Imagining Dialogues with the Voiceless

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Imagining Dialogues with the Voiceless

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An imaginary dialogue is a classical literary device to give a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. Plato and Lucian already recorded imaginary dialogues centuries ago between famous protagonists of differing views as a literary form of argumentative conversation - arguing, urging, agreeing, or staking out contradictions. Their protagonists were voiceless since they were long dead. Likewise, an imaginary dialogue can be used to give a voice to those components of the city that remain hidden to us because we don't speak the same language. We tend to think of cities as human communities in relation to their physical surroundings. But these surroundings are built up of characters and creatures that are also inhabiting the city; our cities are multi-species habitats, that we share with innumerable other-than-human beings. Philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour (1993) developed the idea that the separation between nature and culture is an illusion, and that non-human actors should have the same rights as humans. If we begin to understand non-humans as protagonists, as fellow citizens with their own rights and their own perceptions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cities that we live in.

An imaginary dialogue is a device that can aid in such an understanding of non-humans as fellow citizens, giving them a voice. Such a dialogue can take the form of an interview, in which you are the interviewer. The aim of an interview is to gain insight in the perspective of others, and to extract information about a certain topic from a protagonist who has knowledge about this topic - because of their expertise or experience. When an interview is open-ended and cyclically-iterative, determined by the interviewer as much as by the interviewee, it becomes a dialogue. The twentieth century Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), described the concept of the dialogue as being:

...the single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life. [In it] a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. Dialogic relations have a specific nature: they can be reduced neither to the purely logical (even if dialectical) nor to the purely linguistic (compositional-syntactic)... Where there is no word and no language, there can be no dialogic relations; they cannot exist among objects or logical quantities (concepts, judgments, and so forth). Dialogic relations presuppose a language. (p. 117)

How can we converse with those that do not speak our language? "How do you give a voice to a Thing, Plant or Animal? What does the Water tell us and what choices does the Iron make?" (The Parliament of Things, n.d.) We cannot know how others than ourselves perceive the world. So, to give them a voice and treat them with respect and seriousness, as an equal, you need background research. Paradoxically, at the same time we need to be very much aware that we can only see things from our own perspective: the perspective of the interviewer. From that perspective, from your own relation to the subject, you can observe the subject so close that you can put yourself in their shoes, so to speak, immerse yourself in them, as architectural historian Erik de Jong paraphrased the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "to understand something about water, you have to actually stand in it." (2020)

An interview needs both preparation and expression. The dialogue stands at the centre of preceding research and notation afterwards. Observe your subject as an individual, precisely and from different angles. How does it look, smell, sound? How is the relation between its details and its overall form? How is it different from its relatives? How does it respond to changing conditions? With the aim of a dialogue, you will look at your subject with different eyes. The notation of the interview also determines the knowledge you will retrieve. It might be poem, a short story, a script, or a film. The best form is not a fixed format but will be determined between you and your interviewee.

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Imagining Dialogues with the Voiceless

Assignment

1
Select a single tree. Get to know your interviewee intimately. This you do by literally approaching it from different directions. Determine the cardinal directions.

2
Firstly, experience and document the characteristics of the east side of the chosen specimen tree by close observation. Start from as far away as possible (e.g. the other side of the street, or building façade) to get a full view of the tree from top to bottom. Take note of the tree's dimensions (shape, height and width of crown and trunk), branch structure, transparency.

3
Next, move to c. 1,5 metre from the tree. Use each of your senses: register the movement of leaves, sounds, changes in shade pattern on the ground, insects and birds or the traces they left behind, etc.

4
Document your experiences in overall as well as close-up photos and drawings: showing micros-cale patterns, colours, forms, structures, as well as descrip-tions, associative words, sound recordings, film, etc.

5
Repeat steps 2-4 for the south, west and north side. Pay atten-tion to the differences with the east side: the overall shape (no tree is symmetrical), the different temperature and amount of moss growing on the trunk, etc.

6
Now, imagine you are the tree: stand or sit with your back against the tree and observe the surroundings. Move around tree, and project your senses outward: look, listen, feel the soil, feel the air. Touch the trunk with your hands, look closely at a leaf. Look up from the base of the trunk, feel and look at the texture of the trunk, branches, leaves, the tem-perature of the trunk, the pattern of the roots, smell, marks left by people or cars, etc.

7
Now you know enough about your subject to interview the tree: how might the urban environment be perceived from the perspective of the tree? The next steps you might either do on site or behind your desk. Create a conversation by jumping between the recorded perceptions toward and from the tree. What can the tree tell you about the surrounding urban landscape that would otherwise escape your attention? What would it see or hear if it had eyes or ears? How do the surround-ings affect the tree (shade from buildings, suffocation from paving, damage from parked bikes, etc.)?

8
Imagine what it might have witnessed from the moment it was planted here until now. Think about both progressive and cyclical changes. Does it have any opinions about the changes it witnessed? How do these changes affect the tree?

9
How does it interact with its sur-roundings? What other species live in and around the tree, both above and below ground? How do they communicate?

10
Devise your own notation system for the fictional interview, options include: classical interview text, short story, poem, drawing, immersive film, etc. Use your find-ings from steps 2-6 to support the story.

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