

## **“I speak, therefore I am”: Repositioning Nonhuman Intelligence, Language, and Cognition within Assemblages in “The Great Silence” by Ted Chiang**

### **Abstract [paper]:**

In 2012 Philip Low wrote, together with a group of cognitive neuroscientists at the University of Cambridge, what is known as the “Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness” where they groundbreakingly stated, among other ideas, that “humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness” (n.p.) and that “[n]onhuman animals [...] also possess these neurological substrates” (n.p.). These affirmations served just as another indication to confirm what philosophers, scientists and scholars from multiple fields have upheld since the posthuman turn: that anthropocentric human superiority based on our “unique” mental capacities, including intelligence and consciousness, is not completely substantiated. Not only do we have proofs that nonhuman animals have cognitive capabilities that would dismantle this hierarchy but also, we can see clearly now how, with the latest creation of generative systems of Artificial Intelligence capable of processing and creating information, the ‘human’, as we knew it, is suffering an integral and complete redefinition. Cognition has become then, one of the, if not the central analytical category in the current debate of posthuman and animal studies, which has been proliferating in the last decade. N. Katherine Hayles (2017), following this line, proposes a reconsideration of concepts like intelligence, consciousness, and cognition from the perspective of a new paradigm, the ‘cognitive nonconscious’, in which she claims that not only humans, but other nonhumans, what she calls ‘cognizants’ or ‘cognizers’, like animals, plants, technological systems or material forces have agency and a cognitive capability of their own to a certain extent. In this re-understanding of cognition as an extended capacity beyond the human, she affirms the existence of a system of non-hierarchical relations in which information circulates and influences all the parts equally. This, she claims, is a ‘cognitive assemblage’, or an “arrangement of systems, subsystems, and individual actors through which information flows, effecting transformations” (Hayles 118). The cognitive nonconscious, in combination with the notion of assemblage, appears as a perfect tool to understand our accelerating, ever-changing and technically mediated world. In literary studies, the nonhuman, and more relevant for this paper the nonhuman animal, is surfacing in contemporary creative works in what Kate Marshall has called “Novels by Aliens”, or narrations from viewpoints of conscious nonhumans that experience feelings and emotions and that act as cognitive agents. Ted Chiang adapts this idea in the short story under analysis in this paper, “The Great Silence” (2019), narrated by an almost extinct parrot that lives in the Río Abajo Forest in Puerto Rico. As a first-person narrator, the parrot reflects about the humans’ insatiable desire to contact with extra-terrestrial intelligent life through the Arecibo telescope at the expense of destroying the narrator’s natural habitat and while obviating, or negating, the narrator’s cognitive capacities, among which are language and an understanding of abstract concepts. The text, analysed using the ideas and potentials of the cognitive nonconscious and the assemblage among cognizers-- both human and nonhuman animal--, serves as an example of how posthuman fiction and theory are following the same trajectory to dismantle human exceptionalism.

(500)

**References (maximum 150 words) (Chicago style)**

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**Keywords (maximum 5) (separated with semi-colons)**

Posthuman; cognitive assemblage; animal studies; speculative fiction; Ted Chiang.