

From the Old Brewery S1-EP5

Speaker 1 [00:03]

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Dr Suk-Jun Kim Welcome to from the old brewery, postgraduate podcast programme at the School of language, literature, music and visual culture. My name is Suk-Jun Kim, Director of Postgraduate Research at the school and I'm co-hosting this episode with

Isabella Engberg 00:38

Isabella Engberg. I'm a PhD student in comparative literature.

Jun 00:43

Thank you, Isabella. And today our guest is Ines Krischner. Ines holds a PGDE in English and History from Karl-Franzens-University Graz, Austria (2015), as well as an MLitt in English Literary Studies from the University of Aberdeen (2018). She has worked as a modern foreign language assistant and teacher in Austria, Spain, and the UK. Ines started her PhD in 2019 and is a recipient of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture's New Kings studentship. Her PhD project explores nature and wildlife conservation in twenty-first-century fiction, with a particular focus on multispecies projects of world-making. In 2020, she organised an event on storytelling and urban ecology for children and families as part of, and co-funded by, Explorathon and Being Human, the UK's national festival of the humanities. She has been a teaching assistant on EL1009 Acts of Reading and attended COP26, the UN Climate Change Conference, as part of the University of Aberdeen's delegation. Ines, can you tell us a bit more about what your research is about?

Ines Kirschner 01:53

Thanks, Jun. So, my PhD thesis explores nature and wildlife conservation in 21-C fiction, with a particular focus on multispecies projects of world-making. In traditional Western human-centred ontologies, nature tends to figure only as a backdrop for human action, as something that humans use, shape, destroy, and preserve. I've always had an interest in animals and ecology, but I'd never really questioned these types of onto-stories that I grew up with. But in the first year of my PhD, I came across Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, or making-with, and I was just really struck by how it subverts these traditional subject-object positions, and by how it redistributes agency across any supposed human-nonhuman divide. Now, I look at fiction and theoretical approaches that represent conservation as a multispecies project, and that also attend to the agencies of nonhuman actants.

In one of my chapters, for example, I look at representations of rewilding as the experimental work of a more-than-human collective.

But today, I'd like to talk about my current research on conference-going polar bears and climate change in Yoko Tawada's novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*. The question I'm interested in for this chapter is: Can anthropomorphic fiction help us imagine a more-than-human politics? So, here I focus less on

world-making, and more on the sort of ontological imaginaries that make certain world-making projects possible and foreclose on others.

Jun 03:32

That sounds fascinating. Speaking of conferences and climate politics, I hear that you recently attended COP26 in Glasgow as an observer. Before we talk about your research for this chapter, could you tell us more about how you became an observer for the University of Aberdeen and what your experience was?

Ines 03:54

Sure. So This was the first time the University sent a delegation to COP, and it was really only made possible thanks to Dr Ana Payo Payo from the School of Biological Sciences. She led the uni's bid to become an Official Observer Organisation. Last August, I think, they sent out a call for applications to staff and students, to apply to attend COP26 as an observer. I initially wasn't going to apply because I thought it was unlikely that they'd select a humanities student. But I tried anyway, and my application was successful. I was very proud that I was selected because they apparently received over 420 applications for the 46 observer passes they had available.

Jun 04:41

Wow, that's amazing. So what was it like? What was it like going to a UN climate change conference as an English literature student?

Ines 04:53

it was very interesting to gain an insight into the UN f triple C process. Although a lot of the relevant sessions were close to observers. And if I had to describe the conference itself, the main image that comes to my mind is that of a vast anthill. I think that's an apt image since we're talking about ecologists in politics today.

And what was it like to attend as a literature student? Well, there's a really lovely scene in *Memoirs of a polar bear*, where the first polar bear, who's a circus performer goes to a conference on the significance of bicycles for the national economy, and sometimes felt a bit like that bear. Like when I was queuing to get into sessions and talking to the other attendants, and notice myself justifying why I was there a couple of times, as in a promise movies such as *relevant*. And I think this may be because climate change and biodiversity loss are usually thought of as the domain of STEM subjects, or the more sciences, social sciences. And disciplines that don't adhere to this positivist framework aren't really considered relevant. But I think that the arts and humanities also have a role to play because they can attend to the human dimensions of these intersecting crises.

Isabella Engberg 06:13

Absolutely. Did you get anything out of your time at COP for your current research? Did you see any polar bear?

Ines 06:22

I did, actually, I saw five of them. They were part of a fibreglass sculpture by the artist Vincent Huang in the Tuvalu national pavilion. Tuvalu is a small island nation in the Pacific which is facing a lot of precarity due to rising sea levels. So, these five polar bears stand upright on their hind paws, and they are back-to-back on this tiny ice floe. All five of them wear fire-engine red life jackets. They're clearly anthropomorphised through their posture and clothing. I was really pleased to see that sculpture at COP because I saw some affinities with my current research on conference-going polar bears and politics.

Now, this was an art installation in a prominent location in the conference venue, and it was an explicit, deliberate attempt to intervene in the process of political decision-making. Huang's collaboration with the Tuvaluan government goes back to 2010, and he's previously represented the country as a delegate at COP18 and COP19. But what really interests me is the way this particular intervention is framed. Huang has said in an interview that these five bears are intended as a *metaphor* for the people of Tuvalu. On the one hand, this speaks to the iconic nature of polar bears as a global symbol of the impacts of climate change. But on the other hand, the polar bears seem to be the just the secondary vehicle for the primary tenor, the people of Tuvalu. It seems like the main function of the polar bears here is that they allow Huang to draw on the familiar iconography of climate change in order to talk about human precarity. And this recalls anthropomorphic representational practices where animal bodies are just used as stand-ins for human characteristics or human issues. But I'll come back to anthropomorphic polar bears and politics in a bit.

The other thing that really struck me at COP in the context of my current research is just how logocentric politics in its current form is. For example, you'll remember the controversy around the wording on coal in the cover decision text. There was a lot of talk about how the 'language' on coal was watered down from calls to 'phase out' coal to 'phase down'. And this change of only one preposition will have such a huge material impact. And then there was of course Greta Thunberg's 'blah blah blah' framing. It all revolves around human communication and human modes of embodiment.

Jun 09:20

So you said, you focused on a specific primary text for your current chapter, Yoko Tawada's *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*. That's a great title. Can you briefly tell us what the novel is about?

Ines 09:35

Sure. It's a fantastic novel. It's a novel about three generations of polar bears. The first bear is a former circus artist in Soviet Russia, who represents the circus at conferences and then starts writing her autobiography. The second bear, who is her daughter, is a ballet dancer who then goes on to have a successful career in a circus in East Berlin. And the third polar bear is her son Knut, who was born and raised in Berlin Zoo and became world-famous as a kind of animal ambassador for the impacts of climate change. What's interesting to me is that it's a first-person narration from the perspective of these three bears. Tawada draws a lot on Franz Kafka's animal stories, and a major intertext in the novel is his story 'A Report to An Academy'. It's the story of an ape called Rotpeter who is locked in a cage, and who learns to behave like a human to escape this cage. *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* makes a lot of intertextual allusion to this story. For example, the first polar bear was stuck in a cage when she was a small cub, and her human keeper put these heat-blocking shoes on her back paws and lit a fire

underneath the cage to train her to stand on her hind legs. That's how the first polar bear becomes anthropomorphised and gains the capacity for human speech. And I think this could also be read as an allusion to human-induced global warming, and the forced adaptation polar bears are having to undergo if they are to survive.

Jun 11:23

Wow, that's fascinating. So what's new about your approach to this novel?

Ines 11:29

None of the critics who have written about this particular novel from an animal studies perspective have really focused on climate politics. I think that's quite surprising, given that polar bears are *the* global icon of climate change, and given that there's a lot of engagement in the novel not just with the politics of animal representation, but also with the role of animals in politics. So, this is a gap in the research that I'm hoping to address.

Bella 12:02

Yeah, it's certainly something that seems very familiar to me my own researches on Darwin, who also often portrayed these anthropomorphize animals, and who is obviously the father of evolutionary theory. And can you say a bit more about how this is portrayed in the novel?

Ines 12:21

Sure. I think the tripartite structure of the novel is significant for this. We move from a bear who becomes this anthropomorphised, liminal being capable of human speech by going through a process of human-induced adaptation. In the second section, we get this polar bear's daughter, who is famous for her anthropomorphic circus feats. She can't speak but she can still make herself understood to humans. And in the third and final section, we get the third generation of polar bears – Knut, who grows up in a zoo and who has a rich inner life but walks on four legs and can't communicate with humans. Now, if you were to remain within the parameters of a human-centred ontology and read this as a linear progress narrative, you would read this gradual loss of human language and embodiment as a sort of de-evolution. But I think the novel itself discourages this type of reading – at one point, the first polar bear says, and I quote, 'if you asked me, I'd lose no time telling you I don't consider it progress to walk on two legs' end quote. So, the novel disentangles three concepts that are often conflated – adaptation, evolution, and progression. There's definitely a multigenerational adaptive response going on here, but it's not tied to a linear narrative of evolutionary progress.

Jun 13:52

What theory are you using for this chapter then?

Ines 13:55

The main theory I'm using is Jane Bennett's reworking of Jacques Rancière's theory of democracy as disruption. Just to give a brief overview of Rancière:
Rancière says that what we tend to think of as politics is not actually real politics. You know, things like elections, interest groups, and so on – these are just what he calls the police order. He focuses on

those who are excluded from this social order – who exist within society but who aren't counted or recognised by it because of what he calls the 'partition of the sensible'.

The partition of the sensible makes some people visible as political actors and makes others invisible. So this focuses on the aesthetic dimension of politics, on perception. When the out-group speaks, the in-group doesn't hear argumentative utterances, but just grunts or babble. Think about groups of people who were previously excluded from liberal politics because those in power didn't think they could make sense – women, slaves.

And for Rancière, real politics takes place when those who are excluded by a given partition of the sensible barge in and disrupt it, by showing that they are also able to participate in language-based activities. With this, they stage a 'wrong', by which he means the injustice of their exclusion. And these staged wrongs are always meant to show what he calls 'the equality of speaking beings'. So, here, politics is still something only humans can engage in, because it's tied to human language use. This type of thinking goes all the way back to Aristotle, who said that only humans are political animals because only humans have logos.

But what's interesting is that Rancière frames this disruption as a theatrical act. He positions it as an intermediary between a kind of knee-jerk instinctual reaction or reflex, on the one hand, and full-blown human intentionality on the other – and I'm putting the 'human' in scare quotes here.

And Jane Bennett argues that this framing opens the door to nonhumans. What Bennett does is, she questions the notion that politics is an exclusively human domain, and that it's only humans who can stage such disruptive acts and who can qualify as political actors. She basically asks, what would a theory of democracy look like that also includes nonhumans as political participant-actors?

Bella 16:58

It sounds very interesting, and but maybe also quite theoretical? Can you give an example of how you will sort of be applying this in your reading of the novel?

Ines 17:10

Sure, um, why don't I read out the passage from the novel, and then I could do a little close reading of it. Lovely. So, this is from the first section of the novel, where the first polar bear attends a conference, and she says:

'To make your opinion known, you have to first be seen by the session leader. This doesn't happen unless you raise your hand quickly – more quickly than all the others. Almost no one can get his hand up in the air at a conference faster than me. 'You seem fond of sharing your opinions': I was once treated to this ironic bit of commentary. I parried with a simple response: 'That's how democracy works, isn't it?' But that day I discovered it wasn't free will thrusting my paw-hand into the air like that, it was a sort of reflex. I felt this realization like a stab in the chest. I tried to put aside the pain and get back into my groove, a four-part rhythm: The first beat was the session leader's restrained 'Go ahead.' The second was the word 'I', which I slammed down on the table in front of me. On the third beat, all the listeners swallowed, and on the fourth I took a daring step, clearly enunciating the word 'think.' To give it some swing, I naturally stressed the second and fourth beats. I had no intention of dancing, but my hips began wagging back and forth on the chair. The chair immediately chimed in, contributing cheerful creaks. Each stressed syllable was like a tambourine underscoring the rhythms of my speech.'

You know, it's funny, I actually had to think about this passage at COP, because the UN had a microphone system on all the tables, and when a delegate wanted to say something or 'make an intervention' as they called it, they had to press a button. And this just reminded me of the Pavlovian dog hitting that button, you know, Pavlov's experiments on classical conditioning. Here we also get this juxtaposition of 'free will' and 'reflex'.

So, we can track how the representation of embodiment changes across this passage by looking at this hand she raises. And I think 'hand' functions as a metonym for human agency here. So, we go from the word 'hand' in relation to a generic 'you', to the compound word 'paw-hand' when she remembers her human-induced adaptation. In this passage and beyond, it's as if she's oscillating between those two poles, human and animal, and this has a very disorientating effect on the reader, so that we kind of lose sight of the differences between the two – which I think puts them on a continuum instead of a binary. Going back to Rancière, there's also a theatrical staging of this disruptive event – there's a rhythm, and dancing, which again foregrounds its performative aspect. And, even more interestingly, this is a distinctly linguistic, and even literary, performance – the four-part rhythm of human-bear-human-bear interaction is set to an iambic metre – unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed.

And it also subverts the traditional human-animal subject and object positions. The humans here are portrayed as passive – on the first beat, 'the session leader's *restrained* 'Go ahead'', and on the third beat, the human audience takes a collective gulp, a sort of involuntary nervous reaction to this speaking bear. The polar bear's actions on the other hand are confident and more-or-less deliberate. They're not entirely intentional, because she unintentionally starts to dance as she speaks. So, the terms in which this is framed is really quite similar to the way Rancière describes the political act – as a staged event that's in-between reflex and free will.

But there's more. The critic Eva Hoffmann makes a very convincing argument that this 'I think' should be read as an intertextual allusion to Kant's 'I think therefore I am' – which is perhaps *the* most paradigmatic statement in Western philosophy on the human capacity for reflexivity and rational thought. So, the polar bear appropriates these words which are meant to exclude her and other nonhuman animals, she appropriates them for herself and plays with them, as if to say – You humans think polar bears can't think, speak, and participate in public life? Well, you're wrong. And I think such a language game definitely redraws the partition of the sensible that Rancière talks about in relation to humans.

Bella 22:16

Do you think anthropomorphic fiction can be a valuable tool in helping us imagine this sort of more than human politics?

Ines 22:24

Yes, I think it can have potential value here. I think the value of fiction and ecocriticism more generally is that they can offer a more playful space for engaging with these issues than, say, a political theory essay. Tawada is a great example for this, with her surrealist aesthetics and her distinctly playful style. Bennett herself says that quote 'a careful course of anthropomorphization' end quote can help us to become attuned to nonhuman agency, even though it resists complete translation. Basically, she says that we can use anthropomorphism as a kind of conceptual crutch to unlearn human exceptionalism and human-centred ontologies. But she's talking about this mainly in the context of what verbs we use

to talk about nonhuman activities, as in, we need to rewrite the grammar of agency so that it's not just humans who act upon an inert world.

Anthropomorphic fiction like *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* arguably goes much further than that – it's not a realist novel, and it pushes anthropomorphism to an extreme, maybe as far as it can go. But what Tawada does really well is to address this gap in translation Bennett refers to, this gap between real nonhuman beings and our anthropomorphic translations of them, and to critically reflect on it. So, here, it's not a naïve or weak anthropomorphism, in John Simon's and Greg Garrard's terms, but a strong or critical one that questions the terms of its own representational practices. For example, the first instalment of the bear's memoirs is published under the title 'Thundering Applause for My Tears', a title which was added without consulting her. When she finds out, the polar bear goes to her publisher and complains, why did you give it that title when you know my species aren't able to shed tears. Why would you squeeze me into these tropes of human sentimentality? So it doesn't just show us the many ways in which animals are already entangled in human politics, but it also scrutinises the ways we represent animals' participation in public life.

Bella 25:05

And do you think there are any sort of limitations for for such an approach as well?

Ines 25:11

Yeah, I can think of two. The first is that, if we're looking to imagine a new form of democracy or politics that isn't based on human modes of embodiment like speech, gesture, or self-presentation, then a novel with a walking, talking, anthropomorphised bear isn't really doing much to help us visualise this. And that's where the middle section of the novel gets interesting, because here we see an attempt to imagine how interspecies communication can happen if one of the partners is non-linguistic. My second concern is about what kinds of mechanisms or institutions of democracy we might use to listen to nonhumans. For example, at one point, Bennett writes, quote: 'surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs' end quote. She also likens this exclusion to the Founding Fathers denying slaves and women the vote. Now, I'm not sure if this is Bennett's intention, because I don't think she intends to remain within the current framework of liberal democracy – but it kind of sounds as if this pushes the discussion into the direction of rights – you know, the right to vote, and so on. And in the context of anthropomorphism and the politics of animal representation, this brings us to the idea of moral extensionism, where you extend rights and moral status to some animals. But extending the franchise in this way is problematic because it only resituates some nonhumans on the rights-holding side of the divide, and it leaves the underlying division of human-nonhuman intact.

It's also problematic because, what are the selection criteria? I could imagine that it would be animals that are most like us or in some way charismatic. And, because we're talking about world-making projects – what kind of world does this shape? Probably a world in our image that just mirrors our tastes and values back to us. I think the novel is actually quite critical of this type of liberal discourse about social exclusion and notions of rights and infringed rights – for example, the first polar bear keeps getting chased by human rights activists who want to give her human rights, and she's very confused by this because she says she's not even human.

Jun 27:56

It sounds like this will be a very interesting chapter. Representations of polar bears in popular discourse are often quite sad, as they tend to focus on precarity in the face of climate change and the species' potential extinction. I was wondering – are you optimistic about the future? Do you, for example, think COP26 was a success?

Ines 28:27

Oh, that's a very tricky question. I'd say it depends. Do I think we're acting quickly enough and with the urgency the situation calls for? No, definitely not. But I also think that it's important to be realistic about what this process can deliver – you know, it's a multilateral negotiation with over 200 countries. One of the central metaphors in my field is entanglement, and we've been so closely entangled with fossil fuels for centuries – in the global North, at least. Our whole way of life is built on them. It's not easy to disentangle ourselves. But in terms of international equity and solidarity, and I mean the discussions around loss and damage, this COP was very disappointing.

Am I optimistic in general? I think I'm neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but hopeful. A year or so ago, I read an article on hope in the Anthropocene by David Chandler which has really stayed with me. Chandler says that hope is not optimism – it's not hoping for the best, it'll all be fine. Hope is an affective desire for alternative possible outcomes. And I think it's important to cultivate a hopeful attitude, because hope is also a prerequisite for action. If you've lost hope, there's no point in acting, right?

Jun 29:59

What's next in store for you? What are your plans for the near future?

Ines 30:07

So the COP delegation met up last week to talk about potentially setting up a climate assembly at the University. In our post-COP meetings, it became apparent that there's a huge appetite for more interdisciplinary collaboration, and senior management also said that there are plans to better link up the uni both horizontally and vertically. For example, there are the five new Interdisciplinary Challenge Areas as part of Aberdeen 2040. One of them is the Centre for Environment and Biodiversity, and I'd love to somehow get involved. It would be really great to see what meaningful transdisciplinary research could look like and how it could be done. Now that I've attended COP26, I'm also looking forward to following COP15, the UN Biodiversity Conference, which is coming up in April. It'll take place in China, but the sessions will be livestreamed. I'm also hoping to make good progress with my writing this semester, because there'll be a new first-year course on Sustainability and Literature in September, and I hope that I might be allowed to tutor on it. And I'm looking forward to February 27, which is International Polar Bear Day.

Jun 31:35

Great. On that note, thanks, Ines. And thanks, Isabella, for this wonderful discussion for this episode. Thanks everyone. Bye now.

Speaker 1 32:12

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