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No Longer Lost on the Human Highway: Human–Animal Relationships in Neil Young's Memoir *Special Deluxe: A Memoir of Life & Cars*

By
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Abstract

Canadian/US singer, songwriter, and author Neil Young is known for his environmental awareness, which is manifested in his promotion of biofuels, critique of genetic manipulation, biotechnology, and ecocide, as well as in his warm attitude to non-human animals. While these issues are dealt with in his music and especially his recent albums *The Monsanto Years* (2015) and *Earth* (2016), the relationship between humans and non-humans plays a significant role also in his memoir *Special Deluxe: A Memoir of Life & Cars* (2015). This essay will propose a new reading of the significance of non-human animals in *Special Deluxe* by placing the memoir in the context of human–animal studies and its critique of anthropocentrism. Through an analysis of reading its representations of close human–animal relationships, this essay shows that *Special Deluxe* reveals an explicit concern for relationality and non-humans in human life. In so doing, it critiques modernity's emphasis on anthropocentrism and human mastery over nature and presents as an alternative less hierarchical and close relationships between humans and non-humans living in a shared world. It is claimed that Young's memoir shows an explicit concern with the non-human world through its focus on the relationality of the human and the non-human, and their mutual interdependence. The importance of non-human others, especially dogs, to the memoir's narrator at various stages of his life is addressed in detail, and the close transspecies relationship constructed is understood as an example of the emotional significance of non-human others in everyday life.

Keywords: Neil Young, *Special Deluxe: A Memoir of Life & Cars*, environmentalism, human–animal studies, anthropocentricism

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Introduction

In April 2017, the website MediaMass announced that Spinee, Canadian/US singer, songwriter, and author Neil Young's Labrador retriever, had undergone a serious medial operation and its carer was asking his Twitter followers for their support: "'May I ask one favour? My dog Spinee needs your prayers […] She just came out of a difficult surgery 20 minutes ago […] She is my beloved" (Fey 2017a). The prayers work and the dog is on its way to recovery, the tweets confirm throughout the night, until the artist finally expresses his gratitude: "'With prayers like this I feel confident Spinee will be fine […] Thank you more than you will ever know" (Fey 2017a). This incident, however, turned out to be one that never happened, a mere hoax on a website specializing in celebrity satire: the site published the same story – practically identical up to the name of the dog – in relation to the alleged illness of the dog of Roberto Carlos, the Brazilian singer-songwriter (see Fey 2017b). While initially superficial, the choice of Neil Young and his dog as an object of ridicule is not of little importance and adds to the need to discuss Young and his work in the context of human–animal studies. In recent years, Young's production shows increased signs of environmental awareness, manifested in his promotion of biofuels, critique of genetic manipulation, biotechnology, and ecocide, as well as in his warm attitude to non-human animals and their presence in human life. These issues are dealt with in detail in his recent memoir *Special Deluxe: A Memoir of Life & Cars* (2015a), as well as on his recent albums *The Monsanto Years* (2015b) and *Earth* (2016) which take a critical stand on many of the above-mentioned issues.

While this interest in the natural world could be seen as a simple expression of a 1960s countercultural hippie world view by those aware of Young's personal biography, this essay will place Young's *Special Deluxe* in the context of human–animal studies and its critique of anthropocentrism. Through a reading of the memoir's representations of non-humans, this essay argues that Young's memoir reveals close relationships between humans and non-human animals in human life, as is shown in its attention given to Young's canine companions. In so doing, the memoir problematizes modernity's anthropocentric insistence on human mastery over nature, as well as its emphasis on the role of Reason and rational thinking that are thought to characterize the human (Badmington 2000: 3) and separate humans and non-human animals from each other. In contrast to such thinking, recent work on human–animal relations by scholars such as Donna Haraway suggests that animals collaborate with humans, and interspecies encounters transform both humans and animals. As Haraway claims, relationships between what she calls "companion species" generate joint processes where both participants are involved in a mutual process of "becoming with" (2008: 18).

Rather than separate, humans and non-humans are entangled with each other in diverse ways.

Following such an understanding, this essay will provide a new reading of the role of non-human animals in Young's memoir *Special Deluxe*. While Young's interest in the environment is generally well-known (see Halliwell 2014, Sodomsky 2016), it has not been addressed frequently in research devoted to his work where other topics are prevalent (see Adelt 2005, Echard 2015, Stein 2008). Martin Halliwell's (2014) work, however, is an exception. as it mentions that environmentalism has influenced Young in various ways. For instance, Halliwell (2014: 106–107) addresses Young's use of New Age and environmentalist themes with reference to the 2003 *Greendale* album. He also mentions that the 2014 album *Storytones* expresses an "environmental interest in ecosystems" (Halliwell 2014: 149). Young's more recent albums have continued this interest in environmentalism. It is a central issue on *The Monsanto Years* and *Earth*, both thematically through songs critiquing biotechnology and the genetic manipulation of natural products, as well as formally in the use of such conventions of biomusic (cf. Brumm 2012), since on *Earth* animal sounds by roosters, insects, and other non-humans become parts of the music score. Halliwell, however, focuses on Young's music, not his memoir (as it has been published later), and does not address any specific interest in animals.

What this essay contributes to the critical discussion concerning Young is that his memoir reveals an explicit concern with the non-human world through its persistent focus on the relationality of the human and the non-human, as well as the significance of such relationships. *Special Deluxe*, as I will show, underlines the role of the non-human in human life by providing strong depictions of close human–animal relationships. Although the title of the volume appears to centre Young's lifelong fascination with cars, an attentive reading reveals its narrator's closeness with his animal companions, including the Labrador-mix Skippy and the hound dog Elvis, the latter featuring in Young's well-known song "The Old King" (Young 1992), to mention a few of them. While also addressing issues of global environmental responsibility through the narrator's reflections on cars, CO_2 mitigation, and the juxtaposition of "freedom lovers" and responsible environmentalists in the era of climate change, the memoir foregrounds the interrelatedness of humans and non-humans through its portrayal of the human–non-human bond. The first part of the essay functions as a context for the analysis by addressing central issues in recent work on human–animal relationships in more detail than as sketched above. The second part provides a close reading of the memoir in this framework.

Approaching Human—Animal Relationships

In current human–animal studies, the issue of encountering non-human others is often discussed in a framework that problematizes conventional binary categories of modernity where reason rules over emotion, culture over nature, masculine over feminine, culture over nature, and humans over animals (and the non-human more generally) (see Lloyd 1984). Rather than reproducing an anthropocentric world view, such work has sought to place humans and animals in larger contexts, emphasizing relationality and interdependence, not hierarchies and difference, to present an alternative to anthropocentrism. As Donna Haraway, one of the key theorists in the field, suggests, humans and non-humans should not examined in a hierarchical framework built upon a belief in "human exceptionalism", but their identities are rather formed jointly: "becoming is always becoming *with* – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake" (2008: 244; emphasis original). In so doing, Haraway critiques the master narrative of modernity where human reason has been posited as the centre of knowledge since Descartes (see Badmington 2000). This tradition has generated a strong anthropocentric world view claiming that only humans are capable of rational thinking and scientific experimentation, whereas non-humans function as "tools" and objects of such experiments (Armstrong 2008: 6). Haraway's (2008) discussion of humans and non-humans as companion species that are entangled with each other underlines the constructedness of the anthropocentric hierarchies and testifies to the importance of more equal relationships in a world where humans and animals are "inseparable" (McHugh and Marvin 2014: 2).

As a result, an anthropocentric world view has been critiqued and supplemented with a less hierarchical understanding of human–non-human relationships that serves as the backbone of this essay. Sociologist Adrian Franklin has suggested that in contemporary society animals are important as they may alleviate "ontological security" for individuals suffering from isolation and lack of community that characterize contemporary life (Franklin 1999: 55–56). In the view of Kari Weil, the increased significance on non-humans in today's animal discourses is based on "an attempt to recognize and extend care to others" and that it foregrounds "a concern with and for alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world" (2012: 17). Thus, recent work in human–animal studies supports what Jodey Castriciano finds important in the "intersubjective" development of human–non-human relationships, namely that it is increasingly "based on empathy and connectedness" (2008: 5). This, as this essay will show, is what Young's memoir finds central in its narrator's experiences of non-human animals: they are his companions and each one of them is an individual.

As the memoir underlines the significance of human relationships with the

non-human world, it can be seen as an environmentally-orientated text. Such works, as Lawrence Buell claims, exemplify four key features:

> 1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.* […]
> 2. *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.* […]
> 3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.* […]
> 4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.* […] (1995: 7–8; emphasis original)

All these aspects are present in Young's memoir. It (i) shows awareness of and critiques the environmental damage conducted by humans and sees humans in relation to other life forms, (ii) defines humans in and through their relationship with non-humans and the environment more generally, (iii) reflects on the use of biotechnology and fossil fuels, and (iv) portrays the relationship between humans and the environment as dynamic rather than as static, seen for instance on his chapters telling of the visit to the oil fields of Fort McMurray, Canada, and the related critique of anthropocentric thinking. In Young's memoir, this general discourse of environmentalism is, as I will show, further supplemented with a personal bonding with non-human animals telling of the significance of such relationships, which emerges as a major issue.

In so doing, Young's environmentalist texts problematize the legitimacy of human rule over nature and underline the relationality of humans and non-humans. His descriptions of intimate human–animal relationships and the expressed concern with the state of the environment shown in the memoir contribute to what DeLoughrey and Handley define as the "aesthetics of the earth" that they understand as "a discourse of transformative self-conscious disruption that calls attention to the universalizing impulses of the global" (2011: 28). In Young's work, the global could be seen as addressed through his concern over the human treatment of the environment, and the local is made evident in his care for and attachment to non-human animals, domestic dogs in particular, that are part of his everyday life. While both aspects are addressed in the memoir, in this essay I will focus on the role of non-humans by discussing the meaningful human–animal relationships as a form of interspecies bonding owing to their significance to the narrator at various stages of his life.

Animals and Relationality in *Special Deluxe: A Memoir of Life & Cars*

This section examines encounters with non-human animals, especially dogs, as narrated in the memoir in the context of human–animal relations. For Franklin (1999: 56), companion animals are increasingly important because of their role in alleviating what he refers to as ontological insecurity characterizing modern life. As a sign of this, Young's memoir pays particular attention to the close emotional connection between humans and dogs and shows the important role that non-human animals play in human life. The role of non-human others in life writing in general has been addressed in critical writing, but in recent criticism the emphasis has been on animal autobiography, this is, the possibility of writing the lives of non-humans and the problems of animal narrators (see Herman 2013, Herman 2016, Krebber and Roscher 2018). However, the role of non-humans and their significant role in more conventional forms of life writing has received less attention. In her introduction to a special issue of the journal *Biography*, Gillian Whitlock (2012) expands the concerns of autobiographical writing and suggests that it can be explored in the framework of posthumanism that has questioned the role of the conventional fully autonomous human subject, imagined rational in Western modernity. Whitlock draws the reader's attention to the diverse ways that contemporary autobiographical narratives utilize in order to critique the conventional subject of modernity: such texts locate the human in new contexts and emphasize how they are "entangled variously in nature, culture, and technology" (2012: vii) – this means that also non-human animals may emerge as significant others. What emerges as a central issue is relationality, an issue that has been addressed by animal studies scholars and can be understood here as deep relationships between humans and non-humans. While Haraway (2008) addresses the joint formation of identities, Vinciane Despret has introduced the notion of "with-ness" to address situations where different species contribute to each other's formation across the species line, "articulating […] new ways of being human with non-human" (2004: 131). Similarly, in an article on horses as significant others in the autobiographical writing of the US memoirist Susan Richards, Jopi Nyman (2014) suggests that its emphasis on affect and emotions is a form of countering trauma and reconstructing identity through meaningful and deep human–animal relationships. Life writing, it can be argued, is a genre that is particularly well capable of narrating strong transspecies emotional bonds and what Despret refers to with "new ways of being" (2004: 131).

In Young's memoir, relationality is present in its particular attention to dogs, not only to cars, which places the narrator in a web of human–animal relationships. This is evident as early as in the memoir's Preface that reflects on the choice of the

title. While the book was initially planned to be published under the title *Cars and Dogs*, the narrator claims that the new title functions better, as it de-emphasizes his failed role as a dog-owner and does not turn off "any dog lovers": "I realized late one night that I was perhaps the worst master of a dog that the world has ever seen" (2015a: Preface). Regardless of this ironic strategy, the Preface closes with a sentence that speaks for the importance of dogs in the life of the memoirist:

> I hope I have made the right decision in still including my dogs, and indeed some other dogs. I am trying to underplay their presence in the story by not mentioning them officially, yet including them whenever it seems appropriate. (Young 2015a: Preface)

Apart from the omission of the dogs from the official title, there is no "underplay" in their representation in the memoir. Dogs are practically everywhere in the narrator's life, they are family members and companions, they ride in cars and have different personalities, even though some of them occupy a more central role than others. The memoir includes portraits of several individual dogs, including Skippy, Winnipeg, Tobias, Snip, and Filmore. While some of them are mentioned only briefly, others such as Elvis and Carl are discussed in more detail owing to their long-standing presence in the life of Young and his family, and they will be addressed separately later. The deep relationship with the dogs shows how several of them emerge as individuals with personal histories and characteristics.

The importance of dogs as family members and animal companions starts in the first chapter of the memoir focusing on Young's childhood in Omemee, Ontario, Canada. The first pages tell of Skippy, "a Labrador mix" and the narrator's childhood companion, whom the Youngs used to take out to the countryside for weekend outings, "runs." These are described as moments of shared pleasure, as "wonderful family experiences" (Young 2015a: 1):

> It was about 1950, gasoline cost twenty-seven cents a gallon, and we had a 1948 Monarch business coupe with a huge trunk. Skippy would jump right in the trunk happily, as far as I can remember, his tail wagging and ready to go, because he knew we were going for a run in the country. (Young 2015a: 1)

While the trips to the countryside take place in pastoral settings where Skippy, happily barking, chases groundhogs, the narrative also makes clear the dysfunctionality of the family that led to the parents' divorce and father's absence from their life. Here, the function of the dog is to provide stability and emotional support: as Lisa Sarmicanic (2007: 166–169) writes, animal companions are

known to be beneficial to humans psychologically and add to our experience of happiness.

In addition to Skippy, who brings the family together during the weekends, the narrative mentions other dogs that are important in Young's life. In so doing, the memoir reveals that animals, to use the terms of Franklin, play a role in assisting people in constructing "enduring relations of mutual dependency" (1999: 57) under the changing conditions of late modernity. Out of the dogs mentioned, those which have particular significance include, first, "a puppy named Winnipeg, a white German shepherd with little brown-gold tips on his ears" (Young 2015a: 117) who features on the cover of Youngs's 1970 album *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* and once shared his house on Topanga Canyon Boulevard in California. Further, the memoir mentions his neighbours' Snip, an Australian shepherd cross at the Lazy Double L. Ranch, whose tasks include riding in a jeep and herding cows with her master, the farm caretaker Louis Avila (Young 2015a: 155–156). A third significant dog from the 1970s is Young's then partner Carrie Snodgress's brother's dog called Tobias, a hound who "loved to ride in cars" but "scratched the back hatch of the Estate Wagon with his paws" (2015a: 151), and has thus left eternal traces in the car. Further, special attention is also given to Filmore, a companion on walks and rides, whom Young leaves in the care of Louis and his wife when starting his 1971 tour. During his time away, Filmore, however, disappears, which leads to self-accusations and a desire to for better caring practices:

> My dog at that time, Filmore, was a white German shepherd pup, just like Winnipeg. I got him right after I moved to the ranch. Those were some happy times, driving all around discovering my new ranch, getting to know every acre in that old jeep with Filmore running alongside. […] Filmore definitely did not like riding in the cars. He would instantly get carsick. […] We both loved our morning walks, a great tradition between man and dog. […] When I got back from the tour, Filmore was gone. I vowed that would never happen again. Later, when I got a bus, I planned to take my dogs with me everywhere, and I did. (Young 2015a: 157)

Earlier research on dogs and their status has suggested that they are often understood as "interstitial creature[s]" that are "neither person[s] nor beast[s]": the dog "oscillates between the roles of high-status animal and low-status human" (Serpell 2015: 312). This is to some extent the case also in Young's memoir: the dogs discussed in the section above tend be treated more as "high-status animals", but the two most significant dogs represented, Elvis and Carl, function as particularly significant others the narrator has a close relationship with and that occupy the

position of "low-status humans", to use Serpell's (2015) terms. Encounters with these dogs in particular reveal a clearly non-anthropocentric relationship to animals, as the dogs are individuals with a strong presence in the narrator's life. Elvis, a hound dog, with a name echoing rock history, enters the Young family in the 1980s as a present from Neil Young's then wife Pegi, immediately leading to an emotional response:

> When I first saw Elvis, he was in a cardboard box under the Christmas tree, his little head popping up over the edge. He was beautiful.
>
> What a soulful dog he was. Elvis was a Tennessee bluetick hound and a fine example of one, already with a good howl even as a puppy. (Young 2015a: 151)

For Young, dogs are clearly individuals, they are "soulful" and have their own personalities and quirks. Their significance is clear in the way in which they leave traces in the lives of their human companions: both Tobias and Elvis are forever present in the 1947 Buick Roadmaster Estate Wagon, one of Young's classic cars. While Tobias has scratched his traces, loveable Elvis is present in the form of the stain on the backseat:

> Once he had a little sore on his tummy and it leaked out some while he was in the Roadmaster Estate Wagon's backseat, where he loved to ride. There is still that little stain there on the backseat. I'm keeping it the way it is. It's just a little stain, and it reminds me of him. (Young 2015a: 151–152)

While these memories are somewhat sentimental, they indicate a strong affective bond between the human and the canine. A memory of the non-human companion is activated every time the narrator enters the car, a site of mutually shared moments of pleasure that has both physical and mental traces of the animal's presence. This shows how memories of animals emotionally close to humans generate affective and even artistic responses, which is a sign of what Despret (2004) understands as "with-ness" and Susan McHugh sees as animals' way of "shaping" their humans (2011: 3). As an artistic response to the process of "shaping", Elvis, renamed as "Old King", lives on in Young's eponymous song on the album *Harvest Moon* (Young 1992). This is at one level a story of the life and death of a fearless deer-chasing hound dog, but at another level it emphasizes its speaker's close relationship with a dog to whom he tells "everything", in addition to revealing the importance of their shared memories of driving around in his car. Through the song, the speaker is able to come to terms with the loss of a friend in

a way that does not trivialize its death but allows for mourning (cf. Walsh 2009: 487). The close relationship between the dog and its carer shows how it is possible to cross the human–non-human boundary and form meaningful relationships with other species.

The second particularly important dog that Young writes about is Carl, "a cross of a golden retriever and standard poodle, sometimes called a Goldendoodle", referred to in the text as "a stunningly great-looking animal" (Young 2015a: 306) and as "Carl the Affection Hound" (Young 2015a: 306). Carl, together with the Young family, moves from their former farm to the new apartment on Green Street, San Francisco. His task is to bring together the narrator and his teenage daughter Amber, and also to deepen their relationship. During the daily "Poop Loop" the dog allows father and daughter to connect and reflect on life, to "chat[…] and laugh[…]" (Young 2015a: 307), in a way that contributes to emotional well-being and adds to family cohesion (Walsh 2009: 483–484). The narrator's words "[i]t was really cool taking these little walks with Amber. They were one of those beautiful low-key times we got to talk" (Young 2015a: 306) are revealing, as they refer to moments where the presence of an animal is crucial for the development of human relationships. Unsurprisingly, Carl's death at the age of 14 in 2010 has been reported on the fan-maintained website *Thrasher's Wheat*, mentioning his performance on the video version of the song "Johnny Magic" (*Thrasher's Wheat* 2010). In other words, through its narratives of dogs, *Special Deluxe* reveals the extent to which non-human animals contribute to human lives in various ways: they offer meaningful mutual relationships and emotional support, and link family members with each other. In so doing, the memoir confirms Franklin's view that companion animals are important to humans, since meaningful relationships with non-humans generate opportunities for emotional fulfilment amidst modern social life by providing "forms of sociability" that provide relief from a general "sense of confusion, loss, unpredictability and anxiety" (Franklin 1999: 56). In the case of *Special Deluxe*, Young's daily walks with Carl and Amber provide shared routines and opportunities for developing the human–dog as well as the father–daughter bond.

In the case of the memoir's narrator, dogs contribute to his identity-formation in a further and unexpected way. Upon starting the memoir, the narrator refers to his family background by using dog-related terms as metaphors to develop a closer identification with the other species. This is seen in this statement that he is "Drawing on my *pedigree* as the son of a great Canadian writer, Scott Young" (Young 2015a: Preface; emphasis added). At a later point in the memoir, he self-identifies as one of the "three old dogs" (Young 2015a: 264) when enjoying dinner with two of his old friends in a Santa Cruz restaurant. Finally, to underline the role of dogs in Young's artistic production, it should be noted that the band

touring Japan and Australia in 1989 was named "Neil Young and the Lost Dogs", which is a further indication of the importance of dogs for his art and life and of the potential of transspecies identification to blur the established division into the human and the non-human, and in so doing imagine new ways of being.

To conclude, the memoir reveals the significance of dogs for Young as companions, and the extent to which they have contributed to his life and art since childhood. In addition to offering possibilities for companionship crossing the species line, the dogs have contributed to family cohesion and its maintenance and thus have agency. Their strong presence in the world of the narrator shows that it is not one dominated by anthropocentrism as non-human animals are not mere "passive objects of study" or representations that lack agency (Armstrong 2008: 2–3). At another level, they have offered symbolic means through which it is possible to identify with non-humans, at least temporarily and ironically, and generate what Haraway (2008: 18) would refer to as becomings, as joint or hybrid identifications across the species division. In the context of human–animal studies more generally, the continuous presence of, and the increasingly more intensive attention to, the role of different non-humans tells of an environmentalist sensitivity challenging modernity's anthropocentric discourses that characterizes Young's recent work.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the role of the non-human in Neil Young's memoir *Special Deluxe* in the context of human–animal studies and its critique of anthropocentric thinking through an emphasis on the strong meaning of the relationships between human and non-human animals. On the basis of current work emphasizing the importance of human–animal relationality, and the role of animals in alleviating security in modernity, I have suggested that the memoir, while at one level rooted in Young's more general environmentalist critique, imagines deep relationships between humans and non-humans to show their entanglement and participation in a shared world. Just as biomusic and animal sounds on the album *Earth* provide the non-human with a voice, *Special Deluxe: A Memoir of Life & Cars* underlines the significance of meaningful transspecies relationships in human and animal lives. The dogs represented in the memoir, Elvis and Carl in particular, are individuals as well as family members who literally leave permanent marks in the life of the narrator and his family, and who are remembered fondly after their death. The significance of these dogs in forming relationships which cross the boundary between humans and non-humans, reveals the extent to which cross-species

interaction is part of everyday life and its emotional significance. Through these representations of human–animal relationality, the memoir challenges conventional anthropocentric thinking and imagines shared multispecies spaces where both animals and humans have access to agency and opportunities for joint identity formation enriching the life of both participants.

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