

Break the spell, narrate like an earthling

Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore congress (Aberdeen, Scotland)
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Greetings from the SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) congress, arranged on 3.–6. June 2025 in Aberdeen, Scotland. Lilting Gaelic accents made one feel midst great storytellers, and those seeking more-than-human myths and legends were not disappointed, for fabled white cows haunted Irish folktales and muskrats saved the world in Indigenous creation stories.

The theme for the congress was *Unwriting*, which promised to revisit “the consequences of casually accepted paradigms, confronting the unseen, unheard, untellable, or untouched” (SIEF 2025). Casually accepted paradigms sounded both ominous and pertinent; *unwriting* steered the focus towards the narratives that govern our lives. One of the buzzwords was decolonising – breaking the spell of dominant narratives and challenging the paradigms. Surprisingly, many speakers had interpreted this as the unwriting of the relationship between human and

nonhuman animals. With the emergent fields of zoofolkloristics and multispecies ethnography, as well as environmental anthropology, nonhuman animals are being written into research not only as symbols or background for human narrative but beings with their own agency (see, e.g. Marjetka Golež Kaučič's research). This yearning to recognise more-than-human agency, however, highlights certain methodological problems: accessing the voices of, interpreting, and ethically narrating with nonhuman animals.

For example, more-than-human narratives can be lost due to the limits of human understanding. Sadie Hale (University of Bergen) had taken on the challenge by immersing themselves in the sensory world of whales. Sinking a hydrophone – microphone for underwater use – into the ocean took the researcher into a world not heard above the surface, where the echolocating clicking of whales is disrupted by underwater noise

pollution from shipping traffic, oil and gas exploration, and military sonar. Meanwhile, Andrew Whitehouse (University of Aberdeen) suggested that in observing migratory birds the anthropologist becomes involved in noticing other beings and caring about what they encounter on their journeys.

The speakers also explored meaning that is co-created with more-than-human in everyday interactions. Ryan Lash (University College Dublin) argued that for the small-scale pastoral farmers of Inishbofin Island, local stories are entangled with traditional ecological knowledge: “Heritage is enacted through embodied skills that navigate more-than-human assemblages.” Sheep actively shape the landscape of the archipelago through grazing. The farmers must understand the assemblage of sheep, herding dogs, and islanders; they must know how to read the landscape and the sea as the sheep are moved by boat from one pasture to another. Lash suggested that this knowledge of worlds beyond human could be used to create environmental stewardship as an alternative to rewilding. To demonstrate the interwoven histories of human and more-than-human on the Island, Lash recounted the legend of the white cow of Inishbofin Island. According to the legend, the cow was beaten and turned into a rock, but the old woman who had beaten the cow shared the same fate herself. Just as the farmers’

embodied skills, the legend transforms the space, so that the rocks are not only rocks, but a story of a more-than-human relationship narrated within the landscape. While the legend lives, its wisdom lives.

One of the plenaries was by Associate Professor Shawn Wilson of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, who greeted the congress by first acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land. The practice is customary at gatherings held in North America and Australia; Wilson, however, wished to extend this sense of being connected to the land to all peoples – including the modern city-dwellers of Scotland. In Indigenous cultures, stories are told to create ties to specific places in the landscape. For example, in a Cree creation story, a muskrat sacrificed herself to help create land after the flood and the land was built on a turtle’s back: this is why North America is referred to as Turtle Island. In Wilson’s stories, muskrats were interwoven into culturally important narratives of specific places as well as entangled with significant events in personal history.

Wilson spoke through symbolic stories to demonstrate the difference between Western and Indigenous thinking. At the heart of Indigenous ontology are relationality and relational accountability: how one behaves in relationships with family, the multispecies community, and the world one inhabits shapes reality.

Treat the land well, and the land treats you well by providing food and shelter – not catastrophic floods. In Indigenous worldviews nonhuman animals have agency and the Land is sentient, thus research, too, must convey this.

Landscape itself can be an unknown when human narratives override the voices of whales and oceans' whisperings on seashores. We construct our views of more-than-human through language, e.g. speaking of nature as a resource. New methodology experiments with accessing more-than-human worlds through decentring the human within the scenery. This approach may be seen as a Western academic response to Wilson's urging to see Land as an authority. Just as human stories are intertwined with those of nonhuman animals, both are embedded within their environment.

Denéa S. Buckingham (University of Cambridge) and Jessica Hampton (University of Liverpool) asked how changing the language would change their experience of a walk on a beach. They explored the potential of the Indigenous Samoan language concept of *vā* for decolonising their empirical exploration of ecolinguistics. *Vā* means the space between, space that relates and holds things together in unity. In thinking with *vā*, their aim was to develop new methods of exploring how language and landscapes influence each other. Buckingham and Hampton discovered that thinking with *vā* invited

them to look at interconnections within the landscape they had not seen before, to see the past of the place as part of its presence, and to approach the beach with more wonder and curiosity. The altered sense of perception denoted, they suggested, a vulnerability, in which the process of decolonising lead them to experience a sense of belonging. Tuning into the landscape through a different concept painted the researchers as part of it, not outside it.

Listening to the presentations put into sharp relief the fact that human and nonhuman worlds have been entangled in our stories for centuries. Could such *emotional rewilding of humans*, as the practice of decolonising seemed to offer for Buckingham and Hampton, create a sense of belonging to a place and its multispecies community – and would that inspire one to behave respectfully towards them? The ecologically uncertain times had introduced a note of despair into the interactions of the congress. Although it was balanced by a note of gentle encouragement, it was as if some invisible line had been crossed, and the ways of discussing the climate crisis had shifted from warnings of danger to descriptions of living with it. When conducting research in the Outer Hebrides, one of the presenters, Genevieve Soucek (Southern Methodist University), had met local environmentalists engaged in beach cleaning. One of her interviewees had said: "We can't do

everything everywhere, but we can make a difference.” If climate change inaction is understood as a culture of self-harm, the question then becomes: how does one create a culture of healing instead? By nurturing relational imagination, one may create stories that heal the wounds that are hard to reach: new multispecies stories can be written in the landscape through action, be it beach cleaning or walking respectfully with *vā*. The message of the congress was that you are not alone. There is a community – of people, beaches, and muskrats – around you, waiting to relate.¹

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References

SIEF. 2025. “Theme: Unwriting.” Last updated September 13, 2025. <https://www.siefhome.org/congresses/sief2025/theme>

1 *Note on the use of AI:* University of Turku Library AI Assistant has been used to search for sources. AI has not been used to write the text.