

Learning with Others: Multispecies Relations Across Time, Space, and Crisis

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This issue concludes the journey – physical, psychological, emotional, and, as scholars, intellectual – that started in Spring 2020 with the preparation of the international conference, *Humanities, Eco-criticism and Multispecies Relations*, hosted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy, on 28-29 September 2020. The organisation of this meeting began during the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when little was known about SARS-CoV2. Even less was known, of course, about our reaction as humans to “this thing that has happened to us”, as the novelist Arundhati Roy described in her famous piece “The Pandemic Is a Portal”, which appeared in the *Financial Times* in April 2020:

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly,

with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

This issue presents a series of multispecies ethnographies, which show how worlds in the past, present, and future are discovered, created, understood, or imagined with non-human others. Multispecies ethnography is a way of doing anthropology – and cognate fields – that acknowledges the interconnectedness and inseparability of humans and other life forms, extending ethnography beyond the human. When multispecies investigations first appeared 12 years ago (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010), they brought the ‘animal turn’ into the practice of ethnographic fieldwork. Nowadays, discussions are not limited to human and non-human animals, but include plants, minerals, microorganisms, viruses, and so on. Multispecies investigations remain ethnographies of relations. They look at the elements of a given assemblage as subjects, in their own way, of a rapport where humans are no longer at the centre, and no longer an exceptional species. These assemblages along with their elements are sites for ‘becoming with’, in Donna Haraway’s (2008) sense: the subjects within them emerge through their shifting encounters, rather than existing prior to their meeting (Haraway 2008). And from February 2020 none of us could escape or expel a new addition to the amalgamations within and without our bodies – SARS-CoV2.

Thus, we met to discuss our various examples of multispecies interrelations at a time when our own lives were being collapsed into our scholarly writing. There was no way we could sustain any boundaries between human and non-human, intellectual and material, theory and practice, or academic work and the rest of life. A tangle of proteins, indexed visually as a faceless ball covered in suckers, was coursing through human and animal bodies, re-shaping society, ecology, place, and work. We could not but be aware that we were living the multispecies agglomerations we were describing in our various ethnographic case studies. And yet we continued to invoke conventional boundaries in our presentations, as we delineated our respective fieldwork sites and theoretical approaches. The institutions within which we work and study would not have accepted anything different, even if we had had the time and space to formulate it. The rapidly changing global context had created a mismatch between our scholarly intention to engage with the fact of interspecies relationship, and our immediate experience of it. Hence, our work stands as a point in an ongoing transition: it is one marker within global scholarship’s continuing passage through the pandemic’s portal. It displays the conventions and paradigms of the pre-pandemic world, as it documents the conflux of multispecies relationship that is carrying us into an unknown future.

When the conference finally took place, it was the only one held in person at the University of Venice that summer, before the second wave of infection struck Italy – and many other countries – again. At that time, at least 35,720,249 people around the world – the confirmed cases – had encountered SARS-CoV2. The first issue of this series, titled *Humanities, Ecocriticism, and Multispecies Relations. Proceedings (part I)*, was published in December 2021, just before the global infection rate skyrocketed again, reaching its highest number of daily cases (23,278,336 on 17 January 2022), so far. As we, the editors of this second and last issue dedicated to the conference, write its introduction, we are slowly recovering from the first passage of SARS-CoV2 through our bodies. We are likely to have encountered its Omicron BA.5 variant that, compared to the previous variants of the virus, is less likely to cause severe disease, but which is more interested in infecting a high number of individuals – at least in the human population.

For most of the two and a half years that have passed since the first human case of COVID-19 was reported on 31 December 2019, topics such as the use of masks, social distancing, lockdown, and vaccination have occupied most of the pandemic-related debate that has occurred in our houses, roads, TVs, social media, and academic papers. But at the beginning, before our focus as humans moved on to how to protect ourselves and the most fragile amongst us from infection, all our attention was outside our species. It was on what other animal, or animals, SARS-CoV2 had come to us from, and how, when, and where the spillover happened. Before then, a handful of researchers, and the readers of the much-acclaimed book by David Quammen (2012), *Spillover. Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, were familiar with this term. In December 2019, many became aware, for the first time, of species such as pangolins and civet cats, the superstar immune systems of bats, and the impact of human actions on ecosystems – and hence on the co-existence of different species. Then, as the pandemic and its concomitant research expanded, people followed with apprehension the discovery of the three dozen non-human animal species – dogs in houses, minks in fur-farms, tigers in zoos, white-tailed deer in woodlands – who can also be infected by SARS-CoV2 (VandeWoude, Bosco-Lauth, Mayo 2022). According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, while the risk of animals spreading COVID-19 to people is low, several cases of animals infected with SARS-CoV-2 have been documented around the world.

As the discussion of inter-species disease transmission confronted many with the complexity of multi-species interconnection, so the experience of national lockdowns in many countries disrupted citizens' affective perception of space and place. People rediscovered their localities – including the animals, birds, rivers, and trees of their im-

mediate vicinity - as simultaneously they developed new worlds of mediated contact via a proliferation of virtual meeting technologies. This reconfiguration of place, ecology, and inter-species connection exposed for many the reality of the climate crisis. It was impossible to miss the marked improvement in air quality and auditory ambience, as birdsong replaced the noise of cars, railways and airplanes. The essayist Zadie Smith (2020) has described 2020 as “the global humbling”, or the moment people collectively realised that our pre-COVID-19, ‘normal’ life was probably more similar to a bad habit than to a model of life we really want for ourselves. It can be argued that COVID-19 has opened many people’s eyes to issues, such as the human exploitation of the environment and other life forms that have long been part of our pre-COVID-19 status quo. Unfortunately, it is not clear yet whether this realisation is going to last long enough to resist the temptation of going back to ‘business as usual’, rather than turning into concrete actions that put our future on a healthier, safer, happier, and fairer track. As far as justice is concerned, the forthcoming books *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* (Chao, Bolender, Kirksey forthcoming) and *More-than-One Health. Humans, Animals, and the Environment Post-COVID* (Braverman forthcoming) will elucidate the difficult intersection of social justice with the lives of non-humans, while exploring the possibilities for achieving human and non-human justice and health.

According to the results of the *World After Covid* project at the University of Waterloo,¹ which asked scientists to reflect on the positive and negative societal or psychological changes that might occur after the pandemic, increased care for nature ranks only eighth out of the twenty main positive consequences of our encounter with SARS-CoV-2. While this can be considered a worrying signal, it should also be observed that many environmental issues are actually societal ones; they originate with humans’ relationship with the environment. One example is Russia, as it currently exists under Vladimir Putin’s regime. The worst recorded forest fires in human history raged in Siberia and Arctic Russia throughout the summer of 2021 (Davydova 2021). These fires manifested the incompetence and corruption of the federal political elites, through demonstrating the absence of crucial fire-fighting resources. Instead, the populations of historically marginalised and colonised regions were forced to fight the fires themselves, in order to save their villages and livelihoods.

In the *World After Covid* project, the top three positive consequences were identified as renewed social connections, structural, and political changes, and solidarity. Even if these three tendencies are not directly related to how we share our existence with

1 <https://worldaftercovid.info/>.

other life forms, they are relevant to non-human life. For example, the philosopher Valerie Tiberius from the University of Minnesota suggested that the pandemic may lead to an “increased awareness of our vulnerability and mutual dependence”.² Two and a half years ago, we realised – we experienced through our tired lungs and numb tongues – that this dependence is multispecies. Since then, we have been learning how to go through a pandemic not only as individuals and members of a local and global community, but also as elements of a multispecies system. If this is the case, then multispecies research has acquired a new power to mobilise change, through documenting and demonstrating the different configurations of multispecies relationship that have existed across time and space. Multispecies ethnography has become a call to action.

None of the papers in this issue is about the pandemic, although one of them does focus on the theme of health. Most of this research was started before the pandemic, and hence its arc encapsulates the transitions the pandemic has engendered. What these papers have in common is their presentation of short ethnographic accounts of multispecies relations that are simultaneously unique and profound learning experiences – at least for one of the species involved (humans). The multispecies relationships in this issue trouble conventional materialisms, confronting us with the agency of water beings, non-human ancestors, and articulate rocks. The order of the papers in the issue is geographical; it starts in Venice, where the conference was held, and travels the world eastwards. This geographical ordering reflects the power of multispecies relationships to configure inhabited spaces and places, which is clearly demonstrated by all the papers in the issue. The journey eastwards also mimics many of the colonial journeys that inform these papers and their settings: unequal power relations between humans are a key component of these multispecies relations, as we have indicated above.

In the landscape of Sápmi, in the Scandinavian peninsula, De Vivo describes the resistance, despite enforced conversion, of the collective memory of the interactions of Sámi people with other-than-human beings in Indigenous toponyms. Placenames are protected and valued as strongholds to help young Sámi know how to navigate their land and their history – and meet, through oral tradition and culturally-situated practices, the other-than-human beings that centuries of colonisation have tried to remove from local multispecies relations. In India, Nadal explores three examples of community-led debate and action on One Health, an expression coined in 2004 to acknowledge that the health of humans, animals, plants, and the environment are closely linked and inter-dependent. The examples

² <https://worldaftercovid.info/interviews/valerie-tiberius-2/?timestamp=0>.

show how, long before this phrase appeared in the scientific language, local human communities developed well-studied strategies to safeguard health – the health of themselves, their environment, and the other animals of the locality – together with, respectively, trees and antelopes, vultures and the sun, and cattle. In the Russian Arctic, Vallikivi follows some families of Nenets reindeer herders on a journey that is at the same time physical (through the Great Land tundra), and spiritual – between ‘the old ways’ and the most recent dissemination of evangelical Christianity. He investigates how this conversion transforms the lived experience of multispecies relationship among nomadic herders who, when crossing the tundra, come across the invisible agents who inhabit its waters and its mountains, but with whom they are no longer allowed to interact. In Siberia, Peers follows the public reaction among the Sakha people to the display of an ivory model of an ancient Sakha festival, produced for the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1867. She uses the ambiguous absence or presence of horses in this model to demonstrate the interconnection between varying configurations of multispecies relationship, and aesthetic expression.

In Australia, Tamisari analyses how the Yolngu people express their mutual life-giving bonds with other-than-humans such as animals, plants, natural features, and land in terms of kinship relationships. Young Yolngus, and the adopted anthropologist herself, are taught reciprocal responsibility, interdependence, cooperation, care, and other basic social skills, through the ‘mutuality of being’ among living beings. Her piece echoes Peers’ discussion of the aesthetic dimension of multispecies relations, through her description of new expressions of multispecies relationship in contemporary popular music. In the Paraguayan Chaco, Bonifacio and Maresca describe how the colonisation of two regions unfolded through multiple, unpredictable, and precarious combinations of people, cattle, and grazing lands. The transition that occurred over the twentieth century was not only temporal, but also ontological: it was characterised by the disappearance of certain beings and the assemblages they were part of, and by the coming to life of new ones. In the Fiemme Valley, Italy, Martellozzo investigates the aftermath of the storm that hit the area in 2018 and profoundly changed the physical landscape, describing peoples’ lost familiarity with what has gone, and their attempts at negotiating new forms of coexistence with trees, mushrooms, insects, and atmospheric patterns. Faced with this transformation, the challenge for the human community is to understand how to take part in it, renouncing the illusion of control derived from the anthropocentric perspective. Along the Piave River, Italy, Breda meets stone gatherers and is introduced to the pebbles and rocks they collect for the limestone industry as living beings. By examining the relationship between humans, stones, and the river water, the author de-

scribes the human attribution of subjectivity, intentionality, ability, and agency to non-humans, specifically to the water, which provides 'good' or 'bad' stones and imbibes the local ecosystem with economic and cultural meanings.

All these papers demonstrate that the lives of humans, other-than-human animals, weather and landscape are intrinsically connected - as we have discovered for ourselves from the pandemic, in addition to our field trips. So far, people who have adopted a multispecies perspective in their work, in and out of academia, have fulfilled the tasks of portraying this evidence and creating a space for it in public discussion. Multispecies perspectives afford the intricate and accurate analysis of the pandemic, and its far-reaching effects. Now, especially in the crisis-ridden world we are witnessing at present, we need to practically engage with local multispecies knowledges, if we are to change the way we live our present, and secure our future.

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