

The Goose

Volume 16 | No. 1


Article 28

8-24-2017

What Rises Above the White Noise: the Possibility of Hearing Truth in a Post-truth World

Harriet Fraser
University of Glasgow

Rob Fraser
Independent Photographer

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)
Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Fraser, Harriet, and Rob Fraser. "What Rises Above the White Noise: the Possibility of Hearing Truth in a Post-truth World." *The Goose*, vol. 16, no. 1, article 28, 2017,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss1/28>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

HARRIET FRASER
and
ROB FRASER

***What Rises Above the White Noise:
The Possibility of Hearing Truth
in a Post-Truth World***



There is a single tree, the Langstrath Birch, curving out of the bank of the beck that cuts through the Langstrath Valley in Borrowdale, Cumbria. Below the tree, the water flows white and thunderous over boulders in a series of falls: stand here and you are always within, and surrounded by, *white noise*. The valley becomes an echo chamber: the fell walls on either side

contain and amplify the endless sound of water falling. It is possible to pick out low notes—water sloshing in thick waves against curves of rock—and mid-range tones from the water where it is in full flow, as well as delicate high notes from tiny droplets thrown up by the speed of the flow. At the edge of the beck, water drips out of thick, saturated earth, and there are side streams. Sometimes the wind adds its voice, an airy gust. It's a real challenge to isolate these individual pitches of sounds from the general roar. Standing here with the birch tree, thinking about the environment and which voices are heard in debates about climate change and resource use, we were inspired to create an installation that asks: What Rises Above the White Noise?

This birch tree is one of seven trees in Cumbria that featured in our recent project, *The Long View* (2015-2017). Over two years we walked time and again to each of the trees, in all weathers, all seasons, night and day. At each tree we enquired into the layered cultural and natural history of its specific location, considered broader issues of the environment, and explored the different ways that we as humans experience and relate to the environment and how we behave towards it. Our meetings with farmers, ecologists, and land managers fed into our learning. We expressed our response to all these elements through a temporary installation, each one using a different colour of the rainbow. The colour transformations were fleeting, lasting for between two hours and two months; our interventions were removed, or faded, while the elements of earth, wood, stone, water, and air remained. The lasting legacy is a photographic record and poetry presented through screen prints (displayed as part of *The Long View* touring exhibition) and an altered perception of seven remarkably ordinary trees.

Our starting point of enquiry at the Langstrath Birch was communication: what is spoken, and by whom, what is unspoken, and what is heard. With an overload of information available, how difficult is it to hear new or meaningful voices? To what extent do we, as individuals and as communities, dwell in “echo chambers” where we hear our own points of view reinforced and confirmed? The birch's location sets it as if in a stadium, where all these questions manifest through sound.

It takes around a minute for the water to flow forty metres from the birch to the bend in the beck where boulders provide a perfect viewing platform. One short minute. Just sixty seconds, around the time that passes in my own cycle of twelve resting breaths. In terms of tree-time, not much happens in a single minute. When the birch is heavy with catkins and releasing seeds perhaps a few hundred may be carried away by a particularly strong wind in this time, and in autumn a leaf or two may fall, but, really, a minute isn't very long. On social media, however, a minute somehow bulges or expands to encompass a mind-boggling amount of communication. In one minute on Facebook, more than thirty-one million messages are sent; Twitter is burdened with almost three hundred and fifty thousand new tweets; on Instagram more than forty-six thousand images are posted; and on YouTube, in each sixty-second period of time, an average of three hundred hours' worth of videos are posted. That's just a fraction of the information that flies around the world.

Here with the birch my own short minute expands in an entirely different way, filled not with the buzz of social media or the glare of a screen but with the noise of the river and the sweep of the valley sides. The river is grey and white, the sky too. I imagine blue, which in the Indian philosophy of the chakra system is the colour of communication, the fifth chakra, located in the throat where vibrations of sound are refined into language. This chakra is symbolically recognized as the centre for speech, communication, and truth.

I watch the water, and when I take my attention from the hypnotic flow I think about what can be communicated each minute. What rises above the white noise? Which voices stand out? Which are remembered? Which opinions or words of advice are heard above the rest, who is speaking up for the environment, who listens, and what actions are taken? How can a balance between human lives and abundant biodiversity be achieved if only partial truths, or isolated voices are heard? This is a challenge here in the Lake District, just as it is in many other parts of the world.

It seems to be getting ever harder, with the increase of social media, to decipher what is true, what is false, what is distorted, and which “facts” can be trusted. Each one of us exists within our own echo chamber with our own set of truths: we surround ourselves with like-minded people and listen to the voices and opinions of those who agree with us, and when we are online we are shown adverts and newsfeeds that cater to our interests. The effort needed to put our beliefs to one side and to seek out and really listen to viewpoints beyond our own is considerable.

What rises above the white noise? Right here, it is the tree itself, a tree that holds its ground and tells its story without any spin, and spreads its own message through the release of winged seeds or “samara.” These tiny seeds are its way of communicating: these are its future. The brief installation of blue at the birch suspended this single word above the white noise. Samara. Repeated sixty times: printed onto sixty pieces of blue cloth strung onto a long blue line, and held in place, above the river, for seventy-seven minutes.



Journal entry, April 1, 2017 Langstrath Valley

There was nothing but white noise. I hadn't anticipated the task of holding cloth above the river to be quite as challenging as it was. When I let the cloths touch the surface of the water, I felt the incredible force of the flow. I became part of the fight against it. I was shaking from the

adrenalin that surged through me with the fear that I would slip as I jumped from one wet rock to another, holding this spread of words, weighty with water. My ears were full of white noise. The water rushed past in a blur. It wasn't easy to rise above the white noise. But when I held the line tight and clear of the water, the cloths swayed in the breeze, delicate, light. I used the support of a massive boulder, a chunk of solid stone that was probably here long before the river found its form, and I watched. A line of sixty flags, one for each second of a minute, fluttered blue, rising with simplicity and peace, above the white noise.

—

It is uncanny sometimes how things work out. Doing a site-specific installation demands a lot of planning, getting to know a place, measuring, and then working with the weather. What we hadn't planned for, after we had wound the cloth back in and taken our sandwiches out to have a bite to eat, was the arrival of a farmer who is one of the commoners whose sheep graze in the Borrowdale Valley. Joe has arrived on his quad bike, with his five lithe dogs, to check how things are going beyond the fell wall.

We ask how his ewes are—they've been scanned now and will be lambing soon—and chat about the past year. Joe fills us in on what's happening in Borrowdale and we talk about the tree planting in the valley that has been done with the National Trust. We can see the sturdy wooden cages up on the fell beyond us that keep deer and sheep away from young trees that, all being well, will become veterans of the future. I ask about the different flocks and farms that share the [common land](#) here, and Joe points out whose sheep go where. He maps the valley with the names of those who know its bogs, rocks, curves, and rises well. I get a feel for it as a land of hefts, invisible borders held on fenceless fells as if stitched by footsteps of farmers and the flow of sheep from one side of the watershed to the other. We talk about the continual challenge of working out a way to find a balance here in the fells, where hill farming on common land can continue beside rich biodiversity. We discuss flooding, particularly relevant after the devastation caused by Storm Desmond in 2015, the development of hydro projects in Borrowdale, and even what's happening at Sellafield. Before Rob and I get round to telling Joe about the string of blue above the water, he talks about the difficulty of getting accurate facts heard, particularly when it comes to decisions about land management and land use. He asks, who hears what information, and what is done with it? Which voices are listened to and acted on? The challenge of finding balance in valleys like Borrowdale is not new, but perhaps now more than ever, with the pressures of flood risk and the uncertainty of policy changes in the face of Brexit, clear communication is needed.

This installation, the simple stringing of the word samara, repeated, above the river, began as a way of asking how hard it is for the environment, and nature, to have a voice above the “white noise” of multiple truths and globalization. In the process of putting it in place it did this, but it also found relevance at a local level: the very real truth of the force of a river and one single tree, and the people who come past it day after day, generation after generation, and have their own stories to tell about a valley they know intimately. Sometimes it is these, the most local voices, that are drowned out by the voices of politicians, businesses, and social media

chatter. It doesn't seem to matter which part of the world you are in or what your ethnicity or cultural heritage is: the struggle of speaking up and being heard and standing up for the environment has been continuing for many centuries. But perhaps now, more than ever, is not only more difficult, but more important.



HARRIET FRASER AND ROB FRASER work collaboratively as “somewhere-nowhere,” combining their individual practices of writing and photography. Their work is rooted in the outdoors and the act of deepening connections with the environment. Projects explore the beauty as well as the fragility of the natural environment and frequently involve collaboration with those who work the land and organizations charged with caring for sensitive environments and influencing

policy. They share their work through exhibitions, community engagement, in schools and through publications, and in academic conferences.

This installation is one of seven that form part of *The Long View*, which uses seven isolated trees as a trigger for artistic enquiry into issues of environment and place. The first installation, “Everything is Connected,” is featured in *The Goose*, Volume 15, Issue 1. The installations follow on from site-specific and kinetic poetry created during Harriet’s MPhil (University of Glasgow): “Open Fell Poetics: *Investigating the Lake District as a Cultural Landscape through Practice Based Poetics.*”

More about their work at www.somewhere-nowhere.com.