



Re-storying SDG 14: life below water

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Abstract

This article narrates multispecies stories about life below water, and asks how to re-tell such stories which awake moral agency in humans to care what happens with life below water. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 14, 'life below water', aims to sustainably conserve and utilize oceans, seas, and marine resources, and it outlines ten specific targets that are closely intertwined with human utilization of these resources. This article posits that it is equally important to consider water bodies as a home, or 'oikos', for a diverse range of marine creatures. These creatures should be regarded not only for their instrumental 'use' value, but also as living beings with whom we can develop empathic relationships. The author explores the use of oral storytelling as an artistic practice to re-story the human and more-than-human relationship, particularly in relation to life below water. She argues that the ability to empathize dramatically through multispecies storytelling aligns with the principles of feminist care ethics, which emphasizes other-directedness and openness to diversity. The performance *Being Salmon, Being Human* portrays as an example of multispecies storytelling practice which can foster empathic relationships with more-than-human life, leading to a more ecocentric understanding of sustainability, and creating moral agency for a life below water.

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Introduction

Our grandmother Tiktaalik, when she left the sea 380 million years ago, she took it with her in her blood. And you too have almost the same concentration of salt in your blood as in the sea. So, whether you live on high mountains or dry desert or right here in Oslo, still you sweat, you cry, you bleed like the ocean. (Keable, 2018)

The above quote is taken from the beginning of the performance *Being Salmon, Being Human*, summarizing the findings of chemical calculations and paleontological studies on the evolution of large vertebrate animals leaving the oceans (Mueller, 2017, p.78; Imbler, 2022). To view fossils as ‘ancestors’ is to blend traditional storytelling with scientific knowledge, resulting in what I have previously called ‘ecosophical storytelling’. Ecosophical storytelling seeks to close the gap between humans and other life forms by telling connecting stories that awaken affects and transform the human-more-than-human relationship by challenging human’s structures of feeling (Aaltonen, 2011, p. 153). The goal of ecosophical storytelling is to cultivate moral agency, empathy, and care for the more-than-human world. Donna Haraway (2021) has introduced the related concept of ‘multispecies storytelling’, which emphasizes the importance of justice and care towards all entangled human and more-than-human beings, rejecting the notion of human exceptionalism. We care what happens to something we feel for. This text examines narratives about life below water and how they can be told to evoke moral responsibility and concern for the well-being of marine life.

First, I introduce the theoretical grounding and examples of artistic practice for re-storying the human and more-than-human relationship. My methodology is informed by a postqualitative, new materialist, and critical posthumanist research paradigm (Murriss, 2021; Murriss, 2022) that advocates for the “[...] inclusion of nonhumans, other-than-human and more-than-human research participants in our research and enquiry [...]” (Murriss et. al, 2022, p. xxii). I draw on the work of Weili Chao and Karin Murriss (2022, p. 126) who consider ‘storying’ to be an “alternative pedagogical and research paradigm in postqualitative educational and social science studies [...]”. To further explore storying as a methodological choice, I look at Kuan-ming Wu’s (2011) story-thinking and David Abram’s reflections on connection with the senses and perception with oral re-storying and shapeshifting (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor,

2020). According to Abram, “a renewal of place-based community cannot happen without a renewal of oral culture” (Abram, n.d.). Wu writes that the way we talk and write shapes the way we think, and consequently shapes the way our world works, either for or against our nature-milieu (Wu, 2011, p. 3). Wu divides stories into inside- and outside stories, or a combination of both. I choose to re-story by combining outside and inside stories.

In the following sub-chapter, I outline my research position and provide an overview of my research material. I begin by sharing an outside story example called ‘sustainable aquaculture’, problematizing the tropes ‘new fish’ and ‘sustainability’ in relation to aquaculture that causes harm to ocean biodiversity. Then I take a critical look at the concept ‘sustainability’ as defined in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and argue that it is used for anthropocentric and politically motivated purposes to sustain global capitalism. To achieve true sustainability, I propose adopting an ecocentric worldview, as suggested by Washington et al. (2017). I explore re-storying life below water through the performance *Being Salmon, Being Human*. I describe the narrative and performative strategies used in the performance, which offer a fresh perspective on the relationship between humans and more-than-human aquatic life (n.d.).

I compare oral storytelling practice with psychophysical acting method and the ethics of care, drawing from the work of Noddings (1984) and Verducci (2000). In conclusion, I suggest that the practice of multispecies storytelling could enhance our moral agency and better equip us to engage with the complex realities of more-than-human life.

Re-storying the human and more-than-human relationship

In 2015, the United Nations established the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlining 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015, p. 14) addressing environmental, social, and economic concerns. This article focuses on SDG 14, which pertains to ‘Life below water’, and aims to conserve and sustainable use oceans and marine resources for sustainable development (2015). The goal has

ten action targets², but evidence compiled by Siri Martinsen (2022, pp. 4-18) suggests that these actions have not been successful in halting the alarming rate of biodiversity loss. As a result, there is a growing interest in finding alternative and more respectful ways to restoring the human and more-than-human relationship. Ecophilosopher Abram (1996; 2010) argues that the relationship is not possible to restore without transforming human thinking, re-storying the relationship. His ecophenomenological thinking is deeply relational with earth and a continuation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's³ investigation of perception, embodiment, experience, and language.

In the realm of creative techniques for storymaking and responding to stories, Alida Gersie and Nancy King's book from 1990 is an early example that emphasizes emotional literacy and intelligence in relation to environmental issues. Gersie (1992) also authored *Earth Tales: Storytelling in Times of Change*, which focuses on storytelling and storymaking during the process of personal and collective change. Gersie, Anthony Nansen and Edward Schieffelin edited a collection of practical community work examples in 2014/2022. Joseph Bharat Cornell's *Sharing nature worldwide* (n.d.) website and flow-learning techniques, presented in his book *Sharing nature* (Cornell, 2015), offer tools to work towards more ethical relationship with more-than-human life. Additionally, Georgiana Keable has organized numerous outdoor storytelling events (Aaltonen, 2015) and authored books for storytellers striving to connect humans with more-than-humans, including (Keable, 2017; Keable & McFarlane, 2023).

According to Michael Wilson (2006, p. 120), contemporary oral storytelling emerged from the post-1968 alternative theatre movement and is linked to popular and resistant acting traditions. Wilson notes that the work of Brecht and his contemporaries represents a return to a narrative-centered tradition after the anti-narrative stance of naturalism. Many contemporary theatre performances are

² 1. Reduce marine pollution; 2. Protect and restore ecosystems; 3. Reduce ocean acidification; 4. Sustainable fishing; 5. Conserve coastal and marine areas; 6. End subsidies contributing overfishing; 7. Increase the economic benefits from sustainable use of marine resources; 8. Increase scientific knowledge, research and technology for ocean health; 9. Support small scale fishers and 10. Implement and enforce international sea law.

³Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961).

currently using strategies from epic theatre and resemble acts of collective storytelling.

The Finnish Theatre Academy has been exploring posthuman performance and nonhuman acting for several years (Aaltonen 2021; Arlander 2020; Kirkkopelto 2020 & Kokkonen 2011). In 2020, animal philosopher Elisa Aaltola established a two-year multidisciplinary research and artistic practice project called *Can an animal be told?*⁴ The project examines how different animal representations influence human understanding of non-human animals. The project asks whether it is possible for humans to become closer to non-human experience through non-linear and poetic arts such as fiction, poetry, visual arts, dance, or performance. The project has spawned a two-year follow-up called *The voiceless in the spectrum of life and speaking for them*⁵.

Re-storying and shapeshifting as methodological choices

Jerome Bruner⁶ (2002, p. 14) has emphasized how humans shape their lives through storytelling⁷. Abram (1996; 2010) argues that our understanding of the more-than-human-world is limited by our ability to perceive it with our senses and tell stories about it. The stories we tell shape our sensory experiences and our understanding of the world around us. Abram suggests that re-storying the land and shapeshifting the body are two ways to expand our understanding. This approach aligns with several activist theatre practices that use storytelling and bodily practices to facilitate transformation (Fritz, 2012). In *Becoming Animal*, Abram discusses 'shapeshifting', or the human body's capacity to become something or someone else (2010). Abram explains that shapeshifting involves our bodies' ability to directly experience the Other:

[...] we have within our bodies echoes of every other bodily presence around us, even if they be very distant echoes. And everything, conversely, every part of the landscape, is a distant variant of my own

⁴ Author's translation of Voiko eläintä kertoa? n.d.

⁵ Author's translation of Elonkirjon äänettömät ja puhe niiden puolesta n.d.

⁶ Jerome Bruner (1915 – 2016)

⁷ "A self is probably the most impressive work of art we ever produce, surely the most intricate. For we create not just one self-making story but many of them [...]" (Bruner, 2002, p. 14).

flesh. After all, we are all constituted of the same stuff. And so we have within us this magical capacity to feel into and empathize with pretty much *anything* of the Earth – because we ourselves are, first and foremost, pieces of Earth. And, so, a kind of shapeshifting is just native to the human organism. It's our birthright. (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020, p. 21).

The concept of shapeshifting, as introduced by Abram, refers to the human body's innate ability to understand and empathize with the more-than-human world through direct experience. According to Abram we are all composed of the same material, and thus, we have within us the capacity to connect with and feel into the essence of anything on the Earth. Matilda Aaltonen's (Aaltonen & Tuomivaara, 2022) dance performance *Seagull story*⁸ (Aaltonen, 2021), at Helsinki marketplace, investigates the possibility of achieving seagull perspectives and experiences through dance. At the center of her work is a question: How to dance seagull? Aaltonen emphasizes the importance of considering the individuality of the seagull and adopting a multispecies approach that involves attentiveness, respect, and listening to the perspectives of other species. Through bodily connection with the seagull, Aaltonen becomes more familiar with the bird's mental state and way of experiencing the world (Aaltonen & Tuomivaara, 2022, p. 140), a process that resonates with Abram's idea of shapeshifting as a fundamental practice.

The stories presented in this text are guided by the principles of case study inquiry, which involves an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and draws on multiple sources of evidence, as defined by Robert K. Yin (2009, p. 18). Wu's ideas on story-thinking, have influenced the selection of these stories. Central to storytelling is the act of re-storying, which creates new possibilities for stories to emerge and evolve. Storytelling is a dynamic process that is continuously processed and reprocessed, as Wu (2011, p. 1) notes: "Story-thinking is direct actuality-thinking; actuality is active and alive, never set or formal, but free and reasonable. Actuality is things as they are alive, actively actualizing themselves, birthing unceasing".

⁸ Author's translation of Lokkijuttu.

Wu (2011, pp. 16-18) outlines three ways of storytelling. The first is referred to as “originative storytelling from *inside* me and inside my culture” (p. 16) This approach aligns with Abram’s concept of ‘interbreathing’, which recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020, p. 18). Originative storytelling often employs anthropomorphic perspectives that acknowledge the aliveness of all things, celebrating a polytheistic worldview (Wu, 2011, p. 17). The second approach is ‘outside storytelling’, which is called an objective way of telling. Wu (2011, p. 18) argues that “all explanations tell stories”. In outside storytelling, everything is measured and viewed as mechanical or a “blind stuff and process” that can be explained through figures and graphs (Wu 2011, p. 17). This approach is influenced by “mechano-morphism”, which perceives the world in mechanistic terms, and has become pervasive across all aspects of life. The third approach combines both inside and outside storytelling, a perspective that this text embodies. This form of storytelling allows for a dialogue between outside and inside narratives, as in the performance *Being Salmon, Being Human*, which serves as an example of the practice of re-storying life below water. The performance draws from both outside and inside stories to create a space where the two can interact and shape-shift, leading to new possibilities of storytelling.

Research position and research material

As a teaching artist and researcher, my role in this case is that of a researcher who did not participate in the creation process of the performance. The scope of my analysis is limited to aspects related to the stories performed in the piece. The significance of the performance becomes clearer when juxtaposed with the outside narrative called Norway’s ‘sustainable aquaculture’.

The 50-minute video documentation of the performance was recorded⁹ on September 5th, 2019 at DOKK-house in Trondheim, during a public event entitled *Where shall the bumblebee buzz?*¹⁰. I had the opportunity to witness the performance in person on two occasions in Trondheim. The first was during the Ocean Week on May 7th, 2019, at the Radisson Blu Royal Garden, and the second

⁹ The performance was recorded by Nils C. Boberg, NTNU.

¹⁰ Author’s translation of *Hvor skal humla suse?* I curated a public event for artists and researchers to discuss about the loss of biodiversity (Environmental Humanities n.d. Previous events).

was at DOKK-house. The Ocean Week performance was attended by researchers and individuals interested in the topic of changing oceans. The photos in this article were taken during the first performance¹¹. The audience at the DOKK-house was more diverse and included many school students.

The research material for this study included a range of sources such as literature on SDG 14, ecophenomenology, deep ecology, mapping art practices on more-than-human and human relationship, biological knowledge of wild and farmed salmon, and sustainable aquaculture. The manuscript of the performance (Keable, Mueller, Bryn & Vassvik, 2018) and interviews with the creators, Keable and Mueller (Zoom interview 21.2.2023), were also reviewed. Additional sources included Mueller's (2017) book based on his doctoral thesis, media material such as articles, online debates, and information from the performance website. The researcher is personally familiar with the storytellers and has previously invited Keable to perform in festivals she has organized.

Outside story about SDG 14: Life below water

It is worth noting that the UN Environment program website (2022) presents an anthropocentric viewpoint. According to the website, “the ocean drives global systems that make the earth habitable for humankind”. This perspective positions humans in a God-like role, where they redefine their role as “managing the essential global resources”. Unfortunately, this perspective prioritizes human interests and needs over those of other sentient beings. This worldview is based on the idea of separation, where other beings are seen primarily as means to human ends, rather than as ends in themselves.

To illustrate an outside story, I will use the example of salmon farming, which is often marketed as “sustainable aquaculture” (Sustainable Aquaculture, 2022). The act of storytelling from an outside perspective is influenced by the philosophical principles of Enlightenment era. These principles deny the idea that a salmon has a personal existence and instead view it as an industrial product in feedlot practices (Mueller & Hydle, 2021, pp. 103-126). Simon Sætre and Kjetil Østli (2021) conducted a five-year investigation into the consequences of the appearance of the so-called ‘new fish’ resulting from salmon farming on North Atlantic coastal ecosystems and

¹¹ The performance was photographed by Per Henning, NTNU.

communities. It is worth noting that captive salmon are not naturally occurring fish; they are a result of gene technology experiments that began in the 1960s. The original aquaculture salmon were created by mixing the genes of fish from forty Norwegian rivers and one Swedish river (Sætre & Østli, 2021, p. 17). After sixty years, this new fish now grows almost twice as fast as wild salmon.

Atlantic wild salmon has a rich evolutionary history that spans millions of years, and a cultural history that spans thousands of years. Depictions of salmon can be found on fjord rocks and in Norse sagas. Wild salmon possess unique abilities, such as the ability to survive in both fresh and salt water during distinct phases of their life cycle. In fact, wild salmon played a role in the settlement of Norwegian coastlines to around 9500 BC, as hunters and fishermen were drawn to the area by the abundance of food in the waters (Bazilchuk, 2018; House of Hegelund, 2018). Wild salmon still hold many secrets that humans have not been able to solve. It is remarkable to consider how this animal is born in fresh river water and then navigates thousands of kilometers of open ocean, only to return to her birth river one day, spawn new generations, and quite possibly, die. It is truly fascinating that wild salmon possess an innate sense of direction and can navigate the vast and ever-changing ocean to find their way back to their birthplace. These abilities are just some of the many mysteries that make wild salmon a truly remarkable species.

Despite the remarkable qualities of the wild salmon, Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) is now considered an endangered species. In just forty years, the number of returning wild salmon has decreased by half. As of 2021, only half a million Atlantic salmon are estimated to return to Norway's rivers, which pales in comparison to the estimated 400 million farmed new fish in saltwater cages along Norway's coast (Henriksen & Neteland, 2021). The plight of the wild salmon underscores the importance of understanding the impact of human activities on the natural world.

In 1970, farmed fish production was 294 tons. By 2018, this figure had increased to 2,435,900 tons, 8,285-fold increase in just 50 years (FAO 2020). During the same period, 68 % of Atlantic puffins have disappeared due to poor breeding success (Vulcano, 2022; Anker-Nilsson et al., 2021). Tycho Anker-Nilsson has conducted extensive research on Atlantic puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) at Røst, an island off the Norwegian coast, from the late 1970s to the present day. During the late 1970s, Røst boasted not only Norway's largest seabird colony, but also the world's largest puffin colony, with almost 1,5 million pairs. Regrettably, the population has experienced a

significant decline since then due to food shortages and decline in chick production (SEAPOPOP, 2022).

Anker-Nilsson acknowledges that there is no conclusive evidence linking aquaculture expansion to seabird extinction¹², which is concerning. Why is there little interest in investigating the relationship between salmon farming and biodiversity loss? One explanation could be the 'Norwegian salmon fairy tale', which has generated 38 aquaculture billionaires (Berge, 2021). Stories of sustainable not only greenwash the environmentally damaging salmon industry but also provide significant economic benefits to a few politically powerful individuals.

In 2021, while Norwegian seabirds were dying due to starvation, the Norwegian Seafood Council celebrated a record-breaking year for seafood exports. According to the Seafood Council's 2021 statistics (Budalen et. al., 2021), Norway exported 3.1 million tons of seafood, worth 120.8 billion NOK, equivalent to 15 billion seafood meals or two meals for every person on earth. The government views this economic success as a positive sign for the future, with a focus on increasing sustainable aquaculture revenue along Norway's coastline. However, there are concerns about the negative environmental consequences of salmon farming and the conflict between economic growth and sustainability (SDG8¹³ and SDG14). The promotion of farmed salmon as a 'sustainable' bioproduct raises questions about the moral, economic, and political values underlying this narrative. The key issue at stake is whose lives are being supported and sustained by this approach to Norwegian aquaculture.

Sustainability in transformation: from anthropocentric to ecocentric worldview

Sustainability in aquaculture is influenced by anthropocentric beliefs and attitudes towards fish. The industry exhibits characteristics that are typical of psychopathy and

¹² I e-mailed Anker-Nilsson to inquire about any research that may exist correlating the breeding success of seabirds and salmon farming. According to his response, there has been no such research conducted to date, and no evidence exists to suggest a connection between the decline in seabird populations and the rapid growth of aquaculture.

¹³ SDG 8 promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (Goal 8: Economic growth, 2015).

narcissism (Aaltola, 2018, p. 69). Aaltola coins a new term 'anthropathy'¹⁴. Typical qualities of anthropathy are self-directedness and grandiose egoism, paranoia/skepticism over the minds of others, power over/manipulation of others, and disregard for moral considerations (Aaltola, 2018, p. 79). These same characteristics are evident in human-animal relationships, where more-than-human realm is often seen primarily in terms of its usefulness for humans. This self-centered attitude impacts the other dimensions of anthropathy and may be at the core of this concept.

Anthropocentric beliefs in sustainability result in the categorization of animals based on their utility to humans, rather than recognizing their individuality. Statistical evidence is characteristic for objective, outside storytelling. Wu (2011, p.17) mentions that "things are seen as mechanical blind stuff and processes". Reports from Norwegian Seafood Council or FAO do not try to understand the inside stories of farmed individual fish, nor of wild, free-roaming salmon in their habitats. This approach has resulted in greenwashing rather than meaningful sustainability efforts.

To truly prioritize sustainability, we must transform our economy-driven thinking and highlight more-than-human beings. Jason Hickel (2015) critiques the contradictory SDGs, specifically Goal 8, which promotes export-oriented growth in line with neoliberal models. Hickel argues that sustainable futures will require degrowth (Hickel, 2021). By reorienting our actions, economy, morals, and politics toward co-creating a shared future with all living beings, we can move beyond anthropocentric beliefs and promote true sustainability.

Haydn Washington and his colleagues (2017) advocate for a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric worldview. According to them, ecocentrism recognizes the intrinsic value of all lifeforms and ecosystems, while anthropocentrism values them only insofar as they serve human interests. The authors argue that ecocentrism is crucial for sustainability from ethical, evolutionary, spiritual, and ecological perspectives (Washington et. al., 2017, p. 35.).

They examine the different understandings of sustainability in various UN documents, including the Earth Charter (2002), which contains sixteen principles organized

¹⁴ The Greek word 'anthrop' means human, and is the origin of the words 'anthropocentric' (human-centered) and 'anthropathy' (suffering with a difficult condition in believing that being a human is something extraordinary).

around four pillars: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence and peace. An ecocentric worldview emphasizes the human connection with more-than-human life and considers sustainability in terms of ethical considerations such as respect and care for all life.

Re-storied life below water: Being Salmon, Being Human – the Performance

In this sub-chapter, I provide an example of how wild and farmed salmon experiences have been re-storied through the performance *Being Salmon, Being Human*.

From 2017 to 2021, the performance toured in various locations and events, including North America, the UK, Sápmi, and conferences and festivals throughout Scandinavia. The group had plans to begin touring in Norwegian schools in 2021, but due to the Covid19-pandemic, the school tour was not possible. The most recent performance took place at the 2021 UN Climate Summit COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland. A complete video documentation of the final performance is available on YouTube (Being Salmon, Being Human, 2021).

The performance is an example of ‘platform storytelling’ or ‘theatrical storytelling’ (Wilson, 2006, p. 59). Two storytellers and a musician performed on the DOKK-house stage with the aid of microphones. The audience was seated in rows behind the fourth wall, and there was no interaction with the audience during the performance. Throughout the performance, the three performers – Keable and Mueller as storytellers, and Torgeir Vassvik as musician – are on stage, taking turns performing solo (Figure 1). They wear salmon pink and black costumes that associate with the color of salmon.

At the start of the performance, the two storytellers stand in a line and move back and forth, bringing to mind ocean waves. Vassvik contributes to the atmosphere by Sámi joiking, while playing various instruments, including the guitar, drum. The performance has three distinct beginnings. First, Keable recounts the beginning of life on land, followed by Mueller who tells the story of a female wild salmon’s birth from a first-person perspective. Finally, Vassvik introduces himself as a Sámi artist (as seen in Figure 2) and shares insights about the indigenous culture of Arctic Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. He explains that joik does not follow the traditional song structure of telling a story *about* a person or object but rather allows performers

and audiences to *become* other beings, such as bear, wolf, salmon or even natural elements like seascape, atmosphere, or seasonal mood.



Figure 1. Left to right: Martin Lee Mueller, Georgiana Keable, and Torgeir Vassvik.
Photo: Per Henning/NTNU



Figure 2. Torgeir Vassvik combines joik with traditional instruments.
Photo: Per Henning/NTNU.

In the performance three narratives are intertwined, with two of them attempting to answer Mueller's philosophical inquiries about the identity and experiences of salmon, "who salmon is and what it's like to be the salmon?" (Mueller 2017, p. 55). As seen in Figure 3, Mueller himself presents a condensed version of chapter 8 of his book (pp. 133-154), wherein he employs Abram's (1996) eco-phenomenological method to listen and speak into the somatic qualities of salmon's inner experience, both in rivers and at sea. Drawing on knowledge from fields such as biology, critical animal studies, ecology and behavioral science, he tells an autobiographical story about the migratory life cycle of an Arctic salmon, from her birthplace in a river to her time in the ocean and eventual return. Her migration cycle is divided into segments and woven into the other narratives throughout the performance forming a continuous story arch.



*Figure 3. Martin Lee Mueller tells first-person story of wild salmon.
Photo: Per Henning/NTNU.*

He starts the birth story of Arctic salmon as follows:

I am a golden planet. I am a tiny egg. Right now, my mother is pushing me out of her body. We are so many. We are born into the river. Is this my world? We tumble round and round. With my large, black eye I see sunlight dancing at the surface. Then again, I see light hit the river bottom. There is hole down there. We are sinking towards it! What is happening now? A white cloud spills into the water. Father's milk. It washes towards me. Just as it touches me, I ... am. This is the tiny morning of my life. (Keable, Mueller, Bryn & Vassvik, 2018, p. 1).



Figure 4. Georgiana Keable tells a first-person life story of exploited captive salmon.
Photo: Per Henning/NTNU.

Keable narrates the story of a farmed salmon's life, presented in segments throughout the performance (Figure 4). Unlike the previous story, this salmon never leaves its contained and fully mechanized environment. Keable's first-person narrative sheds light on the harsh realities of commercial salmon farming. The story is based on chapter 3 "Exploited captives" (Mueller, 2017, pp. 33-56). This segment of the story begins as follows:

I am a tiny salmon egg and live with 10 000 other eggs in a big plastic box-world. I break out of my tiny golden egg and I'm a fish. I'm alive. All

around me are other little fish. Some of them I like and some I kind of hate. There is a dance which we are doing together. It's a game. I will defend my little corner of the plastic box. There is one thing that's weird. Every day finishes suddenly with a click. It's dark. It's the same in the morning. Click, and it's light. Was it meant to be like that? (Keable, Mueller, Bryn & Vassvik, 2018, p.2)

The third narrative told in the performance is a real-life story of Niillas Somby. He was a prominent Sámi cultural figure who fought for Sámi rights and participated in the historic Alta River protests during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Kuhn's book (2020, pp. 53-67) details Somby's journey, including the loss of his arm and one eye during a political action, and his eventual escape to the First Nations of Canada, where he spent several years. Intertwoven with Somby's autobiographical narrative is a Coast Salish indigenous story of the Pacific Northwest, about the salmon people, who are depicted as partly human and partly salmon (Mueller, 2017, pp. 185-186). The performers integrate these two narratives to create a cohesive and compelling narrative that sheds light on the struggles of indigenous peoples and their connection to the natural world.

After the performers have told 23 minutes of stories about salmon and Sámi activists, Mueller takes the stage to tell a story about the group's touring in UK, Scotland, Sápmi, the US, and Canada. He recounts protests in Canada where indigenous groups fought against Norwegian companies, and paraphrases the words of Namgis First Nation chief Ernest Alfred:

Norwegian corporations are coming to our homelands. They bring a different kind of fish that has never been seen in our waters, Atlantic salmon¹⁵. Our Pacific salmon catch diseases from them. Our salmon used to come to our rivers by the millions. Now we can count them on our fingers. Their salmon also pollute the water for other fish. Our waters are becoming deserts. (Keable, Mueller, Bryn & Vassvik, 2018, p. 7.)

¹⁵ According to Sætre and Østli (2021) the Norwegian corporations are not importing Atlantic salmon to Canada, but rather a genetically modified fish known as AquAdvantage salmon.

The inclusion of this real-world context and the voices of indigenous activists adds depth and authenticity to the performance and highlights the ongoing struggles for indigenous rights and environmental justice. Chapter 12 of Mueller's book, titled "Salmon fairytale" (2017, pp. 225-244), does not discuss fairytales for children. Instead, it explores the narratives that have influenced the construction of Norwegian identity since 1960s and onwards. These narratives have often centered around the cultural significance of mineral oil and salmon in Norway, and have played a role in shaping the country's relationship with wild and farmed salmon.

As it turns out, modern Norwegian identity was shaped by two stories that developed around the immense riches of resources brought up from the oceans. In the 1960s, Norwegian struck oil, and the notorious story of Norway's conflict-ridden entanglement with fossil fuels has been known, ever since, as the *oljeeventyret*, or Oil Fairytale. The salmon success story has since become known as the *lakseeventyret*, or Salmon Fairytale. Salmon, like oil, are considered a unique and spectacular success, an exceptional modern marker of what it means to be Norwegian. (Mueller, 2017, p. 226).

In the performance, Mueller (2017, p. 227) delivers a condensed version of the message he conveys in his book, stating that the Norwegian salmon industry's creation of a national epic around the systematic exploitation of millions sentient creatures is problematic. He highlights the need to reconsider our relationship with more-than-human beings and the natural world.

This is the new Norwegian Dream

We call it *Lakseeventyret*

The *Salmon Fairytale*

We mass-produce life at any cost

Faster and faster.

We engineer them to always be hungry and never feel the joy of a full belly.

Sterile zombies that never know the ecstasy of love.

A confused mass that eats whatever we force down their throats – yeast fungi, South American flowers, bacteria grown on North Sea-gas.

Faster and faster.

And if they grow so fast that their spines cripple and they grow hunchbacks –

And if they grow so fast that their hearts grow upside-down –

And if they have no appendices or their swim bladders fail –

And if we expose them to salt water too soon, so soon that their bodies have no time to adapt, and forty percent go blind –

And if their gills are exposed and their tails shrink and we pack them so tightly that they grow nervous and start fighting and fighting and fighting –

Well.

It's none of our business.

It's just business.

And why stop here? Why not occupy Scotland, Canada, the US, Japan, hell, the Mongolian desert?

Let push even into the global south, even when salmon in 6 million years never crossed the equator. This our salmon empire!

It's just business.

(Keable, Mueller, Bryn & Vassvik 2018, p. 11).

The final story shared by Keable portrays a hopeful tale about a salmon girl:

Do you remember Salmon girl? She has become grandmother, and as her people have done for thousands of years, she's at her fire by the river's edge. And beside her is her grandson. He is eating a juicy, roasted wild salmon tail. She says to him – 'remember'. And she watches him take the fish bones and walk out of the firelight and into the darkness. (Keable, Mueller, Bryn & Vassvik 2018, p. 13).

The performance showcases multispecies storytelling, highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and other living beings. It gives voice to voiceless more-than-human beings and shares stories of oppressed peoples fighting against injustice. The performers demonstrate empathy and other-directedness and create openness towards difference. They re-story life below water and practice shapeshifting. Complicated, big stories about sustainability and aquaculture are told by caring empathizers, who have looked deeply into the eyes of more-than-human experience. Through storytelling and psychophysical acting, they portray qualities of caring practices, highlighting the importance of understanding the needs and desires of more-than-human life.

Re-storying entangled experience: discovering multispecies storytelling

This sub-chapter delves into how storytelling can awaken moral agency in humans and encourage them to care about the life below water.

Susan Verducci (2000, p. 88) suggests that although the empathy an actor exercises with a character in a play is not identical to the empathy inherent in “the ethic of care”¹⁶, there are certain shared processes and skills between the two forms of empathy. Verducci outlines the caring practices based on Nodding’s book *Caring* (1984). She notices that a cognitive understanding of another’s situation is the first requirement of caring, followed by emotional resonance or an affective relationship with another, and finally shifting from an ego perspective to the other’s perspective. It is essential to maintain a duality between oneself and the other during this process, rather than becoming lost in the other. Verducci (2000) summarizes this as follows: “The Caring practices of cognitive understanding, affective resonance and motivational shifting, as well as the experience of self as a duality, also describe dimensions of dramatic empathy” (p. 90).

In exploring how to re-story life below water, it is crucial to identify the connections between ‘dramatic empathy’ and ‘caring empathy’ (p. 90), as these skills are essential to effective storytelling. Oral storytelling, often called the ‘poor man’s

¹⁶ "Ethics of care, also called care ethics, feminist philosophical perspective that uses a relational and context-bound approach toward morality and decision making. The term ethics of care refers to ideas concerning both the nature of morality and normative ethical theory." (Dunn & Burton, 2013)

cinema', requires from the storyteller a journey similar to that of psychophysical, Stanislavskian acting. The salmon characters portrayed in *Being Salmon, Being Human* require a detailed analysis of their emotional, psychological, and sensory lives. To achieve this, somatic practice is used to gain an inside experience of those more-than-human bodies. The spoken words – between bodies, on breath – are important and are part of the somatic practice, allowing listeners to enliven the experiences inside their own bodies. Performers in multispecies storytelling need to study both similarities and differences between species. The goal is to awaken authentic and trustworthy characters through careful research. Mueller suggests that “through our shared carnal beingness, we can speak a carefully developed language that conveys the Otherness of salmon across our obvious differences.”¹⁷

Verducci (2000) examines the similarities between the skills of method actors and “caring empathisers” (p.91) and identifies three key skills: “cognitive understanding through textual and contextual analysis” (p. 90), “attention and attunement to the behaviour of others” (p. 92), and “motivational shifts and substitutions” (p. 92). As they enter the story world, storytellers ask contextual questions and evoke sensory experiences related to the characters’ embodied perspectives. Attention and attunement require a keen insight into other living beings’ somatic reality. Constantin Stanislavski¹⁸ (1936) guides actors to invest themselves into the ‘given circumstances’ of characters. In the performance context, storytellers practice shapeshifting (Abram, 2010) and invite audiences to consider that the more-than-human world may be peopled with sentient, somatic intelligences beyond humans. Direct, empathetic caring for the ocean and its inhabitants may rarely be possible – except that it does seem possible as soon as we consider our own bodies to be translation devices and realize that experiences can be *imagined* too. Storytelling, in that sense, evokes real experience. It is not *as if* as much as it is using expressive arts to evoke real, somatic, shared experiences *between* audiences and listeners, *between* breathing bodies, *between* humans and fish.

As Abram suggests (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020), storytellers facilitate moments of interbreathing between the story, its characters, and its listeners (p. 18). From a moral and psychological standpoint, stories should provide audiences with a

¹⁷ Mueller’s personal comment 6.3.2023

¹⁸ Constantin Stanislavski 1863 – 1938

cognitive understanding of the context and conditions of more-than-human life, with the aim of transforming them into 'caring empathizers' who can make more-than-human experience real within their own bodies.

Noddings (1984) outlines a framework for caring about living beings that involves considering their natures, ways of life, needs and desires (p. 14). However, for the storyteller, attention and attunement to more-than-human others requires additional sensitivity, as they enter into a realm of experience beyond the human. More-than-human others have different sensory capacities than humans, which can make it challenging to appropriately attend to and attune to their behaviors, and to open such attunement for the audience through speech. While we can never be completely certain that our human interpretations are correct, the same applies to our interpretations of other humans.

Verducci compares the third skill of method actors and care empathizers, which she terms "motivational shifts and substitutions" (2000, p. 93). Care empathizers shift their emotions, while psychophysical actors use emotional and intellectual motivations to build a character's inner life. Actors and oral storytellers both create trustworthy characters by working in similar ways. The difference is that the actors act out motivated actions, while storytellers use nonverbal communication, epic description and personal monologue or dialogue with multiple characters to create narrative about motivated actions. Substitution involves the actor-storyteller using emotional memory to substitute something from their own life into the play that elicits an emotional response similar to that of the character's (p. 93). By mobilizing similar situations from their past, the actor-storyteller can channel their motive energy in service of the character. When the actor-storytellers engages with the individual more-than-human life, they will use their somatic imagination to access alternative realities.

Care empathizers and inspired actor-storytellers experience a phenomenon called in drama educational practice 'aesthetic doubling', in which they simultaneously inhabit their own reality and that of the character they are portraying. Verducci (2000, p. 94) describes this duality as follows: "While one part of the actor's consciousness observes and guides, another part experiences the character. Her conscious sense

of self splits”. This duality is described as the ‘paradox of acting’ by Denis Diderot¹⁹ (1830), where the actor needs to remain calm and unmoved in order to move the audience’s feelings. However, Verducci notes that while method actors and care empathizers may use similar skills, the intention behind their use is different. Method actors use their psychophysical skills for artistic reasons, while care empathizers use the same skills to help others in need (Verducci, 2000, pp. 95-96).

Empathy can be understood as a movement between oneself and others. Aaltola (2018) explores the forms of empathy that enable moral agency, particularly other-directedness and openness towards difference (p. 63). Other-directedness refers to the ability to direct one’s attention towards others’ wellbeing, experiences, and needs, even if there is no personal benefit. However, simply focusing on *human* wellbeing does not meet the requirement of care ethics to be morally acceptable. Openness towards difference involves seeing value in creatures who may differ significantly from ourselves, such as fish. A self-directed morality can only see value in things that resemble oneself.

Conclusion

Oral, multispecies storytelling combined with method acting techniques can contribute significantly to our sustainability toolbox. This is especially important as we need to transform our sustainability thinking from an anthropocentric perspective to an ecocentric one. Multispecies storytelling emphasizes and celebrates the individuality and subjectivity of more-than-human life. It is essential to use such techniques to reframe our understanding of more-than-human life below water, and to create truly sustainable ways of co-inhabiting this biosphere with other sensing and feeling bodies, such as salmon, whales, seagulls, and puffins. Psychophysical acting requires cognitive understanding and a careful analysis of context to enliven the more-than-human experience. Multispecies storytelling requires the performer to actively engage with other-directedness and develop sensitivity and openness to difference and enrich our experience of inhabiting an organic reality with more-than-human perspectives. By re-storying our cultural narratives, we can crack open anthropocentric narratives and breathe richer, more diverse strands of interbeing and

¹⁹ Denis Diderot 1713 – 1784.

relatedness into them, regenerating our cultural narratives to become truly interspecies narratives.

It is widely recognized that humans can never fully comprehend the experiences of other species. Nevertheless, we can choose to treat them as individuals with their own needs, desires, and feelings, which are just as important as our own, albeit different. To do this, we must abandon the notion that more-than-human species are simply resources to be exploited for our own purposes. One approach to promoting this perspective is through multispecies storytelling, which focuses on emphasizing the similarities between humans and more-than-humans. Although we are different in many ways, we are made of the same basic building blocks. As such, it is no more difficult to imagine the life of a salmon or a puffin than it is to imagine the life of a human neighbor. Recent research in animal studies has shown that animals can develop cultures, bonds, and communities, even as our society continues to view them as nothing more than industrial food sources.

The purpose of this text is to explore the potential of multispecies storytelling to encourage people to care about marine life. By imagining the experiences of other species, storytellers can help to change our attitudes towards them, foster empathy, and increase our understanding of life below water. Human imagination turns experiences, desires, and appreciations into stories. Stories of respect and companionship with the more-than-human world empower and encourage. All living beings are sentient subjects of their own life and have a desire to live a meaningful life. Multispecies storytelling can open a door for the experiential world of the desires of more-than-humans. In the future, it matters what kind of stories we choose to re-tell about life below the water.

About the author

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