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To cite this article: By Eamonn Connor (2020) “If a Tree Falls ...” : Posthuman Testimony in C. D. Wright’s *Casting Deep Shade*, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35:1, 123-143, DOI: 10.1080/08989575.2020.1720183

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1720183>



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Published online: 05 May 2020.



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“If a Tree Falls ...” : Posthuman Testimony in C. D. Wright’s *Casting Deep Shade*

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ABSTRACT

During a period marked by profound ecological transformations, there has been surprisingly little consideration of how testimony may operate as a mediating discourse between human and nonhuman. Based on a close reading of C. D. Wright’s “memoir” *Casting Deep Shade*, this article reconsiders the subject positions of witnessing in posthuman terms.

KEYWORDS

testimony; witnessing; posthumanism; nonhuman

Witness tree, graffiti tree, tattoo tree, autograph tree, trysting tree, avenue tree, arboglyph, CMT (culturally modified tree), Presidents’ Tree (for the one in Takoma Park carved with presidents from Washington to Lincoln in 1865; blown down in 1997). They say it really doesn’t hurt the tree, all that carving. But harm and hurt are different. Beech bark is a tender thing.

— C. D. Wright and Denny Moers, *Casting Deep Shade: An Amble Inscribed to Beech Trees and Co.*

Prior to C. D. Wright’s unexpected death in 2016, she was engaged in years of research on the shared histories of humans and beech trees in the northeast US. Developing Wright’s unique prosimetric style, the resulting book-length poem *Casting Deep Shade* is described by the author as a “memoir with beech trees,” and the book’s subtitle frames the text as a testimonial act: *An Amble Inscribed to Beech Trees and Co.*¹ “Amble” is how Wright describes her wanderings among the old-growth forests and estate arbors throughout the Ozark Mountains, a physiographic region in the US states of Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Yet, just as “ambling” denotes movement, “inscribed” remains static, denoting words written (or carved) on a surface, in witness.² Indeed, reviews have noted

CONTACT Eamonn Connor ✉ eamonnconnor.apolish@gmail.com 📍 Apartment 410, 333 Bath Street, Glasgow, G24ER.

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that *Casting Deep Shade* demonstrates “the power of poetry to conserve, preserve, and bear witness.”³

Casting Deep Shade engages in poetic communication as a form of testimony, yet unlike Wright’s earlier works it “affirms the need to witness” the world beyond the figure of the human.⁴ Composed of ecological genealogies, colonial narratives, situated folklore, anecdotal asides, travel memoir, cultural commentary, and family autobiography, *Casting Deep Shade* begins as a passionate naturalist’s ode to the beech tree and then branches out to touch on a dizzying array of topics, cultivating what Wright calls “an arboretum of the mind.”⁵ While commentators have noted the centrality of acts of witnessing to the memoir, Wright’s elliptical prosimetric style challenges the singular “I” of the autobiographical pact and its investment in the human.⁶ The figure of the subject who bears witness and provides testimony in *Casting Deep Shade* will thus be central to this article.

I want to suggest that Wright testifies from a subject position that exceeds her-self, producing a form of posthuman testimony from within an assemblage of human and nonhuman beings in the Ozark Mountains. Testimony here does not result from an encounter with the infinite alterity of the animal Other, but instead emerges from *inside* a community of beings that are entangled in specific and situated ways of living and dying. First, I will examine the posthuman position of the subject-witness who testifies in the memoir, leading me to suggest that the book itself is materially constructed as a type of “witness tree.” I will then show how Wright seeks to produce, through various rhetorical gestures, a reader who is capable of bearing witness to testimony that emerges from beyond a bounded human subject. Since testimony is an epistemological act, I will also consider how testifying to becoming “beech-conscious” produces certain types of knowledge in the Ozarks, arguing that bearing witness to posthuman testimony produces an ethics based on *accountability* to “trees and tree-kin.”⁷

A Subject-Witness in the Ozark Mountains

Casting Deep Shade is a three-panel hardcover tome that encloses a poem accompanied by striking black-and-white monoprints by photographer Denny Moers, hand-printed using analogue film and darkroom effects. In his introduction to the text, poet Ben Lerner describes the book as “a work in a perpetual state of becoming.”⁸ This is immediately acknowledged in the printing: the text bound to the center block (or trunk) is more embraced than contained by the wraparound cover, the pages (or leaves) just hanging on, at the threshold. The paratextual framing of the poem materializes Wright’s later description of the beech tree: “Mono-layered leafers like the beech avoid blocking out each other’s light by forming a jigsaw-like pattern to capture the light.”⁹

When readers open the book, they encounter a color photograph on the inside panel. It is a portrait of sorts, although a far cry from conventional author photographs that work to essentialize the notion of selfhood and authorship. The image introduces Wright, standing bottom left of frame, as the “author” and subject-witness who provides testimony in the memoir. But she is not alone. At first glance, Wright appears to be standing beside a beech tree. On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that her feet are arched upon, “rooted with,” to use Wright’s phrasing, the “elephantine feet” of the tree.¹⁰ Unlike traditional author photographs, Wright does not return the reader’s gaze. Instead, we follow her gaze up to the ancient giant that exceeds the frame. This establishes that Wright is indeed the subject who bears witness and testifies, but she speaks within the memoir from a perspective *rooted* in a community of human and nonhuman beings, “Beech and Co.”

In order better to understand this testimonial position, it is worth considering how Wright depicts the beech tree in *Casting Deep Shade*. She consistently seeks to focus our attention on the tree itself, not *the* beech tree in the figurative or abstract, but particular trees and groves as sites of assemblage. A beech tree is rooted in the earth, “[a]lways the risk of becoming rootbound”; trunk rising up, “tall trees ... impressionistic creations”; branches splayed out, “whirling above the ground,” with or without buds or leaves, “clover and climbing roses.”¹¹ Is the beech tree, then, an object? If so, how should we define it? What is tree and what is not-tree—“Co.” and “kin”? Where does *this* beech tree end and the rest of the Ozarks begin in *Casting Deep Shade*? Wright breaks off a piece of the tree and inspects it closely, “that watersmoothsilversatin bark.”¹² She finds that it is populated by myriad organisms which have nestled beneath, “the scale (*C. fagisuga*) then the fungus (*Neonectria faginata* and *Neonectrica ditissima*).”¹³ There are ladybugs and “parasitic wasps attacking aphids,”¹⁴ and birds who make their nests and spread beech seeds so that the genus reproduces throughout the Ozark Mountains:

Blue jay reflecting and scattering its blue, winging and cashing its nuts, foresting us with oaks and beeches (and in the case of the Steller’s jays, pines). Bless their raucous, cheery souls. Jay, from Latin *gallus*, gay. Only 1 percent are egg robbers. 1%. One was observed burying 2,000 beechnuts in one month.¹⁵

Wright’s depiction of the beech tree establishes that it is not an object at all, but a situated gathering together of living beings and threads of relation in the Ozarks. *Casting Deep Shade* strives to build sites of attachment, connecting the living beings like the blue jays that bury beech nuts and congregate in and around the tree in a process which Wright describes as “*Inosculation*: intertwined and joined together.”¹⁶ This

resonates strongly with Tim Ingold's argument that to inhabit the world is to "join in processes of formation."¹⁷ The world that thus opens up to inhabitants is an environment without objects, populated by "things" that draw together lifeways: "The thing is a going on, or better, a place where several goings on become entwined. To observe a thing is not to be locked out but invited to the gathering."¹⁸ Recall the first image we see of Wright on the inner panel of the book—she gazes up at the beech tree, observing a "thing" rather than an "object," and as we shall see, these acts of witnessing increasingly embed her within the "gathering" over the course of the memoir. The "thing" is Ingold's formulation of an assemblage, a concept to which ecologists have turned to avoid "the sometimes fixed and bounded connotations of ecological community."¹⁹ Wright depicts the beech tree as an assemblage, an open-ended gathering in which things *become* together, for, as Anna Tsing argues, "[a]ssemblages don't just gather lifeways, they make them."²⁰ The subject-witness who provides testimony in *Casting Deep Shade* is a subject in a perpetual state of becoming. The origin of the testimony is not a complete, bounded subject, and testimony emerges from within the assemblage of Ozark beech groves, an assemblage that is never static but always *in process*—a becoming "beech-conscious."²¹ Wright thus disturbs the principle that tethers the narration of "lives" to the singular and anthropocentric embodiment of "a life."²² In *Casting Deep Shade*, the embodied and embedded human being represented in autobiographical narrative becomes part of a posthuman assemblage of bodies, history, and matter in the Ozark Mountains.

Witness Trees and Co

The beeches of Oradell, NJ, are said to have witnessed certain episodes of the American Revolutionary War. Many trees went down, but the beeches survived the nor'easter of 2010, Hurricane Irene, and Superstorm Sandy.

— C. D. Wright and Denny Moers, *Casting Deep Shade: An Amble Inscribed to Beech Trees and Co.*

Recognizing that Wright testifies from a subject position beyond her-self has significant ramifications for how we understand the text as a testimonial document. Testimony is a mediating discourse, which is to say that the past and present are mediated through testimony, and the production of testimony functions as an intermediary between individuals, communities, and the social field, and, in this case, between human and nonhuman. *Casting Deep Shade* textually mediates Wright's acts of witnessing to an addressee, an audience-witness, who is capable of bearing witness to posthuman testimony without rejecting or transforming it. In order better to understand this process of mediation, we can turn to Wright's formulation of the "witness tree," a figure that recurs frequently throughout the

book. In *Indian Trails of the Warrior Mountains*, a field guide to Native American history referred to within *Casting Deep Shade*, a witness tree,

1. Bears manmade markings or evidence of non-naturally occurring reformatory growth patterns.
2. Serves as a signpost or communication device.
3. Acts as a message board, boundary marker, warning sign, or has evidence of domestic usage.
4. Is a repository of vital information or record keeping.
5. Contains information pertaining to any cultural or historical event which occurred during the lifespan of the tree.²³

I want to suggest that *Casting Deep Shade* fulfils these criteria and the book itself is constructed as a type of “witness tree.” It bears the markings of tree lore (“Beech in the house interferes with a spirit’s passing”²⁴) and indigenous and colonial histories (“Cherokee in presyllabary code”²⁵); it communicates through a foliate language (“The hanger-on-until-spring leaf is *marcescent*”²⁶); it is a repository of vital information about the genus of trees (beech) and its family (*Fagaceae*) and environmental history (“In the Pleistocene, beech spanned the continent”²⁷); and it testifies to cultural and historical events (“The beeches of Oradell were scheduled to bear silent, unsworn witness to Benedict Arnold”²⁸). *Casting Deep Shade* is a repository of record-keeping, full of esteem for arborists, indigenous knowledges, and folklore, for they are—like Wright—committed to keeping language and landscape particular, unpredictable, “testimonial.”²⁹ It is a message board and a boundary marker: “The beech has to do with thresholds. Used to mark boundaries.”³⁰ Yet, these “boundaries” are frequently shown to be fluid, dependent on the material conditions of assemblages rather than serving to separate or categorize living beings or cultural histories and concepts. Like the “witness tree,” *Casting Deep Shade* is a site of inscription, a kind of “slow-growth kinetic sculpture” that proceeds at an amble to “preserve in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and expectations for the future.”³¹

The poem is also, very literally, an arborglyph inscribed on pages that began as tree flesh. It is materially composed of beech woodgrain paper, and this materiality is foregrounded when Wright urges the reader to “read the leaves” closely.³² She speaks of writing the poem by “using a beech branch as a pen. ... it will enable a bok,” and thus situates the origins of art in environment: “Beech is Anglo-Saxon *bok*: book, document, or charter; and *beche* in Middle English, *bech*, *beetch*, *beech* from Old English; *bece* of Germanic origin, *buoh* in Old High German, *boke* in Middle Low German, *baike* in Modern Low German, *in modern German*

Buche, Old Norse *bok*, and Dutch *boek* and Danish *bog* and Swedish *bok*, all meaning both book and beech.”³³ Wright makes it clear that the book was formed by joining with and following forces and flows of materials in the Ozarks. In doing so, she does not seek to replicate static forms in the world. As the plant grows from its seed, *Casting Deep Shade* grows from acts of witnessing that articulate relations in motion. Karen Barad’s theory of “agential realism” continues a tenet of post-structuralism in critiquing representationalist theories for upholding a gap between thoughts and the world, and for conceptualizing the project of epistemology as the pursuit of accuracy between the two.³⁴ Representationalism assumes “that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing.”³⁵ *Casting Deep Shade* does not attempt to mirror preexisting phenomena to organize its account of the natural and social world of the Ozarks. When Wright writes “Every time the tree works the leaves dream,” she is playing with the double meaning of “leaves,” referring to not only the literal leaves of a beech tree, but also the verb to “leaf through” the fleshy pages of the book the reader holds in their hands.³⁶ By making it clear that *Casting Deep Shade* is, very literally, a *bok*, Wright frames the poem as a type of embodied inscription: “The media ... is living.”³⁷ The “thing” represented is not held to be independent of her embodied poetic practice of “ambling.” She calls the poem an “improvisation,” and this entails following the ways and relations of the Ozarks as they become, rather than connecting up in reverse a series of points already traversed.³⁸ Similarly, Moer’s photographs throughout the book do not reproduce preconceived ideas or figures of trees but work with chemicals and materials from forests in the Ozarks to “transform from the literal to the imagined via accidental contingent design.”³⁹

These processes of production and inscription suggest that *Casting Deep Shade* is a type of “witness tree”: materially composed of tender bark, bearing arborglyphs engraved by a “branch,” testifying through the markings and evidence of the entangled social, cultural, and environmental histories of the Ozarks. It is a communication device, a source of vital information and record-keeping, and a facsimile of a tree’s growth outwards—a cumulative chronology in rings of testimony. The book is a gathering together of threads of life in the Ozarks, “trees and tree-kin” and “Beech and Co.,” and it thus mediates a posthuman testimony.⁴⁰ *Casting Deep Shade* is the “witness tree” upon which Wright has inscribed her acts of witnessing as a relational subject.

Bearing Witness to *Casting Deep Shade*

Having established a subject-witness within an assemblage, whose testimony is mediated by *Casting Deep Shade* as a type of witness tree, what

is the location of the audience-witness here? Dori Laub has attested to the importance of being an “authentic witness” who can recognize the truth of the experience being testified to.⁴¹ Without this aspect of testimony, Laub argues, there is a “collapse of witnessing,” whereby the testimonial account is not recognized and fails to produce knowledge.⁴² *Casting Deep Shade* works to produce a reader who is capable of bearing witness to the posthuman testimony that Wright delivers as a subject-witness inside the assemblage of “tree and tree kin” in the Ozarks.⁴³ She actively points to a material-discursive reading practice: “The mono-focal experience of the *bok* is the heart and soul of what it means to read.”⁴⁴ The use of the term “*bok*” highlights the origins of books in beech, and this suggests that reading *Casting Deep Shade* is a type of material experience with the beech tree, rather than a passive encounter with a testimonial document whose words “represent” the lifeways of the tree. When writing about climate crisis, for instance, Wright plays with the material relation between the book and the beech: “Knowing the general outline of the argument of the Holocene extinction put forth by Elizabeth Kolbert in *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* , I have not yet brought myself to the pain of cracking its spine, to be taken to the brink.”⁴⁵ Wright associates the pain of encountering climate-crisis testimony in Kolbert’s book with “the pain of cracking its spine.” The “mono-focal experience” that defines beech-consciousness is thus an *embodied* ethical position oriented toward specific relations and materialities in the Ozarks. It is an ethics rooted in this place, these trees, these people. *Mono* denotes singularity, and this singularity is materially registered in the paratextual framing of the book. After “cracking its spine,” the book unfolds into an expansive three-page folder. Due to its size and the fragile connections between the panels, it cannot be read while reclining on a couch or in bed. As it lacks a binding stem, the reader must always be touching the book; otherwise, the poem will snap shut and the testimonial encounter will end. Lest we forget the delicate material relation between book and *bok* , Wright reminds us that “[b]eech bark is a tender thing.”⁴⁶ This suggests that the testimony offered by *Casting Deep Shade* is textually fragile. The care that must be taken while reading should be understood as connected to Wright’s stated desire to produce “sustained acts of attention, slow exposures of gaze” in the reader.⁴⁷ Bearing witness here is an ethical act that attends to singularity, the “mono-focal,” material experience of encountering testimony that emerges from beyond the human subject.

The architecture of the poem also works to produce a certain “mono-focal” experience of reading that does not operate through narrative accumulation but sensorial encounters. Brought before *Casting Deep Shade* , we must abandon our accustomed ways of reading, for, as Lerner notes,

“this is also a book about looking.”⁴⁸ We do not scan for information, the way we might do when we scroll through media on a screen,⁴⁹ and there is no strong narrative compulsion to the book-length poem. The compressed lines and the silence that surges from the margins and between polyphonic fragments make the gaze linger and alight. Passages distort time by intensifying the senses, inviting the reader to bring to mind the taste and texture of “horse chestnuts aplenty ... rich in oil, tanning.”⁵⁰ The poem’s fragments resist paraphrase, which is to say that the poem is not particularly invested in producing knowledge *about* the beech tree or the speaking “I” of the memoir. There are occasional didactic asides: “Beech, *Fagus*. Family Fagaceae. Alternating leaves of the *sylvatica* (European) crenated, of the *grandifolia* (American) crenulated; the former a little wavy, the latter a little toothy.”⁵¹ However, these blocks of information, composed of etymologies and biological science, are frequently interrupted by poetic interludes, like “the former a little wavy, the latter a little toothy.” These effusive, imaginative disruptions frame scientific discourse as simply one thread in the deep wells of knowledge that inosculate in the Ozarks. *Casting Deep Shade* performatively enacts a type of testimonial “dispersal”—tracing the disparate threads of relation within the assemblage. Wright writes the following about beech-tree propagation:

Dispersed by wind. Says one.
 Not dispersed by wind. Says another.
 Dispersed by wildlife. Says one.
 Dispersed by blue jays. Says another.
 Not dispersed by jays. Says one.⁵²

A “dispersal” is above all an act of distribution, and by rhetorically enacting the dispersals that mark the assemblage, Wright gives shape to witnesses as distributions or assemblages of human and nonhuman beings. In the passage above, the “jays” are a crucial actant, among many others, in propagating the threads of life that congregate in and around the beech tree, and determine the conditions of possibility for the assemblage itself. The frequent interruptions and “dispersals” awaken the reader’s concentration—the shifts in perspective and register require a focused reading that attends to the flights of becoming within the assemblage, that resists the rush to unity for the complexity of entanglements. When we read *Casting Deep Shade*, our eyes may wander down the pages, but they also linger on charged fragments: we move forward, we skim back, we examine closely, we *crack* the spine of the book in our hands. Wright’s poetry produces a kind of “fluid but deep concentration,” retraining our minds to dwell in the open awareness that marks beech-consciousness.⁵³ When we amble through the poem, our typical capacities of *making sense* are destabilized and we must feel our way forward with

our unknowing. I am given fleeting glimpses of what pulses beneath the words: the mysteries of relationality in the Ozarks in which no-thing and no-one are truly separate. Reading *Casting Deep Shade* attentively means tracing the situated material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and tree bodies. “Some of us,” Wright says, “do not write particularly for pleasure or instruction, but to be changed, charged.”⁵⁴ To crack the spine and “be taken to the brink,” to read to be changed, requires a witness that can be attentive to the flux of becoming in beech groves.

In order to understand why *attention* is necessary for a reading that is capable of bearing witness to the testimony of *Casting Deep Shade*, it is important to understand how the book testifies to a duration. Just as the “author” is not a bounded individual, the book does not testify to single, delimited events. Jacques Derrida notes that the assumption in testimony is that we testify to an “instant.”⁵⁵ For example, in a legal context, the witness testifies, in an instant, to their presence at a prior instant. In contrast, Wright does not simply attempt to *capture* the reader’s attention to bear witness to an “instant,” but works to produce sustained acts of attention that can bear witness to the duration of *becoming* “beech-conscious.” It is worth turning for a moment to the figure of the “adequate witness” in the work of Leigh Gilmore. In *Tainted Witness*, Gilmore takes the unequal role of judgment in bearing witness as a starting point to discuss the myriad ways in which women’s testimonial accounts are discredited. She searches for an “adequate witness,” a “moving target” who receives testimony without transforming it by “suspicion.”⁵⁶ Albeit in a very different context, I want to suggest that, in performatively enacting the “dispersals” that mark witnessing from inside the assemblage, Wright aims to produce a kind of attention in the reader that attends to her testimonial accounts of becoming within the Ozarks, while resisting the rush to judgment or transforming the testimony into a representation that functions didactically as a “field guide” or merely stands in symbolically or metaphorically for something else. *Casting Deep Shade* appeals for an “adequate witness” who is capable of “taking in a witness tree and its ramifications” while avoiding affective identification practices like empathy and sympathy, which extend ethical rights to nonhumans on the basis of their similarities to us.⁵⁷

Becoming “Beech-Conscious”

A scheme emerges here: the subject-witness is Wright, testifying from a subject position beyond her-self within the assemblage of “Beech and Co.” in the Ozarks. This testimony is mediated by the physical text, inscribed on a “witness tree,” which actively appeals to an “adequate

witness” who is capable of bearing witness to a duration—a becoming “beech-conscious.” Since testimony is an epistemological act, this leads us to the question: What knowledge is produced in the testimonial transaction?

The poem begins with descriptions of the beech tree taken from the National Forest Register: “Poses no significant litter problem | Ranks as ‘not particularly outstanding’ according to the Forest Service.”⁵⁸ The opening pages provide a broad genealogy of human-beech relations: “Iron Age man made beechnut flour | Native Americans made beechnut flour.”⁵⁹ Wright utilizes an emotionally detached academic discourse: “The pollen record keeps going back and back | Pollen from pre-Roman peats has been found in the UK.”⁶⁰ After these didactic statements, indented by line breaks, she begins to introduce blocks of text that provide genetic and species information, and Latin etymologies from texts like the *Manual of Woody Plants* and *Portraits of Forest Trees*.⁶¹ Slowly, she begins to interweave excerpts of Romantic poetry, from Robert Frost and John Milton, which describe beech trees: “Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks.”⁶² However, this line from Milton is directly juxtaposed with a previous line from the *Manual of Woody Plants*, which notes, “In autumn ... the leaves still cling to their stems.”⁶³ We learn that, since it was a beech forest surrounding the ancient Benedictine monastery at Vallombrosa where Milton claimed to be staying when writing his poem, the poet either never visited or willfully distorted his surroundings when he wrote the poem. This is one of several occasions in the text where Wright playfully mocks canonical writers like Milton, Virgil, John Keats, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Mark Twain, Henry David Thoreau, and Voltaire for misrecognizing the beech tree in their writing.⁶⁴ She shows that they consistently misname or ignore the materiality of the trees, even as they instrumentalize them to reify an essentially humanist and anthropocentric Romantic worldview. She chastises them for their “lack of attention” to the trees that they employ as symbols and metaphors.⁶⁵ In showing how these poets lack beech-consciousness, she establishes the first elementary characteristic of becoming within a posthuman assemblage of “tree and tree-kin”—namely, the human must be attentive to the materialities of the living beings around them. This includes noticing that beech leaves cling to their stems in autumn and knowing the difference between an oak, a chestnut, and a chinkapin.⁶⁶ Part of the “mono-focal” experience of the beech is recognizing that a tree is a singular living being.

Wright compares the figurative metaphors of the poets to the writings of prominent arborists who produce natural histories of the Ozarks: “All of Larry Lowman’s information about beech aspect and behavior is borne out in the literature again and again.”⁶⁷ However, she makes it clear that this information is only meaningful insofar as it allows for a recognition

that facilitates a material encounter: “but there is nothing quite like a close encounter of the other kind, either at the elephant foot of one of the elder survivors of human disturbance and vengeful weather or from the mouth of a native plant master.”⁶⁸ She testifies that there are knowledges that escape the humanist representationalism of the poets, and the discourse of the scientists and arborists, which are produced through direct material encounters with beech trees and the testimonies of the indigenous peoples of the Ozarks.

Wright suddenly departs from the linguistic pattern of block text and inserts indented and bracketed lines that give a clearer sense of the sort of knowledge which interests her: “If you take root, you’ll go deep. | (Always the risk of becoming rootbound).”⁶⁹ This break in the established pattern suggests that this knowledge emerges in the cracks, is “rooted” in the spaces between the intersection of human and environmental histories. She follows these lines by noting that beech trees are not “rooted” in the way we might think they are—“A taproot is not the securing component of the beech, which instead spreads its elephantine feet out along the surface”⁷⁰—and claims that to “be rooted” is the most important and least recognized need of the human—“A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.”⁷¹ She then indents another stand-alone line: “Minus the expectations, trees and humans do manifest a common gestalt.”⁷² The text is accompanied by a color photograph, taken by Wright on one of her visits to beech groves in the Ozarks, of the “elephantine feet” of a beech tree spreading across the grounds of a park.⁷³ This makes visible her claim that beech trees are not “rooted” in the way we may think they are—that is, via underground networks invisible to the human. This testimony produces a specific knowledge: trees and humans are *both* rooted by virtue of their active and material participation in the life of a shared community. However, Wright does not write that trees and humans “share” a common gestalt; she is unequivocal—they “manifest” a common gestalt. This tells us that while humans in the Ozarks are always already embedded in a community of (non)human beings, to be “rooted” (the most important need of the human) requires a “real” and “active” participation in the life of that community. Being “rooted” is not a passive inclusion. Rather, the act of bearing witness and testifying from within the assemblage, and adequately bearing witness to that testimony, necessitates material encounters. Wright is testifying here to the emergence of beech-consciousness—the recognition of herself and the world from the perspective of a posthuman assemblage in the Ozarks means relinquishing one’s figurative relations

with beech trees and actively recognizing and engaging in the material relations that constitute a situated community.

On the following page, Wright introduces the first-person “I” for the first time in the poem, as she recalls a trip she had taken as a child to the “hill-country splendor” of Missouri.⁷⁴ She writes: “I was not beech-conscious at the time.”⁷⁵ She testifies that, at this point in her life, she was only “semi-aware” of the groves.⁷⁶ She lacked the awareness to recognize that she was a “by-product of the Ozark Mountains.”⁷⁷ She was not yet able to recognize the beech trees and hardwoods as “her standing brothers and sisters.”⁷⁸ So, becoming “beech-conscious” is a move from semi-awareness to a complete awareness of the way in which we are ecologically embedded in local communities. It means recognizing the ways in which we are all “by-products” of specific, situated ecologies, embedded in relations of kinship that exceed human communities. This awareness does not happen at any one instant, but is rather a *process* made possible through material encounters. *Casting Deep Shade* does not function as a step-by-step guide or manual to achieving beech-consciousness. Instead, Wright plots her “becoming” as a series of linked instants and, in doing so, testifies to a duration: beech-consciousness is always *emergent*.

At this point in the memoir, much like the Romantic poets, Wright consistently misrecognizes trees: “I curse-swished Spaldings at age 10 ... or was it a pawpaw tree.”⁷⁹ While reflecting on her youth, she describes her nearsightedness as a “minor tree-related manner.”⁸⁰ How exactly could it be a “tree-related manner”? Wright recalls how the only trees that her parents allowed her to climb as a child were trees which had been felled. She encountered only dogwoods, “squat, flouncy things,” and she describes how she thought they were “on my level.”⁸¹ Her nearsightedness meant that standing, living trees were naught but “impressionistic creations” to her eyes—they only “individuated” upon her “climbing to their level.”⁸² As she testifies to the moment of that realization, she indents a bracketed line: “(The buds of tree consciousness.)”⁸³ Here, she connects to the slow climb “to their level” as the beginnings, the “buds,” of becoming “beech-conscious.” Again, she is testifying to the idea that becoming “rooted” in the community of “Beech and Co.” is made possible by active material encounters with the nonhuman members of said community. She juxtaposes this testimony with the story of a nearby house in Arkansas named Twelve Oaks: “a sternly aristocratic, white stucco house on Hwy & en route to the Buffalo River ... The drive lined with a dozen imposing oaks. A tornado took each one of them out like soda straws. Without them the house looked like an asylum. Exactly like an asylum.”⁸⁴ This passage functions as a sort of cautionary tale. The budding beech-consciousness to which she is testifying contrasts vividly

with the grim image of an austere house stripped of its trees. The house becomes “[e]xactly like an asylum,” associating a lack of beech-consciousness with disconnection and madness, and pointing the reader toward the consequences of environmental destruction. For Wright, it is becoming *with* those “slow-growth kinetic sculptures” that “tethers life.”⁸⁵ She thus suggests that people in the Ozarks who fail to recognize their belonging within a community of human and nonhuman beings, who fail actively and materially to manifest that belonging, that common gestalt, become untethered from the threads of life which make living and dying possible in that community. This resonates with the argument made by Cary Wolfe that we are “not that auto- of autobiography that humanism gives to itself.”⁸⁶ Wright testifies that there is a certain confinement and madness to the isolated and separate humanist subject, and connecting imagery of “soda straws,” preeminent symbols of twenty-first-century pollution, with the violence of a tornado provides a grim vision of a future that untethers the human from communal life.

Becoming “beech-conscious” is also a process that illuminates the entanglement of environmental and colonial histories in the Ozarks. For instance, “witness trees” throughout the groves bear cultural histories through the presence of Native American arborglyphs: “Regarding the witness tree: Beech is preferred for carving in the East, aspen in the West.”⁸⁷ The “witness trees” in the East, throughout the Ozark Mountains, are beech precisely because of the colonial exploitation of the indigenous Cherokee populations: “The color for the Long Hair Clan of Cherokee (also known as Twister, Wind, or Hanging Down Clan) is yellow. Their tree is beech.”⁸⁸ Wright notes that there must be many Cherokee arborglyphs that still endure, but many people in the Ozarks would be unaware of their presence, since the lettering would be far from the ground and much expanded with the growth of the trees. This recalls her earlier description of lacking beech-consciousness because she could not and would not meet the trees “on their level.”⁸⁹ By testifying that, in the Ozarks, environmental history and exploitation are inextricable from colonialism and cultural erasure, *Casting Deep Shade* shows that becoming “beech-conscious” necessarily involves becoming aware of the exploitation of indigenous peoples and the complex entangled histories within a situated community. Any reading or encounter with the beech tree, our “standing brothers and sisters,”⁹⁰ which fails to produce that knowledge is an inadequate act of witnessing and diametrically opposed to beech-consciousness.

Later in the poem, Wright tells the story of meeting a physically vulnerable English poet in Arkansas with a rare, agonizing disease: “When drugs offered no relief or necessitated tapering off, NATURE, she vowed

(in all caps), was the only healer.”⁹¹ Afflicted since birth, the poet recalls suffering greatly one day as a child, going outside and lying on her back in the grass beneath a beech tree: “When she stood up she beheld a glimmer of blue silhouetting her body that quickly dematerialized.”⁹² While the phenomenon never recurred, leaning on trees or lying on the earth continued to soothe her. Crucially, “physical contact was essential to receive the succor offered.”⁹³ Wright testifies to the idea that there must be some material contact for beings, human and nonhuman, to “succor,” to support each other within the Ozarks: “Embarrassed to hug it [the tree] then and there, but tentatively, I did. Who knows when an otherwise inexplicable transference of strength might strike.”⁹⁴ Strength is passed, distributed, and dispersed throughout the members of the community. However, while the beech tree is shown to offer “succor,” the human is frequently shown by Wright to fail to reciprocate. On the following page, Wright juxtaposes the story of the vulnerable English poet with a retelling of the story of Joan of Arc. She notes that the beech tree was

Never a hanging tree:

but Joan of Arc was thought by her examiners to be receiving satanic messages from a Fairy Tree, a beech, alas.⁹⁵

Wright’s retelling of the execution of Joan of Arc testifies that human beings have long been aware of the presence of beech trees, and aware of their capacity to communicate and change the outcome of events, but framed this communication as mystical and dangerous, associating it with a threatening, nonconforming feminine. Joan is burned alive in Wright’s account because she “heard the (demonic) tree speak.”⁹⁶ Wright connects this account of Joan with the “assassins” of the beech tree, *Phytophthora*, a pathogen that has infected 40% of beeches in the northeastern US, attracting ambrosia beetles and chestnut borers, which “set upon the stressed.”⁹⁷ The wilted foliage makes the European beech subject to burning and relational to Joan in its precarity: “The Europeans burn easily. Once the foliage is stripped they are subject to sunscald.”⁹⁸ It is here that Wright begins to consider the ethical dimensions of beech-consciousness, as she explicitly claims that both humans and trees in the Ozarks share the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) hardiness zones 4–7, or 3–8, “depending on the literature.”⁹⁹ A “hardiness zone” is a geographic area defined to encompass a range of climatic conditions relevant to plant growth and survival. While it explicitly refers to flora, Wright testifies that the USDA zones are in fact the climatic conditions relevant to the growth and survival of *both* human and nonhuman beings in the Ozarks.

By foregrounding the material inter- and intra-connections across bodies in the Ozarks, the testimony that emerges from *Casting Deep*

Shade denies anthropocentric exceptionalism by considering all species as intermeshed within larger currents. If, as Wright testifies, “the grey-water days are upon us,”¹⁰⁰ then she is clear that the only appropriate ethics involves the “pain of cracking [the] spine,” a spine that would separate human, trees, and other Earth “others.” The ethical knowledge produced here is not grounded in a situated response to a radically exteriorized other, but about accountability for the lively relationalities in which we are embedded in specific environments—in this case, USDA zones 4–7 or 3–8 in the Ozarks. This recalls the situated ethics espoused by Donna Haraway, who writes, “Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.”¹⁰¹ Wright testifies that beech-consciousness makes the question of accountability more insistent, as the intra-active production within assemblages means that we actively contribute in bringing forth the world in its specificity, ourselves included, “split-open ribcages, palpating hearts in hands.”¹⁰²

As Wright, the subject-witness of the testimonial chain, becomes increasingly “beech-conscious,” she begins to rematerialize her language. Scott Knickerbocker has described this process, of cultivating an active and productive imagination concerning the “language” of nonhumans, as “sensuous poesis”—“the process of rematerialising language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature.”¹⁰³ Wright’s poetry and prose change as she becomes increasingly conscious of the materialities of the assemblage and seeks actively to respond to the textures and sounds that she encounters. She writes: “The watersmoothsilversatin bark is an adaptation from its tropical beginnings, fending off the ephiphytic plants.”¹⁰⁴ Humans and trees become “inosculated”; swaying funnel-shaped treetops are described as “infunibular”; smooth, hairless leaves are “glabrous”; and ancient beeches waiting to be felled are “grandegrannydames.”¹⁰⁵ Portmanteaus like “watersmoothsilversatin” and “grandegrannydames” are utilized for their intensely onomatopoeic effects, and these descriptions of the beech trees complement the textural photographs that adorn the pages opposite her writing. The “buds” of tree consciousness infuse language through the double meaning of words like “sappily,” “brood,” “root,” “heartwood,” “harvest,” “branch,” “weeping,” and “bark,” and death is described as the “long-term dirt nap.”¹⁰⁶ Wright is explicitly aware of the interplay between language and nature, book and *bok*:

First page
of literature
in Sanskrit
on beech
the runic tablets
on beech

Firstbooks [Database][Mismatch]
 were beech
 in Sanskrit
 the Vedas
 Who know
 who wrote
 Old English
 on bound
 beech
 bark.¹⁰⁷

In making clear that it was always our relations with beech trees, among innumerable other nonhuman beings, that made human communication and art possible, Wright stresses the depths of our ethical accountability. We are at stake. Wright does not observe the communities of beech groves from some outside position; she testifies that she is part of the Ozarks in its ongoing emergence, and that this has ethical ramifications. Near the end of the poem, she begins employing complex compound sentences, spanning, at times, a couple of hundred words, which innovatively imitate the movements of the beech tree, not a static object, but a “thing” that gathers together threads of life: “When one experiences a grove of beeches, it is a life force revealed.”¹⁰⁸ She goes on to suggest that one of the ways that we can respond to our ethical *accountability* is to join with the forces and flows within the assemblage. When we bear “adequate witness” to beech trees, we can develop innovative and unanticipated responses to the environmental crises that we are facing. For instance, Wright describes the way that Japanese scientist Koryo Miura recently conceived of a method to fold an array of solar panels by mimicking beech leaves unfolding from the bud: “Further applications include a subway map and heart stents.”¹⁰⁹ Underneath this passage, she includes a panorama of Miura’s solar-panel designs and the accordion folds of a beech leaf. The image is recalled again at the very end of the poem. *Casting Deep Shade* becomes increasingly effusive, until Wright suddenly breaks from the complex compound sentences and reproduces the beautiful silent poem “Fisches Nachtgesang” (“Fish’s Night Song”), by Christian Morgenstern.

“Fisches Nachtgesang” consists only of patterns of dashes and brackets printed to replicate scales, waves, and bubbles. It is an example of concrete poetry, yet its visual shape is abstract. It is an aural poem, marked by strokes and circular arcs that graphically describe the accented and unstressed syllables of a poem. Yet it evokes no discernible sounds. It is a wordless testimony. The lines are not connected to form a solid figure, and the shape of the fish remains just out of view. It is up to the reader, the audience-witness, to fill in the blanks, to give form to the shape. By refusing to provide any explanatory, didactic information about the origin

of the poem, Wright evokes the earlier image of Miura's solar panels and the ridged accordion folds of the beech leaf. Underneath this visual poem, Wright includes a single line: "Strange otherworld. But it is inside this one, just as Éluard said."¹¹⁰ She challenges the reader to perceive this "otherworld ... inside this one"—the more-than-human world that can only be perceived, the text suggests, through a process of becoming tree-conscious. Wright thus gives priority to processes of formation over their final products, and to material flows and transformations over states of matter. Form, to recall the words of Paul Klee, is death; form-giving is life.¹¹¹ "Fisches Nachtgesang" bespeaks possibility, a possibility to which we are frequently blind because we lack the proper consciousness. Wright testifies that this is possible under certain material conditions. In the Ozarks, this is a process of becoming "beech-conscious," which illuminates the entangled social, cultural, and environmental histories unique to that region and community. Wright witnesses from inside the assemblage, testifying that humans and trees in the Ozarks are part of "the same mealy, meaty family."¹¹² In *Casting Deep Shade*, material encounters with "witness trees" and "tree-kin" leave Wright "changed, charged." She testifies to this change, a becoming "beech-conscious," and seeks to produce a certain type of reading that might leave the audience-witness of the text "charged" and "changed" in their encounter with a "witness tree." To bear "adequate witness" to the testimony that emerges in *Casting Deep Shade* means to resist the rush to judgment and open oneself to the pain of "cracking its spine," in the knowledge that the encounter with testimony could "trigger a reset of your entire cosmology."¹¹³

When I close the final "leaves," *Casting Deep Shade* does not free me from its grip. The force it exerts *charges* my consciousness. I close the spine with a sense that I have been complicit in preventing my capacity to relate. Wright makes it clear that life is open-ended: its impulse "is not to reach a terminus but to keep on going."¹¹⁴ She testifies to a renewed sense of accountability, to the ongoingness of life beyond the human subject, a "life" in which we are embedded and co-constituted, and for which we are accountable. In a final act of generosity, a final testimony to the fact that no subject is ever truly bounded or alone, Wright chooses to end her memoir with a line from her late friend, the poet and environmentalist W. S. Merwin: "On the last day of the world | I would want to plant a tree."¹¹⁵

University of Glasgow

Notes

1. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 1.
2. Muske-Dukes, "Poet."

3. "Casting Deep Shade."
4. Muske-Dukes, "Poet."
5. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 78.
6. Muske-Dukes, "Poet." See also Fishman, "Poetry Review."
7. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 23.
8. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 23.
9. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 65.
10. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 65, 21.
11. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 21, 31, 31, 64.
12. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 203.
13. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 131.
14. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 129.
15. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 209.
16. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 207.
17. Ingold, "Bringing Things to Life," 3.
18. Ingold, "Bringing Things to Life," 3.
19. Tsing, *Mushroom*, 23.
20. Tsing, *Mushroom*, 23.
21. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 24.
22. Whitlock, "Post-ing Lives."
23. Marshall and Walker. *Indian Trails*, 18.
24. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 69.
25. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 65.
26. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 64.
27. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 6.
28. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 93.
29. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, x.
30. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 212.
31. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 22.
32. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 12.
33. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 69, 50.
34. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 46.
35. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 46.
36. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 125.
37. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 164.
38. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 33.
39. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 40.
40. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 23, 1.
41. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 80.
42. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 80.
43. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 23.
44. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 125.
45. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 63.
46. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 62.
47. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, xi.
48. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, xi.
49. Xie, "Restoration," 2.
50. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 26.
51. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 4.
52. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 209.

53. Xie, "Restoration," 2.
54. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 55.
55. Derrida, "Demeure," 36.
56. Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 2.
57. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 24.
58. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 2.
59. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 2.
60. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 3.
61. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 8–9.
62. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 20.
63. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 20.
64. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 20, 56, 59, 63, 108, 151, 239.
65. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, xi.
66. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 25.
67. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 21.
68. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 21.
69. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 21.
70. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 21.
71. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 22.
72. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 22.
73. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 21.
74. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 24.
75. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 24.
76. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 24.
77. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 25.
78. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 25.
79. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 26–27.
80. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 31.
81. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 31.
82. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 31.
83. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 31.
84. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 31.
85. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 22.
86. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* 119.
87. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 64.
88. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 65.
89. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 24.
90. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 25.
91. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 71.
92. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 71.
93. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 71.
94. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 79.
95. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 72.
96. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 72.
97. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 73.
98. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 74.
99. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 74.
100. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 239.
101. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.
102. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 241.

103. Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics*, 2.
104. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 203.
105. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 207, 210, 223, 241.
106. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 67.
107. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 50.
108. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 40.
109. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 196.
110. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 235.
111. Ingold, "Bringing Things to Life," 1.
112. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 2.
113. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 211.
114. Ingold, "Bringing Things to Life," 10.
115. Wright and Moers, *Casting Deep Shade*, 243.

Acknowledgments

The idea for this article emerged from my work as a research assistant for Anna Poletti. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Poletti for her expertise and generosity throughout the supervisory and editing process.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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