



## **The within-ness of things:**

### **working with/alongside the other-than-human**

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### **Abstract**

In this text, I think through the question: what does a mutual and nurturing conversation with the other-than-human look like, and what would the ethics of such an endeavour be? In my investigation, I participate in performative gestures of slowness, walking, and waiting, amongst other menial tasks, as I attempt to collaborate with the other-than-human. By taking a walk over and over, I attempt to develop a conversation (with a stone in this case) that is not rooted in my language but allows the opportunity for the other-than-human to perform its own language. It is a language that is not an attempted translation into the familiar words and voices I may know but rather one that exists in its ambiguity and acknowledged for its difference and distance. This text responds to and seeks guidance from the works of Natasha Myers, María Puig de la Bellacasa, Tim Lilburn, and Robert Bringham.

**Keywords:** other-than-human, visual arts, walking, performance, language.

*This text was an attempt at a list  
of all the names of things seen and heard  
experienced from a place of waiting  
But this list has failed before it began  
as I do not know all the names of what I see and hear  
nor do the things named care to know what name is spoken  
A stone is a stone but only to me  
if I ask of it what it wishes to be called  
a response does not exist in text or tongue  
But when I pick it up and it still holds onto the cold morning's dew  
it warms slowly while my hand begins to cool  
until a point is reached where it is too hard to tell between them  
It is here where I feel two things can speak  
in slowness a nameless space is seen  
and the initial attempt of a list becomes obsolete*

These words written came from a walk taken...a walk repeated.

I was in a small town over the summer where I began many of my days taking a walk around the few streets and trails that connected the few homes and businesses, with odd ruins in between. And I interrupted many of these days with many more of these slow meanderings without destination. As I walked through my cottage door, and down the hill to the main road, then down the main road towards a row of homes, I would come upon a dirt trail. This dirt trail was maintained by the many ATVs that provided two tracks of compressed mud and stone for me to follow. As I stepped upon this compressed earth, sometimes straddling the two tracks to avoid the soiled ground between, I was greeted by a rocky shore of stone and salt water to my left, and dense low lying trees and shrubbery hugging the ground to my right.



a walk i, performative process, Port Union, NL, 2019

In this small town—Port Union, on the Bonavista Peninsula in Newfoundland and Labrador—I would try to learn the names of the things I passed. I'd see a stubby fir and spruce tree, the multi-layered sedimentary rock along the shore, the disk-shaped aspidella (an ancient fossil preserved in stone). I would say their name, and then my name in return (as if two people were meeting for the first time, a shaking hands of sorts). The name was a starting point to a conversation between two *speaking* things, an attempt to become courteous to...

And in this attempt to be courteous to...I wanted to name all the things I interacted with. So one morning I woke up and started: pillow, sheets, bed, my partner Michelle, the hardwood floor, drywall and the grey paint upon it, ceiling, a carpet, door, toilet, sink, toothbrush, my two cats (Hubbell and Winston), coffee (and within that: the water, kettle, grounds, mug and the clay that made it)...and I continued as I left the cottage: wooden steps, screws, asphalt, concrete, grass, white fence, and those red painted stones I passed each day...but I gave up before I ever reached the dirt trail. With everything I named there were at least ten times more things that were left unknown or unnoticed.

To name things in such a manner was, to begin with, a doomed task. As days went by after my failed attempt, I would continue to reflect upon each name I knew, and each name I didn't (still performing this introductory conversation in my head). But this manner of introduction—a 'hi, my name is, dot, dot, dot—although polite, seemed too simple a start with an

emptiness that followed. It was indeed a beginning, but to learn from, to collaborate with, to participate alongside, to speak towards, and to be spoken to, I would have to change.

Was this change physical? As someone with settler ancestry, I actively work against histories inherently within me and question the relationship I have with the land around me. Reflecting back to my initial collection of words and thoughts...*A stone is a stone but only to me...if I ask of it what it wishes to be called a response does not exist in text or tongue.* To speak to the stone, is it a matter of being a stone? Or at the very least, being less me? How does one become less of themselves? And how does one speak to the other-than-human as a human, but in a space and language that is also other-than-human? I believe it is within this space where language does not simply equate to a set of terms where this equals that. It is an in-between where collaboration, cross-pollination, inter-disciplinary (or more-than-disciplinary) encounters exist and move away from colonial perspectives and thinking. For me to collaborate with and work alongside the stone or tree or fruit fly would require a shift in thinking; a shift in being.

In *Sensing Botanical Sensoria*, Natasha Myers states, “[h]ere I invite you to cultivate your inner plant. This is not an exercise in anthropomorphism—a rendering of plants on the model of the human. Rather, it is an opportunity to *vegetalize* your already more than human body. In order to awaken the latent plant in you, you will need to get interested and involved in the things that plants care about”.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the change is a change in perspectives—a perspective that comes through the other-than-human and not oneself (although acknowledging that this perspective shift is seen and carried out through a veil of human experience).

But how does one change perspectives into something so removed from what one is? In the book *Matters of Care*, María Puig de la Bellacasa speaks about being interested and involved in the things the other-than-human cares about. But what does a stone care about? To begin this process, I would argue, you must sit with a stone, wait with it, slow your thinking to the thinking of a stone, to the geological time from which a stone came. This act is then speculative and physical, perhaps even spiritual.

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<sup>1</sup> Natasha Myers, “Sensing Botanical Sensoria: A Kriya for Cultivating Your Inner Plant,” Centre for Imaginative Ethnography, last modified June 6, 2014, <https://imaginative-ethnography.com/imaginings/affect/sensing-botanical-sensoria/>.



a pause, performative process, Curling, NL, 2020

But even if one can get to a place to know what a stone cares about, how would you *stonify* yourself further? Or is this process enough (assuming that it can be done)? If we revisit Puig de la Bellacasa, she would argue what it means to care is not simply to be able to care about something but also to care for it. “Care is required in processes in which humans and nonhumans co-train each other to live, work, and play together to construct a relationship of ‘significant otherness.’”<sup>2</sup> The first process towards a ‘significant otherness’ is then an empathetic repositioning of one’s perspective to that of the stone’s, which is then done, in addition to, caring for the stone through the perspective of a human. It is a crossing between these two spaces: a caring for the stone from the stone as well as a caring about the stone through the perspective of oneself—an attempt to co-train and live-with each other.

I am again walking down the dirt trail created by the compressed earth from the many ATVs that have passed, and I find a place to sit upon the shore. I position myself on a large stone that looks out to the water with my legs dangling beneath me. In this spot I wait—a waiting with this stone to attempt to slow my thinking and my pace to that of the stone’s. In this waiting, this pause, I pull out a book from my bag that happened to come along with me, and I begin to read. In this attempt to *stonify* myself I now move to something much more human, I am reading to the

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<sup>2</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 83.

stone. I continue reading towards the stone I sit upon, or perhaps with the other-than-human, knowing, or assuming (maybe wrongfully), that this act goes unnoticed.

In my attempts, there is a moving back and forth between thinking as a stone and as a human, with knowledge of the inevitable failure of the former. Puig de la Bellacasa mentions, “to speculate is also to admit that we do not *really* know wholly.”<sup>3</sup> These *vegetalize* or *stonify* attempts exist within speculation and in doing so calls attention to the admittance of never *really* knowing, and this is okay. This never knowing, for me, is a comforting place. It allows and expects failure, further attempts, and trials, as long as such attempts come from a sincere place of learning from the stone as a thing with agency, while also unlearning assumptions one may have of the stone as if it is a static object.



a walk ii, performative process, Port Union, NL, 2019

To work alongside and in collaboration with the other-than-human, in a state of becoming less of oneself and more of a thing, one may try to communicate and become attentive to the conversations that already exist. In my investigations I perform gestures that bring me to a space parallel to the other-than-human, a space I attempt to not impose upon but rather sit beside: to watch, to listen, and to wait with. In such acts I hope to allow the opportunity for the other-than-human to perform its own language—a language that is not an attempted translation into the

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<sup>3</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 117.

familiar words and voices I may know but rather one that exists in its ambiguity and acknowledged for its difference and distance.

But what does this language look like? I do not know...nor do I think I will ever know fully. But I can try to learn, humbly. I can use the language I do know to point back towards it, which is where the text in the beginning, and later, the end, come from. Tim Lilburn, a Canadian poet says (and this is a quote I return to again and again):

The acme of speech is language that carries the knowledge of its inevitable failure inside it: the word cannot be circumscription; it cannot name; it can't even confess with accuracy. But it still loves—helplessly—the world and so walks alongside it; it says what it loves is a red, red rose, say's it's a sunset, dusk over a river, and names nothing with this, misspeaks what it points to but hears and reports a moan deep within the speaker. Such language can't identify what it wishes to name, but it somehow manages to achieve a greater interior proximity to that thing. This is desire's speech.<sup>4</sup>

This 'helpless' loving of the world and the attempts of speaking about it and towards it, while knowing it is failing in its translation (but simultaneously getting closer to the thing through such humble attempts), exists in an even more potent way when trying to speak to the other-than-human, as the makeup of that language, the material of the language, is much more distant to me. It is easy to acknowledge that these things speak and have agency. But it is hard to know what that agency is or what is being said. And it is easy to assume one knows what wants to be said and be done with it. Puig de la Bellacasa, referencing Donna Haraway and *The Companion Species Manifesto*, says, "Thinking-with non-humans should always be a living-with, aware of troubling relations and seeking significant otherness that transforms those involved in the relation and the worlds we live in."<sup>5</sup> To think of the other-than-human as a significant otherness brings to attention the caring for, the caring about, and the courage to admit you are wrong, ability to ask for forgiveness, and an expectation to do what you think is best for the other—a give and take of sorts, and a giving again.

In searching for what this other-than-human language may be, as it is my assumption that the diversity of other-than-human things and environments would also create an equal diversity

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Lilburn, *Going Home* (Toronto: House of Anasai Press Inc., 2008), 185.

<sup>5</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, 83.

of languages to be experienced, I create the potential for many opportunities to encounter such conversations. When Lilburn speaks about a book of poems exploring similar yet different ideas and concerns he says, “[i]ts strength is not expressed in the reach to a complete argument, but in repeated awkward plunges of orphic exploration.”<sup>6</sup> The awkward plunges I take, whether it is through touching, speaking to, waiting with, dragging something upon, walking over, carrying, bringing back, pushing into, etc. can begin to create a space of awareness of the complexity of this endeavour in a fragmented, yet cohesive, way.



a walk iii, performative process, Curling, NL, 2020

But how do we know any of these other-than-human things want to even talk to us? They can't give consent in an easily understood yay or nay. In the book, *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*, by Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky, Bringhurst begins the first chapter by speaking about humans as liminal creatures—“we often get closer to the wild by pushing against it—brushing out a trail...or catching and cleaning a trout.”<sup>7</sup> But is this manner of pushing up against things okay to do? It is only too easy to take advantage and push too hard and too quickly. In the same breath, Bringhurst also mentions, “[i]f you look closely enough, you may find it impossible to identify any animal, plant, fungus, or even bacterium that doesn't in

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Lilburn, *The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2017), xii.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bringhurst, “The Mind of the Wild,” in *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis* by R. Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2018), 34.

some degree manipulate and modify the nearby environment to better suit its preferences and needs...The wild, you could say, is a big, self-integrating system whose edges are everywhere and whose centre is nowhere.”<sup>8</sup> In this manner, we, as liminal creatures, can participate in these interconnected conversations but there is a responsibility to be aware of our own edges, the edges of others we push up to, and the fact that the centre which is often quickly assumed to be human, is in fact, nowhere. Thinking back to the notion of consent in conversations with the other-than-human is then not a manner of hearing a yay or nay, but it is an understanding that our edges exist in contact—a contact that is meant to be soft and responsive opposed to that of unforgiving hardness and ignorance.

To interact with the other-than-human in an ethical way, for me, is then a caring for and about a thing (through more than one perspective), it is being spoken to and speaking (in more than one language), it is listening, it is borrowing only what is needed and giving back when you can (over and over, again and again). It is reciprocal and nurturing. However, I understand what is needed and what needs to be given back exists in flux. Because of this changing nature of needs, it is a paying attention to and evaluating for oneself where you can fit in on this moving spectrum. And this reciprocal and nurturing relationship may not be noticeable in each instance. My care may go unreturned. Puig de la Bellacasa states, “[t]he care that touches me today and sustains me might never be given back (by me or others) to those who generated it, who might not even need or want my care. In turn, the care I will give will touch beings who never will give me (back) this care.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to recognize that although care is or can be a reciprocal action, it should be given without the expectation of being returned. The first step or instance of care in this working with should come from me, as the care provided by the other-than-human has been constant, unnoticed, and often unreturned.

This paper is not about what has been learned when working with and alongside the other-than-human but rather an attempt to understand what it means to do this, what it may look like (or the difficulty in locating what this would be), and what protocols and thinking I do before even beginning such conversations. Having settler ancestry, there is a need to actively work against ideas of colonialism when reflecting upon relationships to the land around me.

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<sup>8</sup> Bringhurst, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, 121.

This, in turn, points towards a paradigm shift of how one relates to, experiences, learns from, unlearns misinformed notions, and participates in the ecology they exist within. As stated in Bringhurst's text it is "[s]tarting to learn to see things with precolonial eyes, and with nonhuman eyes...It's a way of trying to learn to think like an ecosystem instead of like a disconnected visitor—a predatory tourist."<sup>10</sup> At the very least this includes acknowledging and understanding it is not a mastery I will achieve of a stone, but a partnership; it is not an owning of such things but a borrowing and a putting back of what has been lent in attempts to gain further awareness of the things themselves. It is paying attention to the quietness, patience, and magnitude of learning that needs to be done when reflecting on how one may attempt to see through the perspective of a stone.

A final collection of words written that came from a walk taken...a walk repeated.

*(a reminder for myself to learn to be here, to be present)*

*travel down the road, the gravel, now mud and grass*

*up onto the boulder*

*try to move slow, think slow, slower still, now stop*

*sit and wait, look and listen*

*it is okay to be noticed as it is not easy to be as if never here*

*but only then will you allow your surroundings to return to their ways*

*to know how the robin may act*

*when their alarm calls return to song*

*when you become slow enough to notice and be unnoticed*

*when looking and listening become seeing and hearing*

*but until then remember this task is difficult*

*as your body is hard to be made still*

*and your mind is hard to ease*

*and it is always hard to be waiting*

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<sup>10</sup> Bringhurst, "The Mind of the Wild," 8.

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### About the Author

Andrew Testa is an artist, writer, and educator working through prints, drawings, books, words, and installations. He has been awarded SSHRC and the Elizabeth Greenshields grants for his research, has exhibited nationally and internationally (UK and USA), and has participated in residencies and conferences across Canada. Currently, he is working towards a new body of work for a solo exhibition at SNAP (Edmonton, AB) and group exhibitions at Modern Fuel (Kingston, ON) and Eastern Edge (St. John's, NL) in 2021 that have been awarded a VP Grenfell Campus Research Fund. Testa is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in printmaking at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and has additionally taught at Thompson Rivers University (Kamloops, BC), and Algoma University (Sault Ste. Marie, ON). He completed his MFA and BFA at York University (Toronto, ON).