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Developing Empathy through Literature: Interspecies Relationship in *La Mirada de Humilda* by Alonso Sánchez Baute

Развитие эмпатии через литературу:
межвидовые отношения в романе
La Mirada de Humilda
Алонсо Санчеса Бауте

Абстракт

В книге *La Mirada de Humilda* (2022) колумбийский писатель Алонсо Санчес Бауте описывает историю своей четырнадцатилетней дружбы с Хумбилдой, собакой породы вест-хайленд-уайт-терьер. Это мемуарный роман о двух существах, которые наблюдают друг за другом, поддерживают и любят друг друга, но однажды вынуждены расстаться. Целью настоящей статьи является исследование того, как книга Санчеса Бауте может формировать вовлеченность читателя в текст, как она способствует развитию симулятивной эмпатии, позволяя читателям эмоционально соединиться с опытом собаки и отношениями между человеком и собакой, представленным в романе; как она увеличивает эмоциональную глубину и привлекательность истории, предлагая уникальный взгляд на межвидовую связь. Для изучения вышеупомянутых тем будет проанализировано влияние домашних

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Abstract

Alonso Sánchez Baute's *La Mirada de Humilda* (*Humilda's Gaze*) (2022) is a book about the interspecies relationship between the writer and his dog, Humilda, West Highland White Terrier. It tells a story of a friendship of two beings who observe, support and love each other and who are made to say goodbye one day. The aim of this article is to explore how Sánchez Baute's book may shape the reader's engagement with the text, how it fosters a sense of simulative empathy, enabling readers to emotionally connect with the canine's experiences and the human–dog relationship depicted in the novel; how it enhances the emotional depth and appeal of the story, offering unique insights into the interspecies bond. To explore the abovementioned themes, the impact of the companion species on a human being will be analyzed, along with their communication and the process of grieving after the dog's death.

животных на человека, а также их коммуникация и процесс скорби после смерти собаки.

Ключевые слова: постгуманизм, межвидовая коммуникация, скорбь, „становление с”, животный нарратив, симулятивная эмпатия

Keywords: posthumanism, inter-species communication, grief, becoming-with, animal narrative, simulative empathy

Introduction

Human stories are not the only ones worthy of attention, claims Éric Baratay¹ and adds that we cannot overlook other living beings' experiences. Their stories should not be secondary, for they are also written with bodies, feelings, emotions, pain, pleasure, sense of closeness, etc. In recent years, the principles of inclusive historiography have caused significant changes in how researchers approach the relationship between humans and animals. Attention is focused on the complexities of animal representation, their agency, and their intricate relationships with humans. Researchers explore “animal viewpoints,”² analyze shifts in focalization, reconstruct animal biographies, and identify details that contribute to their individuation. They also look for abuses in the way animals are represented in writing, to prevent the processes of reducing their presence to the role of props, infantilizing their images and casting them as symbols and allegories. Animal-centric literature envisions possible scenarios regarding the role of animals in human life and allows for their partial emancipation. The interest in animal-centric narratives is also associated with a paradigm shift in thinking about animals as creatures experiencing fear, pain and suffering.³ It calls for the development of inclusive language to dismantle hierarchical relationships between humans and nonhuman animals, and brings attention to the scale of violence inflicted upon them, from industrial breeding to the hidden suffering in scientific laboratories.⁴ Such literature privileges stories of individual animals and highlights their uniqueness, personality and subjectivity.⁵

¹ Éric Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia. Inna wersja historii*, translated by Paulina Tarasewicz (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórku, 2014), 9–10.

² Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia*, 33.

³ Éric Baratay, *Zwierzęta w okopach. Zapomniane historie*, translated by Barbara Brzezicka (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórku, 2017), 220–234.

⁴ For further discussion see for example: Bartek Sabela, *Wędrówka tusz* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023); Rosalind Hursthouse, *Ethics, Humans and Other Animals: An Introduction with Readings* (London: Routledge, 2000); Margo DeMello, ed., *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Éric Baratay, *Animal Biographies. Toward a History of Individuals*, translated by Lindsay Turner (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2022), 12.

It is therefore necessary to free ourselves from an anthropocentric vision and see our fellow nonhuman companions from their point of view, to comprehend their experiences, emotions and reactions. Through narratives, which are a central feature of empathy, we may place ourselves in the situation of another, imagine what they must be feeling.⁶

Adopting a nonanthropocentric position involves rethinking traditional binaries and emphasizing the interconnected agency of all matter. Barad's⁷ concept of "intra-action" emphasizes that entities emerge through interactions, that they are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing, and working inseparably. Donna Haraway's⁸ "companion species" thinking dismantles hierarchical human-centric perspectives in favor of mutual dependency between humans and nonhumans. Jane Bennett's⁹ "vital materialism" attributes agency to nonhuman forces. Such philosophical stances decouple human primacy, embracing an interconnected view of existence that recognizes the intrinsic value and perspective of nonhuman actors. Building on these philosophical frameworks, literary inquiries further explore how texts can dismantle anthropocentric narratives, offering new ways to conceptualize human–nonhuman relationships and shared agency. Scholars such as Lawrence Buell, Stacy Alaimo, Timothy Morton, Claire Colebrook, and many others, ask how texts might resist anthropocentric epistemologies to challenge the primacy of human concerns, and imagine different ways of knowing and relating to the nonhuman. Bruno Latour's actor–network theory and the theories of Deleuze and Guattari also inform these inquiries. The novel *La Mirada de Humilda (Humilda's Gaze)* by Alonso Sánchez Baute seems to reflect many of the abovementioned themes by decentering human experience. It invites readers to relate to interspecies entanglement and to engage with nonhuman animal creating an illusion of an experience from a dog's perspective.

In *La Mirada de Humilda*, Sánchez Baute narrates his intense relationship with a West Highland White Terrier. His book is a story of their special bond that was generated throughout the fourteen years spent together. It is a book about two beings that observe each other and love each other. The story is told in the chronological order, from the moment the writer adopted Humilda when she was twenty days old, to the moment they had to say goodbye. Throughout its 207 pages Sánchez Baute describes the daily, co-habitational routines, neighborhood life, the friendships,

⁶ Shaun Gallagher, "Empathy, Simulation, and Narrative," *Science in Context* 25, no. 3 (September 2012): 371.

⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁸ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010).

the silences, and the aches and pains of everyday life. The dog also appears in her own voice in several chapters. In addition to making reference to the fourteen years which the writer lived by Humilda's side, the book introduces a series of reflections on the long relationship that has existed between humans and dogs, and in this way the book is part of the trend of pet memoirs, which have popular scientific ambitions. The authors of such pet memoirs weave into personal memories information drawn from the scientific literature on dog domestication and their ancestry, about their presence in philosophical reflections, about the species of which the pet is a representative, etc.¹⁰ *La Mirada de Humilda* is also a combination of pet memoir and grief narrative. In this case the death of a close animal becomes an opportunity for philosophical reflections on the life of a companion species. But first of all, *La Mirada de Humilda* addresses many of the issues that are relevant to present dialogues within several distinct fields of animal studies and post-humanism. They concern human/nonhuman subjectivity, intimacy, ethics, condemnation of the poor treatment of animals, presence of animal emotions, the questioning of categorical distinctions between species, etc. It is also a book that might help the readers feel someone else's experience as their own.

The aim of this article is to explore how Sánchez Baute's book may shape the reader's engagement with the text, how it fosters a sense of simulative empathy,¹¹ enabling readers to emotionally connect with the canine experiences and the human–dog relationship depicted in the novel; how it enhances the emotional depth and appeal of the story, offering unique insights into the interspecies bond. According to Bloom or Bazalgette,¹² there exists a fundamental confusion around the meaning of empathy. They propose different vocabulary for the rational ethics of care, moral response and emotional identification. However, for the purpose of this study, the word “empathy” will be understood as a capacity to understand others, empathize with them, and experience the world as someone does, and make this experience salient and important.¹³

¹⁰ Małgorzata Rutkowska, *Psy, koty i ludzie. Zwierzęta domowe w literaturze amerykańskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2016), 138.

¹¹ Elisa Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy. Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

¹² Peter Bazalgette, *The Empathy Instinct. How to Create a More Civil Society* (London: John Murray, 2017).

¹³ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy. The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 4, 12, 13.

Narrative and Simulative Empathy

Elisa Aaltola, in her book *Varieties of Empathy*, claims that simulation is fueled by contextual information. We need context to map out others' life settings and simulate what it may be like to exist as them, but we also need imagination in order to achieve other-directed empathy. Narratives, by means of providing context and inspiring our imagination, hold much potential in permitting us to perceive and sympathize with the viewpoints of others. Narratives seem necessary for empathy as they provide understanding of diverse contexts; they give us access to contexts that are broader than our own and that allow us to understand diverse situations.¹⁴ According to Martha Nussbaum,¹⁵ our ability to take the perspective of others is often enhanced by reading novels, as narratives play crucial role in enabling the development of simulative empathy.

When it comes to nonhuman animals, narratives are also an excellent way to achieve other-directed empathy. Narratives decipher and interpret the continuity of nonhuman experiences and their causes, the felt sense of the animal "I," the ongoing feel of what it is like to be, for example, a particular dog, combined with her memories of the past and how she makes sense of her own condition and surroundings, into a form more readily grasped by storytelling humans. By constructing narratives that incorporate an animal's history, environment, abilities, characteristics, and other relevant aspects, we can develop simulated perspectives that allow us to engage with the animal on its own terms, rather than viewing it as a "humanized" version of a nonhuman animal. The aim of such narratives, then, is to translate the animal standpoint into something more easily comprehended by humans.

The notion that we can understand the inner experience of an animal has been dismissed historically. However, the inability to fully inhabit another human's perspective does not preclude us from gaining a substantial understanding of what it might be like to be someone else. By the same token, considering the physical parallels we share with different mammals, we have a foundation for understanding the internal experience of other nonhuman entities.¹⁶ Literature can provide a window into the subjective worlds of others, deepen our understanding of diverse perspectives, and enrich our capacity for insight and empathy. In this way we might overcome our biases and the fact which Bloom highlights that "it's far easier to

¹⁴ Gallagher, "Empathy, Simulation, and Narrative," 355–381.

¹⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ Gregory Berns, *What It's Like to Be a Dog: And Other Adventures in Animal Neuroscience* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

empathize with those who are close to us, those who are similar to us, and those we see as more attractive or vulnerable and less scary.”¹⁷

Posthumanism brings animals back into our thinking (about and with them), allowing us to better understand them, to understand what they feel, what they experience, and if and how we can try to get in touch with them. Sánchez Baute’s book directs post-humanist attention to the analysis of nonhuman other and the interplay between the human and nonhuman worlds.

Alonso Sánchez Baute takes an intermediate position in his novel, similar to the one that Éric Baratay represents. He constructs an “animal story,” which aims to manifest things from the nonhuman perspective but he starts from the human story to explain how animals experience and feel it, and in this way tries to get closer to their own story. The animal side complements and enriches the human side, but also has its own autonomy and its own value.

Interspecies Intimacy

Anna Tsing¹⁸ writes that “human nature is an interspecies relationship,” by the same token a human and a dog share a habitus crafted through the actions that take place in their overlapping canine and human worlds. They become, in Haraway’s term, “mess mates.” They both engage in a mutually constitutive process of “becoming-with in a contact zone.”¹⁹ Becoming-with is grounded in connectivity and encounter in which people and companion species are bonded in significant otherness.

In spite of Halberstam’s belief that pets are never coplayers in the relationship with humans, and that humans romanticize such a relationship making “a pet a kind of stuffed animal” to “play out dramas of dependency, emotional entanglement, and protection in relation to it,”²⁰ Sánchez Baute makes visible his empathic and unselfish relation towards Humilda and presents a new way of storytelling about the world. *La Mirada de Humilda* does not obliterate the nonhuman experience and by no means replaces it by the human one. It decenters the human, recognizes an animal vantage point and promotes a nonanthropocentric position.

¹⁷ Bloom, *Against Empathy*, 22.

¹⁸ Anna Tsing, “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species,” *Environmental Humanities* 1 (November 2012): 141–154.

¹⁹ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.

²⁰ Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things. The Disorder of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 119.

Sánchez Baute explores how the knots of connection produce a sense of relatedness between him and Humilda. The writer believes that the first knot appeared with the act of feeding the dog with a bottle, which created a special bond between the two of them. However, the writer never treated her as his child, but he felt he was the leader of the pack:

I would let her run in the park, sniff everywhere, play and walk with others of her kind and do whatever she wanted. I gave her too much freedom, perhaps because I trusted her completely in what I had taught her. Parenting, I learned with her, is above all a matter of trust, of allowing her to be what she was, but at the same time demanding a couple of things from her, because I had to be the leader of the pack.²¹

Humilda's caregiver understood that companion animals require abundant affection, consistent and prolonged companionship, acknowledgment of their uniqueness, and the chance to run and play. All this led to the development of trust and commitment. The commitment from Humilda extended beyond mere physical closeness, offering a profound recognition of Alonso's essence. In the company of a canine, he often found closeness to himself, experiencing serene composure. It is possible that this inner tranquility, characterized by integration and healing, represented the true essence of intimacy²² and trust. All these entail also tactile knowledge and moments of tenderness which the writer discovered together with Humilda:

When I put her on the bed in those days, instead of taking her place on her right side, she would run to me and crawl under my arms or ask me with one of her hands to stroke her head. That's when I discovered her weak spot was the inside of her ears. She would make a face of spiritual ecstasy that I have never achieved. [...] I would scratch her belly until she fell asleep. If I stopped caressing her, she would immediately open her eyes and ask me again with her hand to continue pampering her.²³

Surprisingly, the state of intimacy may be most effectively achieved not with another human but with one's animal companion.²⁴ In the course of reading

²¹ Alonso Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda* (Bogotá: Seix Barral, 2022), 69. All the translations from *La Mirada de Humilda* are my own.

²² The author of the article understands intimacy as emotional bonds, and responses experienced by and among human and more-than-human beings.

²³ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 60.

²⁴ Alice Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 107.

Sánchez Baute's book, one learns that Humilda had been an inseparable companion for the writer for fourteen years and provided him with social support and companionship, which was especially felt during the confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic. She had always been there, and for Sánchez Baute this means compassion. When the dog saw him being depressed or crying she would lie on his chest and he felt that she understood what was happening to him. And this is what he means by the spaces that pets inhabit, not just Humilda. This space seems to be understood as one where the human animal and companion species encounter each other, see each other and respond to each other:

With Humilda [...] I didn't have to pretend or invent a character. Next to her I was simply me. It's incredible how vulnerable I allowed myself to be in front of her. Humilda was my emotional support [...] she had that ability to know when I was having a bad time. [...] She would jump on the bed and, if I was lying down, she would lie on my chest in an attitude that I understood as "I'm with you," and if I was sitting up, she would put her head on one of my legs – with the salt from my eyes falling on it – and lick my hand. She was compassionate. She was with me in pain. She contemplated with her dark crystalline eyes and it was a look that I interpreted as "stop the drama, you are not alone" [...] this is really what one needs in moments of silence and loneliness. Not banal words, but real presence. Humilda really felt what she transmitted to me in that moment of sincerity. And that remains inside, it enters softly through the pores without our noticing, as with anesthesia, and it encourages us more than a phrase would. And that is appreciated. [...] I know, my heart tells me, that she knew what was happening to me, not because she understood that my sobbing was similar to hers or to that of other animals when they are sad, or because I talked to her about my sorrows, as I often did, but because she felt my pain at the same time as I did.²⁵

The bond between the writer and Humilda may trigger empathy in readers, not only for the dog but also for the shared vulnerability and dependence between humans and animals. This constitutive feature of who we "are" undoes the very concept of anthropocentrism. The idea of vulnerability that is shared by all living beings is an important element of recent post-anthropocentric thought. Vulnerability has become an important perspective on the meanings and ethical implications of creaturely embodiment, an emphasis on embodiment is, in turn, crucial to any discussion of key terms such as "vulnerability" and "agency," as well as their interrelations given their conceptual inseparability from our particular understandings of corporeality and our existence and experiences as embodied

²⁵ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 68, 95–96, 99.

beings.²⁶ There are traits that we obviously share with other entities: we are interdependent, embodied, capable of pleasure and pain, vulnerable, born to. The fact that we are beings who can be wounded and killed brings us together and creates sociability. We exist in a state of shared vulnerability. We are all precarious, we will all die. We share this condition with animals, and with the environment.²⁷ Through this relationship, the novel underscores the significance of companionship, highlights interconnectedness, and makes the reader more invested in both characters' fates.

The readers clearly experience radical change in the writer's life when Humilda appeared. She not only became his best friend, but also the earthquake that brought down the walls of his loneliness. In the moments of depression from which the author suffered as a result of delving into Colombian armed conflict, and writing a book²⁸ about it, she managed to break through the emotional barriers of his sorrow, allowing warmth and brightness to enter his life. It follows the argument of Kuzniar,²⁹ who claims that "the peaceful presence of the dog reknits the self that had previously disintegrated in melancholia." It is beyond doubt to Sánchez Baute that Humilda helped him combat problems of psychological nature "through deep-seated familiarity, co-situatedness, intimacy."³⁰ The dog offered the writer calmness, equilibrium and alleviated his loneliness. It emerges that his depression was not a single-species event.³¹ In moments of fragility, she accompanied Alonso without judging him. Cheerful, stubborn, loyal, she was the catalyst that allowed him to open to a new life. The emergence of an extraordinary relationship between the writer and the dog was made possible by a shared becoming-with and responsibility, which is also an openness to communicate, provide answers and meet each other's gaze.³²

The writer, in his relationship with Humilda, takes this opportunity to become curious about what the dog might actually be doing, feeling, thinking. He does

²⁶ Dominik Ohrem, "An Address from Elsewhere: Vulnerability, Relationality, and Conceptions of Creaturely Embodiment," in *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide. Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture*, eds. Dominik Ohrem and Roman Bartosch (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 43–75.

²⁷ James Stanescu, "Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals," *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 567–582.

²⁸ The book titled *Libranos del bien* was published in 2008.

²⁹ Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog*, 110.

³⁰ Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog*, 110.

³¹ Elizabeth Pattinson, "Cuts: The Rhythms of 'Healing-with' Companion Animals," in *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide. Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture*, eds. Dominik Ohrem and Roman Bartosch (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 97.

³² Meeting each other's gaze according to Haraway suggests ethical and respectful ways of interacting with animals, a commitment, breaking down anthropocentric barriers, and understanding the nonhuman perspective. It reflects curiosity practices which can be summarized with the following words: "Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning." Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

not want to miss, as Derrida³³ did with his cat,³⁴ “a possible invitation, a possible introduction to other-worlding.”³⁵ This curiosity is not only one-directional. Humilda is also wondering what her human experiences and tries to understand him. *La Mirada de Humilda* is written in the spirit of creating a new subjectivity, at the center of which lies the intermingling of worlds and coalitions of a human with the nonhuman other. By creating this connection and emphasizing the importance of relationship, the author ceases to be an anthropocentric category, he becomes a posthuman hybrid subject, who is connected by a network of relationships with a nonhuman other.³⁶ The redirection of curiosity towards a curiosity “with” others seeks to include the other-than-human in its sphere of interest. Moreover, the knowledge that Sánchez Baute gains in the relationship because of the multi-species curiosity practices creates his new identity.

Sánchez Baute’s task seems to be constructing a story centered on the other rather than on one’s own wish to see the other in a given light. That is why he collects information from various venues. From their snippets he aims to create a holistic account, without being overly hampered by a humanizing gaze. His account tries to convey at least some aspects of what it is to be another. In the case of *La Mirada de Humilda*, the dog’s actions and emotions are no longer abstracted from history and present context. Sánchez Baute translates the animal standpoint. His book becomes a tool for contextualizing the dog, informs the readers’ understanding of Humilda’s life as she comes to be seen as a creature with her own past, reasons for feelings and experiencing in particular ways. All this guides us towards simulative empathy, provides a path towards other-directedness. It enables us to imagine the experiences of others without imposing our own interpretations and reasons onto their situations.³⁷

Opening up to new understanding, learning to be attentive to diverse ways of life that also constitutes his world, trying to inhabit this world well and paying attention to others, and crafting meaningful response, Sánchez Baute lets himself

³³ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” translated by David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002): 369–418.

³⁴ Haraway has written of the disappointment with Derrida and criticized him for missing an opportunity to “seriously consider an alternative form of engagement either, one that risked knowing something more about cats and *how to look back*, perhaps even scientifically, biologically, and *therefore* also philosophically and intimately” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 20).

³⁵ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 20.

³⁶ For further discussion on interconnectedness of humans and nonhuman entities see: Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

³⁷ Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 35–36.

and the dog engage in a dialogical effort, recognize plural worlds and create ethical zones of contact between them. The writer treats Humilda with respect, reflects on her true needs, existing independent of human fantasies about the role of the dog in human life. This, in turn, creates conditions for the emergence of new vulnerabilities and practices, which enable fruitful communication.

Communication

Nonhuman animals do have voices, and dogs are by no means silent. However, they do not express themselves in human language, and we cannot measure their communication to a predetermined human standard.³⁸ Nonetheless, learning about other animals' languages can help us understand them better, and build new relations with them, while by the same time challenging an anthropocentric view of language. It can help us explore possibilities for building new languages and worlds with other animals. Narratives which feature speaking dogs acknowledge various forms of first-person animal expression. Through them the readers attempt to connect with the minds of others by engaging their own subjective and imaginative perspective and thereby navigating between the boundaries of "self" and "other." Despite their potential limitations,³⁹ narratives offer significant possibilities for enabling us to empathize with the viewpoints of others, fostering a deeper understanding of their experiences.⁴⁰

That is why Sánchez Baute examines the practices of communication. Because Humilda is a full-fledged subject of family relationships, the communication between her and the writer is quite frequent and emotionally saturated. The exchange of glances and body language play a decisive role here; however, the writer uses human language in communication with her as well:

Like when I said "let's go" with a smile. This gesture on my face, the sign of joy, she understood. I would say upstairs and she hopped on the sofa, or "downstairs" and she would go down. [...] Or "Doyouwanttogothepark?" and I would show her the leash. And then I'd just say "Doyouwanttogoto thepark?" and she'd jump up and down with joy. [...] And showing her a hug, a kiss or some nice words would satisfy her more than cookies or other treats. [...] Over the years, as I defined each

³⁸ Matthew R. Calarco, *Animal Studies. The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 92.

³⁹ For further discussion on the risks of animal narratives see: Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*.

⁴⁰ Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 37.

look and got right what I thought she was telling me by the way she looked at me, the communication between us flowed.⁴¹

Animals clearly communicate with each other and with humans but they are deprived of voice in human societies because language is defined as solely human. Their voice is that of a different use, which Wittgenstein calls language-games.⁴² Using this term, the philosopher refers to the whole of our natural language, as comprised of a collection of language-games, in which the importance of gestures and other nonlinguistic expressions is emphasized. Eva Meijer, who borrows the concept from Wittgenstein's work claims: "[t]hinking of language as a collection of language-games is an appropriate starting point for thinking about interspecies languages, because it does not discriminate between different types of linguistic and non-linguistic acts, and because it emphasizes the relation between meaning and use."⁴³ Referring to interspecies communication in this manner, Meijer suggests this perspective is valuable for understanding interspecies communication. Humans and various animals engage in diverse relationships and interactions, expressing themselves through a range of methods. Instead of pondering whether animals possess a genuine language, viewing language as a series of language-games allows us to explore human-animal communication by examining the contexts in which they unfold. Interactions between humans and dogs encompass a multitude of scenarios, involving the utilization of human words (although this is not obligatory), vocalizations, gestures, eye contact, smell, and other modes of communication. The complexity of these forms varies, resembling the intricacies seen in human interactions. Communication dynamics can shift over time as relationships develop and mutual understanding deepens.⁴⁴

Humilda was so important for the writer, she was such an integral part of his life that she became his object of research understood as the afore-mentioned curiosity practices. Sánchez Baute began to take notes, analyze and describe Humilda's gaze. In this way he sensed what she was saying. He fantasized what she might be telling him, he looked at what she usually does, what puts her at ease, and made associations. Over time he came to understand that the look matched what she was trying to tell him. And all this, as he claims, established a stronger bond. Humilda was also learning from observation and communicating by means of language games:

⁴¹ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 39.

⁴² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

⁴³ Eva Meijer, "Speaking with Animals: Philosophical Interspecies Investigations," in *Thinking About Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene*, eds. Morten Tønnessen, Kristin Armstrong Oma, and Silver Rattasepp (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 78–79. See also: Eva Meijer, "Political Communication with Animals," *Humanimalia: A Journal of Human/Animal Interface Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): 28–52.

⁴⁴ Meijer, "Speaking with Animals," 78–79.

Humilda was no fool. She tried to convince me that she was just barking, but she was smarter than me. She always looked me in the eyes. [...] She looked at my face more than any other part of my body. She watched my gestures, the way I moved my lips when I spoke. The degree of her concentration in those moments was unbelievable. She never got tired of studying me. Humilda collected all the information she got from watching me day after day. She knew what I liked and what bothered me. She knew my every gesture and understood the tone in which I spoke, beyond language.⁴⁵

Unlike Wittgenstein, Gregory Bateson⁴⁶ defines inter-species communication as embodied communication, which, he claims, “is more like a dance than a word.”⁴⁷ He would say that this is what human and nonhuman mammalian nonlinguistic communication fundamentally is, i.e., “communication about relationship and the material–semiotic means of relating.”⁴⁸ All these perspectives lead to new forms of response and responsibility, open up to different approaches to reality. In Haraway’s terms it is response-ability (“always experienced in the company of significant others”),⁴⁹ which centers upon honest curiosity that brings one into transformative, responsive relationships.

Whether these are language-games, embodied communication, or intentions,⁵⁰ it all is not named but described intuitively by Alonso Sánchez Baute on the pages of his book. All these practices seem to strengthen the degree of intimacy between the writer and Humilda. What is more, he seems to go a step further in the need to understand and predict the dog’s behavior, and makes her a co-author of the book in spite of claiming to be resistant to literalist anthropomorphism.⁵¹ However, what he does, gives the idea of ‘egomorphism’ instead of anthropomorphism, as the author might understand this process similarly to Milton,⁵² who believes

⁴⁵ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 40, 42.

⁴⁶ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 367–370.

⁴⁷ Using a similar metaphor of a dance among species, Haraway talks about a human co-history with the dog as an “ontological choreography,” which suggests a dance between species, where humans are not featured as the only dancers. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 100.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 26.

⁴⁹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 89.

⁵⁰ Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher’s Dog* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2002).

⁵¹ Philip Armstrong claims that “‘non-human agency’ immediately invites the allegation of anthropomorphism.” Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 3. According to him, nonhuman narration invites familiarity, and familiarity requires that anthropomorphism is avoided, for it does not invite recognition.

⁵² Kay Milton, “Anthropomorphism or Egomorphism? The Perception of Non-human Persons by Human Ones,” in *Animals in Person. Cultural Perspectives on Human–Animal Intimacy*, ed. John Knight (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 260.

that “understanding is achieved by *perceiving* characteristics *in* things rather than, as anthropomorphism implies, *attributing* characteristics *to* things.” That is why Milton calls it egomorphism.⁵³ So Sánchez Baute’s egomorphization of Humilda, by inviting a dog to be co-author of the book, might be an expression of realistically occurring similarities between human and nonhuman animal. Giving voice to animal protagonist seeks to reconstruct the diverse relationships in the world which we also share with other species, and thus raises the question of not only the limits and boundaries of empathic sensitivity, but also makes real the opportunity to get closer to the natural world, from which we have distanced ourselves. A dog narrative in *La Mirada de Humilda* might be understood as a literary endeavor of cognitive empathy, representation of the state of the observed subject and taking over her gaze. The narrative is conducted from the perspective of observation, empathizing with the animal, but also it is a personal narrative, created from the position of the extra-human animal itself. In view of this, the text moves “towards mastery’s undoing.”⁵⁴ Human and animal experiences intersect and the reader is somehow drawn into them. The aim of the narrative, however, is to go beyond this ever-defined human community through post-humanist reflection, and to show possible encounters at the intersection of perspectives with realistically depicted more-than-human, who represent themselves in the text and are an important contribution to the critique of humanism with its central category of human, master subject.⁵⁵

Reading talking dog stories puts us in the position of the “grazed witness who understands – or thinks that s/he understands – the language of the dog.”⁵⁶ Humilda’s body language, along with her entire lived experience and inner emotions can be labeled as “language.” In narratological terms, elements such as focalization, voice, characterization and the portrayal of fictional minds work together to achieve this effect. Thus, our perception of reality is disrupted and replaced by a new perspective. That of Humilda alters the reader’s understanding of the world, eliciting empathy as the reader temporarily adopts the perspective of a dog, “trying it out” and experiencing it in a first-person way.⁵⁷

⁵³ “‘egomorphism’ implies that I understand my cat, or a humpback whale, or my human friends, on the basis of my perception that they are ‘like me’ rather than ‘human-like.’” Milton, “Anthropomorphism or Egomorphism?,” 261.

⁵⁴ Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery. Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

⁵⁵ Anna Barcz, “Posthumanizm i jego zwierzęce odgłosy w literaturze,” *Teksty Dru-gie* 1–2 (2013): 69, 78.

⁵⁶ Theodore Ziolkowski, “Talking Dogs: The Caninization of Literature,” in *Varieties of Literary Thematics*, ed. Theodore Ziolkowski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 86–122.

⁵⁷ Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck, “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” *Narrative* 22, no. 1 (January 2014): 68–93.

Nonhuman narration⁵⁸ can serve a variety of functions in the narrative. It can generate interest by means of defamiliarization, which turns the text into a vehicle for scientific knowledge.⁵⁹ Humilda as the narrator can be a subject of knowledge creation and meaning transmission, and as a new protagonist she forces us to rethink human attitudes towards animals. In the thirteen chapters where Humilda is the narrator, her voice is succinct and straightforward, reflecting her unique perspective on the world and her perception of the author. He understands the animal as a presence which must be grasped as a first-person subject from a first-person point of view. This point of view is not from the detached objective place, but it is a point of view that we grasp through the way the other grasps us. According to Dominique Lestel, this is “to think hairy,” which is a metaphor for a nonhuman perspective. It is used to describe deep, instinctual forms of understanding or connecting with the world. “To think hairy” captures animalism in the form of a concrete, relational and interspecies ontology. “To think hairy” is to think about the animal at the intersection of different points of view. “I can comprehend the animal because I think how the animal thinks about me, because it becomes my extension through the opportunity offered to me to be its extension.”⁶⁰

Sánchez Baute, in one of the interviews, described the chapters in which Humilda speaks as those characterized with a distinctive beauty. And added that initially, he faced challenges in capturing the essence of a dog’s communication, but gradually, Humilda’s stories emerged. Her voice conveyed a desire to be part of these narratives, speaking to him with the message: I want to be present in these stories. Sánchez Baute, giving voice to a dog narrator, makes her visible and honors not only Humilda but the animals in general as individuals, taking seriously the parts animals play in society capturing, and making noticeable the animal as an agent, who is individually self-determined, at least to some degree.⁶¹ At the same time, he addresses the idea of animal awareness and sensibility, the articulation

⁵⁸ Often called ventriloquism (people voicing nonhuman animal minds) or mediation (nonhuman animals used as relays between human minds) Margo DeMello, ed., *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1, 4; Jill Morstad, “First Friend, First Words: Speaking of/to Talking Dogs,” in *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo DeMello (New York: Routledge, 2013), 200.

⁵⁹ Karla Armbruster, “What Do We Want from Talking Animals? Reflections on Literary Representations of Animal Voices and Minds,” in *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo DeMello (New York: Routledge), 17–34.

⁶⁰ Dominique Lestel, “Myśleć sierścią. Zwierzęcość w perspektywie drugoosobowej” translated by Anastazja Dwulit, in *Zwierzęta i ich ludzie: Zmierzch antropocentrycznego paradygmatu*, eds. Anna Barcz and Dorota Łagodzka (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.iblpan.5573>.

⁶¹ André Krebber, and Mieke Roscher, “Introduction: Biographies, Animals and Individuality,” in *Animal Biography. Re-framing Animal Lives*, eds. André Krebber and Mieke Roscher (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

of nonhuman moral agency, or the disruption of absolute categorizations that separate humans from animals. In this way Humilda becomes an “active participant in the constitution of what may count as scientific knowledge,”⁶² which is visible in the short chapters “written” by the dog:

Dogs learn more from humans than they do from us. Although I think Congoloch understands me. For example, he knows that I bark more happily when I hear the doorbell ring at our house. [...] Congoloch⁶³ has learned to understand me in the same way that words like “up,” “down,” “come,” “look,” “take,” “over there,” have become commonplace for me, or “why?” which, always precedes a scolding and sometimes makes me feel so bad that I run under his bed. [...] The one I hate the most?

“Todayisbathtime!” I feel like biting him when I hear that.⁶⁴

Deleuze and Guattari⁶⁵ observed that animals are excluded from language and representation, so fighting with this exclusion Sánchez Baute made Humilda co-narrator of his book, thanks to which she became a significant contributor to a cultural production and knowledge making.⁶⁶ At the same time, the narrative helped the author to recover the dog in language and representation.⁶⁷ And although the novelist is unable to access and reproduce what other animals mean on their own terms, he tries to regain the intensity of their relationship through language. Sánchez Baute represents animals’ experience through the mediation of cultural encoding, which inevitably involves a reshaping according to his own intentions, attitudes and preconceptions. However, he seeks to go beyond the use of animals as mere mirrors for human meaning, and locates the ‘tracks’ left by animals in texts. In this way cultural formations are affected by the materiality of animals and their relationships with humans.⁶⁸ Sánchez Baute goes beyond anthropocentric conditions and schemes, making a dog present in a cultural text and highlighting animal individuality. He tries to show that the animal is a subject and interpreter of

⁶² Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 310.

⁶³ This is the name (term of endearment) Humilda uses to refer to Alonso Sánchez Baute.

⁶⁴ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 65.

⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1987.

⁶⁶ Sarah McHugh, *Animal Stories. Narrating across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 11.

⁶⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 43.

⁶⁸ John Simons, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), 5–6, 85–87.

meaning, that Humilda herself means and interacts in the literary text. That is why animal writing makes us see that animals are active collaborators in the construction of meaning, that they are something other than passive objects of study.

Literature is capable of fostering socially effective empathy towards nonhuman entities. This helps distinguish them from “faceless, distant, generic mass of ‘animality’ to which animals are often depicted as belonging.”⁶⁹ Literature integrates familiarity with stories that resist and interrogate anthropocentric stereotypes. It tries to invite recognition and promote nonhuman subjectivity. Consequently, narratives that combine factual information with fictional elements can activate imaginative processes leading to other-directed empathy and help us imagine what it is like to be another being.⁷⁰ Dog narratives can challenge the readers’ familiarity with mental processes via their empathetic engagement with animal minds. Following Masson’s claim, “the more we know an animal personally, the more we are likely to accord them emotional and cognitive complexity.”⁷¹

Death and Grief

The loss of a dog usually creates complex emotional states, and while everyone recognizes grief associated with human loss, the deep sorrow many experience upon the death of a companion animal does not always receive the same acknowledgment. Although this loss can be equally devastating, people often feel embarrassed by their intense grief.⁷² Grieving for a pet’s death remains marginalized and disenfranchised⁷³ in Colombian society.⁷⁴ It seems to be unacknowledged as important

⁶⁹ Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 38.

⁷⁰ Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 38.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Lost Companions: Reflections on the Death of Pets* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020), 17.

⁷² Masson, *Lost Companions*, 14.

⁷³ The term “disenfranchised grief” was first coined by Doka to recognize that some grief “is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.” See: Kenneth J. Doka, “Disenfranchised Grief in Historical and Cultural Perspective,” in *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention*, eds. Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Henk Schut, and Wolfgang Stroebe (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2008), 223–240.

⁷⁴ In contrast, recently, in the Congress of the Republic of Colombia, a discussion was opened due to the intention of a group of legislators from Colombian Liberal Party to grant days of mourning for the death of a pet. The main argument to reject the project was that it could present a new burden that would be detrimental to businessmen and that could increase the affectations that companies have been going through after the pandemic (Germán Espejo, “Se hundió ley que otorgaba licencia de luto por muerte de mascota. ¿Por qué?” *Radio RCN*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.rcn>

enough to grieve or ask for social support. Alonso Sánchez Baute opposes such thinking and claims absurd the fact that people have to silence their pain in public because of the existing prejudices. Mourning a dog's death is a necessary process, and writing is one possible form in which this process can take shape.

Sánchez Baute's novel ends with Humilda's passing. In the penultimate chapter, the dog talks post-mortem and reflects on her own death⁷⁵:

So this is death: not being able to move or make any sound, not being able to see what is happening around me since the veterinarian closed my eyes when Congolocho came to the clinic to see me for the last time. He, who always asked me not to leave him until he had prepared himself for my departure and had enough strength to live from now on in the most complete solitude, "the black butterfly," as he calls that cold in the soul; he, who I hope someone will love him as I loved him, as I love him...⁷⁶

Love, and intimacy between the writer and Humilda are clearly visible in the book. The following quote also illustrates their bond: "As much as they think I don't understand, because I'm not like him, everything that happens to him somehow affects me."⁷⁷ But what happened to Humilda also affected Alonso. Her death crippled him in mourning:

I walked in and saw Humilda on the stretcher [...] I collapsed. Literally. I squatted down with my back to the wall facing her and for the next few minutes I squealed like a pig. [...] When I went out into the street I suddenly felt I couldn't walk, so I sat on the edge of the platform in front of the clinic and for the next thirty or forty minutes I did nothing but cry like a newborn baby.⁷⁸

One tends to anticipate a dog's death as the dog's years run faster than the human years, and, as Derrida wrote, the dog always dies first. In this connection, even

radio.com/politica/se-hundio-ley-que-otorgaba-licencia-de-luto-por-muerte-de-mascota-por-que). On the other, in 2023 the Supreme Court of Bogotá, legitimized the concept of "multi-specific family" (i.e., that a companion animal can be considered as a member of the family and an important part of it) (Andrea Salcedo, "Divorced Couple's Dog Is Legally a Family Member, Colombian Court Says," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/09/dog-colombia-court-member-family/>).

⁷⁵ For further discussion on the concept of death in animals see: Susana Monsó, "How to Tell if Animals Can Understand Death," *Erkenntnis* 87 (2022): 117–136, or *Playing Possum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

⁷⁶ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 185.

⁷⁷ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 86.

⁷⁸ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 189–190.

before Humilda got old and sick, before she died, the author experienced anxieties concerning her passing away. Before her death, the writer described painful experiences related to the aging of the beloved companion, enumerated ailments, diseases, stays in clinics, medications administered. At that time Alonso began to play a subservient role to the sick and aging dog. Haraway⁷⁹ wrote that “we ‘hail’ animals into our constructs of nature and culture, with major consequences of life and death, health and illness, longevity and extinction. We also live with each other in the flesh in ways not exhausted by our ideologies.” What her words highlight is the fact that human beings have more tangible connections with animals. These connections entail the existence of multifaceted relationship that influence our lived experience. As we share it with a living being who is capable of dying, healing, getting sick, recovering, and flourishing, we are tied in a daily negotiation of activities. And those daily activities, the habitualness that Sánchez Baute recaptures after Humilda’s death, combine into overwhelming loss:

It is those moments, I believe now, the moments of pain, of sacrifice, of worry, of fear because I could lose her, the moments of the possibility of death, that most contribute to weaving the bond between a dog and the owner; those are the moments that bring us closer and, paradoxically, they shape love.⁸⁰

It is clear that the myriad ways in which our daily lives are intertwined with the constant presence and care of the pet cause the attachment to be inadvertently close. As a consequence, the separation comes as a shock. The author’s grief shows how enmeshed their daily lives were. Sánchez Baute’s book emphasizes that the mourning needs to be witnessed in spite of it still being a social taboo, meaning that the intimate nature of such human–animal relations usually must remain unspoken. The love for a dog is at best regarded as a poor substitute for the “real” intimacy between human beings; accordingly, mourning the loss of a nonhuman companion is often something that is considered as improper, or even ridiculed as trivial or sentimental:

It is impossible not to feel pain when someone dies who gave you so much joy and discovered for you the meaning of some values you knew only by hearsay. It is impossible not to feel pain when someone to whom you talked every day, to whom you told what was good, but, even more, what was bad that happened to you, or what you thought or imagined. Or what you heard. Those fourteen years that she was by my side are the longest, most intense and enriching personal story I have

⁷⁹ Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 17.

⁸⁰ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 159.

ever had. [...] She and I were, in a way, one, because where I went, she followed me; because where I was, she was. We smelled the same and when I entered another place, the dog or cat there would sniff me thinking I was her. When she was a puppy she watched me day and night. She tried to be me so that I would love her more.⁸¹

During their short lives, companion species have more influence on our character, values and attitudes than we might expect. They live with us and change us too, therefore, the dog's stages of life should be acknowledged and commemorated. However, when there comes time to say goodbye, we often have difficulties, as there are few public rituals or customs to commemorate the dog. When we organize our private ceremonies, we borrow the practices from human funeral rites. It proves that in the case of the death of a companion species there is a blurring of the distinction between what is human and what is animal.

Sánchez Baute destabilizes the boundaries of “grievable lives,” echoing Judith Butler’s critique of “unmournable lives.” By openly narrating and documenting his mourning process for Humilda, Sánchez Baute transforms his personal grief into a public and political act. The author’s grief becomes a political intervention, making visible the ethical and ontological connections between humans and nonhuman animals, and advocating for their inclusion in a shared community of vulnerability and care. *La Mirada de Humilda* invites us to see animal lives as precarious yet worthy of recognition, challenging the societal boundaries that deny animals a place in public acts of mourning.

The discussion of animals in terms of “unmournable lives” obviously owes much to Judith Butler’s social ontology of precariousness. Although her commentary on nonhuman animals is dispersed and marginal in her work, it has nonanthropocentric applications. Exploring Butler’s fragmentary pieces on animals, one will find powerful tools for fighting the prevailing norms of who is to be grieved, and which bodies matter.⁸²

A large number of vulnerable nonhuman lives are still without recognition or grief. Beyond the human sphere, there are no established social rituals or formal practices to acknowledge and mourn the suffering and loss of animals. Thus, their fate is determined by complete ungrievability. However, they deserve to be mourned for their precarity to be recognized and reduced. We should expand our consideration of which beings can experience suffering, enabling “a new trajectory of affect.”⁸³ That is why nonhuman animals have to become politically visible as subjects of grief and compassion.

⁸¹ Sánchez Baute, *La Mirada de Humilda*, 195–196.

⁸² Stanescu, “Species Trouble,” 567.

⁸³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 11.

Mourning does not just bring with it moments of isolation, it is not only a private experience. When we mourn, we make connections, establish kinship, recognize the vulnerability and finitude of the other. When we mourn, we oppose disavowal; and when we stop practicing disavowal, we might start creating the community of intelligibility of our shared precariousness. Mourning is also about celebrations, memories, and stories. Narratives about suffering and sickness create a shared experience that draws people in and makes them feel compassion for others. Mourning both celebrates and grieves our precarious lives. Mourning is all about ethical, political, and ontological connections. Making private grief into public grief would serve as a powerful dismantling tool that would create acknowledgement of the fact that nonhuman animals constitute a life worthy of protection and sustenance.⁸⁴

Sánchez Baute, writing a novel about interspecies relationship and mourning, transforms private grief into a shared experience. Doing this, he affirms the value of Humilda's lost life and opens a path for personal healing. Seen in this light, his narrative may help individuals process and transcend the emotional crises of loss, at the same time including the dog in a collective experience of mutual vulnerability.

The death of a significant one closes a certain stage of the author's life, and the period of mourning that immediately follows allows him to realize how he has changed under the influence of this relationship. Kuzniar believes that when the experience of death is recounted and incorporated into an autobiographical narrative, this act helps the caregiver overcome the psychological crisis. Sharing such intimate feelings with those who have experienced a similar loss can be considered a therapeutic activity.⁸⁵ The readers can empathize with the writer and realize that mourning a dog's death is a necessary process.

Literature, capable of creating an illusion of an experience from a nonhuman animal's or a dead being's perspective, may recognize the simultaneous similarity and otherness of nonhumans. Consequently, anthropocentric ideologies can be destabilized, giving a voice to nonhuman animals and facilitating empathy. Such literature can place them on a continuum with humans, rather than constructing them as opposites. The story invites readers to emotionally step into the writer's loss. By depicting the deep bond between Sánchez Baute and his dog, the narrative evokes shared feelings of love and grief. This connection allows readers to imagine the profound pain of losing a companion, while also fostering empathy for dogs as creatures capable of love and loyalty. The grief is universalized, creating a bridge between human and animal emotions, making readers reflect on the broader emotional lives of dogs and the mutual dependence between species.

⁸⁴ Alina Mitek-Dziemba, "Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective," *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 4 (2018): 113–129.

⁸⁵ Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog*.

Conclusion

Sánchez Baute's book is a tribute dedicated to animals. It teaches us that it is not enough to think about them, we need to start thinking with them and living with them. His dog memoir emphasizes cultivating "arts of attentiveness," which involves paying attention to more-than-human and crafting meaningful response in the process of co-becoming.⁸⁶ We need to reevaluate both our relations with nonhuman animals and the concepts attached to those relations, because both forms of life are shaped and made possible through a shared heritage, an entanglement,⁸⁷ which Isabelle Stengers⁸⁸ characterizes as "reciprocal capture" and Kathleen Stewart⁸⁹ as "attunements." Correspondingly, human beings and non-human animals do not just happen to meet each other, their relationship emerges from coevolutionary histories, from rich processes of co-becoming. This co-becoming involves the exchange and emergence of meanings, immersion in webs of significations that might be linguistic, gestural, biochemical, and more. Multispecies relationality tuned to the temporal and semiotic registers makes evident a lively world in which being is always becoming, and becoming is always becoming-with. It involves opening up new understandings, relationships, and accountabilities.⁹⁰

What Sánchez Baute's book also highlights is the fact that Humilda possesses an episteme which includes her in the process of knowledge making. It brings the dog into dialogue and authority as an equal partner of a human being. Sánchez Baute created a space for a new understanding of animal subjectivity, which can lead to real changes for animals. It shows that they have personalities, different type of emotions, wants and desires. It makes them appear more like us, and thus, more worthy of our consideration.⁹¹ *La Mirada de Humilda* is a book that gives the readers a new storytelling, a multispecies narrative that grants the reader a kind of access to non-human lives. It helps to imagine those lives as different yet similar. It forms a bridge between the human and the nonhuman; provides a link by figuring the lived, phenomenal worlds of the more-than-human.

⁸⁶ Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–23, 2.

⁸⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁸⁸ Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁸⁹ Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 29, no. 3 (2011): 445–453.

⁹⁰ van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, "Multispecies Studies," 2.

⁹¹ Krebber and Roscher, *Animal Biography*, 249.

Finally, it is a story that shows us that our relationship with a companion species is not a poor substitute of the “real” intimacy between human beings. It demonstrates that the life of our companion animal should be commemorated, that mourning of a dog’s life is a normal and necessary process, and should be more openly acknowledged. It demonstrates that contrary to what Yi-Fu Tuan⁹² (quoting Lorenz 1949)⁹³ claimed about losing a pet, this void may not be so easily filled again with a substitute.

All the above-mentioned themes explored in the novel enable readers to transcend human-centric viewpoints and cultivate a profound empathy for the non-human world. Literature is a vehicle to challenge anthropocentric ideologies and break away with the human desire to catalog and measure nature, instead immersing audiences in the worlds of more-than-human actors. Richard Powers, in his novel *Bewilderment* (2021), illustrates this necessity by means of his protagonist’s vision of neural feedback training to experience life as a different species. It speaks to the transformative potential of understanding “what it felt like to be a dog” or any other creature:

[...] we’d learn what it felt like to be a dog. It could just be a regular part of school. Everyone would have to learn what it felt like to be something else. Think of the problems that would solve! [...] The template animal could be a dog or a cat or a bear or even one of my son’s beloved birds. Anything that could make us feel what it was like to not be us.⁹⁴

Such an imaginative leap, fostered by literature, can create a more compassionate, interconnected and ethical worldview. By immersing ourselves in narratives that allow us to become a plant, animal, or ecosystem, we begin to grasp the intricate, interdependent tapestry of life on Earth. Such literature does not just tell stories; it serves as a universal mandatory course, guiding humanity towards a deeper awareness and a more ethical stewardship of our planet. Powers’ insight reminds us that to solve the myriad problems we face, we must first learn to see, feel, and understand the world from a perspective beyond our own.

In short, we need human–nonhuman animal stories in literature, film, television and theatre in order to be able to imaginatively simulate different varieties of nonhuman existence and human–nonhuman entanglements. Such stories ought to be rendered political and made into something other than pure enjoyment.

⁹² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

⁹³ Konrad Lorenz, *Man Meets Dog* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964).

⁹⁴ Richard Powers, *Bewilderment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 152.

They can awake us to the concreteness of other lives and provoke reflection and response.

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