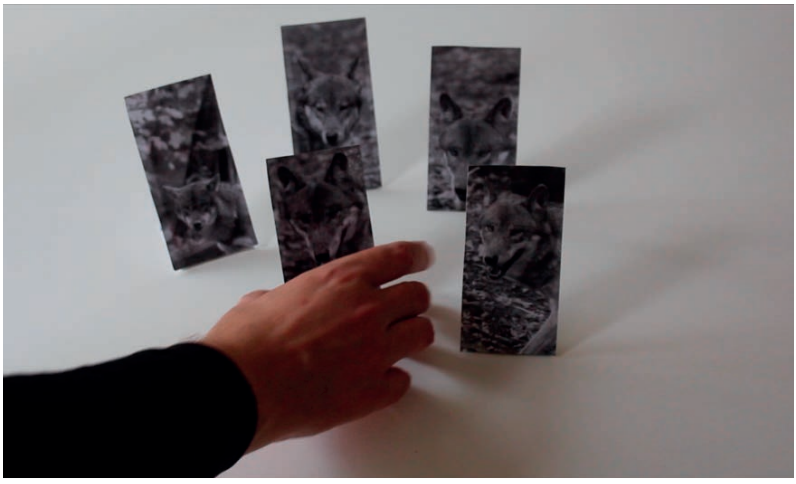
But the objective of the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" educational subproject was not only to engage the participating youngsters in theoretical reflections but also to create a framework for youngsters to actively produce signifying practices that would unsilence nature. The educational package was inspired not just by the theoretical reflections on the construction of nature, and the unsilencing tactics, but also by participatory photography, and methods like photovoice, which Jarldorn (2019, p. 1) defines as "the combination of participant created photographs and narratives". This package (particularly the two assignment

12 https://fargfabriken.se/en/right-now/item/1471-listen

13 Slightly confusingly, the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" label was used for both the educational package and for the entire project.

videos) generated a framework for the participating youngsters to create a photographic exhibition that would contribute to the further unsilencing of nature.

Figure 1: Still from video-essay 4 ("Unsilencing Wolves") with a selection of wolf portraits from the "Wolves at the Prague Zoo Assemblage" project

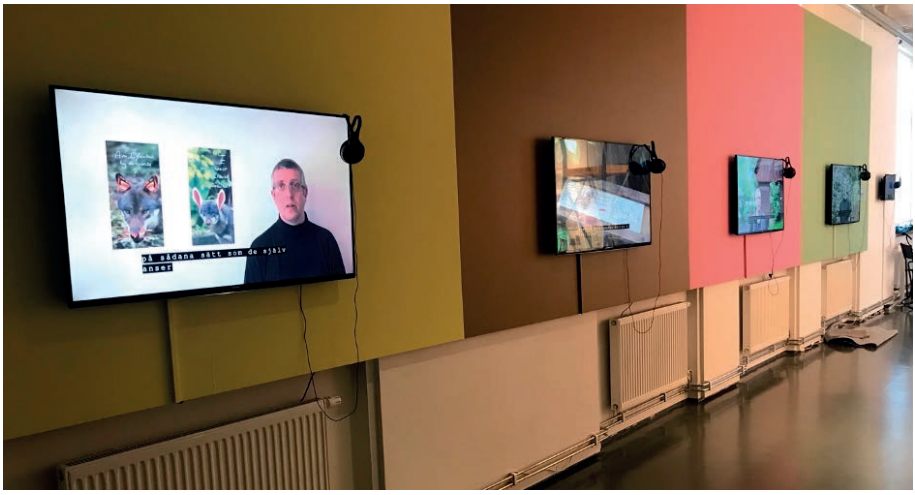


On 10 October 2020, the Lyssna! team organized three parallel "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" workshops, at three locations: Färgfabriken organized a workshop in the Swedish capital Stockholm, Virserums Konsthall did a workshop in the south of Sweden and Skellefteå Konsthall did one in the north of the country. A key element of the workshops (and the set-up of the assignments) was that each group would initially decide, collectively, on which component of nature to unsilence. In the case of the Färgfabriken workshop, the 10 youngsters and the Lyssna! staff decided to focus on the tension between grass and weed (in Swedish: 'gräs' and 'ogräs'), and to act as the stewards of weeds (see Carpentier, 2021b). For example, a photograph produced by Joel (see Figure 2) who was one of the participating youngsters, expressed respect for the resilience and adaptability of weeds, with the following text accompanying his photo of a wallflower: "I'm strong, I'm alive. I break out where you push me down. In the cracks between your concrete, I bloomed. Jerk me out and clear me away. My roots are blowing a new path for me."

Figure 2: *Färgfabriken Lyssna!* workshop photograph and text by Joel

As part of the (broader) Lyssna! project, the video-essays were also integrated into an exhibition and screened in the Project Room at Färgfabriken, from 12 September to 29 November 2020 (extended to 14 February 2021), and then at the Nordanå Centre in Skellefteå, from 13 March to 30 May 2021. Figure 3 gives an impression of the set-up of the videos at the Nordanå Centre.

Figure 3: Set-up of the "Silencing/Unsilencing Nature" video essays, at the Nordanå Centre in Skellefteå (photo: Daniel Uray)

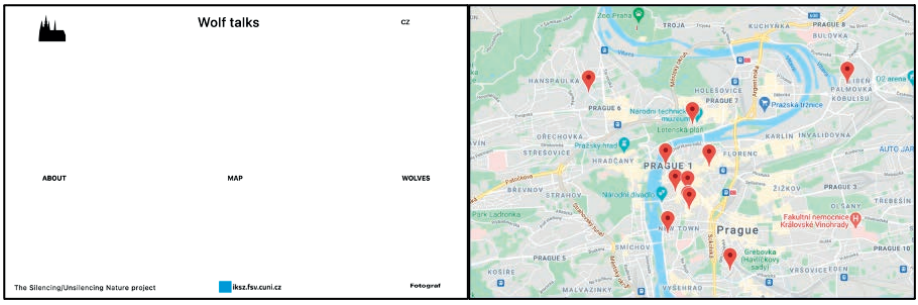


The "*Wolf Talks*" subproject is the third and most recent intervention of the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project, (re-)assembling its different components. Theoretically and strategically, the subproject was, like the other two, driven by the tactics of unsilencing nature. "*Wolf Talks*" also contained critical reflections on the hegemonic representational mechanisms, by reusing the first series of wolf-and-cat-face collages.[14] In "*Wolf Talks*", two components were added, which increased the material dimension of the project. The first addition was a spatial component, as the 12 photographs were displayed in 12 locations in Prague, as part of the 2021 Fotograf Festival.[15] In a way, the wolves of the Prague Zoo assemblage were shown to have 'escaped' and to have found a new home in their city. Their images (and voices) now claimed part of the urban public space of Prague, through their presence in the window displays and on the walls of art centers, museums, shops, cafés, bank offices, and metro underpasses. Festival visitors could find them, by retracing the photographs through the online interface (which has a map) and visit some of them. Visitors were also invited to go on a "Wolf Walk", which encompassed a visit to all 12 photographs.

14 At this stage, one more photograph of a mounted wolf was added to the nine wolf-and-cat-face collages and the two additional photographs.

15 This multi-site exhibition ran from 3 September to 3 October 2021. Afterwards, the 12 photographs were exhibited together, at the Prague Hollar Gallery, from 12 to 17 October 2021, at the University of Okara, from 2 to 3 February 2022, and at the University of the Punjab, from 8 to 13 February 2022.

Figure 4: "Wolf Talks" website components



The second component that was added was auditory. The 12 wolf photographs (9 wolf-and-cat-face collages and 3 additional photos of a mounted wolf, a stuffed wolf toy, and a slightly frightened Yorkshire Terrier visiting the wolf enclosure at the Prague zoo assemblage were combined with a sound fragment each, which could be accessed through a QR code positioned close to the photographs. In each recording, a voice actor spoke from the 'lupocentric' position of the portrayed wolf, combined with a soundscape composed by Bart Cammaerts. These two to three-minute performances strengthened the representational dimension of the project, by having the wolves speak back to the spectator and lecturing them on the power dynamics in the relations between human and non-human animals. Below is an example of two fragments of the text related to the question "What am I in the zoo assemblage?":

> "Tell me: What am I in the zoo assemblage? Am I at center stage, the animal around which everything revolves? Am I the reason why the zoo exists? I like to think so. But I know better. The zoo assemblage combines many different components and has many different reasons of existence. The zoo assemblage groups have many different discourses, that all give meaning to our presence. […] There are also so many material components. I wouldn't know where to start. There are all the buildings of the zoo, in this lovely park. There are the bodies of administrators and caretakers, of shopkeepers and visitors. There are the fake and real rocks, the cages in which we are placed, the glass panels that allow visitors a good view. And there is me. So now you see, I'm only one little part of the zoo assemblage. But the thing is: This isn't my assemblage. It is not mine."

REPRESENTATIONAL COMPLEXITIES

In its attempts to reconfigure the power relations between humans and nature, the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project organizes a practice of representation. In doing so, the project relates to the representation concept in both of its main meanings: the political meaning, as 'speaking on behalf of', and its cultural meaning, as in 'making present'. Both components of representation are highly complicated and potentially problematic in socio-political practice, and this also applies to the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project. At the same time, these complexities are very useful to organize a more critical discussion of the limitations and dangers of this project.

When focusing on representation in its cultural meaning, as signification, we are immediately confronted with the interpretative issues related to all signifying practices, but even more so when using more artistic repertoires. Arts-based research projects have to face the tension between (the production of) more open and more closed texts, or "readerly" and "writerly" texts, to use Barthes' (1974, p. 4) language. These projects need to navigate between texts (or, signifying practices) that invite multiple interpretations or, by contrast, that attempt to fixate interpretation. Even if "writerly" texts are also open to interpretation, rendering the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" signifying practices too "readerly" might push them outside the realm of academic research communication. This is arguably one of the areas where the celebration of interpretative multiplicity and textual openness that sometimes characterizes arts-based research (Leavy, 2015, p. 26) needs to be qualified, but striking this balance in the "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" project proved to be a rather difficult tightrope-walking-experience. This tension was further deepened by the combination of critical and interventionist dimensions, with almost contradictory outcomes, where the symbolization of a silencing lack of respect for animals was juxtaposed by an attempt to enhance respect for animal sovereignty. This combination is prone to a variety of interpretations, that might inverse or reject these critical and interventionist dimensions, partly or entirely.

In the context of cultural representation, we must also acknowledge the limits of discursive and signifying practices, which implies we need to acknowledge that the discursive can never completely capture or saturate the material, with the latter always escaping total discursification. It is a firm reminder that the "*Wolf Talks*" photographs can never replace the wolves' materiality, or their signifying practices. Nor can these photographs ever fulfill the desire for animal liberation, as the movement's more radical activists and critical animal studies scholars, are advocating for (see, e.g., Weisberg, 2009). However, this discursive shift might still provide a condition of possibility for animal liberation.

But we should also acknowledge the political limits of cultural representation. As mentioned earlier, human signifying practices are not automatically translated into discourse. Potentially, critiques on the hegemonic discourse and the formulation of counter-hegemonic alternatives can dislocate these hegemonic discourses, but this kind of impact is not guaranteed – nor is it easy to achieve. Singular signifying practices have their importance, but in order to become transformed into discourse, they often need (institutional) signifying machines to coordinate, strengthen and sustain them.

At the level of political representation, when humans try to unsilence nature, they unavoidably find themselves in the position of being a steward, acting on behalf of nature and representing nature without formal, or even informal, participatory mechanisms that would provide legitimacy to the actor representing nature. After all, no-one could have asked the wolves of Prague Zoo to endorse the photographs, the cat-face collages, the questions on the collages, and the words spoken by the voice actors on their behalf. Part of the answer to this dilemma lies in the acknowledgment that there are no better alternatives available, and the *laissez-faire* attitudes of the past (and the violence Derrida (2008) wrote about) have contributed more to the problem than to its solution. The risk that this type of stewardship escalates into an equally problematic anthropocentric position still needs to be acknowledged. Apart from the acknowledgment of the dangers and possible perverse effects, another answer lies in the qualification of the signifying practices. In our example of "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*", the relevant questions become 'what is being said?', 'how it is said?' and 'what discourses structure the signifying practices?'. After all, there are many ways to speak on behalf of nature, and many of them are structured by anthropocentrism, instrumentalism, and speciesism. These signifying practices do not unsilence nature; they contribute to nature being silenced. Arguably, in order to unsilence nature, signifying practices require a 'lupocentric' (or ecocentric, to use a more general term) re-positioning that is articulated with (and by) a non-hierarchical and respectful sense of responsibility, an ethics of care and empathy, combined with consideration for all creatures' vulnerabilities (Pick, 2011). This, in turn, implies a fundamental acknowledgment of animal sovereignty, a concept that Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, p. 170) define as "the capacity of animals to pursue their own good, and to shape their own communities."

A more political theory driven answer to these problematics lies in the unpacking of the concept of political representation, where democratic theory can provide some solace. Even if the counter-balancing force of participation is virtually absent, democratic theory allows us to think about post-election situations, where political decision-making powers have been delegated to a select

few. These (delegated) powers are expected[16] to be wielded with responsibility and empathy (Morrell, 2010). In other words, representation in the human parts of society is a mechanism where power is relinquished to particular representatives, whose position is legitimated through the nature of their actions. However much it is sometimes abused and regretted, representation implies that individual citizens weaken their power position, and accept a degree of silencing, through the act of delegation. Moreover, the logic of empowerment, which aims to reconfigure power imbalances, has a slightly concealed collaborative component where those in strong power positions actively contribute to the equalization of power relations. This is an imperfect setting, caused by the impossibility to achieve "full participation" (Pateman, 1970) on a permanent and global scale. Still, empowerment remains desirable and necessary, despite the continued presence of power imbalances that render, as only partial, the unsilencing of non-privileged actors.

CONCLUSIONS

Anthropocentrism, instrumentalism, and speciesism are, at least potentially, discourses that work against nature, and of particular interest in this article, against the animal realm. Characterized by dualist and essentialist articulations, these discourses sustain hierarchies of privilege and domination, and trap the animal world in a series of destructive homogenizations. Starting from a discourse-theoretical perspective, this article argues that alternative (and more respectful) ways of giving meaning to nature are possible, but that these also require us to rethink the role of discursification. How we give meaning matters tremendously, but we also need to reconfigure how we define the discursive and its relationship with the material. More specifically, ample space must be allocated to the material when configuring the discursive-material entanglement. This would help to avoid the creation of a hierarchy between the discursive and the material, and acknowledge the significance of material agency.

This need for reconfiguration also plays out at the level of the ontic, and how we look at particular assemblages, without ignoring the workings of the discursive-material knot at the ontological level. This implies that Prague Zoo, and its wolf enclosure, is a significant location for studying how anthropocentric and speciesist discourses are both activated and resisted. It becomes apparent how wolves are exposed to the human gaze, with carefully constructed glass walls to facilitate the process, in combination with signifying processes that label and categorize the four animals in the enclosure as representatives of a species,

16 In practice, this might not always be the case.

without acknowledging any individuality. A more careful observation also renders the signifying practices of the wolves visible, which with the material shapes and behaviors of their bodies, emphasize the mammaldom that they share with humans. Under closer inspection, the individuality of these four living creatures, all of which have very distinct behavioral patterns and personalities, becomes visible. As do their frequent refusals to expose their bodies to the gaze of the visitors, leaving the latter staring frustrated into a void.

Even though the four wolves are thus not at all mute, developing more unsilencing tactics remains desirable in order to compensate for the power imbalances that structure human-animal relations. Interventions such as "*Silencing/Unsilencing Nature*" remain important, even though modesty about the impact of individual projects is still very much a necessity. Acknowledgment is required that the representational mechanisms, in both the cultural and political meanings of the concept of representation, behind these unsilencing tactics are hardly straightforward. Still, the unsilencing tactics of the project supported by arts-based research methods that bring in more embodied and affective ways of knowing – can support change. In particular, the critical analysis of the workings of the discursive-material knot can open up reflective spaces that provide opportunities for change in two ways. First, change is supported by better understanding, communicating, and critiquing the functioning of hegemonic discursive-material assemblages. Second, change is also supported by contributing to the creation of signifying practices that support alternative (and even counter-hegemonic) discourses, that articulate the animal world in a more respectful and emphatic way.

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