**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Giving Voice to the Non-human**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 1. Episode 8.

We understand better than ever that the human dramas of social justice can’t be disentangled from the natural ecosystems in which they are embedded. The creative artforms of storytelling, creative writing and theatre have an important role to play in helping us to see and understand these interconnections. But how can artforms which have tended to be all about human interactions develop ways of speaking for other species? Cath Heinemeyer and Liesl King of York St John University discuss these questions with Anthony Nanson, storyteller and author of *Storytelling and Ecology: empathy, enchantment and emergence in the use of oral narratives.*

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Hello, and welcome to Conversations in Social Justice, the podcast series of the Institute for Social Justice, and to this episode ‘Giving voice to the more-than-human’ which is particularly coming at the question of social justice from an arts perspective and from an ecological perspective. My name is Catherine Heinemeyer. I'm a lecturer in arts and ecological justice at York St. John University. And I'm with Dr. Liesl King, who is Associate head of creative writing, media and Film Studies at the university, and with Anthony Nanson, who's a storyteller and author who's looked into these questions of representing nonhuman worlds in fiction and storytelling from different perspectives.

So we're hoping to have a really productive conversation today on how we include the nonhuman in our conception of social justice, how we acknowledge our interdependence with natural organisms and ecosystems, because we know that we can't really think about social justice any more in isolation in a world which is in ecological and climate crisis - it's always going to be the most vulnerable humans and the most vulnerable ecosystems which experience the first and worst impacts of that climate and ecological crisis.

So, in building understanding of this interdependence, obviously, the arts have a massive role to play. And particularly today, we're looking at, I suppose, the verbal arts of storytelling, literature and theatre. But the challenge for these word based art forms is that they tend to be on the whole all about humans interacting with humans. So there's a real importance, real urgency to develop storytelling and literature and theatre that attempts to empathise with and speak for the more-than-human world, for animals, for ecosystems, for trees, for fungi even. And we know that this brings up quite a lot of challenges for us within our art forms.

Within theatre Wendy Arons and Theresa May have written about how the theatre world faces various challenges of representation when it tries to represent ecological forces: the much greater timescale over which ecological stories unfold, how we speak for animals who are very different from us, how we show in our theatre work, for example, that our economy is always just a subset of an ecological world, that can only ever exist within the limitations of that ecological world, and how we revisit the canon of everything that's already been written that quite often make ecological forces invisible.

So that's why Liesl and I have invited Anthony here to York St John - in a zoom format - to discuss these questions for us, with us. So Liesl’s work looks at Ursula Le Guin and in a moment, I'm going to ask her to talk a bit more about that. And Anthony has a book coming out this year called *Storytelling and Ecology: empathy, enchantment, and emergence in the use of oral narratives*, which really grapples with a lot of these questions about representing the more-than-human world and goes a long way towards answering a lot of questions I have highlighted - and I know Liesl has find massive resonances between her research interest in Ursula Le Guin’s speculative fiction and some of the themes Antony explores in both the Storytelling and Ecology book and his fiction, for example, his novel *Deep Time*, so I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

I’m going to start by asking first Liesl and Anthony just to introduce themselves briefly and their kind of starting point with these questions.

**Liesl King**

So I'm Liesl King. Thanks, Catherine. I'm the Associate Head of School for creative writing and film and media. And I've worked here at York St. John University as an academic on the literature team since 2002. So yes, as you say, the key reason for my involvement in this podcast stems from my long standing engagement with writer, storyteller Ursula LeGuin. And that's because her work regularly draws on storytelling, and very specifically foregrounds ecology. So she's had just such a huge effect on me since my 20s. When I first read *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I was very fortunate to get to study with Professor LMP at San Francisco State University early on in my 20s. She had published work on LeGuin and she brought her work to the fore for us as MA students. So I would say, what's particularly impactful for me is that as an academic, perhaps as a woman, that of course, you know, these categories are themselves quite fluid, but finding myself in academia, which is quite a highly masculinized space in many ways, Leguin has been a kind of anchor for me because her emphasis on different ways of knowing and different ways of being that includes the sensory, the emotional, the spiritual, the intuitive, connect me with other realities other other ways of seeing. So yeah, so she inspired me to write a PhD and to teach her work to students, undergrads and MA students, and now also to PhD students. And that's been for about 20 years now. So I'm really looking forward to talking to Anthony, and to you to Catherine and pulling some threads together around these themes.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Thank you so much Liesl for that. So Anthony, could you tell us just a bit of an introduction to your work, your *Storytelling and Ecology* book, and also how you approach these themes in your fiction.

**Anthony Nanson**

So I divide my time really, or my obsessions between creative writing, so writing fiction, short length, and novel length, and then working as an oral storyteller. So I've always been a fiction writer, since I was a child, storytelling only became part of my life when I was about 30 or so. And I've always been interested in nature, it's always popped up in my stories. And I've been interested in Ursula Le Guin as well since I was started reading her as a teenager. But it was really on a master's degree in creative writing that I did in 1998, that there was a module by Richard Courage on writing and environmental crisis. And that introduced me to the field of ecocriticism, and everything came together. So my creative interests came together with it, my rather vague concerns about the state of the environment at that time, and they just meshed together into a sense of mission, I suppose about bringing ecological concerns into the writing and telling of stories.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Thank you so much, Anthony. And just to say, again, this book *Storytelling and Ecology*, I'm so glad that we have a copy on order for our library - it will be arriving this year - because really, it's like, if these problems around representing the more-than-human in art forms like storytelling is a forest, then I feel like you've cut quite a lot of paths into the heart of this forest in this book. So I’d like to just spend some time discussing the book and the main themes in it. And I'd like to start by asking you: a really strong path in the book is that you explore approaches to storytelling, which are multi vocal, which don't just have a single hero, but approach the same story from the perspective of different individuals, or even sometimes organisms, or even sometimes whole species. And can you explain why you feel this is so important, in an age of ecological crisis?

**Anthony Nanson**

This idea of multivocal, multiple voices, is something where the critic Mikhail Bakhtin was very engaged. He was particularly interested in the novel as a literary form, in which you get multiple voices. So compared with some typical poem, or the typical essay, or speech, say, in which there's a privileging of a single voice, though, he thought it was important, politically, to deprivilege the single voice and allow the dialogue between multiple voices. And so feeling your way towards the truth of what's going on, or what needs to be done through the dialogue, have multiple voices, rather than one person saying, this is how it is, this is what we should do. And I think that's really, really important to the condition of ecological crisis that we find ourselves in, because although science can explain what's going on, it can offer various tools of environmental engineering, etc. The crisis is really a political crisis, because it requires people to cooperate to decide to agree what they're going to do to address the crisis. So they don't do that everybody just carries on doing what they want to do, then the crisis will keep deepening, there needs to be dialogue.

So when it comes to oral storytelling, that idea of dialogue can exist at two levels, it can exist within the story where there are multiple characters and multiple voices within the story interacting in some way. Now, I have to say that I think on that particular score, the novel is a stronger form than the oral story, because it has much more scope for complexity and a range of voices that are interacting with each other not only the dialogue, voices or characters speaking, but also narrative voices or internal points of view, that are in dialogue with each other. In an oral storytelling situation, you can't make it too complex, because then the listeners who can't, kind of, turn back the page, they just have to operate with listening and memory and they will get lost if it gets too complicated. So you can involve multiple characters in a story, and I have tried to do that in certain ways, but in quite limited ways compared with a novel.

However, in the oral storytelling situation, you also have a dialogic relationship with the audience, which you don't have when you're reading a book so much. There's a sort of internal dialogue within the reader's consciousness in which they can imagine they're interacting with the author. But in oral storytelling, there's a real ‘here and now’ dialogue going on, even if the listeners are not actually speaking. Now, there may be times when they actually do speak and intervene in some way or given an opportunity to speak, depending what the situation is. But even if they don't speak, they have body language. And so there is a dialogue of body language between the oral storyteller and their listeners, which makes this situation dialogic, it makes it a negotiation of what's going on. And if the storytelling happens outdoors, then the actual physical environment and whatever's going on there becomes part of the dialogue, as well. And so there's a possibility of additional voices coming from the natural world, actually intervening unpredictably in the storytelling situation.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

That's such a brilliant summing up of all those different possibilities and constraints in storytelling. And reminds me actually, of when I met you, for the first or second time, I think when you gave a workshop at the Rising Sun Country Park in Northumbria where you started. It was quite a long time ago, but you've been developing these ideas for a long time. And you did introduce us to ways of inviting the natural world and these multiple voices into our storytelling, which is something I really appreciated as a storyteller starting out.

**Anthony Nanson**

Perhaps I should just say something on that particular point, because that was the original question. There is a model that is very popular in cinema, and in quite a bit of fiction, of having a single hero, the idea of the hero, the valorization, of the hero of central character, who we’re invited to identify with, and it's all about whether they achieve their aims or not, what's the hero's desire? Do they achieve their desire? Or do they not? And there are other kinds of story in which you have more than one character. And each of those characters is trying to pursue their desire. And those desires may be in conflict with each other. And so they run up against each other, it either becomes a greater, greater conflict, or there's some kind of negotiation between them towards some transformation of the situation. And so I think in traditional stories that storytellers might tell, it's quite common to get the central protagonist, the hero. So one of the things that I've experimented with, including on the workshop that you mentioned, is constructing new stories rather than just depending on traditional stories, or revamping traditional stories, to construct new stories to address problems of our time, including ecological problems, and within that to deploy some different characters that have conflicting desires or aims. But to do that, in a careful and simple way, so that it doesn't get too complex for the listener to comprehend and take it away.

**Liesl King**

Anthony, could you say a little bit more about that, in terms of that intentionality? Or those multiple desires, conflicting desires? You know, from the perspectives of the non-human characters? How, what are the challenges in terms of voicing those different characters? Could you say a little bit about that?

**Anthony Nanson**

So the voicing of the non-human. So there are various strategies of trying to represent the voice of the non-human in a story in the oral storytelling situation, an extreme example would be for the nonhuman to actually be physically there. Storyteller Kelvin Hall, he was a keen horseman and a psychotherapist. He's been experimenting in telling stories *in the presence of horses*. And the stories may involve horses. And so just the fact that the horses are there, they have an effect on the situation, they affect the telling of the story. And the the reception of the story by the human listeners, now might not be a voice in the sense of them actually speaking and saying something, but it's a presence that has agency. So that's kind of one extreme.

And then the other extreme, you've got the anthropomorphic animal. So you've got animal characters, like you get in traditional fables, and in some mythology, who, to a greater or lesser extent, are represented as, like humans, so they can speak and they can act in ways that are somewhat like humans, but they also have differences that they are representing their kind in some way. And one of the things I've observed is that in the European folktales, this anthropomorphization tends to be extreme to the extent that the animals are really people with, you know, rabbit's ears or something. Whereas in some of the indigenous cultures, such as the Native American stories, for example, the representation of animals and their traditional stories is closer closer to them being animals rather than dressed-up humans, and I think that has to do with those cultures having into recent times at least remained more in contact with the world of animals, observing them, interacting with them in various ways, whereas in Europe, there's been the progressive alienation from the world of animals so we don't really know what they're like anymore. And in between those extremes, there are various other strategies. One story that I particularly like is the story of the Karampoor Wolf, which is a famous wolf in New Mexico. That was a problem to the ranchers. And they called in a specialist wolf hunter called Ellis Thompson Seaton to hunt down this Wolf and his pack. And he did succeed in that, but it took a lot of doing because the wolf is very clever. And he tells the story in his own book, from his point of view, but there is a sense of the wolf, of him recognising this wolf as a conscious being that he was in a battle of cunning with, and in retelling that story orally, because I'm not Ernest Thompson Seaton, I'm not telling the story from his point of view, I'm telling the story as a storyteller who is outside the situation. And so Seaton becomes a character within the story. And the wolf is also a character within the story. And so what I noticed is that that allows me to go a little bit more into the perspective of the wolf than Seaton himself does.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

So interesting. And it links to I wanted to ask you next, which is that you do a thing in your oral storytelling that I think very few storytellers do, which is you give a quite strong voice to science, but also to other forms of knowledge, like shamanism, or personal experience, or the folk tradition or literature. You allow space for all of those things. And I don't think a lot of people would have a stereotype of storytellers as speaking for scientists, but there you speak for Seaton and I've heard you tell a brilliant story about scientists who discovered the last Ceolocanth, you know, is that something that's an important strategy for storytelling to explore complex environmental conflicts?

**Anthony Nanson**

Yes, I think it is. The first chapter of the book *Storytelling and Ecology* was in an earlier form was published as a pamphlet also called *Storytelling and Ecology* 16 years ago. And that was based on some field research and book research that I did around about 2002. So I observed various storytellers who were interested in nature and ecology, we observed them in the field telling stories interacting with groups and various different situations. And it was fascinating work. But I did notice there was a dependence on traditional stories on folktales, as the sort of main type of story that you tell, for that nature, education, purpose. And there was an interest in finding stories that had a bit of nature or ecology in them. So find a story about an animal or a type of plant and allow that to mediate a little bit of ecological or biological knowledge. But it seemed to me that there was scope for a much greater diversity of other kinds of stories besides folktales. So that's not to reject folktales, they great, you know, they're the easiest stories to tell, really. And, you know, there's a good reason for for using them a lot. But there's a whole range of other kinds of stories, whether that means making up new stories, like we talked about before with the multi-character invented stories, or whether it's looking into science and looking into history, looking into journalism, for material that conveys other kinds of knowledge about the world.

And it's not just about knowledge, it's also other kinds of effect, or impact. So if you tell a story about something that really happened, like the Karampoor Wolf, or like the extinction of a species, like the passenger pigeon, or the golden Toad, then there is a palpable difference in the effect on the listener or on the nature of the interaction, let's say, between the storyteller and the listener and the story, because you're signalling either explicitly or implicitly, you're signalling that this is a true story. It's not an imagined story. And that causes people to receive it in a different way that this really happened. That idea that this really happened, keys up certain types of emotional or ethical reaction that you wouldn't get with a folktale, or a work of fiction. But one of the points about the folk tale is that you might have a great message, but it's kind of easy to ignore it if you wanted to. Whereas if the story is a true life story, this really happened. There's an element of confrontation there. This story happened, how are you going to react to it? You don't have to say that. But that kind of question of how you're going to react to it is implicit within telling the story.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Thank you so much. This feels like a good moment to, to move art forms, and look at Ursula Le Guin. And Liesl, I think you've chosen a passage that relates really well to some of the things Anthony’s just being discussing - the otherness, how we represent the other than, the nonhuman other in our fiction. Do you want to say a bit about that and read it for us?

**Liesl King**

Just segwaying and considering what Anthony has just been saying about multiple perspectives. Leguin has been a champion of the use of multiple perspectives in her literary fiction, well, probably earlier than the 1960s. But publishing, in the 1960s, *The Left Hand of Darkness* where we have the perspectives of two alien beings who meet, have conversations when they don't always understand each other and undertake an enormous long journey across the Gabbran Ice where they begin to see each other and their difference. Later, we have always coming home, which is again told from multiple perspectives in a future might or might not come to be, that looks a lot like Naptha Valley in California, from the, and draws on an indigenous focus on place, and spirit and land and the living organic beings that that we share the planet with.

I think one of the huge challenges for us that Leguin foregrounds is how do we live in an ecological way, but also kind of resolve tensions in terms of our curiosity in terms of developing technology, to actually make space for ourselves to promote wellbeing, to advance our curiosity and sense of adventure, those often seem in conflict. So she's very much interested in those themes. So yes, in *Direction of the Road*, a short story that I want to just read a very short extract for you today, she tells from the perspective of a single tree. So here's the extract:

“With the presence of many motor cars on the road at once a new level of skill was required of me as a mere seedling. As soon as I got my head above the weeds, I had learned the basic trick of going two directions at once. I learned it without thinking about it, under the simple pressure of circumstances on the first occasion that I was a walker in the east and a horseman facing him in the West. I had to go two directions at once. And I did so. It's something we trees master without real effort, I suppose. I was nervous, but I succeeded in passing the rider and then shrinking away from him while at the same time I was still jogging towards the Walker, and indeed past him. No looming back in those days. Only when I had got quite out of sight of the rider. I was proud of myself being very young, that first time I did it. But it sounds more difficult than it really is. Since those days of course, I had done it innumerable times and thought nothing about it. I could do it in my sleep. But have you ever considered the feat accomplished, the skill involved, when a tree enlarges simultaneously, yet at slightly different rates and in slightly different manners, for each one of 40 motorcar drivers facing two opposite directions, while at the same time remembering to loop over each single one at the right moment. And do this minute after minute, hour after hour, from daybreak till nightfall, or long after, for my road had become a busy one. It worked all day long, under almost continual traffic, it worked. And I worked. I did not jump and bounce so much anymore. But I had to run faster and faster, to grow enormously, to loom in a split second, to shrink to nothing, all in a hurry, without time to enjoy the action and without rest, over and over and over. Very few of the drivers bother to look at me. Not even a seeing glance. They seemed indeed not to see any more. I nearly stared ahead. They seemed to believe that they were going somewhere. Little mirrors were fixed to the front of their cars at which they glanced to see where they had been. And then they stared ahead again. I had thought that only beetles had this delusion of progress. Beetles are always rushing about and never looking about. I had always had a pretty low opinion of beetles, but at least they let me be.”

**Cath Heinemeyer**

That's fantastic. Liesl, thank you so much. Anthony, did you want to start with any questions for Liesl or any thoughts about that passage or?

**Anthony Nanson**

I don't know if it's a question but I love that story. I remember when I read it myself years ago, I really enjoyed it. It's the story that stayed with me. That's interesting, I have only read it once. And a lot of stories you read that, you know, you forget them. But I've never forgotten that story. And it struck me is sort of deploying a kind of the theory of relativity in a way in terms of looking at things from the perspective of the other observer, but she's using that relativity in an absurdist way. So it's not to scientifically understand anything about relativity from this, it's just being used as a literary device, to then provoke us to think about trees as beings, and then secondarily, to reflect on ourselves and people like…

Can we have had a conversation before about this idea of relatability? I hate this word, but it's become quite a thing in the sort of contemporary moment, the idea that stories have to be easy to relate to, to relate to that which we're familiar with in our everyday lives. And so a story like this is doing is doing the opposite, isn't it? It's provoking us with something that is quite new territory. I suppose the question one could ask is then what comes from that? What is the, the benefit of that kind of provocation?

**Liesl King**

Well, I guess one way of responding to that would be to think of what Deleuze and Guattari said in *Mille Plateaux*, 1000 plateaus, about making fiction strange or, or really allowing fiction to stay strange to not try to immediately relate to it, or to turn it into something, you know, palatable, where you know, its limitations, and you can kind of package it up and put it aside. So they say about Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, for example, let the verminous insect, be strange, don't try to make it into, you know, a story about religious othering or about identity and so on. So this is strange. And just as you've said, it challenges I think, our barriers that we put up, and it, it asks us to, to dissolve those as we recognise them, we must hold those intentions and, kind of, keep seeing sort of negative capability. And I think that draws us towards fiction. We want something strange, but we want something familiar at the same time. So yeah, I think that it sparks our curiosity. And maybe that's why it's so memorable, because it's not relatable in a certain way.

So yeah, but just as you say, we're challenged to think about this other perspective, the fact that this tree very well has its own being its own language, we know that it connects and entangles with other species, with its own microbiome - it you know, arches, its its branches and rushes its roots down to meet with others of its own species and, and other other species as well. So it does move. It does sense. It vibrates, it's alive as we are. And that's, I suppose, where we meet. But yeah, she told us, she challenges us to go into that space.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Yeah, she gets us to think completely differently about what agency means. We have to see in this story that the tree, although we think it can't move, and it points out, we don't even pay proper attention to it, it has agency in possibly just as meaningful a way that we do - maybe even more so because we have this illusion of supreme agency, buzzing around like beetles. It takes things back to the idea of justice. When we write on behalf of another being we want to do justice to them. We don't want to claim their voice without having earned the right I suppose. And that's there's as much the case for non-human as other human characters. What do you think is the process an author needs to go through, to have the audacity really to attempt, to speak for a being that's so different to us as a tree?

**Liesl King**

So I've been reading recently, this book called *Becoming Supernatural* by Dr. Joe Dispenza. And in this book, he champions meditative practice, meditation itself, and I'm hoping I kind of see little glimpses of this because I haven't finished it yet but I think encourages us also to go into what Angela Voss and others have called the imaginal realm, okay. So, this space which of course, many mystics also quantum physicists, also religious individuals have tried to name might be, you know Jung, collective unconscious, arguably a collective conscious, kind of unified field source, some might call it God, physicists call it the quantum reality or field. So he encouraged us to go very deep within and to erase personality, ego, the past, the future, the email, you know that the grocery list, the fact that your sister called, and so on, so that you can dissolve into that mutual space where you are connected with this, this very dynamic field.

This is not like a static space that Joe Dispenza is describing. And I've recently heard a quantum physicist describing this as quite the dynamic interchange of complexity where your self awareness develops, in a mutual way. So if one can move into that, and move out of oneself, there's a listening process there that can take place and a perception of pain of attention. I would say that what needs to take place, and Leguin talks about speaking and listening in the mother tongue, which is dialogic, and and Anthony talked about that earlier as well, allowing oneself as an artist to listen to move into that unified conscious space one senses, oneself alive with all the other species both on our planet and beyond. It's kind of big stuff, but it's all there, it isn't actually mystical, it is our fingertips.

**Anthony Nanson**

So in response to that, and the direction of the road story by Le Guin, David Abram's book *Becoming Animal* is very strong on this kind of thing. His starting point is sensory observation. So rather than starting in the realm of taking seriously the supernatural, or the animistic, or he starts with sensory observation, so it seems like a sort of respectable kind of sort of scientific observer type of approach, at least to begin with, and he perceives the agency of the nonhuman. So he starts off talking about the creaking of the timbers in the house that he's writing the book in and, and then perceiving agency and therefore a kind of consciousness in that. And then as the night comes on, the shadow of the earth, the night is a shadow of the earth, and it's kind of creeping around the planet all the time. And he perceives that as having agency. And so it looks at lots of different things, not just animals, and perceives agency and therefore infers consciousness. And it feels a little bit like whether he's playing a game about the consciousness to begin with, in the inference of consciousness from the observed agency.

But then later on, he just kind of, he moves in a more audacious direction. And he has this wonderful narrative about going to Nepal and encountering a shaman way. Kankari is the local word. And having some quite interesting experiences with the shaman. And he actually gets trained by the shaman. And this all culminates in him being trained to observe ravens in particular, and then he has an experience that the shamans really been building him up to have, this, of identifying, contrast his consciousness with that of an individual Raven, that he's been meditatively observing, and then the raven takes off, and goes for a fly. And he goes with it, his consciousness goes with it. And he actually sees what the raven sees, and which is valleys and mountains and things that are far out of the view of what he can see from where he's sitting on the ground. And then he flies back in and he actually sees himself with the shaman sitting behind him from the Raven’s eye view as he comes in. And then the last moment, he's back in his own skin and capsulated ego to use Alan Watts’ phrase. And so the way he writes, you have to take this as this really happened. He doesn't present it as a work of fiction. He is presenting this as something that he really experienced. And we have to kind of take, choose whether we trust that truth. And so that kind of experience really does challenge the idea of the skin-encapsulated ego, is a containment of consciousness and the possibility of what I think you were talking about Liesl, that consciousness can transcend the separate self.

**Liesl King**

When you're talking there, about the Raven, and sort of self as bird, kind of the extension of oneself into a kind of spirit animal. It reminds me at the end of *Lavinia*, which was later work by Leguin wherein we get the story of Lavinia in pre Roman times, and she is just a very small character or minor character in the original. She comes to life and she gets to tell her story here, and by the end, when she hears the tumbles and the rage of war, at one point, she merges I mean, of course, I'm describing something fictional and you have to read it to experience the impact, that she merges into an owl. She is able to to be quiet and fly, and she soars above that experience of war. And as a reader, you understand what it is to achieve a kind of detachment and to observe the ridiculousness and the damage inflicted by war there.

And then the second connection was in thinking about the sensory activation going back to 1969 in Leguin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*, her Handarian foretellers practice sensual receptiveness, so they go down to the trance, but it's not just about going inside themselves and contemplating, you know, depth and erasing ego, they are super conscious of all that is around them. And I always thought, I've talked to students before about that connection between the sensory, all the living world, but the flight as well, what I love in, in California, the vultures, the black vultures, that roam overhead as you walk or as you as you drive. Sitting in the moment with that observation allows you to live very much in that present moment and takes you takes you away from from ego as well and allows you to merge. So she talked about that early on.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Bringing that passage together, really, I think, gives life to a lot of what Anthony was talking about before. I think, Anthony, you've got a passage for us from your fiction as well, from your novel, *Deep Time,* that relates to a lot of these ideas. You want to give us that.

**Anthony Nanson**

So this is a passage a little way into the novel. It's fairly fairly early in the novel, and the setting is a scientific expedition somewhere in the Central African rainforest.

“Now that it was dark, and our world had shrunk into this fire, that space between the little huts, the whole community gathered close around the fire, men, women, children, altogether, skin to skin, arms draped over each other. And we the guests were subsumed in their fellowship. The woman on one side of me, a young man on the other, their warm, pungent bodies pressed unconsciously against me, as the old man began to tell stories.

Of course, I couldn't understand a word he said, but the words were augmented by the wrinkled eloquence of his face by grunts and whistles that mimics the voices of forest creatures, and most evocative of all, by his energetic miming of the action, whether of himself or his hunting companions, or the quarry they pursued. Astonishing how this old man standing on two legs could through his stance, through the way he held his head and moved his limbs, so potently convey an animal fleeing through the woods, eyes wide nostrils, flaring.

Curtis lent across the woman between us to whisper, *he's talking about hunting a Bongo*. I knew, had recognised in the precision of the old man's mime that very species we'd seen yesterday. But he wasn't relating yesterday's hunt. This was a story from his own younger days in which he had taken part yet, it was as vivid and immediate as if happening right now. The distinction blurs between hunter and prey. There seems to be only the Bongo, or maybe two Bongos. The hunter has become the hunted. He moves in precisely the same way. The muzzle twitches that the air, the head pears nervously round, eyes and ears are tuned to every crackle and whisper, the chest heaving with fatigue, legs trembling on the verge of cramp, a moment of terrible stillness in which we all hold our breath.

Then, like a whirlwind, the Bongo resolves into the human hunter, who leaps forward, the muscles in shoulder, arm clench and release as he hurls his spear, and the other Bongo. The true Bongo takes the point in his heart and gives up his spirit. The tension of the listeners lets go in one synchronised sign of breath, but the story is not finished. Another creature leaps out of nowhere to claim the fallen antelope, a snarling grimace of bared teeth. A simple point is a flailing of clawed paws, a leopard, who is the hunter now. Each one is pulling closer to each other, closer to the fire. The bodies press each side of me tighter that children grab their mothers, the woman next to me lets out a shriek of alarm. Everyone's eyes are popping out of their head, the hunter and the leopard each holds his ground, not willing to back down from the prize of fresh meat. That leopard goes belly still, gaze fixed, only his back legs aquiver. With a terrific thrust from them he springs forward, fore limbs reaching to claw the hunters face. But the hunter is quick, his spear does not falter, presents the weapon at just the angle to impale the leaping beast.

The old man triumphantly drew attention to the leopard skin around his hips. Everyone gazed with admiration though they must have heard the story countless times before. I noticed that the spots formed larger rosettes than is usual in leopard, smaller than a Jaguar, it was curious. Were it not the man's loincloth I'd have liked a closer look at that skin. The teenage boy called out for another story, I recognised that tone of voice. The old man was on a roll - another story, another hunt. What kind of animal this time I wasn't sure, something large, much heavier than a Bongo with a rolling plunging gait. The listeners were stilled in all of his creature and the old hunter’s audacity, an okapi perhaps, or a buffalo. But the old man's movement suggested something larger than either, and he held his hands to his head, tips of the thumbs rooted to his crown, fingers splayed back to suggest backward growing antlers, more elaborate horns than any okapis or buffaloes.

I felt a quickening in my chest. In spite of all my intentions, I knew too much. I knew there were no stags in Africa, I knew that nothing like the creature this man was depicting should inhabit this forest today. His mining was so skillful that as I watched, I could picture how the animal might have looked, how it resembled certain creatures that had once lived in Africa. But I'd been fooled by this sort of thing before. These Aboriginal storytellers can segue without pausing for breath from hunting yarn to one detail to primal myth. They draw no strict distinction between truth and imagination.”

**Cath Heinemeyer**

Well, thank you, Anthony, there's so much to say that the first thing I wanted to say is, the power that that performance of the old man had for his listeners, I was imagining what it would be like if he told a story about industrial agriculture, you know, how that would leave the listeners changed, how impossible it would be not to see that from the point of view of the prey animals of our agricultural system. And there seems to be a bit of a message for theatre in that: *are you doing that?* Are you bringing home these realities to audiences in a way that that old man did for his listeners?

And I also felt very much what you were talking about earlier, there's no cute anthropomorphism in that form of storytelling. It's the storyteller, almost teaching his listeners how to do the thing that Liesl said, what we need to do to get into that, that shared consciousness space that we might share with animals. That listeners who experience that kind of storytelling would be able to enter that space and understand the otherness and the agency of animals in a very powerful way.

I feel like between that extract, the Leguin extract and the themes in your book, we've managed between us to look at quite a few of the paths into the forest that I was talking about at the beginning, of overcoming some of these challenges of representation, the long timescales, the difficulty of representing those creatures that are very other from us, the difficulty of making it really manifest how our culture and our justice questions interact with the natural world and the injustices being perpetrated by us on it.

And I think we're going to have to draw the our discussion to a close, but the way we'd like to end it is to each of us share a current creative challenge that we're experiencing in that task, that task of showing how our culture, our human culture is so completely bound up in the nonhuman world and how our justice struggles are so bound up in the struggle for ecological justice as well. So it'd be great to hear from each of you one of your current challenges creatively in doing this, and perhaps a creative challenge to the listener, something they could maybe try to experiment with this in their own time. Anthony, do you want to go first with that?

**Anthony Nanson**

So one of the major themes that was emergent for me in writing *Storytelling and Ecology*, the new book, was the importance of, of consciousness or awareness in what you're doing. And this has been influenced by, I've been instructed in how to meditate over the last few years. So that's the stream that’s fed into my thinking in the book. And so I've come to believe that this is crucial to the ecological challenge, it’s crucial to be conscious in our interactions with each other and in our making decisions. And so, a creative challenge for me now, when I look forward to returning into the storytelling arena, if and when the pandemic eases off, is to bring that quality of consciousness more into my storytelling, and thereby to give more dialogic space to my listeners to find something worthwhile, emergent, from the experience of receiving the stories.

The challenge that I thought of for the listener, it's simply to go for a walk somewhere where there's some nature and be alert for other beings, nonhuman beings out there, and encounters with animals, especially wild animals, but maybe domestic animals, maybe plants, and then be alert, anything that seems a particularly interesting encounter, where you have the opportunity to at least observe some animal, or possibly a plant going about its business, maybe interacting with other creatures or who knows what. And then when you get home, to relate what you observed about that creature, to your friend or family member, somebody who wasn't with you on the walk, just tell them the story of what you observed. But don't bring yourself into it. Don't say ‘I did this’ or ‘I hid behind the hedge’ or whatever, just leave yourself out of it. And just describe what you observed and what you inferred about that creature’s experience.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

I love that. I think that's a great challenge. I will be having a go at it definitely. Liesl, how about you?

**Liesl King**

So my challenge is always in thinking, because I'm interested in science fiction, about the tension between the living world which of course, you know, we are a part of, we are enmeshed in and entangled within fortunately, and technology and technological advancement. So I as a living being am very conscious about the fact that technology is encroaching on my well being. So I do all sorts of things. I'm holding a stone now, I'm holding a literal yellow stone, just to keep me in touch with something organic, because I am so alienated in many ways, with technological interference. So my challenge to myself within my creative projects is to consciously curate every day, an experience that resists an overwhelm in terms of of technology.

So as a challenge for one day, remain extremely conscious. Are you sucked in by Facebook? Are you taken in by WhatsApp? How much screen time are you engaging in before you do some amazing yoga poses or, you know, go within and wipe the slate clean? I'm sure we are in an overwhelmed state. Going back to the LeGuin, as I said in thinking about *Always Coming Home*, technology has a place. And it is useful to some, it's a space for memory and history and information and useful tools, many useful tools for advancement and wellbeing, but it's a limited space. So the science fictional future, which is the smart city where the whole planet is running on a kind of technological power that's anathema to liquid vision. And I, I recommend that we remember that in terms of our sensory wellbeing we're organic creatures, for a reason to keep us in touch with, with a living reality.

**Cath Heinemeyer**

While you've been saying that I've been holding, gripping on with my hands to the wooden table that I'm sitting at here, and tracing over the knots in that wood, and trying to picture the tree that it might have come from. Well, I think my challenge relates actually really closely to both of yours. And it is a creative challenge. But it's also a teaching challenge in my teaching practice, because I'm really interested in my research in how we can encourage students and lecturers in universities to engage with the campus as not just a whole lot of classrooms and facilities, but an ecosystem that comprises us as humans, as well as other species. Even though we might really dominate it, it's not just ours. And we need to be teaching in a more place-based way, I think, so that students’ learning is happening in a place and engaging with the people, both human and non-human, who share that place. But the real challenge that we've talked about a lot in this podcast, we don't see the tree when we drive past it, we don't observe our ecosystems. So our relationship with the campus as a place is really thin. It's really dominated by what we want to use it for, rather than the agency it might have or the relationships that happen within it.

So what I thought to myself is, well, what's the place I know best, and it's my local park. That's the ecosystem I know best. I don't just know the ecological corners of it - I also know the people who always pass through it. And that kind of entanglement between the human and non-human inhabitants of the park is something that I do know. So I wrote a little account of a typical walk that I might make through the park.

That's my challenge to the listener. What's the place you know best, write a little account like that. A little kind of a walk that you would take, who would you expect to see and how do they depend on each other? And that is a good way of thinking into these entanglements and interdependencies.

Well, that brings our podcast sadly to an end. I've really enjoyed this conversation with the two of you, Liesl and Anthony. I feel like, yeah, we've made lots of inroads into the woods. We will make a bibliography with some suggested reading and these creative task invitations available on the ISJ blog so that you'll be able to read those and have a go at them. Thanks to both of you. And thanks to everybody who's listened.