

Considering Kingsolver’s “Great Barrier” for Beyond the Pastoral

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Ursula K. Heise’s Introduction to *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* posits a series of questions that press her readers to consider possible futures, through stories and storytelling, and beyond systems that simply reconfigure already established processes:

What affirmative visions of the future can the environmentalist movement offer, visions that are neither returns to an imagined pastoral past nor nightmares of future devastation meant to serve as “cautionary tales”? ...However effective those models of storytelling and image-making may have been, it is also clear, at this point, that conservationists will need to complement or even replace them with other kinds of stories...Is it possible to acknowledge the realities of large-scale species extinction and yet move beyond mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia to a more affirmative vision of our biological future? Is it possible to move beyond the story templates of elegy and tragedy and yet to express continuing concern that nonhuman species not be harmed more than strictly necessary?¹

From her series of questions, and looking at stories, I suggest that we can begin imagining processes of re-worlding, or processes that involve un-learning and re-learning our human relationships with the environment in ways that are more than human and within a more-than-human world.² I wonder, too, if poetry can lead us to a similar place, poetry offering an approach toward a collaboration with the nonhuman in a more-than-human world.³ Barbara Kingsolver—known for dealing with a range of topics within her novels and poetry—recently published a poem for *Times*, as part of a larger body of figures addressing their responses to

¹Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 12 – 13.

²In one of my articles, I specifically address the possibilities stories and storytelling can offer for processes of reworlding within the Anthropocene in regards to contemporary, American fiction. My introduction, here, considers these same questions, but I diverge to specifically think about these questions as they relate to poetry rather than fiction. See Madison Myers, “Different Kinds of Stories: Human-Worlds and Non-Human Worlds in the Anthropocene,” Forthcoming Publication.

³See Haraway, *When Species Meet (Posthumanities)*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

climate change, and in a very public forum.⁴ Her method to participate (through poetry), the genre with which she chose to participate (a widely read, non-academic journal), and the breadth to which her work speaks (anyone and everyone who has access to the widely read and largely respected journal), speak to the power of poetry as participating in public discourse, as influencing public discourse, and as influenced by public discourse. I also argue that she allows the potential for completely reimagining new practices and processes toward approaching the Anthropocene, through the genre of poetry, that does not return to something familiar.

“Great Barrier,” generally and broadly responds to climate change and the anxiety surrounding our limited amount of time to dramatically address climate change. Pulling from images very much a part of public discourse and from current events, Kingsolver evokes a sense of urgency about a planet that faces great danger and destruction, but she surpasses such urgency, and she ultimately seeks a new way of being a human creature amongst nonhuman creatures. Her first image connects to the fire at Notre Dame this past Spring, where the world mourned the loss of history and nostalgia, the loss of something that many worried could not be regained or salvaged. While she offers this concrete image of fire and destruction (literally of a cathedral), she utilizes this event to connect to “the damsel rainbow parrot”,⁵ “the charred beams/ of coral [lying] in heaps on the sacred floor”,⁶ “spires collapsed/ crushing sainted turtle and gargoyle octopus”.⁷ We are to quickly realize that this event, this Notre Dame destruction, parallels the destruction of the planet. We are to feel the mourning, the loss of history and nostalgia, and the worry that the planet cannot be regained or salvaged. We are to be afraid. This fear, and perhaps elegy, does not remain the focus of Kingsolver’s poem, however, because she both thrustfully and gently guides us readers, us humans, to reconceive ourselves as a category of creatures within community of nonhuman creatures. I argue that the intention of her poem is not to remain in this mourning. It is not an attempt to fix what we have broken, so we can return to the planet as we have once known it; it is not to succumb to doom and gloom and therefore lose all hope. If she does not directly offer us an approach toward a new way of being human within a more-than-human world, she at least advocates for us to begin by thinking of ourselves in ways we may not have before.

Kingsolver’s next stanza acknowledges, perhaps, the biggest issues we face in the Anthropocene—beyond the destruction and imminent danger of the collapse of human

⁴Barbara Kingsolver, “Read ‘Great Barrier,’ Barbara Kingsolver’s Wrenching Ode to Our Planet,” *Time*, 12 Sept. 2019, <https://time.com/5669066/barbara-kingsolver-great-barrier-poem/>.

⁵Kingsolver, “Great Barrier,” line 3.

⁶Kingsolver, “Great Barrier,” lines 3 – 4.

⁷Kingsolver, “Great Barrier,” lines 5 – 6.

civilization—or human self-centeredness. She writes, “Something there is in my kind that cannot love/ a reef, a tundra, a plain stone breast of desert, ever/ quite enough”.⁸ I go out on a limb here and imply what Kingsolver may be too polite or political to say: we love ourselves and prioritize ourselves more than we love or prioritize anything not human. She goes on to discuss the magic and splendor of a tree, only for the human to use the magic and splendor for our own “holy” purposes:

...A forest after the whole of it
is planed to posts and beams and raised to a heaven
of earnest construction in the name of Our Lady.

All Paris stood on a bridge to watch her burning,
believing a thing this old, this large and beautiful
must be holy and cannot be lost...⁹

But, this statement—or the focus on the human and of human values—again, is not the crux of her argument; the crux comes in her final stanza and the single line that follows the final stanza. Kingsolver ends poignantly, completely reimagining her place amongst the planet, the fish, the trees, and the coral reefs. She does not end in mourning, but rather she ends with a charge to begin anew. She reclaims what is holy, and she speaks:

Lord of leaves and fishes, lead me across this great divide.
Teach me how to love the sacred places, not as one
devotes to One who made me in his image and is bound
to love me back. I mean as a body loves its microbial skin,
the worm its nape of loam, all secret otherness forgiven.

Love beyond anything I will ever make of it.¹⁰

Kingsolver, rather than fitting herself within the already established human signs and systems of world-meaning-making and of the human self within the world, requests to a God beyond

⁸Kingsolver, “Great Barrier,” lines 7 – 9.

⁹Kingsolver, “Great Barrier,” lines 9 – 15.

¹⁰Kingsolver, “Great Barrier,” lines 18 – 23.

humans—to a God that doesn't simply serve humans—to teach her a new way of being, a new way of seeing, a rejection of what has been, and a rejection of returning to a pastoral beginning. Rather, she requests a completely unprecedented approach toward building community between her human positionality and various forms of nature that have been violated, destroyed, victimized, deprioritized, and othered.

We see this move—the move to completely reimagine humans responding to the Anthropocene in new and unprecedented ways—in fiction, and perhaps one could argue that poetry does something different. Maybe one could argue that poetry can only return to what it knows, or what it has known, or that it can only participate within a configuration of something already known or done. That may be the case at times, but in the case of Kingsolver's "Great Barrier," and many other literary works and poems, I think poetry can offer us something new, reimagined, unprecedented, from-the-group up, not returning to an idyllic past, or succumbing to a catastrophic future.

Kingsolver intentionally chose to publish her piece in a magazine that is widely read by the public, that influences the public, and that is influenced by the public. Of all the mediums she could have chosen—as a prominent and esteemed author and figure—she chose to insert herself into a political sphere, where her poetry became a mode of political power. I understand that much of the work scholars attempt to do is interrogate whether poetry must be inherently political or must participate in the public in ways that the author may or may not intend (they may simply want to make art for the sake of art!). I cannot speak, nor does this brief project seek to answer these broader questions, but I can say—and feel quite confident in saying—that poetry and fiction may not have to offer us a new way of approaching the world, or specifically the Anthropocene, but they certainly can, and many times do.

Works Cited

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