Pandemic, Imagination, and the Rise of the Animal Kingdom

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Abstract

The worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 caused most countries to declare a national lockdown during the spring of 2020 to avoid the further spread of infection. By the end of April of that year, most large urban centers in the world faced empty streets, closed businesses, and an eerie absence of their human population. During the lockdown, a new legend emerged, largely popularized by the media and different social networks: around the world, wildlife was repopulating and reclaiming the urban space once occupied by humans.

This article addresses wildlife tales that appeared in the media during the first major lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. I argue that these stories share narrative patterns with other catastrophe tales, that they were created as a vernacular mechanism to cope with confinement, and that they were also a creative manifestation of human hope for a better post-pandemic world.

Introduction

The year 2019 saw the birth of a dangerous foe that assaulted humanity and changed people's behavior worldwide. Strange, invisible, unexplained, and unpredictable, the COVID-19 virus killed more than just people at risk like the elderly. It also killed the young, the rich, as well as doctors and nurses, who represented the victims' frontline defense. Within a few months, and with the help of society's new mobility, the virus had reached every country on the planet leaving nearly no place untouched. Virtual maps of the spread of the virus circulated on the web as most national headlines offered a daily count of the number of sick people and of the dead. The outbreak caused many countries to declare a national lockdown. By the end of April 2020, most large urban centers in the world displayed empty streets, closed businesses, and an eerie absence of their human population. (1) People in lockdown came to perceive the pandemic as an uncontrollable and destabilizing entity that equaled death, fear, and the unknown. Like most pandemics, COVID-19 was prone to a narrative construction process that spread worldwide with the help of the Internet and social media. (2) These stories shaped the new reality of humans who were desperately looking for an explanation and for hope.

This article addresses the wildlife stories that appeared in the media during the first major lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. (3) These narratives were part of an ephemeral phenomenon that lasted several weeks during the lockdown and later completely disappeared from Internet discussions. (4) I argue that these stories share narrative patterns with other catastrophe

narratives such as the flood myth, that they were created as a vernacular mechanism to cope with confinement, that they are an expression of humans' anxiety with regards to global environmental issues and are a creative manifestation of human hope for a better post-pandemic world.

These narratives circulated on English-speaking social media and news media platforms around the world and in specific Internet communities. (5) Benedict Anderson [1983] argues that even if members of a community are not physically together (such as on the Internet) they nonetheless form a community, albeit one existing on an imaginary level. Based on the data collected, I noticed most members of these Internet communities share some fluency in English, have access to an electronic device and an Internet connection, are part of one or several social media networks, and are somewhat aware of global environmental issues raised by the COVID-19 animal stories. Therefore, one can assume most of the informants are from modest to highly educated middle-class or well-off backgrounds.

Because the population's movements were reduced to a minimum during the lockdown, with meetings forbidden, and public spaces such as libraries, museums, restaurants, and archives closed indeterminately, social media platforms became essential to human communication. One of the only legal ways to engage with other human beings (and without masks) was through the Internet. Therefore, the COVID-19 animal stories were a vernacular product of a society whose members were forced "to relocate from a real to a digital public life" [Allison 2020]. This probably explains why the phenomenon existed exclusively on the Internet. Furthermore, as a scholar also in lockdown, the only legal way I could do research was through the Internet, making it my ethnographic field. For this reason, I used fieldwork data gathered from a wide range of digital sources indiscriminately. This includes, for example, different official and non-official online newspapers and magazines, blogs, newsreel websites, and popular online platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. While this research method is radically opposed to the traditional way of performing fieldwork, it has allowed me to fully experience contemporary netlore, or folklore transmitted through the Internet [Frank 2011: 9].

Many scholars have written extensively about how the Internet and social media platforms allow for the production and widespread transmission of folklore. (6) Considering the blurred lines between the real and digital worlds, the images, videos, and other digital materials shared by users can be seen as a form of dialogue or everyday argument [Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2001; Hess 2009; Andén-Papadopoulos 2009; Smith and McDonald 2011; Blank 2009; Guo and Lee 2013; Milner 2013; Peck 2014]. Some even argue that the Internet "is gradually assuming the role of reservoir of collective memory" [Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2001: 64]. This makes social media a particularly rich source of social expression and vernacular data, especially during the pandemic lockdown.

COVID-19 Animal Stories: Creation, Transmission, Variation

By March 2020, most locked-down populations experienced the outside world via a digitally framed reality and extraordinary news spread in the media. Italy, one of the most affected countries in the world, was experiencing the return of its wildlife. Indeed, many social media users and news platforms announced the return of dolphins in the Venice canals. For example, *Canadian Global News* headlines reported that "Dolphins Return to Italy's Coast Amid Coronavirus Lockdown" and that "[n]ature just hit the reset button" [Wray 2020]. In addition, a *New York Post* journalist declared that "dolphins and other wildlife are now emerging in the country's much-clearer-looking waterways" [Woods 2020]. Across the globe, *Gulf News Dubai* also argued that "one positive thing that has come out of [the pandemic lockdown] is how Nature is prospering" adding that "before the outbreak, the canals were swarming with tourists and heavy boat traffic, and the city was struggling with a large number of people coming in and impacting the environment" [Gulzar 2020]. Most news articles were supported by a 30-second amateur video of a dolphin swimming near docks in an unknown location [Wray 2020; Woods 2020; Gulzar 2020]. (See Figure 1) All around the world, humanity gazed at this miracle happening because of the "lack of tourism and docking cruise ships" [Wray 2020]. Apparently, this caused the waterways to be much "clearer" than usual [Woods 2020]. With 101,739 people infected and the number of deaths rapidly increasing, which resulted "in almost 50% of excess deaths from any [other] causes in March 2020," Italy was at that time one of the most severely hit countries in Europe [Megna 2020; Alicandro, Remuzzi, and La Vecchia 2020]. The video of the dolphin swimming in Venice was widely shared and came as a balm and comforting vision of life and nature overcoming death.

Figure 1: Screenshot of @NotLacazette's Tweet. [@NotLacazette 2020]

Soon, other animal narratives proliferated on the web. (7) According to a viral tweet, Venetians witnessed the return of swans in their canal. Despite its misleading claim—swans are regularly spotted on the Italian coast—the initial tweet by a New Delhi resident was widely shared by Internet users [Nayak 2020]. (8) Around the time of the Italian wildlife miracle, other animal stories were shared worldwide. For example, the *Washington Post* issued an article claiming that hordes of mountain goats were spotted wandering in the streets of Llandudno, Wales [McCoy 2020]. (See Figure 2) Meanwhile, in India, buffalos and a rare Malabar civet were photographed in the empty cityscape [Evon 2020; Gill 2020]. Other sources later claimed that wild cougars were strolling in the streets of Santiago, Chile and Boulder, Colorado [McCoy 2020; Dapcevich 2020; McDonnell and Poblete 2020; Rogers 2020; Reuters TV 2020]. Mallard ducks were also spotted in Paris and wild pigs were seen under coronavirus closure in Israeli cities and in Barcelona [Voice of America News 2020; Backgrid 2020; Getty Images 2020; Williams 2020; McCoy 2020]. In addition, deer were filmed wandering in the empty streets of Polish and Japanese cities, and orcas were observed in British Columbia [Daly 2020; Spry 2020; RFE/RL 2020; Kuebler 2020; TravelWeek Group 2020]. These astonishing narratives even included "a group of elephants [that] had sauntered through a village in Yunnan, China, got drunk off corn wine, and passed out in a tea garden" [Daly 2020; Spry 2020]. (See Figure 3) Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic animal stories also included a bizarre street encounter in Calabasas, California, between a lobster and American socialite Kim Kardashian [Marine 2020; Kardashian 2020]. (9)

Figure 2: Mountain goats spotted wandering in the streets of Llandudno, Wales. [Furlong 2020]

Figure 3: Screenshot of @Spilling_The_T's personal Tweet. [@Spilling_The_T 2020]

According to most sources, it is the absence of human beings that allowed animals to repopulate cityscapes worldwide. Within a few weeks, these narratives were shared across the planet with the hashtags #natureishealing or #earthishealing. (10) Several images, real or not, supported the claim that the environment was generally better now that traffic and human activity had stopped and the presence of wildlife in urban environments was proving that. For example, one headline even announced that "[a]s humans stay indoors, wild animals take back what was once theirs" [McCoy 2020]. Furthermore, television and news networks widely cited a tweet claiming that "[n]ature just hit the reset button on [humanity]" suggesting the creation of a "World Without Us," or at least, a new order in which humans had no place [Woods 2020; @lucadb 2020; Wray 2020; McNamara 2020]. These post-apocalyptic narratives were both daunting and wonderful. As communication scholar Marcia Allison explains:

> [t]he discovery of Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) has played into cultural narratives of the consequences of unfamiliar pathogens erasing humans and the resulting dystopian future – crumbling urban infrastructures, overgrown flora, empty supermarket shelves, deserted urban centres, large predators roaming the streets and the remaining few humans reduced to prey. [2020]

Past the anxiety of humanity's erasure and a conceivable guilt over environmental issues, the pandemic animal stories ultimately expressed the need to believe in nature's recovery [Daly 2020]. As they continued to thrive, the COVID-19 animal narratives presented a subsequent popular hashtag, #wearethevirus, suggesting that the pandemic was a divine punishment from nature and that humanity deserved this fate for threatening wildlife and the environment. (11) For example, some Internet users compared humans to a disease infecting the earth and mentioned that "it [was] time for payback" [Debjyoti 2020]. (See Figures 4-7) This idea was supported by several users, environmentalists, and journalists, who saw a link between the destruction of the environment and the emergence of diseases. For example, news platforms announced that COVID-19 was a "stern warning from nature" [Webb 2020; The NewsMakers 2020]. Others argued that "Covid-19 [was] nature's wake-up call to complacent civilisation [sic]" and even speculated that "these [environmental] changes indicated that some portion of humanity ought to die" [Monbiot 2020; McNeill 2021]. Finally, another news platform presented articles claiming that COVID-19 was "Mother Nature's Revenge" punishing humanity for wildlife trafficking, believed at the time to be the cause of the explosion of the virus [Weisman 2020; Turtle Conservancy 2020].(12)

Figure 4: Screenshot of Sunny Randhawa's tweet. [Randhawa 2020]

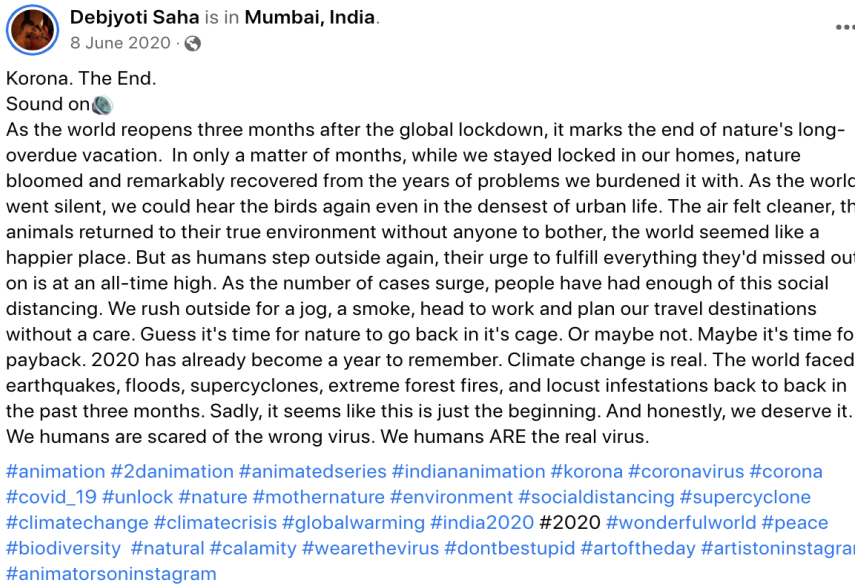

Figure 5: Screenshot of Debjyoti Saha's post. [Debjyoti 2020]

Figure 6: Screenshot of @ThomasSchulz' tweet.[@ThomasSchulz 2020]

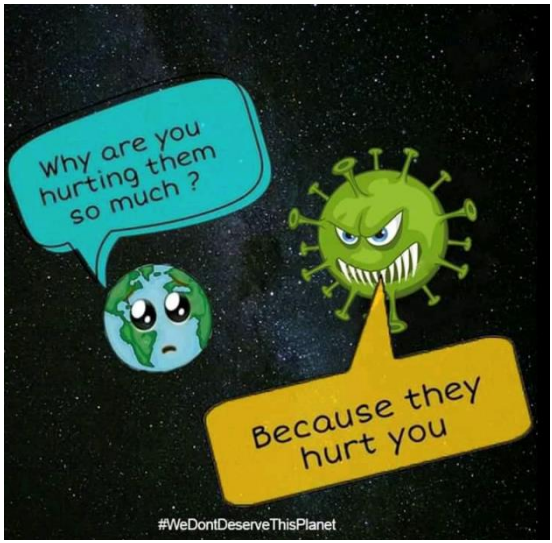

Figure 7: Screenshot of Prade Pradeep's post. [Pradeep 2020]

A few weeks later, these animal narratives were criticized as part of the "'infodemic' of rumours [sic] and misinformation" that spread on the web during the pandemic [Palma 2020]. For example, the images of dolphins were not taken in Venice but in another location in Italy [Palma 2020]. The video of boars dated from 2019 and the Malabar civet, a "Critically Endangered" species last spotted in the 1990s, was in fact a small Indian civet, listed as "Least Concern" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List [2015]. Many of the examples of animals repopulating cities were also exaggerated, as most were already part of the urban environment prior to the coronavirus pandemic such as ducks in Paris, goats in Wales, Indian civets in India, and orcas in British Columbia [D'Urso 2020]. Covering these "fake" stories on news networks is not unusual. As Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank argue, "when mass media coverage of digital trends feeds back into the network, it might reify and spread those trends, occasionally turning viral hoaxes into widely practiced reality" [2020: 12]. (13) As we will see later in this article, these facts did not prompt social media users to delete their posts. Interestingly, the most popular tweet linking to the *National Geographic* article that exposed the fake animal stories was considerably less compelling than the stories it was referencing. (14)

As the breaking news of this expansive scam circulated, a new form of narrative emerged, now based on humorous posts and memes, a form of "evolving tapestries of self-referential texts collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online" [Philips and Milner 2017: 30]. Largely influenced by COVID-19 animal stories, this new imagery claimed the return of imaginary wildlife to the environment. These included cows returning to the sea, semi-trucks

to the rivers, pizzas repopulating the forests of Italy, gummy worms enjoying parks, and trolls returning to Norway, to name a few. (15) (See Figures 8-11) Each of these images was accompanied by the words or hashtags #natureishealing or #wearethevirus, clearly mocking the earlier wildlife narratives and the people who propagated them. (16) This new form of folklore is what Russell Frank refers to as "newslore," or folklore that comments on current events [2011: 7]. In this case, it developed in reaction to the COVID-19 animal stories and their overtly positive claim that nature was healing. These memes contributed to creating another imagined community of opposing members who did not believe in the earth's recovery. As Jessica Maddox argues, "[m]emes often operate as a form of collective identity using in-groups' humor to become a shared social phenomenon, which underscores the groups' 'intricate social dynamics'" [2023: 142]. As we will see later in this article, just like the COVID-19 animal narratives, the hashtags also expose society's anxieties toward environmental issues, and while their criticism might seem fair, the ongoing animal narratives that emerged during the pandemic lockdown were an important vernacular mechanism used to cope with confinement and a creative manifestation of human hope for a better post-pandemic world.

Figure 8: Screenshot of Mark Lee's tweet. [Lee 2020]

Figure 9: Screenshot of u/km8907's reddit post. [u/km8907 2020]

Figure 10: Screenshot of Tri-State Weather's post. [Tri-State Weather 2020]

Figure 11: Screenshot of Ida Tolgenbakk's tweet. [Tolgenbakk 2020]

COVID-19 Animal Stories: Narrative Structure, Genre, and Function

COVID-19 animal narratives take root within a wider representation of human experience and were formed by established mythological patterns that were already present. COVID-19 animal narratives share similar structural elements with other catastrophe narratives such as the biblical myth of the flood. The flood myth is a fine example of an etiological myth—a story explaining the origin of certain phenomena whose origin we do not control—and is one of the oldest myths in the world [Dundes 1988: 2]. In the Bible, it tells the story of Noah and the Ark [Gen. 6-9]. God decides to provoke a flood to wipe out humanity from the earth after seeing humankind's violence and treachery. God chooses a righteous man that is faithful to him (Noah) to build an ark that would hold his family and two, a male and a female, of all living creatures, to repopulate the world anew after the catastrophe. At the end of the story, God promises never to send another flood of this nature and makes rainbows the sign of his covenant. While this narrative uses water as a background element, many stories worldwide, such as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, are similar and present similar structural elements [Kluckhohn 1969: 50-52]. In most versions, a natural catastrophe such as a flood, fire, or epidemic, wipes out the world or most of its population. This catastrophe is always a divine punishment that highlights humanity's powerlessness and fragility. After the catastrophe, the survivors rebuild a better world.

COVID-19 animal stories, as presented in the media, share a similar structure to these catastrophe narratives. First, a mysterious coronavirus pandemic

appears and threatens humanity. Images of empty cityscapes support the idea that human beings were wiped out from the earth. Moreover, the hashtag #wearethevirus regarding wildlife's "return" to empty cities potentially emphasizes that the pandemic was a punishment, created by a divine force—Mother Nature in this case—to punish human beings for the way they treated nature and the environment. This aspect of the narrative, which Hans Kelsen calls "the motif of retribution" is a common element of catastrophe tales and "one of the oldest ideas of humanity" [1988: 126]. Finally, the hashtag #natureishealing presents an alternative world made anew that can be rebuilt by the survivors of the coronavirus. (17)

While COVID-19 animal stories share similar patterns to some biblical tales, COVID-19 animal stories are also distinct from biblical catastrophe narratives due to their profane purpose. Generally, myth is perceived as a sacred narrative that explains the creation of the world and defines humanity's place in it [Eliade 1963: 11]. Myth is anonymous and collective, and its symbolic nature makes it dynamic, changeable, and open to interpretation [Lule 2001: 4; Philip 1999: 6; Dundes 1984: 1; Eliade 1963: 1-8; Bidney 1966: 4]. In COVID-19 animal stories, although Mother Nature acts as a god-like figure, she is not part of any religious morality. Rather, the super powerful goddess is used in the story to explain the source of the plague humans must endure. For this reason, COVID-19 animal stories could be seen as contemporary legends with contemporary environmental morals that present some mythic parallels found in a wide range of stories and cultures, rather than a classical myth. As Gail de Vos argues, "[contemporary] legends emerge as news with their described events or beliefs directly relevant to the audience even though the motifs and structure of the tales are quite old" [2012: xxi]. This use of tale patterns in contemporary media discourse is not an isolated example. (18) Legends and archetypical figures are frequently utilized by Internet users and journalists to explain certain events. As media specialist Jack Lule argues:

> Sometimes […] in describing some experience, in reporting some event, reporters and editors draw upon a fundamental story of earthly existence, a universal and shared story of humankind, and they use that story to instruct, inform, celebrate, or forewarn. Like tellers from every age, journalists can draw from the rich treasure trove of archetypal stories and make sense of the world. [2005: 104]

Following Lule's theory, we can argue that pandemic animal narratives were created as a warning about how humans treated nature and an expression of anxiety toward global environmental issues. This is not surprising as contemporary legends "often embody an emergency as well [as], dealing with an urgent social problem" [Ellis 2001: xiv]. As everyday folkloric expression encodes broader cultural issues and often reveals social anxieties [Phillips and Milner 2017: 28], these animal legends remain significant in telling us about a social group in the context of repressive lockdown measures. Arguably, at the

time of the pandemic, making sense of the world was a necessity. More than just cautionary tales, these narratives also helped with coping with confinement by offering the positive outcome of building a better tomorrow. However, the message these narratives presented remains ambivalent.

Indeed, using the hashtag #natureishealing, the narratives offer comfort despite an uncertain future. Through images of wildlife reclaiming space made previously inaccessible to them, the legends propose a more balanced world between nature and humanity. However, the hashtag also remains ominous, as it suggests that nature is healing from humans because they are thankfully absent. Furthermore, the humorous yet cynical memes also question the possibilities of nature healing and of a better tomorrow. While in the biblical flood myth, humanity survives because some humans are still worthwhile in the eyes of God; the animal narratives, on the contrary, present a world where humans do not seem to have found a place and where they are not in control. They create a sense of powerlessness and insecurity about the future and are thus more complex because they do not seem to offer any clear conclusion or solution for how to build a better world.

One wonders if the solution, however, is not already implied in the message as minimizing humanity's impact on the environment has been part of the global environmental discourse for several decades now. COVID-19 animal stories were born out of the lockdown. Therefore, they focus mainly on the reduction of movements (gas emissions) and activities (consumption) to create a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Like the flood myth and other catastrophe tales, animal stories' roles are to remind humanity of its own fragile existence regarding the power of gods or Mother Nature [Lule 2001: 25]. In this way, the narratives ensure the cohesion of a group by creating social balance and by humbling humanity. This can be seen for example, in the extensive sharing of these stories on social media. For a moment, this participatory digital culture united all nations worldwide who were going through the same lockdown experience and witnessed a possibility of a human-less world. Furthermore, the few who shared animal narratives online and understood the urgency of their message are those who are willing to change their habits, become stewards of nature, and create a better world, just as God chose Noah and his family in the biblical flood myth. This is supported by Allison's argument that: "COVID-19 has wrought into being human desires for a fresh start in regard to climate change, where reduced emissions bring hope to finally resolving the climate crisis" [2020].

The coping mechanism expressed by sharing these stories might explain the ambivalent reaction generated after people found out that they were "fake." For example, one online magazine considered the viral story of drunken elephants to be "adorable" [Weisberger 2020], even if false and some argued that "the apparent resiliency of the natural world is leavening a global tragedy with brief moments of wonderment" [McCoy 2020]. The feeling of hopefulness was also expressed by social media users to explain why they did not delete their posts after finding out that they were misleading. For example, Kaveri Ganapathy Ahuja from New Delhi, India, admitted not having created the tweet about the swans "returning"

to Venice maliciously. She did not delete it either, mentioning that "[t]he tweet was just about sharing something that brought me joy in these gloomy times," thus supporting the theory of the story as a vernacular coping mechanism [Daly 2020]. She argued that "it's still relevant because waters in Venice are clearer than usual—a result of decreased boat activity—and that's what matters" [Daly 2020]. Ahuja was not the only social media user to react this way.

On March 30, 2020, British author Robert Woodshaw tweeted that "[o]n a positive note, at least nature is returning to our cities," supported by a video showing a family of boars, "returning" to Bergamo, Italy [Woodshaw 2020]. After finding out the video was from 2019, he reposted a note indicating that the information was misleading, mentioning he would be having a word with the friend who sent the video and suggesting that people should still enjoy the "unnewsworthy Ligurian boars!" [Woodshaw 2020]. Woodshaw did not remove his tweet either. In an interview, Woodshaw said: "If this were fake news about a potential cure, for example, I'd delete it immediately [but] I think we need lighthearted material such as this to help us through this ordeal" [D'Urso 2020]. Incidentally, several online reports mentioned that during the confinement, people were desperate for "scraps of joy amid all the gloomy mood" [D'Urso 2020].

The nature of the COVID-19 animal legends might also explain why they were perceived as positive. Indeed, "[a]nimal and pet images play a key role in keeping internet spaces habitable, lighthearted, and fun" [Maddox 2023: 3]. Maddox believes that, in general, cute animal images and videos provide a tool for coping with the negative aspects of day-to-day life and Internet cynicism [2023: 9]. This idea is consistent with COVID-19 animal stories that feature wild animals, mostly mammal, and that are generally perceived as beautiful. Interestingly, none of the stories mentioned pests living in urban settings such as rats or mice. They too probably thrived during the lockdown, but their presence arguably would not have provided any positivity. Several researchers noted that people rejoiced when they shared animal stories posts and when they realized the number of likes and retweets they generated [Felton 2020]. Allison even considers, "[t]hese digital vignettes [to] have become an antidote to somber pandemic reporting" [Allison 2020].

Another element of positivity worth mentioning here is the symbol of the rainbow. Although not directly linked to COVID-19 animal stories, rainbow images were initiated on the web at about the same time as the legends. The images of the rainbow with the words "It will be alright" became a symbol of optimism and became a massive global trend. (19) Within a few weeks, homes were decorated with drawings of rainbows, drivers put rainbow stickers on their cars, and Internet users added photo frames to their profile pictures. Perhaps done in an attempt at empowering humanity in the face of the pandemic, the slogan "It will be alright" suggests that a greater future was not just a possibility but a certainty. One cannot help but see a parallel with the rainbow of in the biblical myth of the flood that appears as a sign of comfort and a symbol of God's protection. While not part of the animal narrative *per se*, the rainbow phenomenon is perhaps another way to elicit a positive outcome for society and a better tomorrow amid

the lockdown. Therefore, keeping uplifting animal narratives alive despite knowing they were fictitious was legitimate because these legends, like the rainbows, helped people deal with the stress of the pandemic. In addition, this demonstrates that, even in our contemporary society, mythical themes and storytelling in general are essential to communicating social experience.

COVID-19 Animal Stories: Continuity of Tradition

Using mythical themes and legends in contemporary discourse, as in COVID-19 animal stories, produces images that follow certain values, norms, hopes, and fears shared by the group that expresses them. According to anthropologist Mihai Coman these images are accepted by society precisely because they are symbolic and because they function the same way as societies' mythological systems and rituals [2005: 46]. In *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, Bronisław Malinowski argues that myth is important to society because it is the expression of a form of social faith, a living reality, and that it continues "to influence the world and human destinies. […] Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization" [1933: 78-79]. In that sense, myth is closely linked to the continuity of tradition and culture. Malinowski also argues that it is alive in present-day lived experience to strengthen tradition [1933: 122].

Media spaces also promote the continuity of tradition and culture. They are an important part of human culture because they are a means of communication as well as the symbol of modernity and global social transformation [Peterson 2003: 2]. During the COVID-19 quarantine, social media, television, and the Internet became safety buoys for those whose social interactions were brutally altered and who were desperately trying to explain their situation and to predict the uncertain future. Furthermore, in social media spaces, everyone is free to share or even create stories. In that sense, everyone can be a reporter or storyteller. This makes each sharing of animal stories or rainbows in media an active contribution to vernacular culture and offers the sharer an opportunity to feel empowered when facing an unusual situation. Media both promote and preserve mass culture, which make them important vectors for the dissemination of culture, but also for market structuring and cultural production [Durand 2005]. Therefore, media as an imaginary space is a perfect location where mythical-influenced discourse can be formed [Sumiala 2013: 3]. This puts media at the center of the social construction of reality. Comparing mythmaking and television, communication scholar Roger Silverstone, argues that contemporary narratives borrowing from mythology are at the border between the known world and an unfamiliar reality:

> Mythe et récits mythiques sont profondément impliqués dans la définition et le maintien de la réalité du sens commun, constamment à l'œuvre pour traduire et rassurer, à la frontière entre le monde familier et sûr du quotidien et le monde inconnu, incertain, qui s'étend au-delà [...]. Et je soutiens que la télévision est l'expression contemporaine du mythe. Chacune de ses formes—les journaux télévisés, les documentaires et les

> feuilletons—travaille journellement sur la politique, la science, la vie privée, l'étrange et le provocateur, offrant des exposés du monde qui ont un seul objectif en vue: procurer du plaisir, fournir un réconfort. [1990: 217]
>
> [Myth and mythical narratives are deeply involved in defining and maintaining the reality of common sense, constantly at work to translate and reassure, on the border between the familiar and safe world of everyday life and the unknown or uncertain world which is extended beyond […]. And I argue that television is the contemporary expression of the myth. Each of its forms – television news, documentaries, and soap operas – work daily on politics, science, privacy, the bizarre, and the provocative, offering accounts of the world with one goal in mind: to provide pleasure and to provide comfort.]

Therefore, one can conclude that the animal narratives produced amid the coronavirus pandemic functioned as entertainment but also provided a comforting vision of a better world. Our contemporary human experience expressed through the known structure of the myth helps us make sense of the world [Lule 2001: 7; Huisman 2006: 27]. Mythology, as a narrative form, uses a collective heritage to generate stories that are negotiated, modified, and opened to interpretation as part of a larger social dialogue. Through mythology and storytelling, society has the possibility to refine and redefine social values and order [Coman 2005: 47-54]. In this sense, media is not only a place where human experience is shared but it also contributes to preserving tradition and, by sharing COVID-19 animal narratives about the reconstruction of our world, each social media user actively participated in a larger storytelling construction meant to bring hope of a better future across the globe.

COVID-19 Animal Stories: The End of the Story

The coronavirus pandemic and the confinement of people during lockdown profoundly changed how people perceived themselves and the world around them. Through mythical themes and storytelling, humanity expressed a new awareness of its own fragility. The ongoing animal narratives that emerged during the pandemic lockdown reminded us of our precarious existence regarding divine forces such as Mother Nature [Lule 2001: 25]. In that sense, it strengthened our social cohesion by making us humbler as a social group. After the disappearance of the world as we knew it, animal narratives proposed its rebirth and introduced the idea of balance between humanity and nature in a better and stronger world. These stories allowed us to understand and accept our new reality. During confinement, the narratives of animals taking over cities and of nature healing its wounds offered an optimistic conclusion to the pandemic and a hope for a better post-pandemic world. Mythical narrative themes thus found new ways of expression through contemporary media and new ways of social interactions.

Therefore, each retweet and share of the "fake" animal story is an active contribution in the making of storytellers. These narratives are active recurrences in the contemporary sphere and patterns of meaning-making that should be seen as real demonstrations of spontaneous human communication strategies.

NOTES

1 More than ninety countries had compulsory or recommended lockdowns, curfews, and quarantines. In total, more than 3.9 billion people or half of the world's population were asked to stay at home to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus [Sandford 2020].

2 For examples of the narrative construction process during pandemics, see [Lee 2014; Kitta 2019].

3 A version of this paper was first presented at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada's annual conference in 2021, which took inspiration from [Boivin 2018].

4 Although COVID-19 animal narratives disappeared after the lockdown, the general idea that they generated—Mother Nature taking revenge on humans because of how they treated nature and the environment—persists to this day. For example, on 13 July 2023 acquaintances mentioned local thunderstorm and tornado alerts at the local hardware store. They considered these events to be "normal" since we disregarded the earth and that "it was time for us to pay back" [Boivin 2023].

5 Interestingly, scholars Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby argue that "it is possible to see news journalists as 'folk' or naive ethnographers" [1982: 13].

6 See for example, [Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Dundes 2005; Howard 2008; Blank 2009; Frank 2011; de Vos 2012; Philips and Milner 2017; Peck and Blank 2020].

7 These animal stories presented some common features: they were all about wild animals as opposed to pets, none of them were pests, and except for swans, most animals were mammals and are generally perceived as beautiful.

8 This person's Twitter account seems to have been deleted after she was denounced as the initiator of the first animal story.

9 Whitney Philips and Ryan M. Milner argue, "[b]y posting something obnoxious to an internet forum […] a person might be messing with their audience for a laugh. On the other hand, they might sincerely hold an absurd or outright contemptible opinion. Both options are equally plausible, and, in most cases involving unknown strangers, equally unverifiable" [2017: 51]. Since it is not clear if Kardashian's tweet was meant to be humorous or not, I include it nonetheless in my data.

10 Lynne S. McNeil [2020] argues that hashtags should be seen as a form of folklore rather than just a word or phrase.

11 This hashtag already existed before the emergence of COVID-19 animal stories. It generally accompanies comments and imagery related to environmental issues and animal rights.

12 James Robert Breen and Pamela Pensini [2022] argue that the anthropomorphizing of nature can improve attitudes toward pro-environmental behavior.

13 More on hoaxes can be found in [de Vos 2012].

14 It had received 6,700 tweets and around 16,000 likes as of January 2021. In comparison, posts describing "nature healing" and humanity as the "real virus" received over tens of thousands of retweets. They also received hundreds of thousands of likes [Bosworth 2021; Nayak 2020].

15 For an analysis of pandemic "nature is healing" memes regarding the environment, see [Bosworth 2021].

16 The "nature is healing" jokes that circulated during the lockdown were deemed the "pandemic's best meme" [McNeill 2021].

17 It is important to mention that not all animal stories appearing during the pandemic follow this pattern. For example, one of them claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin released 500 lions to force people to stay indoors during the pandemic. Rather than focusing on animals, this tale criticized Putin's repressive politics in general. Another widely shared story was that of a humpback whale that appeared in the port of Montréal in May 2020. This happened at a time when confinement was about to be lifted in the city. The unusual presence of the animal in town was not perceived as a miracle like animals "repopulating" empty cities, but rather as a curiosity. The whale died six days later of unknown causes [Chattopadhyay 2020; Remili 2020; Thomas 2020; O'Malley 2021].

18 See for example, [Lule 2001; Lule 2005; Frank 2011].

19 Other variations of this phenomenon included the words "Everything will be alright," "It will be ok," "It's gonna be ok," "We will get through this together," "Stronger together," and unicorns with a rainbow and clouds. It seems that it was first initiated in Bari, southern Italy [Otte 2020].

20 Translation by the author.

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