

Hallett, "Stone Talks"

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Book Review

Hallett, Alyson. *Stone Talks*. Triarchy Press, 2019.

Stone Talks is a multi-genre foray into listening to what the world has to say, specifically the beings in the world who are considered some of the most static and unmoving: rocks. Reading Hallett's work through an ergo-poetics lens—drawing from Boyer's ergo-politics—especially in connection with Donna Haraway's assertion in *Tentacular Thinking* that “nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something,” this book offers an engaging and generative reflection on new ways to listen, and listen hard, to find and share meaning among ourselves while widening the scope of who “ourselves” includes. *Stone Talks* offers connections to the poetic, the academic, and the natural through the unfamiliar in the familiar, leaning into ideas of petro-subjectivity (à la Brett Bloom, our awareness of our connection to and distance from oil), geology, and Indigenous land stewardship.

The book is a multi-modal marvel; it contains personal narrative, research, journal entries, poetry from Hallett and other writers, and pictures. The complexities that appear in the combination of genres allow more open windows for creative academic research—a reminder that interdisciplinary studies can be exceedingly fruitful in their complications. *Stone Talks* fits neatly into a genre of emerging energy writings; its form reflects the tanglings of human and non-human—what it means to live with, take from, exist alongside, and acknowledge other beings and non-beings around us. It also reminds readers to resist the urge to humanize the non-human, because what a thing is just as important as what it might be. Hallett says, of listening to rocks who may be voices of the dead, that “If I think about this too much, it's disturbing. If I don't think too much, it's just my life.” *Stone Talks* offers us a way to do both: think deeply about lines and poems, deeply about images, about what a rock in our hand might mean to us, while also accepting that while we cannot contemplate the world as such all the time, the moments we do are of great meaning and beauty.

Divided into chapters, but not in the traditional sense, the book begins with a personal narrative of Hallett boarding a plane, thinking about Haraway's work—because she can't physically bring it with her—as a method of practicing embodied awareness. This includes refiguring what we conceive of as kin. If we imagine kin as connections, all connections, then we open the scope of our community to include “critters”—both living and non-living beings that exist with us. The collection then moves to a discussion of indigenous rights and sovereignty, both for Indigenous Americans and for the non-human beings in places of intrusive extraction. Many of the ideas within *Stone Talks* have roots in Indigenous practices and scholarship, aiming towards sovereignty of all beings; and Hallett's recognition of those roots is important towards understanding the stakes of this argument. Indigenous communities have lived through

ecological and societal disaster, which is doomed to repeat itself without active movement towards preservation and habitability thus also contesting the teleological timescale of popular Anthropocene narratives. This is important especially for both vulnerable human communities and the non-human ecology that surrounds us, who have already been so greatly harmed and excluded from discussions and the lived realities of environmental justice and what it means.

In the section “Stone Talks,” originally given as a keynote speech, Hallett offers several personal and geological narratives to complicate the shared experience of bringing rocks and shells home with us, crow-like. This introduces the reader to the idea that stones themselves are capable of migration—something Hallett learns in the course of her research. This movement of the presumed unmoving is one of the first key defamiliarizations in the piece—every reader has held a rock in their hand, many of us carry them with us for protection, carved or otherwise, but very few readers have put their ear to a rock like a conch shell, either figuratively or literally. This movement, more so than Hallett’s burgeoning awareness of her reliance on small critters for plane travel, opens readers to a world of new thoughts, likely different new thoughts for every reader. After applying for and receiving an Arts Council Grant to research stone migrations, Hallett begins a project in collaboration with stoneworkers to carve and move her own stones as a work of migratory, then stationary, art that will exist for hundreds of years. She relates how she chose to migrate with a stone, even taking it for a walk around the city, listening to where it might want to go. She asks us, through these small moments in pebbles and turquoise and street cobbles, to imagine ourselves as elsewhere and elsewhere—to imagine what would happen if we thought as the rocks do or listened to them and listen as they do. There are moments of questioning of the self, which then leads to questioning of the reader: what are we already listening to? Why do we think there’s a “right way” to write, to listen? When Hallett lays a spiral rock memorial for her father, it is reminiscent of the Jewish tradition I am familiar with, of leaving rocks at gravestones because they, unlike cut flowers, never die. Making these mental connections to our own lives is, in part, the point; Hallett reminds us of ourselves through herself, a useful moment of craft in the personal sections, and in the deleted endnotes, a reminder: “Hold a stone and you hold thirty, forty, fifty million years in the palm of your hand.” The journals she wrote at the time serve to make the work personal and universal, and to remind us constantly that stones have been here for longer than us, will be here for longer than us, and have their own kind of reactive logic.

The book provides other work to “keep company” of the first. Scattered throughout are poems by Hallett and other writers, including Charles Simic, e e cummings, Jack Gilbert, Clarice Lispector (translated by Idra Novey), and Jalal al-Din Maulana (translated by C. Barks and J. Moyne), among other notable writers and scholars who talk about rocks and thought in order to do what theory cannot: make connections for the reader in similar ways to the personal narratives, to bring them closer into oneself. In the section on “Haunted Landscapes,” also originally a keynote speech,

Hallett connects the ideas of writing as a way of speaking to the dead and of listening as a way of speaking to the dead—and in that sense, listening to nature, the world around us, our environment, our connections, the small nudges we cannot identify the source of—are also a way the dead speak to us. It also furthers the question of the connections between art and science, of geology and poetry. Finally, the short piece, “The Stone Monologues,” is presented, which offers a more theoretical and abstract set of statements for a reader to mull over as they finish the work. It operates not as a chronological or temporal understanding but rather an internal one, a way for readers to spend more time imagining both the author and themselves as made up of both parts and connections. These sections lead to introspection and, hopefully, further awareness of our own connections to the world, what, and who we have not been listening to, the questions we have not been asking.

Unanswered questions abound in *Stone Talks*, and though this book is not designed to answer them all, it does present one urgent, unanswered question: is listening enough? The piece posits repeatedly that one of the most important things we can do is learn to be more aware listeners, not just to our own communities but to communities we are not a part of, both human and non-human, living and non-living. Though thinking new thoughts to think with, as Haraway would say, it is definitely a place to start, I am left wondering if *Stone Talks* offers a method outside of thought for making concrete change—though thought is the first step towards action, is it an action in and of itself? And while books like this are often an individual experience, it might also not be enough to call on the individual to move towards this new thinking instead of new movements, new modes of *doing* as well as thinking—especially communally. If the book presents itself as one demonstration of what listening, not just to beings but to art, can accomplish, it seems to find its foothold there in the theoretical. The concrete movements of stones and art and poetry are important to people—what they do on the earth, for the earth, is not always answered.

For readers who are familiar with Haraway’s ideas of tentacular connections and who have an eye for energy and nature literature, *Stone Talks* operates as a poignant meditation on what we are connected to and how we are connected to it, in both loving and harmful ways. For those who have limited experience in these academic fields, Hallett introduces topics of petro-subjectivity, extraction, Indigenous rights and sovereignty, and the intertwining of the geologic and the poetic. Hallett has breached interesting ground in the poetic and academic with *Stone Talks* and its reminder of the being of all things—even the smallest of pebbles.

Haley Keane