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Afterword

Storytelling Animals: Human–Nonhuman Relationships in the Arctic

Sean P. A. Desjardins and Peter Jordan

Man is the Storytelling Animal, and that in stories are his identity, his meaning, and his lifeblood. Do rats tell tales? Do porpoises have narrative purposes? Do elephants elephantise? You know as well as I do that they do not.

Salman Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010: 34)

In reviewing the present volume's collection of innovative new studies in the field of what has traditionally been called "human–animal interactions," we are more inspired than ever to respectfully disagree with the above (and likely popularly held) perspective, and affirm that *all* animals, human and nonhuman alike, tell—and are defined by—their own situational narratives that often involve entanglement with other beings in both simple and complex ways. This process can be direct, as with the cosmological fellowship between humans and nonhuman–animals, or more oblique, as with a researcher drawing inferences about premodern human diets through zooarchaeological analysis.

Until relatively recently, research traditions tended to be characterized by two basic approaches. First, non-Indigenous scholars of the arctic past have viewed nonhuman animals as a medium of adaptation—they offer calories and resources, and people respond to their presence by shaping their tools and mobility patterns to more effectively capture this "energy" from the environment. Second, semiotic approaches have cast nonhuman animals as timeless symbols in a circumpolar shamanic worldview in which places, animals and spirits repeat similar plots and character interactions, irrespective of time and place. Over the past decade, a wide array of new perspectives has challenged these dichotomies. New theoretical conceptions, such as multispecies ethnography, as well as archaeometric methodological advances, such as paleogenomics (analysis of ancient DNA), have revolutionized how archaeologists conceive of the lives—and even cultures—of other species in the past, as well as their relationships with humans.

Of course, these developments are not confined to the study of circumpolar regions, but nowhere else on earth is the economic importance of nonhuman animals to people so dramatically central as across the Arctic. Today in Inuit Nunangat (the traditional Inuit territories of Canada) and Kalaallit Nunaat

(Greenland), traditional “country foods”—including harvested animals, such as Atlantic walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus*), ringed seal (*Pusa hispida*) and caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*)—serve as an important stopgap to hunger in many Inuit households. Such stopgaps are critical in places such as the Inuit-majority Canadian territory of Nunavut, where nearly half of the population regularly experiences moderate or severe food insecurity (Caron & Plunkett-Latimer 2022). The cost of vehicles, fuel and ammunition, and competing time demands constrain Inuit ability to engage in traditional harvesting. Prior to the colonial encounter, nearly the entirety of the Inuit diet in many regions of Inuit Nunangat consisted of country foods derived from nonhuman animals. Harvesting, processing and sharing of animals creates and sustains not just human life on an existential, biological level, but also facilitates the social relations that bind communities and serve as inter-generational conduits for the creation and inheritance of deeper cultural and community traditions (Laugrand & Oosten 2015; Rasing 2017).

Ecological Productivity and Resilience

A common misperception among non-arctic residents is that northern environments are less productive and more hostile to human life than other biomes; after all, it is true that in most arctic regions, traditional agriculture (though not pastoralism) is generally not possible, and species richness (the overall number of animal species in the environment) is relatively low. However, while species richness *is* often low, absolute numbers of individual animals are often high—more than enough to allow people to build strong, healthy and resilient communities. And while cultivated plants have never been a primary dietary staple, gathered plant materials have been an important element of many Northern diets.

Combatting such misperceptions is important because while the past century has foisted many traumatic changes on traditional Inuit lifeways, two of the most pressing relate to the availability of nonhuman–animal resources: (1) climate change, which affects animal habitats and hunters’ ability to travel safely across increasingly volatile ice- and seascapes; and (2) top-down, government regulation of subsistence hunting. Paleoclimatological and zooarchaeological research shows that arctic peoples have long found innovative ways to adapt to past episodes of climate change (Desjardins and Jordan 2019). For example, Desjardins (2020) has demonstrated how in northern Foxe Basin, Nunavut, Inuit developed a highly-innovative strategy of caching walrus meat during the summer for consumption during the harsh winters of the Little Ice Age (from ca. fourteenth century AD) (Desjardins 2020).

Understanding that such systems can be proactive—and not static or only passively responsive—is crucial. The relationships between humans and nonhuman animals are dynamic, with each side having agency and being capable of foresight as well as reflexiveness. Of course, the interconnectedness of humans, nonhumans and the surrounding elements of the natural

environment are central to this topic. There is debate over whether or not examinations of past human/nonhuman adaptations to changing climates can inform future responses to modern warming (see Burke et al. 2021). We have argued that because of the deep-time insights generated, archaeology is uniquely suited to the task (Desjardins et al. 2020). Of course, the burden of contemporary climate change is disproportionately felt by arctic Indigenous peoples and nonhuman animals; measurable impacts (e.g., higher ambient land and ocean temperatures and altered sea-ice conditions) are felt first in northern latitudes, with relatively delicate food webs being among the first to be disrupted. This deepens the moral burden on non-Indigenous societies farther south to ameliorate the effects of change; it also redirects the dialogue on climate justice away from the shared human responsibility implied, for example, in the popular (and obviously anthropocentric) concept of the “Anthropocene” (see Mathews 2020).

Active Storytellers

We believe the interconnectedness of humans and nonhuman animals was key to the resilience of systems facilitating wellbeing in the past, and it is likely to be in the future as well. In the present volume, a variety of forms of such relationality are explored; indeed, we are deeply impressed with the great diversity of cultures and environments featured, as well as with the range of species examined—marine mammals, dogs, domesticated reindeer, as well as what the editors appropriately call ‘non-charismatic’ species, such as muskrats and insects. Importantly, both cosmological *and* economic interests of arctic peoples have been addressed and better integrated within new interpretive frameworks that help align past-, present- and future-focused perspectives on vital human-nonhuman trajectories. We hope this volume furthers a trend of nuanced, creative explorations of these encounters, and that new stories can continue to be platformed, profiled and analyzed responsibly.

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