My interview with a mountain: A curious and imaginative practice of speculative fabulation

Authors:
Ms Tracy Trägårdh[1]
[0009-0003-8705-983X]

Affiliation:
[1] Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University, Sweden

E-mail:
tracy.tragardh@mau.se

Abstract

How do we listen to the unheard voices of the landscape and tell their stories? This article explores Hannah Arendt's concept of plurality, Ursula Le Guin's storytelling, and Aldo Leopold's ecological philosophy to understand and engage with multispecies stories. Through a storytelling session with a coffee farmer and a speculative interview with a mountain, inspired by Le Guin's (2015 [1974]) short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds', this article conducts a playful and creative act of fabulation. Moving beyond Arendt's (2018) concept of plurality, it considers a political space open to heterogeneity. This approach invites reflection on organisations' ethical obligations concerning heterogeneity. By relating Arendt's ideas to Leopold's (1949) idea to "think like a mountain", the article highlights how both perspectives encourage a broader, more ethical engagement with the world. This interdisciplinary exploration bridges creativity, philosophy, and ethics, creating a deeper connection between humans and the worlds around us.

1.   Introduction

> And with them, or after them, may there not come that even bolder adventurer – the first geolinguist, who, ignoring the delicate, transient lyrics of the lichen, will read beneath it the still less communicative, still more passive, wholly atemporal, cold, volcanic poetry of the rocks: each one a word spoken, how long ago, by the earth itself (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:303).

Sustainability is often viewed as a choice between ecological and social priorities. Yet, the crises we face today – environmental destruction, social injustice, economic inequality – are deeply

interconnected, cascading and mutually reinforcing. More specifically, we are experiencing what is described as a poly-crisis: a situation where multiple crises overlap and interact, amplifying their overall impact. According to The World Economic Forum (2023), a poly-crisis occurs when economic, environmental, geopolitical, and social challenges reinforce each other, creating a more complex and severe global threat. These interconnected crises create a complex web of challenges that are increasingly difficult to address in isolation. The suffering of millions is entangled with the suffering of our planet, and they are not so easily separated into neat and distinct categories.

However, the poly-crisis is not a product of happenstance but a result of deeper, underlying structures (Chakrabarty, 2021). This complex web of crises stems from a failure in our abilities to perceive, engage with, reflect on, and relate to various realities (Cooper et al., 2024). These failures form a meta-crisis, driving a multitude of crises due to systemic failures in our social, political, economic, and environmental structures. For instance, Ergene et al. (2024) discuss how current solutions to the grand challenges often perpetuate racial inequality. They argue that addressing climate change requires feminist and postcolonial epistemologies rooted in racial justice, necessitating a paradigmatic transformation in social and environmental research in management and organisational studies. Their work points to inadequacies in our systems of knowledge, governance, and ethical responsibilities, which fail to account for the entangled nature of social and environmental injustices. According to Bruno Latour (2018), social justice needs to be redefined in light of climate change, which defines the entire political order, influencing our understanding of identity, subsistence, and attachment to place. As we grapple with the meta-crisis, conventional, human-centred perspectives are insufficient. These complex challenges call for new ways of thinking and being that transcend traditional frameworks.

New frameworks, which invite marginalised perspectives and acknowledge the broader social, ecological, and ethical dimensions often overlooked, need to be conceptualised. Inspired by Ursula Le Guin's (2015 [1974]) exploration of non-human language in her short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds', this article blends creative writing with ecological insights. It moves beyond Arendt's concept of plurality (2018) to consider a political space open to heterogeneity (McCullagh, 2019). Deleuze's (2006) notion of fabulation and Haraway's (2016) call for multispecies collaboration further inform this study, highlighting the importance of collecting stories of the landscape.

Attuning to Aldo Leopold's (1949) call to "think like a mountain", this article seeks to understand how the voices we encounter can provide insight into how we can open the political space to heterogeneity, necessary for reconciling ecological and social sustainability. Featuring an affective storytelling session with a coffee farmer in Puerto Rico and a speculative interview with the mountain he cultivates, the exploration reveals the reciprocal relationship between humans and landscapes, uncovering personal, cultural, and ecological histories. The speculative interview, a creative act, invites us to think *with* more-than-human others and embrace heterogeneity as a crucial part of organisational thought. Utilising the "we-voice" (Bekhta, 2017), the Mountain's story

resists reduction to a singular perspective, emphasising its collective identity and challenging traditional frameworks.

The article is organised as follows: First, we take a quick look at multispecies research as an emerging field, focusing on the importance of multispecies storytelling. Following the mountain path, I introduce the farmer and his story, a practical example of multispecies storytelling. We then explore Aldo Leopold's land ethic, Ursula Le Guin's short story, and Hannah Arendt's concepts of plurality and storytelling, contextualising the stories within broader philosophical and ecological discussions. The article concludes by synthesising insights from the stories and theoretical explorations, highlighting implications for organisational thought and practice. This section emphasises the need for heterogeneity in organisational approaches and invites readers to engage in multispecies storytelling as a means of ethical re-worlding. Woven throughout the text are excerpts from my interview with the Mountain. These excerpts serve to illustrate the concept of speculative fabulation and its role in creating new ways of thinking and relating, offering moments to disengage and to embrace moments of disorientation.

> **Researcher:** Can you tell me a little about yourself?
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> **Mountain:** Where to start? There is so much to tell! We are not as simple as we look. We are complex with layers of history, but we can start at the very beginning. We erupted from the ocean floor. Breaking through the ocean's surface spewing lava and ash into the sky announcing our arrival, it was spectacular! Did you know that part of us is Pacific crustal rock. Imagine that! All the way from the Pacific. When most think of mountains they think we are sedentary, always standing sentinel but even in our slow movement we can never truly sit still. Like most youth we eventually calmed down, the eruptions ceased, and we began to cool off and hardened ourselves. Once rain began to fall our volcanic rock eroded into soil. The first pioneers, hardy mosses and lichens took root and over time came ferns and shrubs, transforming us into green forests. Soon more complex plants began to grow, like the soil and the rocks, the plants, animals, rivers have all become a part of us.

2.   A quick word regarding multispecies storytelling

Engaging with more-than-human perspectives can help organisations consider ethical and sustainable practices that acknowledge the heterogeneous collective of voices shaping our world and practices. Storytelling is a form of resistance against the limitations of our thinking, promoting a reimagined organisational landscape that is attuned to ecological and social realities. By merging philosophical, ecological, and creative storytelling approaches, this study highlights the need for heterogeneity in organisational thought and practice. It challenges us to rethink how we listen to the world around us, inviting others to engage in multispecies storytelling as a means of ethical re-worlding in response to the interconnected crises we face.

Having a conversation or conducting an interview with a mountain may seem fanciful or whimsical. However, this unconventional method uncovers valuable insights into hidden perspectives and offers us a chance to explore the heterogeneity of our collective world with polite curiosity. Polite curiosity (Despret, 2005, 2016) is a form of attentive, respectful inquiry that involves listening and engaging with others, human and non-human, without imposing one's assumptions or dominating the interaction. To engage with polite curiosity with the unheard voices of the more-than-human world, we must approach the stories of beaches, rivers, forests, lichen, ants, and penguins with openness and respect, allowing them to reshape our understanding.

Multispecies research is growing (Hartigan, 2021; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Kohn, 2013; Ogden et al., 2013; Van Dooren et al., 2016; Westerlaken, 2020). Within this subfield, multispecies storytelling is referred to as a methodology or critical research approach that can draw attention to the plurality of voices and temporalities, decentre the human, and foreground intra-active transformation (Hohti & Tammi, 2023). Rantala and Höckert (2023:63) cultivate "the art of attentiveness with multispecies actors living at the margins of our everyday attention", suggesting that much of the world exists beyond our scope of awareness. Similarly, inter-species stories, as noted by Van Dooren (2014), can reconnect humans with the ongoing impacts of environmental destruction. McEwan (2022) advances more-than-human and non-human geographies by considering plant agency in contested ecologies, using phytography to conceptualise plants as agentic storytellers. McEwan argues that to engage in multispecies storytelling with plants helps better conceptualise the ethics and contested ecologies associated with biodiversity loss. Through case studies of proteas, McEwan explores how we come to know plants and what kind of ethics emerges from this engagement.

In their exploration of posthuman affirmative business ethics, Sayers et al. (2021) argue that feminist speculative fiction is a resource for reimagining ethical relations between humans and non-humans. Valtonen and Pullen (2021) explore the emotional and ethical bonds between humans and rocks. As they recount their encounters with rocks, from the Arctic to Australia, they acknowledge the agency of the rocks, advocating for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the Earth. Anna Tsings's book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), follows the ecological and commercial legacies of the matsutake mushroom, combining human and non-human elements, to explore world-making projects in the Anthropocene. Through her study, we find the different ways mushrooms, humans, and other beings interrelate, highlighting the complexities of ecological systems and the interconnectedness of life in the Anthropocene. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway argues for multispecies collaboration and storytelling as a response to the Anthropocene. Haraway's approach emphasises the necessity of engaging with a diverse 'we', encouraging *thinking-with* and kinship for ecological re-worlding.

In the works of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, fabulation is a concept that unites art and philosophy, influencing the way we conceptualise the Earth and its inhabitants (Wiame, 2018). For Deleuze, the new Earth "to be fabulated is an earth for and of

thought" (Wiame, 2018:537). Ronald Bogue (2010:9) characterises Deleuzian fabulation as an experimentation on the real, a process that aligns with the need to develop new narratives and ethical frameworks that better address sustainability concerns and our entanglement with the world through the act of fabulating a new Earth. Additionally, Bogue (2007, 2010) explains that Deleuze takes up Henri Bergson's notion of fabulation and gives it political meaning, suggesting that the act of storytelling can be a form of political action and transformation. Fabulation is both creative and collective. Though Deleuze never had the chance to elaborate further on the political sense of fabulating, storytelling is at the core of Arendt's political philosophy. The act of fabulating or telling stories of the new Earth emphasises the role of imagination and creativity in shaping new understandings and relationships with the world. The new Earth is not to be discovered, but actively created through thought and stories.

> **Researcher:** What do you like about being a mountain?
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> **Mountain:** What we like about being a mountain? ...ehh...hmm... We like to think of ourselves as a keeper of stories. We preserve, share and pass down stories through time. The stories are etched into every stone and tree. The coffee plants that thrive on, around, and with us do so because we were fiery youth, and over time, the conditions became just right. You can taste our story in the coffee. We are the coffee, and the coffee is us. We are reptiles, amphibians, shrews, and mongooses. We are iguanas basking in the sun and bats fluttering at dusk, the sound of the flowing rivers and the fish. These are all our stories, and we are theirs.

3.   Along the mountain path

As we journey down the mountain path, let us explore the entanglement of a mountain through storytelling sessions with a coffee farmer in Puerto Rico and a speculative interview. The storytelling sessions with the farmer involved two in-depth conversations about his relationship with the land and his experiences in farming, revealing the intricate relations between farmer and mountain. This writing builds on previous research (Trägårdh, 2020) in organisational studies, where I explored the stories of farmers. Finding stories of farmers tangled with the land they cultivate helped me to start thinking differently about organising for sustainability and collaboration. The research engaged with Bruno Latour's (2018) concept of the *Terrestrial*, a political orientation that emphasises knowledge, sensitivity, and care for otherness, to explore what it means to live and organise among the earthbound.

During five sessions, farmers generously shared stories about their journeys into farming, their love of the land, and their disillusionment with the island's political situation. I was struggling with writer's block while trying to figure out how to approach the data. Despite the farmers' generosity, something was missing. To deal with my writer's block and to get out of my head, I decided to take a break and enjoy a moment of creativity.

I had no intention of doing anything with it. I just wanted to remind myself to play, and so sought refuge in creative writing.

Inspired by Le Guin's storytelling (2015 [1974]), whom we will visit shortly, I engaged in an exercise of speculative fabulation, writing a short story from the perspective of a mountain in Puerto Rico, a silent witness to the ebb and flow of human existence. I found myself not thinking *for* or *about* the mountain but *with* it. Unbeknownst to myself, this creative endeavour would later emerge as the key to unveiling the stories I didn't realise were absent, marking a transformative journey. It was what helped find the missing piece. Taking those insights a step further, I thought I would ask the Mountain itself for its stories.

The speculative interview involved listening to the landscape and exploring often-overlooked geologic stories while encountering the strangeness and challenges of engaging with the otherness of the world. Engaging in multispecies storytelling through speculative interviews involves a process of exploration and significant shifts in thinking that are far more radical than one might expect. I know that I can never actually know what the Mountain will say, but I can pretend otherwise. I began with a simple question, "Can you tell me about yourself?", and I let my imagination visit the southern end of an island in the Atlantic Ocean, to the Cordillera Central mountain range, where on the side of a mountain, a river flows past a small wooden house, coffee grows along the slopes, and a farmer leads his horse to slowly and carefully pick beans.

3.1   Becoming-mountain

The speculative interview with the Mountain was an attempt at an act of creation. At the Tuesday lecture series at the FEMIS film foundation in 1987, Gilles Deleuze gave a lecture 'What is the Creative Act?' (Deleuze, 2006). During his lecture, Deleuze explored creativity across fields including cinema, philosophy, and science. Deleuze (2006:314) noted that each field tells stories in different ways: philosophy with concepts, cinema with blocks of movements/duration, painting invents blocks of lines/colours, and science creates functions. He argued that creativity is the actualisation of the virtual, where new possibilities and realities are brought into existence. Creative acts, according to Deleuze, differ from communication, as communication is the transmission and propagation of information whereas a work of art is an act of resistance, "[o]nly the act of resistance resists death, either as a work of art or as human struggle" (Deleuze, 2006:324). Deleuze connected art to human struggle by suggesting that every work of art calls upon people who do not yet exist. The true connection between art and a people that do not yet exist remains unclear (Deleuze, 2006:324). Art is, therefore, not only a reflection of current realities but transcends the present moment.

Elaine Scarry (2001:112) refers to aesthetic experiences as "small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space [so that] we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before". Similarly, according to Deleuze, art creates new forms of thinking that disrupt conventionally accepted perspectives. The creative act is closely tied to fabulation, which Deleuze describes as

the ability of storytelling to invent new worlds, futures, and becomings (Wiame, 2018). Through fabulation, creative acts not only reflect but also construct new stories, thus connecting deeply with the creation of people who are yet to come. The creative act is life-affirming, and for Deleuze and Guattari, "life, from the beginning, is collective and political" (Saldanha & Stark, 2016:435). Our existence is deeply entangled with collective experience and power dynamics. As the Mountain, we do not exist in isolation. Though we may appear solitary, we are part of larger networks and structures that shape and are shaped by our lives.

These exercises were approached as an alternative reality, where we can speak to and know the non-communicative others of the landscape. This approach allowed for a deeper engagement through the we-voice (Bekhta, 2017). The we-voice is a plural voice that emanates from groups, communities, collectives, or nations, rather than individual characters. It captures a collective subjectivity that cannot be reduced to a single I-voice. According to Bekhta (2020), the we-voice does not reduce a collection of individual identities, or a mix of voices. The experience of the Mountain, for instance, cannot be reduced to a singular perspective. The rocks, plants, animals, and atmospheric conditions are all part of the Mountain's identity. Together, they comprise the collective subjectivity of the we-voice. Reducing the Mountain to a singular 'I' would be to oversimplify the story of the Mountain. The we-voice helps capture social and communal aspects of the Mountain's identity, highlighting how individuals within a group are entangled and how their collective identities shape experiences.

Exploring heterogeneity from the perspective of a mountain on a tropical island allowed my imagination to go visiting, to listen to the voices hidden beneath the rocks and roots that tell the stories of time and change, and to think of the Mountain as a way to embrace the multiplicity within oneself. Importantly, this involves making agential cuts, which "do not mark some absolute separation but a cutting together/apart – 'holding together' of the disparate itself" (Barad, 2012:46). These cuts are "the material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce 'objects' and 'subjects,' and other differences out of, and in terms of, a changing relationality" (Barad, 2007:92-93). For example, in this case, the collective 'we' refers to a single mountain within a larger mountain range. The agential cut distinguishes this mountain from 'they' (the other mountains in the range) and 'it' (a singular rock). Agential cuts are momentary stabilisations, doings rather than beings, that at once define what is inside and outside. Detecting these cuts involves creating them, and creating them involves performing phenomena by diffracting different types of agencies – in other words, how different agencies interact and influence the phenomena under observation. In this context, the agential cut highlights that our understanding and interaction with the Mountain requires active participation and boundary-shaping, which in turn influences our perceptions and engagement.

Through these interactions, we not only shape our understanding of the Mountain but also recognise the importance of perspective in these relationships. This became clear when I read the story I had written from the perspective of a mountain, for the farmer, and his subsequent response, which was the key to opening my thinking. After our interaction,

I found myself standing in a different relation to the world. The farmer is a retired IT specialist in his late 60s who returned to the island after living in the continental United States for 40 years. He is restoring his grandfather's home, which had been abandoned for decades. The farmer has also returned to cultivating coffee with traditional methods, which work with the mountain and preserve biodiversity. It allowed me to think *with* the Mountain instead of *for*. I was sitting in Sweden and could not fly to Puerto Rico and drive into the mountains to sit and listen to what it had to say. Even if I could spend my days walking mountain paths, listening to parrots squawking and babbling brooks, how do I argue that it is a credible interpretation of data with conclusions that are plausible and defensible? In *thinking with*, I translated what I imagined a story the Mountain could tell and told it. For geologists, strata tell stories. Stories about the world that existed long before the hominid species took their first bipedal steps. I am not fluent in the language of geology, but I can imagine otherwise.

When I spoke with the coffee farmer for the first time in May, we discussed farming in general, his neighbours, and his opinions on what he thought Puerto Rico needed. "We lost that connection to the land," "[t]hey take and take, and what are we, the Puerto Ricans, what is for us?" "We are dependent on ships for everything. The tomatoes you buy at the store aren't from here," "LUMA [the electric company] can't even keep our lights on. We lose our electricity all the time. How can you live when you don't know when and for how long you will have electricity?" Although I framed the interviews as storytelling sessions, most of the responses I received were direct and focused. The farmer spoke with frustration, critical and concerned, not without reason, addressing collective issues and offering valuable insights into life on an island, suffering under colonialism, as a farmer yearning for change.

> Formed from underwater volcanic activity, we emerged from the ocean's surface millions of years ago. Our story is that of the land – of the soil. Covered in lush vegetation, our health is fundamental for all life. 4,000 years ago, humans began to call us home. Our human inhabitants have feared, revered, embraced, and abandoned us. It was the Spanish who introduced us to coffee. Our volcanic soil, elevation, and the shade we provide make our coffee extraordinary in flavour. When the Americans arrived, they saw no use for us. Coffee production is laborious and difficult, and the markets craved the sweetness of white gold. Some farmers stayed and cultivated crops with us, but it was only a matter of time before they abandoned us for work in the factories. We remain, offering refuge from storms, the heat, conquistadors, plantation owners, industrialisation, and urbanisation. The footsteps of humans are returning. Rediscovering the history that they thought they abandoned in the name of progress. (Story shared by the farmer)

Three months after our first interview, I wrote my story from the perspective of the Mountain. On a whim and with hesitation, I called the coffee farmer to read it to him. The story of the Mountain triggered something in him. From the Mountain itself, we

follow the farmer as he revisits his memories of visiting his grandfather, explaining why he decided to return to farming.

> I used to visit my grandfather that lived in a wooden house in the mountains close to the river. We would watch as my grandfather would come down the mountain with his horse that carried two large baskets full of freshly picked coffee beans. He would lay out large pieces of burlap that he sewed together from old sacks and spread them out on the river rocks. He would scatter the coffee beans on the burlap to dry in the sun. Then, after they dried, he would collect the beans and put them in this large metal bowl to shake off the skins. From there, my grandfather would take the beans and put them into these big, big cast iron pans that sat on a wood fire and roast the beans, always moving them with this big wooden paddle. When he was finished doing that, the next day he would put them in paper bags and take them to the marketplace. He would sell his coffee beans to those people who owned these large coffee factories.
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> Before, people didn't pay attention to the past. It was a beautiful time, beautiful memories with family. Nothing now is the same. Everything is machines and technology. Life changes. It's easy to do it with technology but it was better before. Families were together, doing stuff together. Watching your grandparents making coffee. I remember watching my grandfather grinding coffee to give to people. One time, my grandfather was putting out a burlap onto the river rocks when my grandmother started screaming "Las Piedras están cantando" [The rocks are singing]. She meant the river was coming, but my grandfather didn't have time to get the coffee, and the river came and swoosh and washed away all his hard work. He lost a lot of time with that. Sometimes, me and my brothers and sisters were given baskets to help pick beans. My grandfather kept yelling at us to watch where we were stepping, "Aj! Aj! Aj! Don't step on my babies." He meant the new beans that were sprouting.
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> You know, after my grandfather died and my uncles left for New York there was no one left to pick the beans. They left for New York because they wanted to have another life. It was only my mother and her two sisters that stayed in Puerto Rico. For a long time, no one wanted to be a farmer. We wanted something better. They didn't know what they had. Leaving for the city to work for other people.
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> The farm was abandoned for years. When I got older, I missed that kind of life. I wanted to go back. I think coffee is a good way to sustain people. I like to cultivate the way it was before, not now – using so many chemicals. I'd like to bring back that kind of life – the old time way.

As soon as I read the last line of my story, it was as if the river of memories came rushing and I was allowed to listen to the rocks singing. The inspiration I drew from him sparked his imagination. Something other than the simple exchange of information had occurred. "A story is a collaboration between teller and audience, writer and reader. Fiction is not only illusion, but collision" (Le Guin, 2004:230). The stories are intersubjective; by offering a piece of myself, he reciprocated and offered a piece of himself. "Words are events, they do things, change things […] they feed energy back and forth and amplify it" (Le Guin, 2004:199). Through words and the sharing of stories, we both became teller and listener.

The stories he told give us insight into the farmer, his motivation and his connection to the mountain and the river. We are transported to another time, to another place, and we understand the allure of returning to a place filled with family and love. The joy in his stories is infectious. We can hear the grandmother yelling out the window and see his grandfather rushing, stumbling, slipping on the rocks trying to save his harvest before the rushing rapids wash it away. We get a sense of the care that was taken in tending to the beans, the respect for the river, and the sense of home found on the mountain. The focus shifts from socio-economic issues and frustration with infrastructure to personal and familial history, nostalgia, and a connection to cultural history. The detailed descriptions of the scene and activities create a feeling of intimacy and personal significance. New characters, such as the horse, the rocks, and the river, are introduced. The farmer's story is descriptive and reflective, focusing on personal memories and cultural traditions. A different story is told.

> **Researcher:** Time. That is an interesting concept for a mountain. How do you experience time? And how do you manage the different temporalities that unfold on, around, and through you?
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> **Mountain:** Hmmm. We haven't really thought about it. We suppose we don't experience time the same way you do, you can almost say that at our core we experience a near atemporality all the while different temporalities express how we experience life. Ancient and patient geologic time sculpted us, shaping our peaks and valleys over eons. Ecological time defines us, as forests grow and change over centuries and recently the unexpected rhythms of humans surprise us. Every night we listen to the coqui frogs and every morning we watch parrots take flight. These different temporalities are what give us our rhythm. It's within these rhythms and cycles that there is change.

4.   With whom I think: Storytellers and thinkers

The ethical engagement with the world through multispecies stories brings us to Aldo Leopold, Hannah Arendt, and Ursula Le Guin. In this section, we read Arendt together with Leopold, who brings insights into the interconnectedness of ecological and political realms. Leopold's 'The Land Ethic' and call to '[Think] Like a Mountain' challenge us to expand our idea of community to include more-than-human entities, while Arendt's exploration of the political space emphasises the need for inclusivity and diversity. However, as McCullagh (2019) argues, opening our community as Leopold suggests necessitates a corresponding openness in our political spaces to heterogeneity. Between these discussions, we visit Le Guin's short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds', which further enriches our understanding of these themes.

Aldo Leopold coined the term 'think like a mountain' in his essay by the same name in his book *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, published in 1949, which became a foundational text for the environmental movement. Leopold was a prominent American conservationist who argued that Western ethical frameworks needed to expand to embrace the land, an idea he referred to as 'The Land Ethic' (1949). The essay recounts Leopold's experience of witnessing a shot wolf slowly die. At the time, it was widely believed that reducing the wolf population would lead to more deer and increased hunting opportunities. However, "[...] after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view" (Leopold, 1949:130). In that moment, Leopold realised that the removal of a single species could have profound repercussions for the entire ecosystem. "The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea" (Leopold, 1949:132). This perspective of ecosystems and land situates our ethical responsibility to maintain "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold, 1949:224-225).

Leopold wrote, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" adding that "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (Leopold, 1949:204). Today, much like in 1949, our relationship with the land remains fundamentally economic, "entailing privileges but not obligations" (Leopold, 1949:203). *Homo sapiens* have not relinquished the role of conquerors, continually asserting the right to freely use the land without acknowledging any obligation towards it. However, Leopold (1949:223) recognised that the value of ecological communities is not economic but philosophical. According to Leopold (1949:209), land ethic requires an ecological conscience, where "obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land". In principle, enlarging the boundaries of the community seems a simple task. All you have to do is extend your social conscience and recognise your place within a larger ecosystem – however, that is easier said than done.

This challenge goes beyond recognising your place in the ecosystem. It is also political. It is a problem of recognition and who we recognise as legitimate members. According to Arendt, to be fully recognised, an individual must engage in public acts and speech (Arendt, 1998). When the speech and acts of Others are not recognised, it becomes difficult to admit them into the public space and enlarge the boundaries of the community. However, Le Guin's exploration of the language of animals, decades before the discovery that African elephants have names for each other (Pardo et al., 2024), the sophistication of chicken communication (Marino, 2017), that a peacock's train is a multimodal communication device which includes infrasonic signals (Freeman & Hare, 2015), or sea creatures, once believed to be silent were communicating all along (Jorgewich-Cohen et

al., 2022), offers inspiration on how we can recognise and, perhaps with some challenges, translate more-than-human voices.

4.2   Ursula Le Guin's therolinguistics

Peterson (2001:184), writing about Arendt, states that "[t]o be cast out of community, whether individually or as a member of a despised group, is to lose one's ability to speak for oneself and to act on one's own behalf". Marginalised voices, human and more-than, are often cast out of community, their speech not heard, their action not recognised. The challenge of extending our social conscience becomes more tangible when we recognise that all entities have their own ways of relating and expressing themselves, even when we do not acknowledge the legitimacy of their voice. The following story is a piece of speculative fabulation where animals disclose themselves, the challenge of translation is evident, and where it is considered a failure of our imagination when diverse voices do not make the cut.

Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 (2015) short story 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds: And Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*' is an exploration of the language of plants and animals, where "[s]cience fiction and science fact cohabit happily" (Haraway, 2016:7). In it, Le Guin explores scientists studying non-human animal languages, what she has named therolinguistics, and how they translate and interpret the world around us. The story comprises three vignettes: a journal entry of scientists translating ant language, an advertisement for an expedition to study penguin language, and an editorial by the President of the Therolinguistics Association, which seeks to challenge our commonly held axioms and ponders the possibilities of understanding the non-communicative language of plants.

Le Guin uses multiple perspectives and an epistolary format to engage the reader in a world that is familiar and unexpected. The first vignette, titled *MS. Found in an anthill* (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:295), presents notes from a pair of therolinguists' translations of messages left by an ant on degerminated acacia seeds. "There has been already considerable dispute over the interpretation…of Seed 31: …Up with the Queen!" The therolinguists "…suggest that the confusion over Seed 31 may result from an ethnocentric interpretation of the word 'up'. To us, 'up' is a 'good' direction." The correct translation can only be "Down with the Queen!" as a worker's call for rebellion since for ants "'up' is scorching sun; … exile; death." The body of a small worker ant is discovered alongside Seed 31, "the head severed from the thorax, probably by the jaws of a soldier of the colony" (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:296-297).

In the second vignette, *Announcement of an Expedition*, Dr. Petri seeks colleagues to follow him on an expedition to Antarctica to study the poetry of Emperor penguins. An elusive language, "[o]nly when Professor Duby reminded us that penguins are birds, that they do not swim but *fly in water*, only then could the therolinguist begin to approach the sea literature of the penguin with understanding" (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:298). Further, Dr. Petri argues that, unlike the kinetic aquatic texts of Adélie penguins, the difficult and remote dialectic of the Emperor penguin is a more promising field. "The beauty of that

poetry is as unearthly as anything we shall ever find on earth … Imagine it: the ice, the scouring snow, the darkness, the ceaseless whine and scream of the wind. In that black desolation a little band of poets crouches … starving … The poets cannot hear each other; they cannot see each other. They can only feel the other's *warmth*. That is their poetry, that is their art." Four spots remain. They leave for Antarctica on Thursday.

The final vignette is an editorial written by the President of the Therolinguist Association. The president challenges the therolinguist community to go beyond the study of animals, noting that plant languages remain largely unexplored and considers this a failure of imagination. The exploration of language, according to the president, should not be limited to the active communication of animals but must expand to include the passive arts. Language and art may not only be governed by movement and metered by time, nor solely considered communication, but also reception. They are not action, but reaction. The president challenges fellow therolinguists to be bold adventurers, looking to a future when later generations will laugh at our ignorance, "Do you realise … that they couldn't even read Eggplant?" (Le Guin, 2015 [1974]:302-303).

Le Guin's imaginative exploration, where ants, penguins, and eggplants disclose who they are and we do not turn away, illustrates how they have entered the space of politics. Arendt's political theory is rich with concepts that are embedded within each other. They build on each other, creating a crescendo accumulating in a space where stories shape worlds. *Storytelling* occurs in the *public realm*, the very space where politics unfolds. That *political space* is conditioned on *plurality* and *natality*. It is where one is *born again* through *action*, as it is through action and engagement with the diverse perspectives of others that new beginnings are set into motion. Storytelling emerges as the truest form of political action (Arendt 1998; Jørgensen, 2022; Tassinari et al., 2017).

4.3   Hannah Arendt's political theory

For Arendt, storytelling as political action is central to critical engagement and our capacity for an enlarged mentality. Disch (1993:665) comments that "[a] well-crafted story shares with the most elegant theories the ability to bring a version of the world to light that so transforms the way people see that it seems never to have been otherwise". Stories not only shape individual perceptions but also enable shared understanding. To tell a story is to act, and to act is to create "its own, local, momentary space" (Le Guin, 2004:199). Storytelling is an act of creation – a new beginning, or rather natality – because it allows us to reinterpret and redefine our world, making space for new perspectives and understandings. In *The Human Condition* (2018), Arendt emphasises that the essence of human action is rooted in the birth of new individuals. This birth is a fresh start and the potential for action, which can produce new and unexpected changes in the world. Every time we act, we reaffirm our birth.

According to Arendt, plurality is the existential condition of all political life (Arendt, 1998:7). Plurality includes equality and distinction – we are equal enough to understand each other, yet distinct enough to need ways to do so. Speech bridges the gap between

beings, distinguishing ourselves. It is in our distinctiveness that speech is necessary for revelation, allowing others to see more of the speaker than she might see of herself (Arendt, 1998; Peterson, 2001). However, when Arendt writes "all political life", she refers to all human life, "where nonhumans are excluded from the domain of action and appear only as passive resources to be exploited for human plans and actions" (McCullagh, 2019:142). Recalling Leopold and the land ethic to 'think like a mountain', our idea of community needs to expand beyond *Homo sapiens* to include biotic and abiotic members. McCullagh (2019) interprets Arendt's concept of the public space as relying on a separation between human and non-human activities, distinguishing the functions and activities that take place in public, private, and social realms. According to this view, only private and social realms encompass human interactions with the natural world. By excluding non-human elements from the political space, the needs of ecosystems and species, as well as their interactions with humans, are overlooked as politically insignificant.

McCullagh (2019) develops the concept of heterogenous political space as an alternative to the exclusively human political space which dominates Western political thinking about collective action and justice. Opening the political space to heterogeneity "[…] places humans within a system of nature but also brings nonhumans into focus as relevant 'subjects' of ethics and politics" (Braidotti & Bignall, 2019:10). McCullagh (2019:141) argues that "[i]n their [Deleuze and Guattari] insistence that human action cannot be separated from the productions of nature, we find that heterogeneity, rather than human plurality, is given as a condition of action". McCullagh engages Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of following and assembling, exploring micro-political registers composed of heterogeneous collectives in processes of composition. By doing so, she argues for acknowledging diverse human-non-human entanglements and recognising the different ways in which capacities for political action are constituted in various assemblages.

> **Researcher:** You mention change. Can you expand on that a little bit more? What does change mean to a mountain? How do you experience change through rhythm?
>
> **Mountain:** Continual change defines us. With us there are different cycles and rhythms: linear time, cyclical time, slow evolution, and rapid transformation. It's through the interplay of temporalities where change is life. Each sunrise and sunset bring both something familiar and unique. In the comforting songs of the coqui, now dwindling in number, we feel the ongoing rhythm of things staying the same even as they change. We've witnessed the slow erosion of rocks, the gradual growth of forests, the chaotic destruction of hurricanes and earthquakes and the deliberate scars of people. Yet amidst these becomings, there is a steady heartbeat, a constant refrain, grounding us. It's within this rhythm that change takes on meaning – it is not a disruption but a vital part of existence.

5.   To love the world, think like a mountain

Who am I to speak for the Mountain? I am just a curious being with a wild imagination who wants to think differently. I am not an authority on geolinguistics, nor do I want to be. The idea of communicating with a mountain and gathering stories is an exercise in our ability to imagine otherwise. This act of envisioning a world where non-linguistic entities can communicate with humans is inherently speculative, as it requires one to think beyond the limitations of our existing capabilities and consider new possibilities. Like Le Guin's (2015 [1974]:298) therolinguists, "[...] the difficulty of translation is still with us". The process of blending storytelling with elements of reality offers a way to explore and express complex ideas, relationships, and ethical considerations from a different vantage point. This kind of speculative fabulation allows us to engage with the world in novel and transformative ways. It challenges our anthropocentric viewpoints, expands our understanding of agency and communication, and may even create a deeper connection with the non-human world.

Through stories, we find a way to translate more-than-human voices into a form that we, *Homo sapiens*, can understand and engage with, hopefully doing so in a way that honours how more-than-humans express themselves and participate in the world. Our imagination helps us reconcile what has happened with reality. "Imagination, even in its wildest flights, is not detached from reality: imagination acknowledges reality, starts from it, and returns to enrich it" (Le Guin, 2016:109). For Le Guin, fantasy is imagination, and the imagination is an experimentation on the real. A challenge to this is the argument that by translating more-than-human voices into a form that we can understand runs the risk of anthropomorphising and misrepresenting who they really are. While this is indeed true and requires thoughtful consideration, it is also a way to create empathy and understanding. The voices and stories of more-than-humans challenge anthropocentric viewpoints and help develop a deeper connection with the world around us. This imaginative exercise is not about literal accuracy but about exploring our ethical and relational frameworks.

The speculative interview has led me on a path of thinking about heterogeneity, duration, being, and becoming. By engaging in becoming-mountain through the process of thinking as becoming (Bertetto, 2017), the interview explores how we can understand the Mountain's experience and voice in a creative act of fabulation that envisions new ways of relating and knowing. Thinking as becoming can be thought of through Arendt's metaphoric suggestion to allow the imagination to go visiting. To 'visit' is just that, you use the imagination to visit the perspectives of others without fully assimilating their viewpoints or abandoning your own (Arendt, 1992; Roodt, 2005). It enlarges our mentality, it does not replace it with another one. The practice of going visiting is challenging since it demands that we be genuinely curious about others, especially those that we think we know, to ask engaging questions, and respond thoughtfully, all while being polite (Haraway, 2016:127).

As we have seen with the Mountain and the Acacia Seed, storytelling is key to opening the political space to heterogeneity and acknowledging entanglements that produce

political action. According to Haraway (2018:102), "storytelling is a thinking practice, not an embellishment to thinking". Stories are the moments when personal experiences are made public (Jackson, 2013), allowing us to confront and attend to "the complexities and movements of life" (Jørgensen, 2024:1). Storytelling is not a solitary activity, it is something we do with others and is thus a political act (Arendt, 1998). Through the telling of a story, we interact with others and appear in the public space. Thus, storytelling is not only an act of natality but also an act of intersubjective communication between speakers and listeners, creating a unique, temporary space that draws listeners into an intimate sphere (Le Guin, 2004). This creation of a shared space emphasises the concept of plurality, where multiple voices and perspectives come together.

This article started because I wanted to understand what Arendt meant when she said our existence is conditioned on plurality. How can I begin to think about myself not as the 'I in the many' but as the 'many in I'? Arendt was a situated human figure (Haraway, 2016:), and her thinking is situated in historical and secular contexts. I will take the liberty to forgive the limitations of her thinking that did not extend the political space to more-than-human voices. Her thinking was just that, limited, confined to the situatedness of her reality, but we are not Hannah Arendt, and we do not need to be restricted by her limitations. As Haraway suggests, while we should not dismiss the value of Arendt and her emphasis on thinking deeply and reflectively on our own context and actions, we do need to broaden her approach. Following Deleuze and Guattari, McCullogh (2019) argues that human action is inherently tied to nature, making heterogeneity, not just human plurality, essential for action. Storytelling is a way to understand public life from within it, emerging from different perspectives that preclude objective analysis (Disch, 1993). By acknowledging diverse human-non-human entanglements through storytelling, we can better grasp the complex, interconnected nature of political and social actions.

"It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land" (Leopold, 1949:223). Arendt argues that ethics begins with an individual's relationship to themselves, situated in a pluralistic and interdependent world (Jørgenson, 2024). This inherent responsibility is a fact of being born. Arendt emphasises that ethics are rooted in thinking, which helps individuals develop who they are and act ethically within the web of relations. When we extend this ethical thinking to include more-than-human voices, as Le Guin's storytelling and the metaphor to 'think like a mountain' exemplify, we begin to embrace heterogeneity. Embracing this diversity in the political space encourages a broader perspective that values different forms of life and their contributions, which might lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

> **Researcher:** How do you feel about me telling your story?
>
> **Mountain:** Oh, emmm, well …
>
> **Researcher:** It's okay. I would understand if you thought I wasn't the right person.
>
> **Mountain:** It's just … we've seen your kind come and go. They come and observe, see what they want and then tell their story, not ours. In their stories we are reduced to ordinary descriptions: awe-inspiring, majestic, permanent, and stable, these are stories of what we are and what we are not; entirely overlooking who we are.

6.   Conclusion

Grounded in the insights of storytellers and thinkers, becoming-mountain is one way we can think about and address the meta-crisis. To 'think like a mountain' urges us to deeply consider how our practices and structures maintain or resist social and environmental inequalities, encouraging us to recognise that we are a part of larger ecosystems rather than isolated individuals. The 'many in I' reflects an understanding that who we are is shaped by our interactions with others and the community around us. Instead of viewing ourselves as a singular, isolated entity, heterogeneity encourages embracing the multiplicity of experiences and viewpoints that contribute to who we are. In a sense, this act of thinking leads us towards 'becoming-mountain', where we embody this perspective in our actions and decisions.

In the context of organisations, we can consider the connections and impacts of our actions. Agential cuts, as Barad describes, are not just about separating entities but understanding how these separations and connections are co-constructed. When we make a cut, we make a decision about our role within a larger ecological and social system. This reflection is important because failing to recognise the often overlooked and marginalised voices reinforces inequalities. It asks us to think about who and what we consider in our decision-making processes and the broader consequences of these choices. Every decision and practice within an organisation is a story in the making (Jørgensen, 2024), and the consequences are not so easy to predict.

Opening the political space to heterogeneity is not just about recognising unheard voices but also acknowledging the material and ecological contexts they represent. It is about creating a more inclusive and reflective practice that actively seeks to understand and address the complex web of relationships we are a part of. This way, we can start to unravel the entrenched systems of inequality and move towards more equitable and sustainable futures. Addressing the meta-crisis requires a fundamental shift in how we view and interact with the world around us. To become-mountain encourages us to consider the broader ecological and social contexts that our actions influence.

Multispecies storytelling, then, is an ethical and affective practice. By listening to and incorporating the voices of more-than-humans, we start to make stories that respect and

acknowledge their existence and agency. This storytelling emphasises our entanglement and collective well-being, nurturing our ability to respond (Haraway, 2016). Ethically, it challenges anthropocentric narratives and promotes inclusive and just politics. Affectively, it has the power to inspire and connect us to the worlds we inhabit and make kin with unlikely fellows. Through the creation of stories, we can imagine and create "a new Earth" and alternative futures.

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