

Ecocriticism and the Psychology of Information Processing: Taking a Seat at the table

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Why are we highly sensitive to some information and insensitive to other information?

The Aylan Kurdi Phenomenon

Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali, "Image of Drowned Syrian, Aylan Kurdi, Brings Migrant Crisis into Focus," *NYT* (3 Sept 2015):

It is an image of [Mr. Kurdi's] youngest son, a lifeless child in a red shirt and dark shorts face down on a Turkish beach, that appears to have galvanized public attention to a crisis that has been building for years. **Once again, it is not the sheer size of the catastrophe—millions upon millions forced by war and desperation to leave their homes—but a single tragedy that has clarified the moment.** It was 3-year-old Aylan, his round cheek pressed to the sand as if he were sleeping, except for the waves lapping his face.

Poignancy (or enchantingly moving information) can have a powerful political effect and can empower local individuals

Poignancy, OED:

Evoking a keen sense of sadness or regret. 2. archaic / sharp or pungent in taste or smell.

Origin—from Ofr., lit, "pricking," pres. Part. Of *poindre*, from L. *pungere* "to prick"

Ecocriticism and/as Information Management

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011): "**apprehension**"

Heather Houser, "Managing Information and Materiality in *Infinite Jest* and Running the Numbers" (2014); "Description as Data in Literary Studies" (2014); etc.: "**information management**"

Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (2016): "**database**"

The psychology of insensitivity and how to overcome it

Psychic numbing (Robert Jay Lifton): we are quickly overwhelmed by numbers larger than one. This leads to tragic insensitivity to large-scale phenomena.

Pseudoinefficacy (Paul Slovic et. al.): if we feel we can't help everyone in need, we are less inclined to help anyone.

The prominence effect (Paul Slovic et. al.): competing values lead to distraction and inaction.

The asymmetry of trust (Paul Slovic et. al.): easy to erode trust, very difficult to build it.

The "anesthesia of destruction"

(Vandana Shiva): we need poignant, individualized stories to overcome the numbing effects of information about large-scale issues.

The "trans-scalar imaginary" (Chris Jordan): art (literature, visual art, music, film, etc.)

can help train us to move cognitively between large and small scales.

How **Should** We Value the Saving of Human Lives (or Other Phenomena We Believe to be Important)?

Also by practicing **multidimensional approaches** to communicating quantitative information
Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic, Introduction, *Numbers and Nerves*:

This balanced or multidimensional approach to communicating “data” accords well with the thinking of statistical evidence guru Edward Tufte [...]. In his 2006 publication titled *Beautiful Evidence*, Tufte states: “The world to be explained is indifferent to scholarly specialization by type of evidence, methodology, or disciplinary field. A deeper understanding of human behavior may well result from integrating a diversity of evidence, *whatever it takes to explain something*” (11)

Two Key Points about Achieving “Discourses of Sensitivity”

1. We place great value on saving individual lives or responding to other individual or small-scale phenomena. (**The Singularity Effect.**)
2. We must rely upon processes of **rational deliberation in addition to our initial emotional responses** (such as pseudoinefficacy and the prominence effect) and to think across scales.

Empirical “psychonarratology” remains a nascent field—so much still to learn
Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literature Response*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003.
...Wolfgang Iser’s reception theory focused on the interaction between the text and the reader.... In describing these concretization activities and responses, Iser coined the term “the implied reader” (1974). The extensive discussion that ensued as to what precisely Iser might have intended by this term has generated the consensus that it refers to a text-based concept of the reader, implying that the reading process entails the generation of the meanings already inscribed in the text. **The circularity of his theory is evident: From his theory of the text he extrapolates a concept of the reader, and the reader’s presumed activities confirm his hypothesis regarding the text.... Consequently, his theory sheds little light on what actually transpires in the minds of readers during the reading process.** (7)

Aldo Leopold’s Strategic Use of Singularity in “Thinking Like a Mountain” (a classic work of environmental writing)—also showing his own transformation
Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” *A Sand County Almanac* (1949):

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would

mean hunters' paradise. **But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.** (130)

Scaling up to the bigger ecological picture
Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain":

Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic disuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. [...]

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. (131-32)

This poem about potential extinction uses the poignancy of vulnerability to enchant a future possibility with meaning

Homero Aridjis, "Grey Whale," *Eyes to See Otherwise / Ojos, de otro mirar* (2001):

Grey Whale,
once there is no more left of you than an image
of the dark shape that moved on the waters
in animal paradise,
no legend to log your life and its passage
because there is no sea where your death will fit,
I want to set these few words
on your watery grave:
"Grey whale,
show us the way to another fate."

Photographer/Digital Artist Chris Jordan and "**the trans-scalar imaginary**"
Re-imagining Botticelli's Venus with a digital composition made of thousands of plastic bags

The artist's studio: a bank of computers and a mega-printer

Training "the trans-scalar imaginary"

I was at an exhibition in Boulder, Colorado, at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art with a friend of mine [...], and we were standing in front of that piece, and he had a bottle of water in his hand and was drinking from this plastic bottle. And he said just a second, and he went and threw the bottle in the garbage. Then he came back and stood in front of that piece again, and he got this sheepish look on his face and said, "**Well, that was just one bottle.**" Then he looked back at my piece, and I saw him sort of reel back. **His neck snapped back, his eyes opened, and he looked at me and said, "I just got your piece. That's two million one-bottles."** And I said, "**Yeah, that's exactly it.**"

That's one of the issues I try to raise with all of the *Running the Numbers* pieces. I'm **trying to raise the issue of the individual's role in the collective.** (Interview in *Ecology and Life Writing*, eds. Alfred Hornung and Zhao Baisheng, 2012)

The enchanting poignancy of the "bird gerh!"
Antony Hegarty told *The Sun* that the 2008 song ["Another World"] "describes how I feel about the vanishing aspect of the environment and thinking 'This is my world.' The Earth is the greatest creative force that we know, she's invented so many beautiful

aspects.”

The goal of this music is to “establish a new way to value the world” that we live on.

Evoking a sense of vulnerability and loss in
“Another World”

Antony and the Johnsons, “Another World,” *Another World* (2008):

I need another place
Will there be peace
I need another world
This one’s nearly gone
Still have too many dreams
Never seen the light
I need another world
A place where I can go
I’m gonna miss the sea
I’m gonna miss the snow
I’m gonna miss the bees
I miss the things that grow [...]
I need another world
This one’s nearly gone [...]
Another world
Another world [...]

Representing the lives of Chernobyl survivors through story: 2015 Literature Nobel Prize
winner Svetlana Alexievich

Stories from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster (1997; trans. 2005):

He started to change—every day I met a brand new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his tongue, his cheeks—at first there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers—as white film...the color of his face...his body...blue...red...gray-brown. And it’s all so very mine! It’s impossible to describe! It’s impossible to write down! And even to get over. The only thing that saved me was, it happened so fast; there wasn’t any time to think, there wasn’t any time to cry. (11)

Even abstractions become vivid and concrete

Voices of Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster:

What’s it like, radiation? Maybe they show it in the movies? Have you seen it? Is it white, or what? Some people say it has no color and no smell, and other people say that it’s black. Like earth. But if it’s colorless, then it’s like God. God is everywhere, but you can’t see Him. They scare us! (52)

Anna Badaeva, re-settler

Bioregionalism and Local/Regional Testimony Projects

Bioregionalism: “a political, cultural, and ecological system or set of views on naturally defined areas called bioregions....”

Environmental Testimony Projects: collections of statements (in any genre) by citizens, artists/writers, scientists, and politicians; individualized voices important; authority comes from clarity, specificity, and clear indication of local knowledge.

How testimony projects come together

From *Testimony*:

With a grant of just under \$6,000, we remained sovereign, writers addressing Congress personally. **We printed 1,000 copies for distribution to all members of Congress, to the conservation community, and to the press.** We chose to make *Testimony* a limited resource, like wilderness.

With extraordinary serendipity, the book came together quickly and smoothly. A week of light editing and follow-up with authors, a week in design, a week in printing--and we had a book. With *Testimony* in hand, we flew to Washington, D.C., for a press conference at the Triangle in front of the United States Capitol on September 27, 1995 [...]. Representatives Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) and Bruce Vento (D-MN) responded, accepting *Testimony* on behalf of their colleagues and distributing the book to each member of the House with a cover letter. Senator Russell Feingold (D-WI) subsequently sponsored *Testimony* in the Senate and sent the book to his colleagues with a similar letter. (6-7)

A Few Samples of Early Testimony Projects

Moore, Robert, and Scott Slovic, eds. *Wild Nevada: Testimonies on Behalf of the Desert*. Reno: U of Nevada P, 2005.

From "Introduction," *Wild Nevada*:

The thirty individual testimonies collected here were solicited as personal statements--the precise viewpoints were not dictated to the authors. Therefore, what we have gathered is a varied, sometimes even contradictory, assemblage of perspectives. This is entirely appropriate for a state that prides itself as a haven for free thinking and individuality, for urban revelry and utter wilderness solitude, and sometimes even for social experiments in wild places, such as the annual Burning Man event in the Black Rock Desert. **We offer these lively and diverse statements as a way of discerning how contemporary citizens of the American West feel about the idea of wilderness in one of the wildest regions in the lower forty-eight states.** (3)

A Politician Speaking from the Heart

United States Senator Harry Reid, "The Blank Spot on the Map," *Wild Nevada*:

Though some class "rock and ice" wilderness exists in Nevada, much of my state's wild country lacks water, much less waterfalls. **These are wild lands, but lands that defy conventional conceptions of wilderness. The Jarbidge Mountains near the Idaho border, which were designated by the Wilderness Act of 1964, were the only official wilderness in Nevada until 1989, when--long after all the other western states created their Forest Service wilderness lands--I succeeded in passing a bill designating over 530,000 acres of Forest Service lands throughout the state as wilderness.** This bill largely resolved the question of Forest Service wilderness in Nevada but left unanswered which of the Bureau of Land Management's 100+ Wilderness Study Areas merit inclusion in the Federal Wilderness System.

Interestingly, **most people view Nevada as a great blank spot on the map**, defined by connecting the dots: Las Vegas ... Death Valley ... Reno ... Boise ... Salt Lake City ... the Grant Canyon ... Las Vegas. **Sadly, those who advocate Nevada as a place for dumping high-level nuclear waste have a blind spot for the beauty of the blank spot.** (96)

A Native American Perspective Leader Concerned with Future Generations
Corbin Harney, "Nuclear Destruction of Shoshone Land," *Wild Nevada*:

We say we're concerned about our children, that we're concerned about

the lives of different kinds of animals and birds. Seems to me the government doesn't care so I hope people can wake up and start thinking about these things. **What are you going to tell your children, your grandchildren? If the beautiful land, beautiful animals of all different kinds are gone from the face of this Mother Earth, are we going to say we didn't care for them, that we did something wrong?** (117)

“We are here!”: Poignancy, Storytelling, and the Concept of an Island-Sustainability Testimony Project

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How to concretize the abstraction of 2,100+ vulnerable Pacific Islands?
Tony de Brum, recent Foreign Minister of the Republic of the Marshall Islands,
International Conference on Island Sustainability, 13 April 2016:

**The Marshall Islands is the first nation that may be eradicated due to climate change—
this is an opportunity to take action.**

“Displacement is not an option.”

“Vulnerable countries should not be treated in a one-size-fits-all manner.”

“We have unique vulnerabilities.”

**People elsewhere in the world think of us as “insignificant dots on the map in the middle
of nowhere.”**

We are here!: Toward an Island-Sustainability Testimony Project
Short, personal statements (250-300 words at most).

Stories (brief representations of experience that bring the place and specific issues to
life).

Descriptions of landscape, seascape, encounters with individual phenomena or people.
Briefly articulated arguments or concerns, combined (if possible) with story.

Try not to be overly abstract—accentuate the local and the personal.

Rising sea levels in the Marshall Islands, overdevelopment on Palau, mega-typhoons on
Saipan, critical lack of resources and problems with waste management on Guam (the
most populated island in Micronesia)

Drought on Guam and throughout the Pacific Islands

The Environmental Writing on the Beach Workshop (12 April 2016) will result in the
Island-Sustainability Testimony Page on the website of the Center for Island
Sustainability at the University of Guam

We are all citizens of Earth Island—and many of us are inadvertently causing the
disappearance (genocide?) of island societies!

Reaching toward poignancy: giving final word to UOG undergraduate Arielle Lowe, reciting her testimony in Chamorro and English

We are all in this together
Introduction, *Numbers and Nerves*:

[...] stories and images have the power to help us understand large, complex problems that we cannot comprehend through quantitative information alone. This convergence of story, visual image, philosophy, journalism, and psychology suggests the value of collaboration among thinkers in a wide range of disciplines. We are all in this together.
(21)