Transcript of ASLE Spotlight Episode 1: Human/Non-Human Relations
Recorded Friday, March 19, 2021

Laura Barbas-Rhoden:
00:06
We have enabled the live transcript for closed captioning, and you may find that option on the control bar that usually appears at the bottom of your zoom screen.

00:18
Our warmest welcome today to this ASLE Spotlight on new work in the environmental humanities and ecocriticism. I'm Laura Barbas-Rhoden, Professor of modern languages at Wofford College. And I'm proud to be, with Bethany Wiggin, the Co-President of ASLE.

00:33
For those of you joining an ASLE event for the first time, an extra hearty welcome from our Community. We are a professional organization that seeks to inspire and promote intellectual work and the environmental humanities and arts. We are so glad for you to join us today and invite you to help sustain and further our work by becoming an ASLE Member. It's our pleasure to host this exciting live event in our spotlight series.

00:56
Bethany and I and members of ASLE 's executive committee have envisioned and designed this new series to elevate ASLE Members work in creative writing scholarship and public engagement.
And we're really excited to foster connections with new public audiences through these virtual events.

01:13
As we get started, I want to extend a special thanks to the Penn Program for Environmental Humanities for co-sponsorship of this event and for visionary work on public engagement. Special thanks to Angela Faranda of the PPEH, as well as to Amy McIntyre, ASLE 's amazing managing director. This event would not be possible without the work of the spotlight planning committee and the selection committee and we extend gratitude for their labor, expertise, and time.

01:39
By way of logistical information, we'll ask that you remain on mute and we'll have time for questions later. We'll use the chat then, or the raise hand function, on your reactions button to indicate you have a question. And please try to keep your questions concise, since we have only brief moments together. Amy will help staff the controls and waiting room in the event that you're dropped inadvertently from the meeting.

02:00
So it's my great good fortune to introduce our guest moderator Heather Swan.
Heather's nonfiction has appeared in *Aeon, Belt, Catapult, Edge Effects, ISLE, Minding Nature, The Learned Pig, Resilience Journal,* and *Terrain*. Her book *Where Honeybees Thrive: Stories from the Field* from Penn State Press won the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award. A collection of her poems, *A Kinship with Ash* was published by Terrapin Books in 2020. She teaches environmental literature and writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Heather will introduce our panelists and then she and I will moderate conversation and dialogue, after they each speak briefly. Heather it's all yours.

Heather Swan:
02:42
Thank you. Great to be here and thank you all for coming and thank you everyone for organizing. Just amazing to be here today, I will be just reading short bios of all of our guests and then we will hear a little bit from them. So first i'm introducing Aimee Nezhukumatathil, and she is the celebrated author of four books of poetry: Oceanic, Lucky Fish, At the Drive-In Volcano, and Miracle Fruit. The New York Times bestselling World of Wonders is her first foray into nonfiction. Her awards include a Guggenheim and an NEA fellowship. She is professor of English and teaches environmental literature and poetry writing in the MFA program of the University of Mississippi.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil (she/her):
03:29
hi everybody i'm so glad to see you today. I'm coming at you live from Oxford Mississippi on a kind of cloudy, overcast day but spring is in the air here, the red buds are out in full force, magnolia trees are budding so it's like, so close to spring here.

03:48
And I just wanted, we have five minutes each before we dive in and I just wanted to say, I think there's a there should be a slide showing. Amy is that up Okay, and in the meantime this is my book world of wonders and i'm holding up for those who can't see i'm holding up my book, and I wanted to just show you. Many of the essays in here, these are short essays a collection of 30 essays and if you can see, the little axolotl illustration that I have on there, the third.

04:29
I had about 300, or 200 I'm sorry, plants and animals that I just loved and adored, and I narrowed it down to 30 plants and animals that I just was so curious about, and you know I am a child of the 70s and 80s. and I just never saw anybody that looked like me outside you know? I mean that the things that I, I read John Muir, Thoreau, of course, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, Rachel Carson. And I love those and I teach those now here at the University of Mississippi in environmental writing and and environmental literature classes.

05:05
But they were just simply no Asian Americans or at least not that I had access to, and I know that there were Asian American authors out there, so I guess I point my finger out at the publishers and other professors, you know, why were these books not taught, why were these books not published? And I'm hoping that in 2021 we are opening the table a little bit wider to who, whose stories can be told.
And who gets to be outside safely and tell about it, and why, why is that. So this little slide here, if you could take a look, yes, that is four year old me.

05:47
And a question that I asked my students is what brings you comfort from the natural world where do you feel your shoulders fall a little bit where do you feel safest? I know for me that's very purposely chose that picture that's me and my parents rose garden in the suburbs of Chicago. But it still is the place where I feel the most at home, and they're retired now in central Florida, but walking with them in their garden is the place where I feel the most relaxed. And, You know my mother's from the Philippines, my father is from India and I witnessed as a young girl, I didn't have the vocabulary, for it, but I witness people making fun of their accents you know my mother is a doctor or a retired doctor.

06:34
And you know I would routinely see cashiers tell her like “speak English, I don't understand your words,” you know, when she was obviously speaking English and I didn't --you know she always held up her head high, my father always held his head up high, but they were constantly mocked for their accents, they were constantly told “go back to where you came from,” and you know, I didn't plan this at all, but you can see the horrific events that happened in Atlanta what happens when you constantly keep Asian Americans out of stories of the outdoors, when you just don't see them, when you don't hear them, and when you dehumanize them.

07:16
So my hope is that, with this collection of 30 plants and animals, with the little snippets of memoir in between, is that people get to see, yeah Asian Americans love the outdoors and we're here too, so let's just let's, let's give a chance for everybody to tell their stories of the outdoors because it's 2021 not 1951. Thank you so much.

Heather Swan:
07:46
Thank you so much Aimee, um, really important message, right now, especially.

Patricia Vieira is Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Georgetown University and Senior Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra. She is the author of *States of Grace: Utopia in Brazilian Culture* and in addition to the forthcoming *The Mind of Plants*, has co-edited *Portuguese Literature and the Environment*, *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature,* and *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World*.

Patricia Isabel Lontro Marder Vieira:
08:26
So hi everyone what you're seeing is actually the website of the mind of plants and The Mind of Plants and myself are thrilled to be here and be part of this first episode of the ASLE spotlight, and I would like to start by thanking the organizers of this event and it's really a pleasure to share this virtual room with with everyone else, and then with such great authors and colleagues. So what I'll do is just briefly some of what The Mind of Plants is about and it's it's a book that i'm editing with a biologist Monica Gagliano and the literature scholar, and the poet John Ryan and beyond the three of us the book has more than 50 other contributors, so I am actually here today as the representative of a kind of a collective, so to speak.

09:22
And Monica, John and I, we have co-edited two other books before that Heather mentioned, The Green Thread and the Language of Plants, and both of these books were academic books about the relationships that are established between human and humans and plants in different ways.

09:40
And with The Mind of Plants we build on, on these previous publications, but our goal as editors was to do something different this time and The Mind of Plants is really not an academic book. It's a book that includes 40 brief chapters and these chapters are historical accounts, narratives reflections, lyrical essays and much more, and it also includes 14 poems on various plans and their connections to the authors.

10:13
And what we did, to put the book together is we asked authors from a very wide variety of fields, we talked to artists, writers ethnobotanists, anthropologists, literary scholars to select the plant, and this plant would work as a kind of a guiding threads in their interpretation of what the mind of plants is and the ways in which a blend, minds or plant minds, have impacted these authors lives and these authors work.

10:45
And so, the book is an anthology and we have chapters and poems about all sorts of plants, about plants that are very common in North America and in Europe, such as the oak, the Linden tree or the pine tree. We have chapters about plants that humans have domesticated and consumed and eaten for millennia, like the apple tree, the olive tree, wheat, corn, cacao, coffee, tea.

11:15
We have chapters and poems about plants linked to aesthetics, and to religious practices, like the rose or the banyan tree. And we have also a few chapters on mind altering plants and on the link of these plants to indigenous communities all over the world. Some examples are peyote, cannabis, ayahuasca, and so on, and we even have plants in the book that I at least have really never heard of such as the ugly hornwort, which is apparently a tiny plant that can be found in several herbaria throughout the world; so the book really has a plant for everyone and for everyone's taste.

11:58
And what we did is, we decided to organize all the essays and all the poems alphabetically by common plant name, and the idea was to really highlight the protagonism of the plants themselves in the book. So the artists and the poets, the artists in the book they chose the plants that they were going to write about but, to a certain extent, the plants also chose them. And so as editors, we saw the anthology as the kind of the outcome of a collaboration between the authors, uh, the human authors, and the plants themselves.

12:37
And all of these chapters and poems are a collection of personal narratives and the chapters are filled with experiences, with anecdotes with musings. But they also offer insights into the different meanings and dimensions of the mind of plants by these authors who, who live and work with plants on a daily basis.

13:03
So, as I said, what you're seeing on your screen is the website of the project, so if you're interested in it, you can always take a look at some excerpts, some videos by the authors talking about the specific plant they wrote about, and there's also information about each plant that the authors gave us. I also wanted to use this opportunity to just let you know that we are, the editors are, organizing a symposium on April 9, which is actually April 8 US time, but April 9 Australian time, on the book. So the symposium is free and it's open to the public, so I'll just put the link to the symposium in the chat, so anyone who's interested can, can have a look and can see if that's something they would like to participate in. Everyone's really welcome to to be a part of it so thanks everyone.

Heather Swan
14:02
Thank you so much.

So our next author is Sarah Giragosian, who author of the poetry collections *Queer Fish, The Death Spiral*, as well as co-editor, with Virginia Konchan of *Marbles on the Floor: How to Assemble a Book of Poems,* and she teaches at the University at Albany. So, um, Sarah?

Sarah Giragosian
14:32
Thank you so much Heather, and thank you so much to ASLE for putting this on, I'm really thrilled to be here. So my book is called The Death Spiral, and if you look at the left hand of your screen, you can see the death spiral in action. It actually refers to a courtship ritual among raptors locking talons in mid-air; they cartwheel toward earth, risking death until determining when or if to let go. If they survive the sun, they validate the fitness of their potential mate, if not the test can end in a fatal collision with the earth. You can think of it as the ultimate first date.

15:09
So, written during the years of the Trump era and the consequent exacerbation of xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and the sixth mass extinction, the death spiral is a conceit for our fraught political times and the sense of precarity that I experienced as a queer woman married to an immigrant.

15:27
Like the eagles in their precarious death dance, we are each of us mutually dependent upon one another, entangled, and yet survival in this age, the Anthropocene, may be a practice of letting go, learning a position to one another and the earth, that is less rapacious. For me, it is a practice of letting go of the world as I have known it, the death spiral is part love letter, part death notice, to the earth and its creatures. It is also a source for sources of resilience--a search for sources of resilience--in the queer imaginary and animal ontologies.

16:00
The death spiral asks what it means to be a human animal in our age, to be at once a meddler, a tinkerer a destroyer, a killer, as well as a rehabilitator and steward. It is addressed to those who are interested in rethinking our role in the natural world from a position of dominance to one of coexistence, and reimagining our planetary citizenship as one defined by an ethics of responsibility towards one another, the earth and its creatures.

16:27
A response to the Anthropocene, the death spiral also asks “what is nature?” (in ironic quotes) but something of us and beyond us. It is the incarcerated bittern and so isolated from her own species that she falls in love with the zoo director, the sea cucumber slick with oil, the smoke stack studded sky, the scientist toying with the extinct mammoth’s DNA.

16:50
Both in this collection, and in my volunteer work as a wildlife rehabber, I'm interested in how animals can serve as muses, teachers, and agents of cultural intervention. If climate change and the extinction crisis dramatize the limits of the imagination, I wish to explore how animals can help to recall us to the embodied, communicative, psychic, and sensory material, out of which the imagination makes and

transforms meaning. Embodiment, for example, teaches us about the measure of one's biological limits and potentialities, as well as the fact that the measure varies from body to body, from species to species.

17:27
For most humans without technological aids, this means a peripheral eye span of approximately 120 degrees of arc, of sense of smell 10,000 times less acute than that of a dog, and a taste receptivity to sweetness that some animals, such as felines, simply do not possess. There is no monolithic world, just as there's no monolithic animal, and many animals inhabit worlds that extend beyond the foreshortened world of the human, such as that of the platypus, who senses his pray through the electric receptive sensors of his bill.

17:59
So many of my forays into these questions spring from my work with injured raptors, which has taught me about negotiating power and vulnerability, about communicating through embodied presence in non threatening ways, for example, no eye contact or sudden movements. That work helped me to think through the possibilities and limits of human-animal intersubjectivity when writing my collection. Thank you.

Heather Swan
18:27
Thank you so much, Sarah. And finally we have Callum.

Cal, you go by Cal, Cal Angus, who is a trans writer and editor currently based in Portland Oregon his work has appeared in, um, *National Brut, maybe?* I'm sorry I've never seen this abbreviation before, but *West Branch, LA Review of Books, Catapult, The Common, Seventh Wave Magazine* and elsewhere. He has received support from the Lambda Literary and Signal Fire Foundation for the Arts, and holds an MFA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He edits the journal *smoke and mold*, and his first book of stories, *A Natural History of Transition,* is forthcoming from Metonymy Press in April 2021.

Cal Angus
19:14
Thank you Heather, thank you ASLE, and Patricia, Sarah, and Aimee, it's really nice to be able to come together with all of you and talk about words nature and stories after a couple of very painful days for our Asian American friends, and our country as a whole, so thank you.

19:34
Without further ado. The Trans body is considered unnatural, it's changes supposedly go against nature with few in mainstream literature medicine or history, acknowledging that history-- that nature--is nothing but change. My aim isn't to show that trans people are natural, but to illuminate the many ways in which nature and the environment are trans in their very essence.

19:58
A Natural History of Transition, my book, was originally going to be a work of nonfiction exploring instances of transition and fluid gender in nature. But this direction felt like it presupposed a divide between the human and the nonhuman, implicitly arguing that trans could only be natural because of the abundant instances in nature available to reveal the lie of our rigid human genders. And it also

seemed to rely too heavily on natural history as a rational, chronological disciplines, without examining its deep contradictions and colonial path to scientific fact.

20:37
It could be said that searching for instances of transition in nature actually robs us of our power of metaphor, even though, at first glance, it might seem to be giving us more basis for comparison. Take, for example, *Haliclona,* the sea sponge pictured here in the slide, for whom gender means little. It's special power is that if it's forced through a sieve, so that all of its cells are dispersed and it's like so many beads spilled it on the floor, dead, we might call it, it's cells can then reaggregate and find one another, and it can become a whole organism again. What is more trans than the ability to dissolve the oneness of you, and then reconstitute, groping in the dark after great turmoil.

21:25
When I moved to fiction to explore these ideas, I realized that I had been writing all along these stories that were sort of digestion and reconstitution of all the transformation metaphors and myths I'd been fed throughout a lifetime of consuming stories about the transformative power of nature and hormones. Transformation reincarnated and remixed. Throughout many of these stories included here I'm interested more in the characters relationships with the physical and built environment than I am in their psychology, and I think there's room for more fictional works that explore these relationships, as we move forward.

22:03
Relationships with geology, with the vast currents of air and water that swirl above and below us, with the networks of mycelium that stretch for contorted miles beneath our feet. I think those relationships could deal with some more fictional unpacking, and I don't see a reason why trans characters aren't a good place to start with our own unique concerns about being born and created, nature and nurture, preservation and display. And, I'll just finish with reading a short excerpt from one of the stories within, it's called The Moon Snail, and it reimagines Gertrude Stein's time at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Lab in 1893, where she studied embryology before turning to poetry afterwards.

22:49
She found herself using the, using the lab's way of looking on other things like silverware, the drape of a dress, fallen down barns. A poet makes science out of everything the scientist ignores. She tried opening her viewfinder wider, found she could make a study of the folds of fabric in a skirt, the slatted fences, the slots left open, the kettle's curves. She grasped the space between the words of fishermen speech, the rocking boats, how frightening the amount she could miss. Once in a while she'd be waiting her turn at the nets, or on the beach alone, and everything would stick, slow down to freezing and then come unglued. So easy to separate things from what made them separate, from what made separate thingness desirable, all could be strung along the necklace of thingness, an abacus of those and thises. Thank you.

Heather Swan
23:38
Thank you so much Cal. I think we're going to have some questions now.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
23:46
Yeah, thank you all so much for, for what you shared, for the gorgeous images, and I'm seeing some silent applause, and we'll join thanking all four of you for your words, and Heather for those introductions. We'll take the time, Heather and I have prepared a couple of questions, but also want to invite our panelists if there are things you would like to ask each other as we respond, please do, and then for the audience, if you would queue up questions that you have you're welcome to put them in the chat, or to indicate in the chat that you have a question so that Heather and I can call on you, and let you ask that in your own voice.

24:25
So I'll start and and circle back to some of each of you touched on this in some way, but I wonder if you might elaborate a little. My question is around the generosity that I see in the work that I read from you and, in the words that you've shared today, and I wonder what you hope your readers will perceive through their encounters with the worlds and words you share, because it seems to me that you're extending to an audience a gift of imagination.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil (she/her)
25:07
I'll, I'll go first, I didn't, I didn't know, I wanted to be polite and give a chance. Um, you know I mean really, it's always hard to say like, oh my hopes for this book is like, because honestly my book was released in the middle of a pandemic, and this is already gone beyond all of my hopes and dreams for what who this book can reach. I just assumed, it was going to be swept under the rug, but the most miraculous thing happened is that I think we've been feeling so isolated from each other and people have read, have turned to books, not not just my book, but turned to books in general to feel that kind of connection and my hope in particular with what I'm trying to do in World of Wonders is that people encounter a creature, like the axolotl, for example.

25:55
Maybe they have not had experience with one, or have not ever seen one before, but my hope is that they feel tender towards things that they haven't experienced directly before, as well as some of the more common animals, like a monarch butterfly so that, in turn, that shows that you don't have to have experience, for example with Iraqi children, to feel tenderness towards Iraqi children, you should be able to translate care and concern for plants and animals that you've never seen before, to the human world as well, and to show that we're all really connected. And in that way, I hope that we all feel tenderness towards each other and to ourselves as well, because we I think we've come out of a year, where there was so much, violence and hate, and just fear of people that are different, and my hope is that we see how similar we truly are while appreciating the differences.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
26:57
Thank you Aimee, and any of the, Sarah I see you unmuted.

Sarah Giragosian
27:02
Yes, um, yeah I agree with Aimee, I think you know, the question of animal representation is always fraught in a Western context. You know we've seen the ways in which certain people's minorities have been tied to, you know, racist and sexist and homophobic projects, and we're living in a time in which

we're seeing the effects of racism, xenophobia, homophobia in the political sphere, in really you know, a dramatic fashion, and so I think animals, at least in my book, are a way to kind of think through, you know, the questions of embodiment what it means to represent a creature, with a different story and life world than our own, and think about questions of justice, how do I do justice to the animal is there. And how can animals teach us not just about our environment, but also about culture.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
28:11
Thank you.

Patricia Isabel Lontro Marder Vieira
28:14
Perhaps I can pick up on what Sarah just said, because I think a lot of what she said about animals would also work for plants, and, and it's also what we aim that if, if there is a name to any book, but what we hope for, I think, is really a better word for the book is really, In the mind of plants, the contributors show that plants have a mind of their own, and this has been a part of you know, indigenous stories about plants, a part of literature about the poetry, and even a part of religion for a long time.

28:48
And, and I think our contributors just they just show this in a very creative way, that plants are not just these passive beings, but they do have a mind of their own. And, and through these personal stories that the contributors, share in the book, they show that plants have a really strong connection to humans, and our hope is that the book will bring readers closer to the mind the plants. And there's do it again as a kind of an embodied and embedded form of being. And so it is not a mind that is abstract like, like the human mind has been conceived for a long time, but it's really a lived, embodied mind that plants have and that we also share with plants, so the book helps us to see in which ways we as humans are close to plants in the same way as, as we are, Sarah just mentioned, very close to animals as well.

Cal Angus
29:43
I don't know that I can add much to what has been added in response, but just that it's, it's really fun to talk about this book, in particular on a panel with these three authors, devoted to the human and the non human, because I think it's interesting in that question, who also gets to be categorized in that category of human, who has been included in that in the past. zsnd to put that in relation to, you know, the the stories of other animals and also. you know, earth and water, and, and other things like that is something that I hope readers will get from this collection of stories as well. There's also like a pretty big through line of collecting and preservation, and sort of natural history museums throughout this this certain collection of stories that I have too. And so i'm interested in pushing on that and seeing how that's created the these categories of human/not human as, as they're shown to the rest of the world.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
30:52
Thank you all, I so appreciate those answers, and heather I think your question is a perfect follow up for some of the words we've heard and some of what's appearing in the chat.

Heather Swan
31:03
So thank you yeah. It's funny because I had pulled texts from many of you, and many of you just said, the things that I was actually going to call you on so let's just keep the conversation going. Um, Cal since you were just reading and then were just speaking, I think I want to go a little bit further into Moon Snail, and what I will say that I, one of the things that has been overwhelming to me, is just the beauty of all of your writing. But anyway, I'm going to just say a bit more that I read; this was actually from your, from the edit, the editor's note in your journal smoke and mold.

31:47
But I love the quote, um: “climate change and trans people, both are realities difficult for the cis population to understand, both involve patterns of change and regeneration not easily observable using the templates provided by cisgender and capitalist lives. I don't think amplifying trans writers will change that, the trans writers have been imagining new ways of living and writing for generations, two spirit writers for much longer than that. Despite all this, the trans body is still subject to failure of imagination in the popular consciousness. The trans body is considered (and now I'm kind of repeating what you said) unnatural, its changes supposedly go against nature, with few in mainstream literature medicine or history, acknowledging that nature is nothing but change” and, at the end of this section you say “stories can disrupt a system” which I thought was so great.

32:40
And in the moon snail there's a moment that I really wanted to hear more about and it's, it's the, you know, the, the character of Gertrude is, you know, looking at the snail, and she says she wanted to, its the, the process, “she wanted to slow down and think more about keratin, limestone, calcium, break it down, piece by piece like a moon snail drilling a hole in the shell of a smaller snail and flooding it's caustic juices before slurping it all out. She would like to do that, to the world around her, liquefy it until it bleeds together,” and then later she says “She wants to get inside of it's geometry, part of its perfect equation. She thinks maybe she thinks her and if she can just think shrink her thoughts to fit.”

33:31
What i'm so fascinated by is moving things down to this very granular level, and I'm wondering if this particular work of looking deeply and taking things down to their smallest particles is actually a way to build empathy because, as you were saying in your earlier comments, that idea of, of taking things apart that then reconstituting them, is that, do you think that's empathy building? Is that what, what is the, what do you think your objective is, or just tell me more about that?

Cal Angus
34:03
Yeah, thank you Thank you Heather for that close reading and bringing up the journal, I, I really appreciate that. I think that, looking closely like this way, through, through science, the history of science and this granular level is has been my way in to questions of empathy, particularly because, as a white writer, not just a trans writer, it's been very important to me to read and listen and also cite a lot of the writers of color, especially indigenous writers, that I read and internalize their ideas, and it's important to me not to claim those specifically, while still finding my own way into these issues.

34:48
So, for me, you know, there are many writers and thinkers, Kim TallBear is one, who's thinking about genetics and indigenous sovereignty has really shaped a lot of my thinking about science and biology,

and its relationship to subjecthood. Joshua Whitehead is somebody who writes in fiction, the, the indigi-queer experience, and it's important to me to read those and understand them, and not claim them and find my own way into thinking about issues that relate to the trans body that, I think, have been, I mean the trans body has been under a microscope so intensely, especially in the last, you know, 15 years or so, or, if not forever. And so that has been, that really, really close looking, kind of the work of a naturalist, has been my work way into this subject fictionally.

Heather Swan
35:43
Thank you wow, yeah. Well, and since you brought up an indigenous knowing and knowledge, maybe I'll move actually to Patricia, because of the quote, that I chose from you. I was thinking about how, in one of your interviews, you said that your work has been going in this direction, thinking about the perspectives of non-human beings and what did they bring us, and how could this way of seeing change, you know, our way of being.

36:12
And, but the excerpt that I chose from the book was by Luis Eduardo Luna and what strikes me is that this is a, this is a different way of understanding and knowing plants and using this kind of knowledge, like what happens to, to us, if we think this way, and the questions he asks are: “Now what kind of mind, or minds, am I tapping into? Do they directly have volition,”-- he's talking about the plants—“is it the mind of the plants, of higher intelligence permeating our planet, the mind of the planet itself, the solar system, the galaxy, the whole universe? If it is the mind of the plant, does she have an inner horizon limited to the history of her own individuality, or does it include her parent plants, the whole species, or even a collective plant mind that stretches beyond time and space? Is she a self, what kind of self is she?

37:08
And I think about, when I hear this, I my mind is just expanded, but one of the other things I think about is the kind of limitation that I have, it's very much part of the western, very recent history, right, and so I'm curious Patricia if you think at all about whether this kind of stretching is, you know, is this old thinking, is it new thinking, is it thinking that will create empathy now?

Patricia Isabel Lontro Marder Vieira

37:37
Well that's a great question, and I guess when we chose the name of the book we struggled a bit with the word “mind” exactly because of that, because it has sort of human-centered connotations, and what we wanted to do is to turn that around, and think of the mind as something very broad, and the human mind as one example of the kinds of minds that we find in the world around us, so there are the minds of plants, animals also have minds, and maybe, perhaps even non-living beings have a mind of their own, I mean there is now research into that right? So, mind is something very broad, and then human minds, plant minds, are just examples of what a mind can be. And this is actually even substantiated by recent research on so-called plant signaling and behavior that shows that plants, you know, they can think, they can make choices based on information that they get, they communicate with one another, and so on and so forth, right, and many of these scientific insights, or Western scientific insights, were already known by indigenous people, as you mentioned, right, and and Luis Eduardo Luna he wrote on ayahuasca so he talks about plants in indigenous communities as kind of teachers of indigenous peoples. And many of those plants they are teachers, because they expand the human mind, so they open up the human mind.

39:13
And we're talking here about mind altering plants, as we call them, but for those indigenous people, they really see those plants as entry points into an expanded consciousness, and so lots, several of the authors in the book they, they have this approach to indigenous communities, and we actually have at least one chapter that I remember, there's there's 40 something of them, but there's at least one that is co authored by a member of an indigenous community and an anthropologist, and so I think that that's the one on peyote, for instance, and so there is this idea that through plants, you can unlearn what you thought was the human mind, and think of the mind in in broader terms, that would include not only the human mind, but also the minds of animals and the minds of plants.

40:07
And I think we have a lot to learn from indigenous communities about that, because that's something they already knew, but there's that we, as Western scholars and thinkers have kind of repressed throughout the development of our so-called civilization.

Heather Swan
40:24
Yeah, thank you so much that's wonderful and it actually is an amazing bridge to what I wanted to ask Aimee. So in thinking about what she was saying about teachers, I remember reading an interview with you that, so that when you were a little girl, you must have read science books, and this is what you said, you said:

40:44
“As I was reading these nature and science books, I found myself accidentally question mark placing narratives on these creatures and plants anthropomorphizing them entirely. So that when I did start to read literature, the way I knew how to make sense of human action at interactions was indeed through the vocabulary of the natural world by default. In other words, my language from metaphor, and making connections to the natural world and human relationships, it's really not anything I had to work at but rather how I've always seen the world since I was a little girl.”

41:12
And I just, I'm so aware that your work is studded with all these gems of scientific fact, like my migrating butterflies that take a turn in the middle of a lake, and the fact that the snake has a heart that can slide up and down its body, right, I'm, incredible. But also what I noticed is that in these stories, and this goes to this teaching aspect, it's the wonderful facts about these animals, but they also become like subjects of a parable or a fable often, so like, in the axolotl story um, you know the little girl is experiencing, for those of you who haven't read it, the little girl is experiencing some stereotyping and has received unkindness, because of the color of her skin and quickly we go to the axolotl, who has the ability to have its limbs cut off over and over, and they grow back and they grow back, and they're resilient, but what happens at the very end, Aimee says that “nature has a way of giving us a heads up to stand back and admire them at a distance or behind the glass, and an axolotl’s four legs don't end with sweet millennial pink stars, they are claws.”

Aimee, tell us a little bit about this movement between the animals in their, you know, in their wholeness, in their wonderful being, their miraculous state, but also being teachers, how did, how do you navigate them in your writing?

Aimee Nezhukumatathil (she/her)
42:50
You know it's not something, thank you so much for such a beautiful question and really kind of gets to the core kind of the cross section of this book, in that you know I'm here now, in the south, I still feel someone new though this is my fifth year here, and there's a southern saying you catch more flies with honey. You know, so I definitely I didn't have that in mind when I was writing the book, but I see that, you know, this happens in my class, I think many of us here are educators, you can recognize this when we want to shift thinking. I find, at least for me and and my presence in the classroom, is to kind of point students towards something that they might care about, that they might in fact fall in love with first, and I think, when you get students caring about, oh there's a field of birds, you know sitting, you know sitting on the ground, you know, but when they get to know that it's yellow warbler, and you get to know that beneath the bird call of the yellow warbler is the word sweet-- sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet.

43:54
Those college students, I promise you will never forget that bird when we all go out and, you know, make bird calls to each other, you know, that kind of thing. They have that tenderness, they get to know, they get to put a name to animals that they would just be walking by on campus, you know, that kind of thing. So, my hope is that, and again it was very purposeful that I chose animals that I was hoping people would have a lot of familiarity with, like the monarch butterfly as well as animals, like the cassowary, which I've never seen before, which is a you know, an animal that can, bird, that can kill humans, because of its giant middle claw, and it's only found in New Zealand.

44:39
But there's a tenderness with the cassowary too, it's usually depicted, there's no stuffed cassowaries that you can cuddle, you know, that kind of thing, nobody wears really shirts, unless you're a bird nerd, that has a cassowary on it, you know. They're kind of a traditionally ugly bird, it's royal blue and it's got like a giant turkey wattle kind of thing, and it's black, it looks like it's got black hideous fur on it instead of feathers, and they're dead-- they're terrifying, to me they are an actual living dinosaur if you don't know what I'm talking about, Look, look them up to get a visual. But what I found so amazing about the cassowary is that, many things, many things, but one in particular is that their sound, their call to each other, your actually human ear can't really hear it. You actually can't. it's so low it registers lower than what most humans can hear so it becomes like a boom, like a boom in your body, like you could feel like you could be walking in a forest or at the edge of the shoreline and if you feel like a boom boom boom. That's a cassowary coming towards you, so you should be running away, or at least being more alert you know that can…

45:41
And I love that feeling, feeling it in your bones, and that's kind of how we all as educators, ah, there's so much science, I know, and I'm not a scientist and there's books that are written by scientists that should be praised and read for sure. But there's that unseen part of why we should be fighting for animals and plants, in its that I feel it with my bones, that we should care about these things, and for me that was again, that was the metaphor, that I came up with, was not knowing how to exactly find the science behind it or not, not necessarily knowing the exact words of science behind it, but feeling it in your bones. That you should be caring about this kind of hideous looking bird as well as the cute, so cute axolotl that looks like it has a smile on his face but it's one of the messiest eaters on the planet, it is kind of revolting when it eats live worms and its claws come out, you know, even though it looks so sweet and pink with its, I'm anthropomorphizing, the smile.

46:56
And I think that's what, that's how humans are you know that's how humans are, we think in poems we think in metaphors we dream and metaphors and poems, so why not use that language to get people caring about plants and animals, why not think back to the language that we used as kids. In April I usually get called into kids classrooms to teach poetry for national poetry month and you know this, I mean kids are the best metaphor makers out there. Something happens, and you know they can rival my MFA students, something happens in middle school or high school where they're taught it's not cool anymore, to make metaphors when they're exclaiming over something.

47:40
So, there's a lot of books out there about warnings and things that we should be careful about, I wanted my book to be turning towards wonder, and to remember that four year old in us that exclaimed and said look look look, you know. A kid not too long ago that I taught, a first grader, I didn't know this at the time, but his he lost his mother from cancer. And he you know, I was teaching my metaphor, how to how to explain how they feel, and instead of saying I feel sad, I get to, to thinking about this, he said I'll never forget, he said “I carry two clouds in my pocket.” And I just like, how would you not want to go back to that language again, you know what I mean? so sorry, I get choked up thinking about this little kid but It just shows like.

48:28
I wanted us to, I wrote this book in 2016 as my, as my response to hatred and trying to explain it to my six and nine year old kids and I wanted to use the language that I love, and that is metaphor so, I don't, I'm not a scientist, I know there's gonna be some ornithologist out there that say that's not exactly what a yellow warbler sounds like, but you know what, my students all love the yellow warbler now, um, and I'd put money over marbles that that happened because we all went out there and use metaphor, to call the birds.

Heather Swan
49:06
Yeah that's so beautiful and you're right, I mean the thing about poetry, is that it lifts, lifts the pedestrian language to another level that can hold some of these things that we often can't quite hold. This I love the two clouds, oh my gosh.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil (she/her)
49:23
Oh, my gosh I know, I'm sorry I’m such a dork, but I just think, I cannot forget that statement, and that's, but I didn't teach him that he knew them you know, came up with on his own, I can't take credit for that, that's kids naturally finding language to process hard difficult feelings, you know, and I think about the kid at least once a week, you know, and I just want to protect him with all my my...

Heather Swan
49:50
Thank you so much for sharing that, well so thinking about poetry, it's the perfect time to move to Sarah and your work on the. The quote, that I was actually going to use of yours, was the one that you read, which was about your manuscript: Wanting to use the human as a meddler, a tinkerer, a destroyer, a killer, as well as a rehabilitator and a steward. And you say in there, that you are concerned about reimagining our planetary citizenship, and one of the things that you said in your comments, is that the way that to do that, it is in part in embodiments so maybe you can say a bit about that.

50:31
But I do want to read this little section of a poem called “Superstitions of a Naturalist” and I think that what's interesting is that there is a bit of warning here, right. It said “if you trifle with a chrysalis your child will be as stunted as a chaste tree, aphids will infest your dreams. Kill an orchard orb Weaver, and a riot of mosquitoes will fill up on your flesh; worse still, pull the wings of a spicebush swallowtail and every meal will taste stale for a year. This is, I mean that's terrifying stuff right, but what I find is that what you've done is, you are really, you are really making it pointed that that we have a choice right, that this is there will be repercussions. I just wanted to invite you to talk a little bit about, about how you are planning to achieve this reimagining planetary citizenships through your poetry, maybe with warning, or maybe with the embodiment that you also, that you talked about earlier.

Sarah Giragosian
51:33
Yeah, thank you for that great question Heather and um, you know I think I can just kind of follow some of the things that Aimee was just saying, you know I'm filled with despair and anxiety about the, about climate change and the ecological crisis, but there's also, I think, great joy that Aimee's writing recalls me to, joy and grief can live side by side. And you know my work with animals as a rehabilitator I think has taught me a lot about the ways in which culture and nature interface.

52:12
We tend to think about culture and nature traditionally in a western world as dichotomous, but you know animals contribute to culture, I know that when I was writing my dissertation, I took a lot of breaks watching Meerkat Manor, and reminding myself about the ways in which meerkats have fairly sophisticated cultural roles, some act as sentries, some act as caretakers. And you know, we need to be reminded of the ways in which animals and the environment contribute to our culture, can be part of the poetic process, so there is wonder, and I think there is joy in that. Um yeah I mean with questions of embodiment, you know I there's never a complete transparency between consciousnesses, and especially between the human and animal. But I think that you know, having some basis and scientific knowledge, doing our research, grounding in facts, but also perhaps at times, highlighting the constuctedness of my imaginings, so “Superstitions of a Naturalist” is one of those poems that I think does that, like, how can I encourage a deconstructive reading strategy or how can I highlight the ways in which this is really a product of the human imagination.

53:40
So that i'm not simply like appropriating an animal experience and calling it my own, right, so, yeah and, finally, I think there's also great joy and seeing the animals around me, such as the ones that I work with, acting as readers and interpreters of the world around them. You know, so I learned a lot from the crow the cranky crow that I work with, he was always kind of putting me in my place and, and was very attuned to the world around him. So you know these animals helped me to think about agency and about, and humility.

Heather Swan
54:24
wow beautiful, beautiful answers, my goodness. Um so, Laura have you been noticing the questions in the chat we have any time for questions at the chat from.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
54:36
Well we are right up against our time limit, so there are some wonderful comments and questions in the chat and I will maybe not take those, but rather ask our panelists if there is anything you would like to leave us with as a as a closing thought. And we'll go we'll go round in whatever order you all would like but encourage you, if you have not been reading the chat, there's some vibrant discussion there.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil (she/her)
55:06
I just wanted to thank ASLE, for, I don't want to speak for my panelists but I, this has been the most, I just wanted to say, I would be remiss if I didn't, this has been the most diverse environmental panel I've ever been a part of. I'm so grateful that ASLE is doing this, I couldn't even imagine this 20 years ago. Most of the syllabi, actually all of the syllabi I encountered, I never had LGBTQ author on it, certainly never a brown person on it, I would have loved to have seen various responses to the outdoors. And my white husband would be the first person to say he would have wanted to see more responses than, than the syllabus he had when he was an undergrad and Grad student as well, so thank you so much, and I would just say to the educators out there, please as you're coming up with your syllabi, coming up, please do think of including diverse voices. Students need to hear from the LGBTQ community, they need to see Latino, they need to see Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, first and foremost. Please don't hit print on your syllabus if you don't have a native American writer on there. And I just thank you so much to ASLE because you've done so much work in making this such a vibrant organization and it wasn't the case I don't think that you know you know, a decade ago or 20 years ago, so thank you ASLE.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
56:38
Thank you so much Aimee, we're honored by your words and very much appreciate that, and echo your call to educators, to be attentive to the voices around them.

Sarah Giragosian
56:55
i'll just echo what Aimee said, thank you, this has been a wonderful panel, it's really an honor for me to be able to be in conversation with all of you, many of you are my teachers and you know I've been thinking alongside your writing so I appreciate this opportunity so much.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
57:15
Thank you Sarah so much.

Cal Angus
57:18
Yeah just, just jumping into agree, and that it's so great to get to talk with all of you and I always, I'm excited to leave this session with more things to read and think about and write about for myself, in response to many of you, so thank you so much.

57:35
Thank you Cal.

Patricia Isabel Lontro Marder Vieira
57:38
Again, I would like to thank all the participants and to think as leave for this opportunity, and it was great that we were together here to think about animals and also plants, not just as these backgrounds to our lives or even, as you know, kind of passive beings that are just there, or often we think of them as victims of the Anthropocene, and it was, it's really nice to see us thinking about animals and plants as having really an agency and the will and the desire of their own, and it's I think it's wonderful if we could translate that into more practical connection to animals and plants, so that's I think the whole vibe I have for the work of all of us here together that that this would then, kind of have repercussions in in life outside of zoom when that it would all be good to see our companions on the planet in a different way.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
58:38
Thank you so much Patricia appreciate that response and your call to leave zoom and go into the world with the gift of today. Heather, any closing words from you? So appreciate those really rich questions, the texture of them was fantastic and helpful for our discussion.

Heather Swan
58:57
Thank you very much, I'm so honored to be here, I guess what I want to make sure is that in the chat somehow there's a way for all of the participants to order these books these amazing people wrote so just to make sure that they're in there, I haven't been able to read through anything because we've been talking. But anyway, yeah buy these books, they're amazing and thank you all for being here today.

Laura Barbas-Rhoden
59:22
Thank you all, we will make the record of the chats preserved and links to the books are dropped in there, so if you went to grab them I won't sign us off. If you would like to grab any of the comments or the links right away and know that there'll be coming soon, we hope to see you at our next event and just about one month from now, in April, and look forward to having many, many more wonderful conversations, like the one today, thank you. We cannot thank you enough for the for the time you've spent together with us as a Community.