

Bees Hope: Poetic Reflections on Theorising Hope in a More-Than-Human World

Susan Wardell*

Abstract

Theorising hope in the Anthropocene must take into account the agencies and social actors of the more-than-human world. Here I present a poem that employs a creative and speculative approach to the idea of beekeeping as an assemblage of hope. This emerges from several years of personal/autoethnographic and academic engagement in the topics of ecological distress and climate emotion, through which I also became interested in honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) as a mobile symbol of both hope and loss in global environmentalist discourse, amid rising rates of hobbyist beekeeping, both globally and here in Aotearoa New Zealand. The poem, and following reflection points, considers the degree to which hope is shared between different (human and non-human) social actors in the assemblage of beekeeping. It explores the ways hope might be temporalised, embodied, relational or political; recognising unequally distributed and shifting agencies, or stakes, in the futures, at a bodily level, both within the colony and between bees and beekeepers. This poetic exploration of the epistemologies and ontologies of hope, based on the overarching question “How human is hope?”, spurs a call for critical attention to new ways of both understanding and relating to non-human others, as potential kin and co-participants in world-making, amid uncertain futures.

Keywords: multispecies; more-than-human; hope; beekeeping; creative

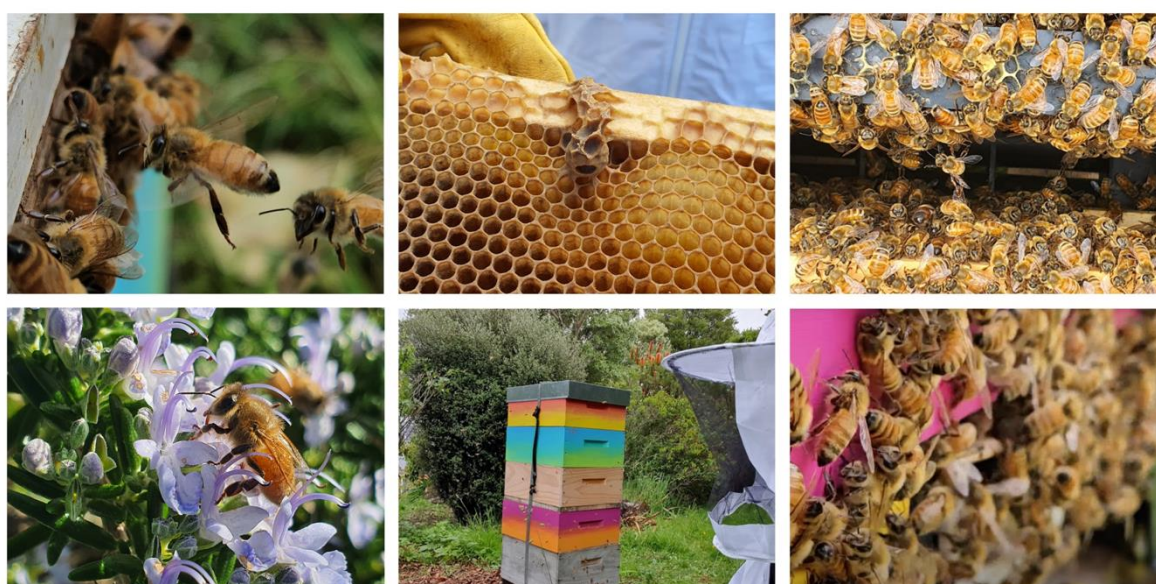


Figure 1: Images from the author's backyard apiaries, left to right: bees flying into the hive entrance; queen cell on frame held by author; bees 'festooning' between hive frames; worker bee with tongue out, on rosemary flower; author in beekeeping suit looking towards hives; bees on the front of a brood box.

Photo credit: Susan Wardell.

* Susan Wardell is a senior lecturer in Social Anthropology at Ōtākou Whakaihū Waka | University of Otago.
Email: susan.wardell@otago.ac.nz

Bees hope: Honey

bees excrete and build hope hexagonal

bees excrete hexagonal hope and build

space to grow into space to fill

with a rainbow of granular hope

queens hope on behalf lead

journeys leave virginal return

heavy with futures with genetic hope

held heavy in their abdomens

workers make queens hope

strong queens hope fat glistening brood

to tuck in with wax caps hope

to replace them selves with fat hope

drones hope less lie hopeless

stagger on autumn's doorstep

find no space leave hope

to live elsewhere find death instead

colony hopes spring hopes

bloom hopes flow to last long

enough to last winter

hopes offspring to see spring

(or is it only) beekeepers who

seek hope build hope taste

hope with their own bodies

with their many boxes with their

own boxed bodies of

hope

Bees hope: Reflections

Many of the questions (and challenges) of theorising hope, in the contemporary context, centre on the massive scales of environmental change and loss associated with the Anthropocene. These same challenges have generated urgent and vibrant scholarship on multispecies relationality and the more-than-human world (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). This poem emerges from several years of personal and academic engagement in the topics of ecological distress and climate emotion (Wardell, 2020), through which I also became interested in honeybees as a mobile symbol of both hope and loss in global environmentalist discourse. This led me to employ ‘patchwork’ (Günel et al., 2020) ethnographic and autoethnographic techniques, over a period of approximately three years, to analyse my own affective attachment to honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) within context of my positionality as a settler-mother in Ōtepoti | Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand, and as a beginner beekeeper, amidst rising rates of hobbyist (or backyard) beekeeping in both Aotearoa New Zealand (Taunton, 2021) and globally (Kosut, 2013).

In this poem, I employ a speculative approach to the idea of beekeeping as an assemblage of hope. I consider the degree to which hope is shared, between different (human and non-human) social actors in this assemblage, and drawing on some of the interests of sociologists and anthropologists, in what ways hope might be temporalised, embodied, relational or political? Poetic techniques provide a different way to probe at some of these questions about the epistemologies of hope in the context of more-than-human worlds, based on the overarching question: “How human is hope?”

Decentering human ontologies: How might bees hope?

Lisberg et al. (2015) describe hope as a “conjectural” mode of understanding, that involves not just a perspective on but a *feeling towards* the future. Feeling, however, is both affective and embodied. Ways of sensing the movement of time, storing knowledge of the past, imagining or anticipating the future, are linked to physiological, sensory and embodied capacities. The poem considers that the way non-human others feel towards the future might be related to their own differently embodied sensuous capacities and biologies, including reproductive biology. This recognises questions that cross-pollinate between fields like critical disability studies, science, technology and society (STS) studies, cyborg anthropology and multispecies anthropology, regarding the relationship between (different forms of) embodiment and subjectivity.

Recent work in the social sciences has also emphasised hope as economically and politically situated (Miyazaki & Swedberg, 2016). But do honeybees have something akin to politics, within their own collective lives? Alternatively, what is their role in, or orientation to, human political or economic enterprise? Critical scholarship on the multispecies has challenged assumptions about who ‘counts’ as a political being, and suggested ways that the acts, presence or movements of animals might be considered forms of political agency (de Bondt et al., 2023). Kosek (2010, p. 669) has been even more specific about this, suggesting that *materiality* should be recognised as part of politics, and an expression of the forms of “nonhuman intentionality” that may exist among insects and other non-human others. In focusing on the more transitive modalities of hope (Jansen, 2016)—i.e., what would bees hope *about*, or hope *for*—the poem aligns with Kosek in the suggestion that what bees hope for might be read in what they make/build/do in a material sense. This is furthered by the structure of the poem, which echoes the structure of the hive, in which workers, drones and queens have distinct roles, based on distinct physiological capacities. At the same time, I speculatively consider the idea of the colony (rather than the individual bee) as the organism—and thus the locus of agency, and perhaps affect—an ontological reframing which new beekeepers are often taught.

The final verse re-introduces the role of the beekeeper as part of the multispecies assemblage, intervening, materially, in the productive, reproductive and material cycles of the hive, across seasonal

cycles. In recognising the *different* roles and agencies of these different social actors, and the moments these may contradict—such as when drone bees are ejected from the hive in autumn, or when the beekeeper harvests honey—the poem also recognises unequally distributed and shifting agencies, or stakes, in the futures, at a bodily level. It thus acknowledges potentially shared, and potentially diverging, forms of hope.

Speculative epistemologies: How human is hope?

Honeybee colonies have often provided symbolic fodder for contemplating human social structures. It is perhaps especially important in theorising human concepts like hope in a more-than-human space, to consider bees as not only as metaphors or conceptual tools—but to take seriously the question of hope, within the bees' own ontological paradigm and as part of our material entanglements with them. Or, to use de la Bellacasa's (2012) terms, consider how to "live with" as well as "think with" them.

Why does it matter if bees hope or not? If hoping is constitutive of a sort of agency (Cook, 2018), the process of recognising hope among other species could be seen as recognising and honouring their social capacities, both within and beyond human assemblages of economic practice and meaning-making. This, in turn, could be a basis for the "kinning" that Donna Haraway (2015) calls for as an urgent task, in a damaged world. But to what degree might our ability to connect or 'kin' across species be based on assumptions about shared experiences or capacities (such as the capacity to hope)? Put otherwise, how might we practise ontological decentering in recognising the role of non-human others as active, agentic, responsive co-participants in world-making (Haraway, 2015), without necessarily searching for similarities or projecting human traits upon them, in order to do so? Certainly, if bees hope, it may look (and smell and taste) different to the way humans hope. But how might we let our different ways of hoping cross-pollinate, and what asymmetries might have to be critically reckoned with to do so?

Careful and critical reflexivity is needed, about both possibilities and risks for social scientists approaching theoretical explorations of 'hope' via a more-than-human lens. This includes reflexivity around the role of creative and/or speculative work, for exploring possibilities for new sets of relations in an age of "great planetary undoing" (Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 34). As one expression of this, and without presupposing an answer, asking the question "How human is hope?" might have relevance for both how hope is theorised, and how it is enacted, through shared agencies, in a shared world.

References

- Chao, S., & Enari, D. (2021). Decolonising climate change: A call for beyond-human imaginaries and knowledge generation. *Etropic*, 20(2), 32–54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25120/etropic.20.2.2021.3796>
- Cook, J. A. (2018). Hope, utopia, and everyday life: some recent developments. *Utopian Studies*, 29(3), 380–397. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.29.3.0380>
- de Bondt, H., de Wilde, M., & Jaffe, R.. (2023). Rats claiming rights? More-than-human acts of denizenship in Amsterdam. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 46,67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/plar.12530>
- de la Bellacasa, M. P. (2012). "Nothing comes without its world": Thinking with care. *The Sociological Review*, 60(2), 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x>
- Günel, G., Varma, S., & Watanabe, C. (2020, June 9). *A manifesto for patchwork ethnography*. Society for Cultural Anthropology. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>
- Haraway, D. (2015) Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making kin. *Environmental Humanities*, 6(1), 159–165. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>
- Jansen, S. (2016). For a relational, historical ethnography of hope: Indeterminacy and determination in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian meantime. *History and Anthropology* 27(4), 447–464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2016.1201481>
- Kirksey, S. E., & Helmreich, S. (2010). The emergence of multispecies ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(4), 545–576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01069.x>

- Kosek, J. (2010). Ecologies of empire: On the new uses of the honeybee. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(4), 650–78. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01073.x>
- Kosut, M. (2013, August 10–13). *Toward an ontology of the bee: Ethnography and urban beekeeping* [Paper presentation]. Conference of the American Sociological Association, New York City.
- Miyazaki, H., & Swedberg, R. (2016). *The economy of hope*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Liisberg, S., Pedersen, E. O., & Dalsgård, A. L. (Eds.) (2015). *Anthropology and philosophy: Dialogues on trust and hope* (1st ed.). Berghahn Books.
- Taunton, E. (2021, July 15). *New Zealanders taking up beekeeping in record numbers*. Stuff. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/125648245/new-zealanders-taking-up-beekeeping-in-record-numbers#:~:text=Of%20the%209585%20registered%20beekeepers,hobbyists%2C%20with10%20hives%20or%20fewer>
- Wardell, S. (2020). Naming and framing ecological distress. *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, 7(2), 187–201. <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.7.2.768>