

The Future of the Witness: Nature, Race and More-than-Human Environmental Publics

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Introduction

In a 2014 article entitled ‘Ecology, Race, and the Making of Environmental Publics: A Dialogue with Silent Spring in South Africa’, anthropologist Lesley Green identifies obstacles to the creation of an ‘environmental public’ in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa.¹ The broader backdrop against which Green writes – one that is experienced globally to differing degrees and in often distinct manners – is that of environmental violence that is enacted both against racialized human bodies and against nature, and with this the entanglement between abuses of human and nonhuman rights. For a start, violations of human rights, both in South Africa and beyond, have been and continue to often be carried out *through* the natural environment, for instance through scorched earth tactics, environmental remodelling, planting, the creation of enclosures and dispossession through land-grabbing.² Moreover, in the context of ‘environmental

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¹ Lesley Green, ‘Ecology, Race, and the Making of Environmental Publics: A Dialogue with Silent Spring in South Africa’, *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 2 (June 2014), unpaginated, p. 5. [Note to copyeditor: page numbers from a printed copy are included for the sake of reference but maybe they should be deleted entirely?] As suggested by the title, Green’s article is a reading of Rachel Carson’s seminal 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, in the context of contemporary environmental debate in South Africa.

² In the South African context, the planting of a wild almond tree hedge around the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens in Cape Town is a prime example. In the words of Uriel Orlow, ‘the planting of [this hedge] to protect the fruit and vegetables from the grazing cattle of the KhoiKhoi can be considered as one of the first acts of violence against the indigenous population.’ Uriel Orlow, ‘Preface: Beautiful, But Dangerous’ in Shela Sheikh and Uriel Orlow, eds., *Uriel Orlow: Theatrum Botanicum* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 21–23; see also Melanie Boehi, ‘Multispecies Histories of South African Imperial Formations in the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden’ in *Theatrum Botanicum*, 81–87, esp. 84.

Regarding scorched earth tactics and accompanying attempts to criminalize ecocide, see Paulo Tavares, ‘The Geopolitical Imperative: On the Political Ecology of the Amazonia’s Deep History’ in Etienne Turpin, ed., *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep*

racism’, such violations are often enacted against racialized populations who are culturally and politically rendered ‘disposable’ or ‘sacrificeable’ – for instance climate refugees or, in the case of contemporary South Africa, those denied access to water, exposed to higher levels of pollution and/or toxicity or removed from their land in the name of the profitability of extractive capitalism, for instance mining – or, in a more sinister move, removed from their land in the name of conservation.³

In the case of nature, Green speaks of the ‘political silence [...] of creatures and landforms that we call “nature”’.⁴ Here, in what will be one of the key gestures that this article sets out to examine in relation to the condition of ‘missingness’, nature is treated as an *object*, ‘a resource *without voice or rights*’.⁵ Moreover, it is treated as an object that needs to be protected by humans, but only certain kinds of humans: for instance, as Green relates, in the context of the ‘tragedies’ of ‘compliance-based environmental management’ in South Africa, nature, so the dominant story goes, needs to be protected by the government from those who supposedly have no right to it (for example, poachers or Asian syndicates) for those who ‘do’ have the rights to it (for instance, quota holders and conservation scientists). This question of who is entitled to, or *ought* to, speak in the name of whom will be one of my key concerns in what follows – above all in the context of silencing and missingness, as well as constructed categories of active/passive, subject/object as these play out across race, nature and shifting conceptions of the human. In the context of South Africa, Green writes, who *has the right* to advocate for nature is ‘profoundly racialized, since voices raised in the protection of nature have an uneasy time escaping the scripts of race and racism.’⁶ Key here is the subject/object

Time, Science and Philosophy (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 209–39, esp. 229–31; and Hannah Meszaros-Martin, ‘Defoliating the World: Ecocide, Visual Evidence and “Earthly Memory”’, *Third Text*, 32 (2–3) (Spring 2018): 230–53.

Regarding violence enacted *through* the environment, see Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, ‘The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions – Introduction’, *Third Text* 151, 32, 2 (Spring 2018), 163–75, at 164; Uriel Orlow and Shela Sheikh, ‘Introduction: A Prisoner in the Garden’ in *Theatrum Botanicum*, 25–39, esp. 28.

³ Regarding this ‘disposability’ and ‘sacrificeability’, see Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010); Naomi Klein, ‘Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World,’ *London Review of Books*, 38, 11 (2 June 2016), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown>. Regarding environmental racism, see Françoise Vergès, ‘Racial Capitalocene: Is the Anthropocene Racial?’, Verso Blog, 30 August 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3376-racial-capitalocene>.

⁴ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 1.

⁵ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 3, emphasis added.

⁶ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 2. Otherwise put, ‘[i]n a context in which conservation is increasingly implemented at the point of a gun or at least at the point of booms that open only to

relation that, as I will come to, must be read through the legacy of colonial categorisations of forms of life. As Green writes: ‘The violence that is racism [...] finds its power in the classification of some as subjects, who have the right to speak, and others who are silent. The silenced are but objects or things in the racial imaginary in which people are reduced to the non-human; classed as a lesser species.’⁷ In other words, classed as closer to ‘nature’.⁸

In the context of this special issue on the theme of ‘Missing and Mised: The subject, politics and memorialisation of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid dead’, my contribution may at first appear somewhat oblique. For a start, beyond my reference to Green’s article, I write neither from South Africa nor of its colonial or apartheid history and legacies. Rather, as do many of the contributors, I respond here to the aim of both the special issue and the workshop that preceded it to take insights from the uniqueness of the status of ‘missingness’ in the South African context and to engage with a multitude of geopolitical settings.⁹ (My reading will move between the European Holocaust to global humanitarian and forensic practices, through largely European and North American science and technology studies and later Amerindian thinking in the Andes in order to gather together a more generalised set of questions and propositions.) I take Green’s analysis of the specificity of environmental publics in the South African context as a provocation to think through a specific kind of ‘missing figure’ on a global scale: that of the witness, albeit in an expanded sense.

The witness as missing figure

The missing figure to whom or which I refer here is not the missing witness as the object of past colonial or apartheid violence – the figure who has been stripped, precisely, of

paying elites, the legacy of racism spills out like oil from a sunken ship’ (2). Green speaks of the exorbitant cost of entry to South Africa’s national parks, which excludes racialized sections of the population.

⁷ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’. On the classification, along racial lines, of people as ‘less-than-human’ and ‘not-quite-human’, see Alexander G Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁸ This is particularly the case for indigenous populations in settler colonial contexts.

⁹ I refer here to the workshop, under the same title, which took place at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of Western Cape, on 27 February–1 March 2018.

their status as *subject* or *person*, dehumanised and disappeared (i.e., been made missing),¹⁰ and who is thus no longer able to speak and testify to their fate, be this to the legal court or to the court of public opinion or history. Nor is this the witness figure as the survivor (the witness as *superstes*) or onlooker (the witness as third party or *testis*) who gives testimony to public, quasi-legal hearings – for instance, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission; but global examples abound – about what *took place*.¹¹ Rather, responding to both Green’s reading of contemporary environmental publics and to the broader escalation of environmental violence on a global scale, the missing figure here designates the very manner in which we conceive of the witness, ontologically (across various forms of life and temporalities), epistemologically and politically. Read through the grammar of the double genitive, my title, ‘the future of the witness’, is intended to provoke two questions: in what ways must we re-conceptualise and expand our understanding of ‘the witness’ as we move into the future; and is it possible for a witness to testify both to present and future experiences – to the very future of life on this planet that is threatened through the ever-exacerbating Anthropocenic environmental violence that I have begun to outline above?¹² As such, *witnessing* in this context is not the act of *bearing witness* (*testifying*), in the present, to an event that took place (*was* witnessed or experienced) in the past, at a determined moment; rather, unlike the classical conception of testimony in which the ‘thing’ experienced is no longer present to the witness and as such is recalled through memory, witnessing is here

¹⁰ To this missingness we can add what Jenny Edkins names ‘unmissing’, as in as in simply not noticed, at least by some, *as* missing. Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 5.

¹¹ These figures have been amply documented and engaged with by scholars embedded in the South African context, for instance from the perspectives of history, literary theory, philosophy, and law, to name but a few, and in the work done in the Forensic History Project based in the History Department at the University of Western Cape.

The word ‘witness’ has two roots in Latin (and, as Emile Benveniste shows, in all Indo-European languages): on the one hand, *testis*, someone who was present as a third party (from *terstis*) at a transaction where two persons are concerned; and *superstes*, someone who ‘exists beyond’ the event, who experienced it and survived it in order to subsequently bear witness. Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (London: Faber, 1973 [1969]). See Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2012), 204; Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel, ‘Introduction: Converging the Yet-Separate Theoretical Discourses of Testimony Studies’ in *Testimony/Bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), ix–xli, at xi; and Jacques Derrida, ‘Poetics and Politics of Witnessing’, in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit & Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 65–86, at 73–74.

¹² The term Anthropocene designates the ‘human dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth’. See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, ‘The “Anthropocene”’, *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme* 41 (2000).

conceived of as an ongoing process that entails the simultaneous registration of experiences (witnessing) and representation (bearing witness) to a public – as an accumulation of grievances in the context of environmental degradation and the subjugation of certain ‘subjects’ (be these human or non-human).¹³

My argument is that, where what is demanded is collective action and responses insofar as singular lives are violated within broader ecologies, the witness can no longer be a solitary figure; rather, the witness must instead be *but one* within a collectivity. Moreover, it is precisely in the context of a collectivity that the witness figure of which I write is constituted and produced. No longer the heroic, autonomous individual, *the* witness must thus be *one of many*, inscribed within a particular social milieu. As Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel stress, despite the lack of agreement regarding concepts of and approaches towards testimony, there is at least one ‘fundamental consensus’: that testimony cannot be determined outside of a ‘testimony constellation’ or ‘social constellation’; “‘testimony’/‘bearing witness’ is a relational concept [...] an intersubjective situation in a historically specific social world that is condensed in the act of testifying.”¹⁴

Furthermore, although the figure of the witness has traditionally been confined to the human (in particular in the legal realm), I argue that where what is at stake is care for both human and more-than-human life,¹⁵ witness collectivities need necessarily entail an expansion beyond the category of the human. Green argues for an environmentality that does not take recourse to modernist categories of subject and object – i.e., the categorisation that I began to sketch out above that forms the basis of the construction of both ‘humanity’ and ‘nature’, as well as race, as I will come to.¹⁶ In other words, for an environmental public that entails more-than-humans. What I propose is that we extend Green’s thesis and conceive of the figures that constitute such a public more specifically as active witnesses, across the human/nonhuman divide, to both present unfolding environmental degradation and possible more liveable futures. What I take from Green’s

¹³ For a reading of the conventional temporal and sense-perceptual schema of witnessing/testimony, see Derrida, ‘Poetics and Politics of Witnessing’, 77.

¹⁴ Krämer and Weigel, ‘Introduction’, x.

¹⁵ I use the term ‘more-than-human’ throughout in lieu of ‘nonhuman’, which defines everything other than human in relation to the human. Also, as per Anna Tsing’s use of the term, this is to designate the entanglement between humans and other-than-humans. See Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 8, 9.

reading of the South African context is the need to surpass the argument around the naturalization of race as a social construct (for instance, in the exotic othering of indigenous peoples, whose representations, from without, place them closer to nature; or the rendering ‘disposable’ of racialized populations merely through a cultural imaginary) and to instead address both race *and* nature concomitantly in the modernist imaginary, precisely through the manner in which the subject/object divide allows us to think through both racism *and* the war on nature. Green turns to the constitution writers of contemporary Ecuador and Bolivia who, by including nature as bearer of legal rights in 2008, ‘have extended their critique of modernist thought to reject the subject-object divide that legitimates a war on nature’, and ‘are attempting to constitute an environmentality that draws on a different intellectual heritage – one that is deeply bound up in Amerindian thought.’¹⁷ While Green’s move is to bring into conversation the South African post-apartheid experiment with that of Latin American decoloniality (which I will turn to below), I would like to suggest that these two ‘experiments’ offer much when we rephrase environmental publics through the language of witnessing, especially when conceived in terms of subject and object and, as I am coming to, classical and persistent postcolonial questions of representation.

To be clear, I am not the first to propose that the figure of the witness be extended beyond the human; I take leave from a range of re-conceptualisations of the more-than-human witness in order to frame these in the context of witnessing collectivities, and to then focus on some specific questions around missingness and representation that I argue require pursuing further. As such, what follows contributes to an as yet dispersed field that traverses multiple disciplines and geographical locations. In the legal context, practices and theorisations of nonhuman rights or the rights of nature – and with this shifting categories of personhood, legal standing and voice – have done much to acknowledge nature as ‘a fundamental space to which cultural and political rights are bound’ and to make ‘ecological systems inhabit the courtrooms of national and transnational forums as potential witnesses of legal violations.’¹⁸ There are notable

¹⁷ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 8.

¹⁸ Paulo Tavares, ‘Nonhuman Rights’ in Forensic Architecture, ed., *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 553–72, at 562. The literature on the rights of nature is vast. For a useful overview, see also TJ Demos, ‘Rights of Nature: The Art and Politics of Earth Jurisprudence’, April 2015, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.ucsc.edu/dist/0/196/files/2015/10/Demos-Rights-of-Nature->

further examples of expanding the category of the witness beyond the ‘human’. For instance, deconstruction (notably in the work of Jacques Derrida) had already shown us that the irreplaceable, sovereign, autonomous and self-present figure that the witness is supposed to be is always already affected by heteronomy and prosthetized by an ‘originary technicity’, as such exposing the impossibility of ‘pure’, ‘actual’ or ‘authentic’ testimony.¹⁹ And if human testimony can be seen as always-already quasi-technologised, and as such never fully ‘human’ (i.e., pertaining to *physis*, as opposed to its supposed opposite, *techné*), on the seeming other end of the spectrum, technological media itself might be considered as witness. Here the work of Susan Schuppli is instructive. Since 2005, through both art practice and theoretical writings, Schuppli has been developing the ‘material witness’: an operative concept that foregrounds the ‘expressive quality’ of nonhuman matter and demonstrates ‘how media artefacts and environmental conditions themselves bear witness not only to “events” but also the sorting and registration processes imposed upon them in order for them to qualify as evidence in the first place’, asking ‘how objects become agents of contestation between different stake-holders and truth claims’,²⁰ especially in the manner in which they are ‘made to speak’ as technical witnesses to crimes. A further significant reference point is the ‘forensic aesthetics’ upon which the work of the London-based Forensic Architecture agency, which arose in the context of the fallibility of human testimony, is based.²¹ In the absence of reliable human witnesses (i.e., when the witness is *missing*), forensic aesthetics, to which I will return, turns instead to the agency of matter (organic or inorganic, including natural environments) or ‘*object witnesses*’ to question factual reality as expressed by the state.²²

2015.compressed.pdf; and Rafi Youatt, ‘Personhood and the Rights of Nature: The New Subjects of Contemporary Earth Politics’, *International Political Sociology*, 11, 1 (2017): 1–16.

¹⁹ In other words, the (self-same) ‘presence’ of human speech (for testimony, *in theory* at least, should be proffered ‘live’, in the first person and without any technological recording or transmission devices) is only possible on the basis of a quasi-technical reproducibility that for Derrida ‘is’ the minimal trace of both communicability and experience per se. Notable texts by Derrida on witnessing include: ‘Poetics and Politics of Witnessing’, op cit; *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998); *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000); Jacques Derrida & Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

²⁰ <https://www.forensic-architecture.org/file/material-witness/>.

²¹ Schuppli was previously Senior Research Fellow and Project Coordinator on the Forensic Architecture project (2011–2014).

²² The group – which is comprised of architects, theorists, lawyers, scientists, programmers, artists and filmmakers – gathers and presents spatial analysis in legal and political forums across the world, with the aim of using the investigative apparatuses of the state *against* the state, above all in respect to its violations, in chime with the model of nongovernmental politics to which I will turn. ‘Architecture’ here is both used in a restricted sense (i.e., buildings, which are viewed as

Where the rights of nature and the practice of forensic aesthetics, for example, are oriented towards evidentiary and legal forums, the witness-collectivities to which I gesture also operate beyond empirical truth claims in the sphere of public opinion more broadly. In what follows, I examine the capacity of nature to empirically register and express environmental change, as well as taking inspiration from the work of political theorist Michal Givoni, whose reading of the specific form of humanitarian witnessing practiced by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors Without Borders) in her book *The Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crisis* (2016) provides a blueprint for conceiving of witnessing as both a practice of care for the other *and* of political protest that contests contemporary (here neoliberal and, we can add, neo-colonial and extractive) forms of governmentality.²³ However, where Givoni's witness bears witness to humanitarian disaster, I argue for the necessity of moving beyond the human.

In considering nature as active participant in environmental publics, I do not propose that nature be conceived as witness figure strictly speaking insofar as this would entail anthropomorphism (for instance, that nature can bear witness linguistically, or be conceived as witness in the framework of trauma studies, memory studies, ethics, affect theory or psychoanalysis that are entailed within testimony theory).²⁴ Rather, my argument is that witnesses are produced in the context of more-than-human socialities, between the human and nonhuman. In the case of nonhuman life, I question whether

documentary forms or sensors), and as a *field of knowledge* and *mode of interpretation*, concerned with *relations* between people and things, through spaces and structures, from the human body, through buildings and homes to the planet itself, which is proposed as the ultimate home or 'construction site'. See <https://www.forensic-architecture.org>; Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012); Eyal Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis' in *Forensic Architecture*, ed., *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 9–32; and Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017). Of particular relevance here are the group's investigations into environmental violence; see, for instance, Forensic Architecture in collaboration with SITU Research, 'Case: Guatemala' in *Forensis*, 519–52.

²³ Michal Givoni, *The Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁴ I take the term 'vocative moment' from Green. For useful overviews of these varying approaches to testimony theory, see Michal Givoni, *The Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel, eds., *Testimony/Bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

our vocabulary must be expanded beyond the term ‘witness’, with all its anthropocentric assumptions.

It is with this risk of anthropocentrism, in particular, that what follows adds a specific line of enquiry to existing conceptions of the witness figure beyond the human. While the discourse of the rights of nature and its ‘vocative moment’ has been debated in terms of the risks entailed in ‘giving voice’ to nature,²⁵ I phrase this here in terms of the paradoxical risks entailed in retrieving missing figures. In the context in which the witness is missing (i.e., absent and, for some at least, missed), should not a prosthetic or proxy testimony be sought? How, then, to grapple with the problematics of ‘speaking for’ *in lieu* of the missing or missed, insofar as this runs the risk of reinforcing an original silencing or effacement, for instance through the category of nature or race? Or, in the context of environmentalism, when this entails the possibility of nature itself becoming the subaltern, deprived of an adequate audience? In other words, in what follows, I wish to ‘stay with the trouble’, to use Donna Haraway’s phrase, of the ambiguities and potentially productive limitations to witnessing.²⁶ If, as I will explore below, the ‘era of the witness’ – a foregrounding of the testimonial narratives of victims that took place notably after the trial of Adolph Eichmann trial in 1961 – was paradoxically premised upon the troubled performance of testimony (i.e., upon a crisis of testimony),²⁷ I ask what the productive ambiguities of both witnessing and representational practices might be in an age in which nature – previously overlooked or missed in the modernist imaginary, as passive object – is granted both legal rights and expressive capacities.

The care of the witness: between ethics and politics

‘No one / bears witness for the / witness.’²⁸ Such are the oft-quoted words of the poet Paul Celan, whose body of work exemplifies the impossibility of testifying to the horrors of the Nazi camps.²⁹ This would simultaneously function as an ethical injunction: that no-one *should* bear witness *in the place of* the witness, that no-one should *speak for* the

²⁵ Critics of the rights of nature ‘include both humanists who are skeptical of the way that speaking for nature is a front for other human interests, and posthumanists who worry about the re-institution of an anthropocentric politics in the act of “speaking for” nonhumans.’ Rafi Youatt, ‘Personhood and the Rights of Nature’, 2.

²⁶ See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

²⁷ See Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 5.

²⁸ Paul Celan, ‘Ash Glory [Aschenglorie]’ (1967)

²⁹ See Derrida, ‘Poetics and Politics of Witnessing’.

witness – a quandary that will be central in what follows in relation to nature. And yet, as Giorgio Agamben writes, drawing from Primo Levi’s experience of Auschwitz in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), the witness as survivor (*superstes*) does not testify fully, for the ‘true’ or ‘complete’ witnesses is the drowned (the ‘*Muselmann*’), who ‘touched bottom’ and *for whom* no-one can testify.³⁰ In other words, for whom no-one can stand in as a third-party witness (*testis*) or ‘spokesperson’. As Didier Fassin writes, ‘in current usage’, the boundary between the figures of *superstes* and *testis* ‘is tending to become blurred’.³¹ The *superstes* has come to be supplanted by the *testis* in manifold ways, most notably nowadays, as Eyal Weizman notes, ‘with the development and widespread accessibility of digital data derived from activist imagery and their accelerated dissemination via mobile phone, cloud, and social networks.’³² Looking back, this shift can be read in tandem with the emergence of the humanitarian witness, propelled by the work of Médecins sans Frontières, which ‘was born in 1971 out of the refusal to remain silent during the war in Biafra’. Thus emerged the witness as *testis*: ‘not the witness who has experienced the tragedy, but the one who has brought aid to its victims.’³³

Here I propose that we linger a while with Givoni in order to eventually bring into dialogue her thesis regarding ‘the care of the witness’ and the problematics of ‘speaking for’ in the context of environmental violence.³⁴ Givoni’s starting point in *The Care of the Witness* is a study of the internal dilemmas and debates regarding humanitarian witnessing within Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) that culminated in the publication and dissemination of a series of studies entitled ‘Speaking Out’ in 2004. What the series’ reflexive elaboration on witnessing, memory and advocacy confirmed was that the humanitarian witness was not just a source of eye-witness testimony, but also a character to take on, one who pursues outspoken statements to be carefully deliberated within

³⁰ “The “true” witnesses, the “complete witnesses,” are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who “touched bottom”: the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. [...] Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.” Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 34.

³¹ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 205.

³² Weizman, ‘Introduction: Forensis’, 12.

³³ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 205–06. See also Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 2.

³⁴ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 4.

(largely Western, admittedly) public, political spheres.³⁵ The re-conceptualised task of witnessing was premised upon more than simply ‘speaking truth to power’; rather than simply seeking to contest power (in particular neoliberal governmentality) it also strove to provide acts of care. By drawing from Michel Foucault’s notion of ethics as a reflective and socially guided ‘care of the self’,³⁶ through her reading of MSF, Givoni argues that the cultivation of the self is not incompatible with a politics that underscores the responsibility towards or care for *the other*.³⁷

Here, the troubled performance of testimony that constituted the ‘era of the witness’ and that had been consolidated by the poststructuralist tradition as ‘the tenacious trace of humanity in politics’³⁸ is combined with a more explicitly activist take: where poststructuralist theory had stressed the bankruptcy of ethics to the detriment of the political challenges of witnessing, and where more recent studies had focused on the political instrumentality of witnessing but neglected the ethical, Givoni identifies in the work of MSF a combination of the two. Here, then, is the entrance of the still ethically-concerned, reflexive witness into the sphere of politics.

While Givoni’s concern is the humanitarian witnessing practiced and developed by MSF, her use of Michel Feher’s account of nongovernmental politics and the ‘shared determination not to be governed *thusly*’³⁹ has much to offer for the context of environmental activism as a means of protesting a mode of governing that is premised upon the assumption that individuals best fulfil their political and civic obligations ‘when they seek to *fulfil themselves* as free individuals.’⁴⁰ Givoni’s aim is to bring into focus the interplay between witnessing and the contemporary logic of governing by responsabilization: for instance, the transformation of liberal democracies from an

³⁵ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 176. Witnessing and testimony are here gestures that do not just produce empirical or metaphysical truths; rather, they ‘are bound to instigate a subjective transformation’ (11).

³⁶ Here Givoni draws from Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), esp. 25–32; and Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³⁷ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 206, 175ff.

³⁸ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 5. Givoni focuses on the figure of the witness in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Giorgio Agamben and Shoshana Felman.

³⁹ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 28, 25–26. See Michel Feher, ‘The Governed in Politics’ in Michel Feher, Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee, eds., *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 12–27.

⁴⁰ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 166, cited in Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 24.

interventionist apparatus to one in which individuals are propelled to act socially and responsibly out of their own initiative. In the context of environmental justice, the point has been made repeatedly that, whereas supra-national binding agreements on quotas to tackle climate change (and thus reduce numbers of climate refugees), combined with adequate state policy, are what is necessary,⁴¹ neoliberal governmentality increasingly seeks to place responsibility on individuals (often as ‘green consumers’).⁴² In Givoni’s account, witnessing is a means of ‘moral crafting of the self’ that avoids creating ‘anchors for neoliberal policy that transfers responsabilization to private individuals in matters pertaining to both global and social justice’.⁴³ Witnessing, as practiced by MSF, is a means of ‘defying neoliberalism from within’⁴⁴ that does not simply ‘[denounce] and [lament] the personalization of politics as the strategy through which neoliberalism causes people to lose sight of their collective interests’;⁴⁵ rather, the practice of witnessing as a simultaneous cultivation of the self *and* care for others as an active participation in political life allows for strategies of self-cultivation that are regarded as ‘a way of relaunching the politicization of the personal’⁴⁶ – a means for citizens ‘to carve out for themselves new avenues for public action beyond those already prescribed in official politics’.⁴⁷ An example of this is the citizen science environmental sensing project that I will later turn to below.

The future of the witness: beyond the human

In the context of contemporary environmental violence, with its roots in colonialism and the plantation system, there is an increasing awareness that what is necessary are practices of more-than-human ‘world-making’ that entail both human and nonhuman planetary subjects.⁴⁸ Givoni’s witnesses, for all their worth, remain within the realm of

⁴¹ See Adrian Lahoud, ‘Floating Bodies’ in *Forensis*, 495–518.

⁴² See for instance Martin Lukacs, ‘Neoliberalism has conned us into fighting climate change as individuals’, *Guardian*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/true-north/2017/jul/17/neoliberalism-has-conned-us-into-fighting-climate-change-as-individuals>.

⁴³ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 25.

⁴⁴ Michel Feher, ‘Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital’, *Public Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2009): 21–41, at 21. Cited in Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 26.

⁴⁵ Feher, ‘The Governed in Politics’, 38, cited in Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 26.

⁴⁶ Feher, ‘The Governed in Politics’, 38, cited in Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 26.

⁴⁷ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 20.

⁴⁸ Many have made strong claims for the Anthropocene (the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment) needing to be understood through the colonial plantation system (hence Donna Haraway’s term ‘Plantationocene’). See

the humanitarian, tasked with rescuing a certain ‘humanity’ faced with ‘inhuman’ horrors.⁴⁹ Thus the question remains as to how the more-than-human (for instance, animals, plants, landscapes) might figure within this constellation. Before turning to this, let us linger a while on the temporality of witnessing.

As mentioned above, in the context of environmental violence, what must be borne witness to is not something that *has occurred* in the past; rather, it is often a present, ongoing condition that spills out into the future and, in the context of the threat of Anthropocenic extinction and exhaustion, makes itself felt pre-emptively in the present.⁵⁰ And besides this temporal expansion is also the question of perceptibility. If Givoni’s concern is to ‘critically examine the applicability of the poststructuralist concept of witnessing to contemporary catastrophes’ and to ask the question of what it means ‘[t]o be a witness to emergencies’,⁵¹ we might ask: how to bear witness to a ‘catastrophe’ or ‘emergency’ when it remains largely imperceptible (on whose scale does an ‘emergency’ register?), and when the emergency itself *is* the slow cancellation of the future? Of a *liveable* and ‘sustainable’ environment? In other words, the slow collapse of an ecosystem, a set of bodies, suspended between the past, present and a looming, suffocating future; the in many cases quite literal annulment of a world, a future.

Here I turn to Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), which I propose we re-read from the perspective of witnessing.⁵² What Nixon terms ‘slow violence’ escapes the spectacle-driven corporate media and our flickering attention spans.⁵³ Typically not even perceived *as* violence, slow violence is not time-bound or body-bound, but rather is attritional and of delayed effects.⁵⁴ Most often environmental

Donna Haraway, ‘Anthropocene, Capitolocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin’, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6 (2015), 159–165; Vergès, ‘Racial Capitalocene’, Gray and Sheikh, ‘The Wretched Earth’.

⁴⁹ See Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 213.

⁵⁰ The threat of ‘Day Zero’ of the Cape Town water ‘crisis’ in early 2018 can be read through this temporal logic.

⁵¹ Givoni, *The Care of the Witness*, 203.

⁵² Nixon himself rarely uses the terms ‘witnessing’ or ‘testimony’.

⁵³ This parsing of slow violence is taken from my entry on ‘Violence’ in *The Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 448–52.

Against the backdrop of the unprecedented fires, floods and heat waves across the globe during 2018, see Nixon’s interview with Amy Goodman about slow violence: ‘Rob Nixon: Gov’t Inaction on Climate Change Is “Slow Violence” That Hits World’s Poor the Hardest’, *Democracy Now!* 2 August 2018,

https://www.democracynow.org/2018/8/2/rob_nixon_govt_inaction_on_climate.

⁵⁴ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3, 11.

and with everything to do with the ‘violent geographies of fast capitalism’,⁵⁵ including racism, this insidious violence elides the narrative closure of recognisable visuals of the victory and defeat of war, instead working its way inwards, ‘somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that – particularly in the bodies of the poor – remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated.’⁵⁶ Here, violence must be re-thought in the absence of a punctual act, a violent event⁵⁷ – without a recognisable ‘disaster’ or ‘emergency’. Slow violence is un-capturable: an event that spills over into the future, yet to fully run its course.

Nixon reminds us that many ‘humanitarian’ disasters are catalysed by human-induced climate change and by the indifference or denial of North American environmentalism to its imperial legacies and contemporary imperial epistemological and extractive violences. Here, the calamitous repercussions of the ‘disaster’ play out across a range of temporal scales, their invisibility thus posing a range of representational, narrative and strategic challenges that resonate with the ‘missing’ as ‘overlooked’ or ‘silenced’.⁵⁸ How, then, to create stories and narratives that are ‘dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention’?⁵⁹ What Nixon calls ‘testimonial protest’ would involve both ‘scientific and imaginative testimony’, with Nixon’s emphasis being placed on the latter; here, the witness is the writer-activist, called upon to draw from literature’s ‘testimonial and imaginative capacities’ to offer ‘a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen’.⁶⁰ While my interest in what follows will be the manner in which definition might be provided by both human and nonhumans, the potential reconceptualization of the witness figure that I am working towards necessitates first of all ‘laying bare’ certain epistemological and ontological biases that are remnants of the colonial conquest of nature and the category of race.

Nature represents itself

For Green, one reason why an environmental public has been unable to gather in South Africa is a lack of attention (a blindness, perhaps) to ‘the ways in which the logics of

⁵⁵ Michael Watts, *Struggles over Geography: Violence, Freedom, and Development* (Heidelberg, Germany: Dept. of Geography, University of Heidelberg, 2000), 8; cited in Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 7–8.

⁵⁶ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 6.

⁵⁷ Lahoud, ‘Floating Bodies’, 496.

⁵⁸ See Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 13.

⁵⁹ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.

⁶⁰ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 6, 14, 32, 15.

coloniality and race continue to inform the idea of nature in South Africa.⁶¹ It is here that the decolonial thinking developed primarily in Latin America, as well as the posthumanities, can be mobilised to inform environmental management and conservation science. Epistemologically and ontologically, modernity, as underpinned by coloniality, generated and continues to generate categories of race and nature through, precisely, its conception of subjects and objects: ‘[T]he nature-culture divide is one of the founding dualisms of modernist thought, and it is grounded in the division of subjects from objects. [...] crucially, the collision of nature and object finds its outworking in racism, for race reduces people to objects via the language of biology and species. [...] racism naturalizes the idea of race’ and ‘turns it into nature’.⁶² Drawing from Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s critique of modernity in *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (2008), which engages with modernist thought’s practice of turning some into subjects and others into objects, Green stresses how Western modernity has yet to overcome ‘the legacy of dehumanisation that shaped colonialism and racism’.⁶³ As Rafi Youatt notes in the context of international politics and the question of who or what can be seen as political actor (or political subject), the making of humanity as a category takes place across lines of race, coloniality, migrants and borders, war, humanitarianism and commodities.⁶⁴ ‘Who counts as human at any political moment is itself a byproduct of political life.’⁶⁵

Moreover, if the public, specifically the *polis*, is commonly associated with the human, then the anthropocentrism that is at the heart of colonial and modernist conceptions of politics is yet another blind spot – another form of ‘missingness’. AFor all its attention

⁶¹ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 5.

⁶² Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 6. Decolonial feminist María Lugones shows how the modernity/coloniality relation must be understood as fundamentally shaped by race, gender, and sexuality; postcolonial and feminist studies of science show how the production of such categories went hand in hand with the categorization of different forms of life and knowledge in colonial science, particularly the natural sciences, including botanical taxonomy and bioprospecting. See María Lugones, ‘Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System’, *Hypatia* 22 (1) (2007): 186–209; Jason Irving, ‘Decentering European Medicine: The Colonial Context of the Early History of Botany and Medicinal Plants’ in Sheikh and Orlow, eds., *Theatrum Botanicum*, 129–36; and Sita Balani, ‘From Botany to Community: A Legacy of Classification’ in *Theatrum Botanicum*, 229–35.

⁶³ Green, ‘Environmental Publics’, 6.

⁶⁴ Rafi Youatt, ‘Anthropocentrism and the Politics of the Living’ in *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*, ed. Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015), 39–49, at 43.

⁶⁵ Rafi Youatt, ‘Interspecies Relations, International Relations: Rethinking Anthropocentric Politics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2014): 207–23, at 207 (see also 213–14).

to the environment and the conjunction between violations carried out against both human and nonhuman life, Nixon's book remains caught within the task of the decidedly *human* writer-activist, and rendering slow violence legible or intelligible to human sensibilities.⁶⁶ This is not to criticize Nixon's vastly important book, which has done much to change the discourse within environmental activism and the environmental humanities – and in fact to create, together with notable others, the field that we might now retrospectively name 'postcolonial environmental humanities'),⁶⁷ but rather to signal to and inhabit the uncomfortable aporias of representation that writer-activists face. On the one hand, as mentioned above in the context of nonhuman rights, 'speaking for' or 'giving voice' to nature runs the risk of anthropocentrism. Likewise, as Astrida Neimanis writes, the warnings posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal 1988 essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', prove as prescient as ever, albeit relating to different forms of 'subaltern'.⁶⁸ In this case, we now see the dangers of 'speaking for' and misrepresenting not only indigenous subjects but also nature.⁶⁹

As Spivak had famously asserted in her essay, attempts to represent (to speak *of* or *for*) the subaltern (in the context of her essay, the Indian woman, or the third-world subject more broadly) are often predicated upon an 'epistemic violence' that '[constitutes] the colonial subject as Other'.⁷⁰ Just as Nixon's *Slow Violence* is a reminder of the role of imperialism in creating the conditions of slow violence in the now global south, Spivak's essay points to the blindness of Western (notably French), poststructuralist thinking regarding the implications of imperialism in this epistemic violence. Furthermore, this is despite the proliferation of attempts to decentre the sovereign subject within poststructuralism. In other words, simply put, to destabilize the subject as the sovereign agent of intentional acts on the one hand, and as a transparent, fully legible and un-

⁶⁶ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 15.

⁶⁷ For a list of notable references within the field of postcolonial environmental humanities, see Gray and Sheikh, 'The Wretched Earth', 1–2. A starting point here would be Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism' in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba et al (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 233–251.

⁶⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

⁶⁹ Astrida Neimanis, 'No Representation without Colonisation? (Or, Nature Represents Itself)', *Somatechnics*, 5 (2) (2015): 135–53. I have previously touched upon these points from Neimanis's essay in Shela Sheikh, 'Translating Geontologies' in James Graham, ed., *And Now: Architecture Against a Developer Presidency: Essays on the Occasion of Trump's Inauguration* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2017), 165–84.

⁷⁰ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 280–81.

differentiated object of knowledge on the other.⁷¹ As Neimanis stresses, the conundrum remains as to whether any form of representation (be this of humans or non-humans), however well-intentioned, necessarily involves at least some form of colonization: a rendering passive or mute, a silencing or secondary ‘missingness’. Representation, especially in defence of the rights of nature, remains an ‘impossible necessity’ – an experience of being trapped between ‘a representationalist rock and a hard place of complicit silence.’⁷²

Practically speaking, there are various manners through which we might think this ‘can’t yet must’ paradox or ‘impossible necessities’ of representing non-humans, to use Neimanis’s phrases.⁷³ To be clear, Spivak does not suggest that we do away with representation altogether, and in the context of environmental violence this is also not an option. However, representation remains fraught; in Rosalind Morris’s parsing, ‘the subaltern (as woman) at the centre of Spivak’s essay describes a relation between subject and object status (under imperialism and then globalization) that is not one of silence – to be overcome by representational heroism – but aporia. The one cannot be “brought” into the other.’⁷⁴ In the context of nature, I am not suggesting here that nature be ‘retrieved’ and ushered into the category of subject; rather, that we remain attentive to the possible mechanisms of missingness between the two sense of representation that Spivak reminds us of: ‘representation’ as *vertreten* (the art of persuasion or rhetoric, as political proxy) and *darstellung* (tropology, or representation as portrait).⁷⁵

In the context of Forensic Architecture, for instance, through the use of persuasion or rhetorical skill, the ‘testimony’ of the inanimate is ‘ventriloquized’ or interpreted in various forums (legal, political and/or cultural) in the context of constructing ‘public

⁷¹ In the easy claims made by some western intellectuals that the oppressed are able to ‘speak for themselves’, the paradox is that the category of the sovereign subject is restored precisely within the theory that sets out to question it. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, 278.

⁷² Neimanis, ‘No Representation without Colonisation?’, 136.

⁷³ Neimanis, ‘No Representation without Colonisation?’, 137.

⁷⁴ Rosalind C. Morris, ‘Introduction’ in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1–18, at 13.

⁷⁵ Both German words are translatable as ‘representation’, and Spivak makes much of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze’s sliding over the contrast between the two in their readings of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, where he writes that the small peasant proprietors ‘cannot represent themselves’ (he uses *vertreten* in the original) (275–76). Spivak’s point is that ‘the shifting distinctions between representation within the state and political economy, on the one hand, and within the theory of the Subject, on the other, must not be obliterated.’ Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, 275–76.

truth'.⁷⁶ This narration, as a form of advocacy or 'speaking for', 'resembles what the Roman rhetorician Quintilian called *prosopopeia* – the mediated speech of inanimate objects.⁷⁷ But 'nature' does in fact represent itself. For a start, we know from that nature – for instance, vegetal life (plants, trees) – has highly complex means of communication.⁷⁸ Neimanis speaks of nature's capacity to 'write itself', which I suggest we translate into the schema of testimony; she looks to ice and water's capacity to materially register traces, and as such 'to destabilise any rigid boundary between nature and culture – one as passive, inert matter there to be consumed and rendered transparent; the other the consumer, the renderer.'⁷⁹ As Schuppli's work on the 'material witness' shows, environments themselves are expressive: polluted environments, for instance, contain vast photosensitive surfaces that register and record the changes caused by modern industrialization.⁸⁰ This can be mobilized by the practice of *forensis*, in which such traces are 'read' and narrated by the (expert or non-expert) witness (here the *testis*) in the quest for accountability and exposure.⁸¹ Recognition of nature's capacity to *represent itself* – i.e., as witness-as-*superstes*, rather than *testis*, in the sense of aesthetic representation (*darstellen*) – is also one element of a new politics (i.e., political representation as proxy, *vertreten*).⁸² As architect Godofredo Pereira writes:

...it is often left to the side that the world is already a sensorium of *environmental transformations* [...]. This is evident in how black snow expresses pollution in the Arctic [...]. We require a different attention to the world's capacity to represent itself. This is where techno-science enters: the molecular nature of environmental

⁷⁶ *Forensis* is Latin for 'pertaining to the forum', and it is this original, broader sense of the term, prior to the emergence of forensic science, that the group retrieves. See Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis'.

⁷⁷ Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis', 9. 'Contemporary modes of *prosopopeia* animate material objects or landscapes by converting them into data and image' (10).

⁷⁸ See for instance, Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2015); Stefano Mancuso, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Island Press, 2015).

⁷⁹ Astrida Neimanis, 'Nature Represents Itself: Bibliophilia in a Changing Climate' in *What if Culture was Nature all Along?*, ed. Vicki Kirby (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 179–98, at 180.

⁸⁰ Susan Schuppli, 'Dirty Pictures' in *Living Earth: Field Notes from the Dark Ecology Project, 2014–2016* (Amsterdam: Sonic Acts Press, 2016), 189–211.

⁸¹ See for instance, Forensic Architecture in collaboration with SITU Research, 'Case: Guatemala'.

⁸² This relationship between the dual senses of representation might be productively read in the context of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which has been addressed by Tavares in the context of nonhuman rights and universal jurisdiction (i.e., representation as political representation) and by Schuppli in terms of the 'cinematic capacity of the oil spill' insofar as the mixing of oil and sea produced a specific image regime (i.e., aesthetic representation). See Tavares, 'Nonhuman Rights'; and Schuppli, *Nature Represents Itself*, 2018, <http://susanschuppli.com/exhibition/nature-represents-itself/>.

change has been pushing a different sensibility to material properties, acoustics, and chemicals [...]. All this has been key to feed the discussion of new problems and the constitution of new politics.⁸³

This ‘constitution of new politics’ has been the concern of figures such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro or the ‘postrepresentationalist anthropology’ of Anna Tsing or Marisol de la Cadena, as well as proponents of actor-network theory such as Bruno Latour.⁸⁴ Rather than remain in the realm of the general, however, let us begin to unravel this through a particular practice, and in the specific vocabulary of witnessing – or, as we shall see, possible replacements or multispecies synonyms for this term that I have so far been prioritising. Here I turn to a project by Jennifer Gabrys, which, although based in the putative ‘West’, engages with many key post- and decolonial representational quagmires. Gabrys’s work on ‘sensing lichens’ is part of the London-based Citizen Sense research project (of which Gabrys is principal investigator), which investigates the relationship between technologies and practices of environmental sensing and citizen engagement.⁸⁵ Part of Gabrys’s research concerns ‘bioindication’: ‘a process by which environmental pollution registers in the bodies, inhabitations and relations of organisms.’ Recalling the temporality of ‘slow violence’, bioindicator organisms ‘express physiological or other observable changes that can indicate the *accumulation or duration of pollution events* – or even possible recovery from pollution events.’⁸⁶ While previous work had focused on moss, the project to which I refer here addresses lichens, which ‘are particularly notable for their bioindicator characteristics, and are frequently studied for their ability to signal air and soil pollution.’⁸⁷

⁸³ Pereira, ‘Towards an Environmental Architecture’, *e-flux architecture*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/positions/205375/towards-an-environmental-architecture/>.

⁸⁴ For a useful overview of the literature in deliberative democracy that proposes to extend communicative competence to nonhumans, as well as ‘object-oriented democracy’ and ‘material politics/participation’ (inspired by actor-network theory), see Lisa Disch, ‘Ecological Democracy and the Co-participation of Things’ in Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer and David Schlosberg, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 624–41.

⁸⁵ ‘Citizen Sensing and Environmental Practice: Assessing Participatory Engagements with Environments through Sensor Technologies’ is funded by the European Research Council. See <https://citizensense.net>.

⁸⁶ Jennifer Gabrys, ‘Sensing Lichens: From Ecological Microcosms to Environmental Subjects’, *Third Text* 151, 32 (2) (Spring 2018): 350–67, at 356, emphasis added.

⁸⁷ Gabrys, ‘Sensing Lichens’, 352. Lichens are particularly interesting insofar as they are not actually plants; composed of fungi, alga and/or cyanobacteria, they are amalgams of multiple organisms across kingdoms and hence taxonomic categories (352).

Gabrys's article opens up a number of avenues relevant to a potential reconceptualization of the witness. Firstly, that of the 'speech' of the (no longer simply human) witness: rather than mobilise the metaphor of a nature that 'speaks' (as is common in environmental campaigns, for instance), and rather than use the generally human-centred noun 'witness', Gabrys instead refers to lichens as 'bioindicators', as such avoiding anthropomorphising nature or anthropocentrizing the 'granting' of rights or 'voice' to nonhuman. In the context of the *prosopopeia* of 'forensic speech' (the 'mediated speech' of inanimate objects),⁸⁸ '[o]bjects are animated in the process of presentation, referred to *as if* they were human subjects' (emphasis added), even if those who do the animating are not simply humans but also 'automated or semi-automated technologies of detection and imaging'.⁸⁹ While Schuppli retains the term 'witness', albeit prefaced by the qualifier 'material' (with the caveat that the term 'witness' is used rhetorically rather than suggesting that material literally is the author of linguistic speech acts), both Schuppli and Gabrys prioritise the term 'expressive' rather than 'speech'.⁹⁰

Secondly, Gabrys's focus on 'speculative engagements' challenges the notion of any given organism (as witness or otherwise) as an individual. Drawing from Alfred North Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers, 'speculative' for Gabrys signals 'the distributed capacity of organisms and environments to generate new modes of encounter together with new propositions for ways of being.'⁹¹ This speculative gesture would entail remaking environmental subjects and rethinking political entanglements that challenge the notion of both the individual organism and environment. In an eco-political register, Gabrys draws on Gilbert Simondon's concept of individuation, which refers to 'the ways in which entities are *in-formed* in relation to each other and their milieus. [...] This is also to say that what constitutes "human" is not a fixed entity, and can shift in relation to different articulations, relations and milieus'.⁹²

Thirdly, in her emphasis on lichens as 'environmental *subjects*' (emphasis added) and participants in 'collective communities engaged in multi-species world-making projects',⁹³

⁸⁸ Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis', 9.

⁸⁹ Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis', 10.

⁹⁰ Gabrys's speaks of the expressive capacities of bioindication or 'expressive organisms', and Schuppli of the 'expressive quality of matter'.

⁹¹ Gabrys, 'Sensing Lichens', 362.

⁹² Gabrys, 'Sensing Lichens', 362.

⁹³ Gabrys, 'Sensing Lichens', 352.

Gabrys provides a useful point of orientation in the abovementioned debates around representation and ‘speaking for’, here framed through perspective. In this conceptualization and practice of bioindication, humans are not ‘proxy representatives’, ‘advocates’ or ‘spokespersons’ for natural systems, and the practice of ‘citizen science’ alleviates us from the condescension of science as a transparent, ‘expert’ practice. Environmental sensing is here approached from a shift in perspective, with the task being ‘to consider how these inverted modes [...] might open up other approaches to environmental conflict by encountering pollution *from the point of view of other organisms*,’⁹⁴ and through their ‘accounts’. Such an approach is now common in a wide range of theoretical approaches and practices.⁹⁵ Yet more importantly for the post- or decolonial context, Gabrys argues that ‘bioindication through these multiplying points of view also demonstrates how “nature” is not a stable referent.’ Rather, drawing from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structuralist Anthropology* (2014 [2009]), ‘nature’ can in fact be understood as ‘a realm where diversity multiplies toward a “multinaturalism” where [...] organisms might also be approached *as persons* and as *having perspectives as persons*’.⁹⁶ It is in this sense that a new politics might begin to take shape.

As bioindicators, lichens are particularly pertinent to the expanded temporal schema of witnessing and bearing witness that I am suggesting here. Recalling the discussion above regarding how to narrate, visualise or represent environmental violations, the speculative gardening practices that Gabrys refers to ‘do not merely “signal” that an event *has occurred* or *is occurring*’ (i.e., in both the past and present) but also materialise relations and processes among and between organisms and ecologies that take place in the process of the accumulation (often slow and otherwise invisible) of pollutants, and of changes in environments due to extractive or damaging industries.⁹⁷ As such, ‘bearing witness’ in this bioindicative register does not merely entail sensing and indicating but also *transforming* environments in the present and future, across species divides.

⁹⁴ Gabrys, ‘Sensing Lichens’, 365, emphasis added.

⁹⁵ Gabrys, ‘Sensing Lichens’, 365. Gabrys refers to Tsing’s attention, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), to ‘fungal points of view, which might recast encounters with forests, where multiple overlooked “participants” begin to have more marked roles in constituting “social relations with other beings”’, as well as Eduardo Kohn’s work on the communicative exchanges and production of ‘meaning’ between multiple organisms in his *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013).

⁹⁶ Gabrys, ‘Sensing Lichens’, 365, emphasis added.

⁹⁷ Gabrys, ‘Sensing Lichens’, 367.

Conclusion

To conclude, Gabrys's work with lichens suggests that nonhuman forms of life may (a) actively register environmental conditions and form parts of multispecies world-making practices, and (b) provide us with alternatives for the representational schemas that, however well-intentioned in terms of advocacy, often end up reinforcing an original silencing that they seek to correct. Here, the 'witness' (or 'bioindicator') can be called upon to 'give an account', but also functions in the productively ambiguous space of 'missingness' insofar as the injury borne witness to is often more qualitative,⁹⁸ resisting quantitative and classificatory capture. This qualitative aspect also extends into forms and practices of care, nurturing and world-making that take place across species and organism divides. Such a proactive or creative (rather than merely reactive) practices of care (rather than simply repair) are useful insofar as they undo or disregard modernist and colonial binaries of nature/culture and subject/object that underlie the deleterious consequences of extractivist governmentality, whereby nature is conceived as worth 'saving' or protecting only insofar as it is profitable to do so, for the sake of the human species.

Furthermore, maintaining the language of the witness, understood through the framework provided by Givoni, allows us to keep hold of witnessing as a distinctive form of ethics and politics that – more than other forms of activism, advocacy or representational practices – entails a practice that at once makes political and empirical claims *and* contests the individualism upon which contemporary neoliberal governmentality is premised. This is particularly pertinent in the context of environmental violence and the 'compliance-based environmental management' that Green speaks of, where states often displace responsibility for the work of care and repair onto NGOs and civil society. Here, the world-making evoked by Gabrys, which has a rich heritage in feminist technoscience, '[allows] for certain subjects and relations to gain a foothold'.⁹⁹ Just as 'humanitarian' disasters do not concern merely the human but instead the conditions that sustain life and enable certain (cultural and 'natural') forms of life and just as the 'rights of nature' are only in part about what we know as 'nature', the world-making practices that I refer to are formed across species.¹⁰⁰ Rather than rights,

⁹⁸ Gabrys, 'Sensing Lichens', 358.

⁹⁹ Gabrys, 'Sensing Lichens', 352.

¹⁰⁰ See Gabrys, 'Sensing Lichens', 352.

voice or membership of an environmental public being extended or granted to more-than-humans from a position of anthropocentrism, ‘persons’ – which I am here extending to ‘co-witnesses’ – are produced in and by relations between humans and nonhumans.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ See Youatt, ‘Personhood and the Rights of Nature’, 3.