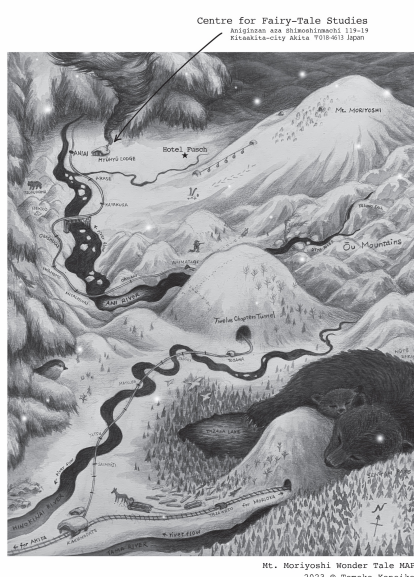


# Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

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## Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival



*Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival*

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### Introduction: Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival

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## **Introduction: Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival**

Mayako Murai

Storytelling is a powerful means of making sense of the world. Stories have been used not only to hand down knowledge but also to form and transform people's worldviews, inspiring them to take action. As the world constantly changes according to various human-induced and natural causes, so do stories people tell and retell in order to find a place and survive in ever-changing environments.

In the past few decades, there has been a plethora of stories in various media and genres about interspecies interactions and boundaries in a way that acknowledges more positive values in more-than-human worlds than before. This rising interest in stories focusing on reconfigurations of human-animal relationships seems to reflect a shift away from an anthropocentric and exclusive view of nonhuman animals towards a more inclusive view that values interdependence and interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings. As an increasing public awareness of the negative impacts of human activities on other species worldwide calls for a radical reconsideration of our ways of inhabiting this multispecies world, we need stories that will encourage us to imagine a form of society that reflects views and voices of more-than-human beings. In the face of current global environmental challenges including the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems, this special issue of *Synthesis* aims to re-story the world for our multispecies future.

As stories are integral to sense-making processes, such radical re-storying requires a multidisciplinary approach which looks beyond the existing disciplinary boundaries to seek common ground across fields. In fairy tales, boundary crossing is an essential trope; without it, there will be no plot development, and no story. Think of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, who strays from the path and goes deeper and deeper into the woods, a quintessential fairy-tale space where the wild things are. While editing this issue, I was struck by the way the critical perspective that each contributor offers seems to be interwoven with their life stories explicitly or implicitly, reflecting their deep need to step out of their boundaries to find alternative ways of perceiving and narrating more-than-human worlds. To tell my own story as a fairy-tale researcher, my approach to fairy tales has been significantly affected by the combined disaster of the earthquake, the tsunami, and the nuclear power plant accident which took place in Northeast Japan on the 11th of March 2011. For those living in Japan, this was a pivotal experience that forced them to recognise the way society had been organised to fulfil the desire to own more, build more, and consume more, thereby causing the destruction of the natural environment and the way of living based on the interdependence between humans and the natural environment. This awareness has affected various areas of society, including academic research and creative practices, and my investigation into multispecies fairy tales is one of the many attempts at telling stories differently to address the issues raised by the disaster of 3.11 and its aftermath.

What are the powerful stories needed for the multispecies turn in today's world? What are the uses of stories for the survival of our own species and others? Who is narrating whose stories for whom? Which parts of our storied past do we draw on and depart from, and in what ways? This special issue on Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival is a collaborative attempt to answer these questions. At the heart of this approach is a commitment to careful and imaginative attention to the lives and worlds of others, whether human or nonhuman, grounded in diverse academic and creative practices, including literary studies, art, critical theory, natural sciences, and Indigenous studies.

Maya Hey's "Symbiosis and the Steward: Reading Human-Microbe Relationships and Re-Storying Convivial Futures" invites us to re-story the world from the perspective of one of the smallest species. Drawing on the recent discovery of microbiomes and their influence on humans, Hey points out the anthropocentric assumptions accompanying the concepts of symbiosis and stewardship which have often been used to describe human-microbe

relations in popular and academic discourse. Instead, she proposes ‘conviviality’ as a more apt term for describing human-microbe entanglements and unravels a more microbiome-oriented worldview in which humans are not the only agency in terms of eating. She finds examples of convivial stories of human-microbe relations in contemporary Japanese manga and discusses the way they ‘visibilise the invisible’ in both textual and visual terms.

In “Anthropocene Forms and the Victorian Novel: Micronarratives in Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*,” Elisabeth Alexandra Strayer also emphasises the importance of ‘scaling down’ in grappling with the Anthropocene. Strayer’s close reading of Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1887) reveals the novel’s capacity to constitute micro-localised worlds that encompass large-scale forces of human and more-than-human entanglements. She demonstrates how Hardy’s novel vacillates between foreground and background, allowing nonhuman woodlanders—trees, birds, and flowers—to take part in the stories in which humans are not the only agents in worldmaking.

WhiteFeather Hunter’s “Performing Bureaucratic Theatre in Academic Science Fields, A Case Study: *The Pheromone Trees and Coyote*” focuses on the invisible, in this case a pheromone, to explore fluid territories of wildlife species and to question the rigid territoriality of scientific research policies and procedures. Hunter’s case study describes the several stages of certification processes which had to be performed in order to conduct a bioart project on the opposite side of the world and discusses how an institutional framework for wildlife governance can discount lived realities of local people including wildlife experts. This article includes photographs of the titular project which she conducted despite various obstacles by deciding to stray from the prescribed path and to ‘meet’ the coyote on her own terms while respecting their territories.

In “Gabriela Carneiro de Cunha’s *Altamira 2042*: Fostering Multispecies Survival Through Performance, Ritual and Active Listening,” María Georgina Sánchez Celaya discusses the innovative ways in which the stage performance *Altamira 2042*, directed by Gabriela Carneiro da Cunha, addresses the critical situation of endangered species in the Brazilian Amazonia. Sánchez focuses on how Da Cunha’s performance, which the artist conceives as a collaboration with the Xingu River, uses the latest technology, especially sound and light devices, to create an immersive multisensorial experience. Sánchez argues that this participatory performance fosters an affective connection with more-than-human species and supranatural forces

while at the same time inviting the audience to think critically and to imagine non-anthropocentric and decolonised futures.

The four essays that follow resulted from a workshop, titled “Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival: Fairy Tales, Art, Science,” held in Northeast Japan in February 2023. The “Preface” tells how this three-day workshop unfolded in a small town at the foot of a mountain, a multispecies community where snow prevails. The workshop section opens with Margaret Lyngdoh’s “Shapeshifting Traditions among the Khasi of Northeast India: Ecological Engagements and Multispecies Relationships.” Like Da Cunha’s performance co-created by the Xingu River as discussed in Sánchez’s essay, Lyngdoh’s article engages with Water as a core mediator, rather than a metaphor, in folklore among the Khasi, an Indigenous community in Northeast India. Based on fieldwork conducted over years, Lyngdoh introduces part of the corpus of previously unrecorded oral narratives relating to the Khasi folklore of Water. Here she focuses on the folklore of water about human-animal transformation—*sanghkini* or ‘hybrid’ persons who transform into were-snakes during the monsoon season—and argues that Water expresses the Khasi knowledge of the world, which offers an example of an alternative way of understanding multispecies relationalities and multiple layers of realities.

In “Making New Stories about Multispecies Kinship through Vital Material Encounters with Clay,” Kim L. Pace describes the process of making ceramic sculpture as a way of forming a creative partnership between herself and clay. She describes the way the process of working with clay unites the artist and the material as equal partners in art-making, blurring the boundaries between subject and object and the human and the nonhuman. She interweaves her story as a clay sculptor with stories of human-clay entanglements from myths, folk and fairy tales, art history and literature and illustrates how art-making can be a way of exploring and re-storying multispecies materialities.

Matthew T.K. Kirkcaldie’s “Evidence and Inference: Blind Spots in the Neuroscience of Non-Human Minds” sheds light on the continuity between humans and nonhuman animals from the perspective of neuroscience. Kirkcaldie first reflects on the structural blind spot in neuroscience, i.e., its inability to include consciousness in its evidentiary framework because evidence is evaluated by mental processes, which leaves subjective experience outside its purview. This leads to another blind spot in neuroscience regarding animal minds; it evades the question of whether nonhuman animals have minds and subjective experiences like our own while accepting them as valid

analogues and models for the human brain due to the similarity between them at the cellular level. He suggests that bridging the gap between the scientific accounts of animal brains and our instinctive as well as storied appreciation of animals as kindred spirits can be a step towards re-storying the world for multispecies coexistence.

My own contribution, “Making a Multispecies Fairy-Tale Library,” explores the possibilities of repurposing the existing tale classification system for designing a new framework that would better reflect multispecies worldviews across different narrative traditions. The reason I focus on the classification of tale types is that the way we classify things, be they stories or species, both reflects and defines the way we perceive our place in the world and relate to the world around us. Therefore, if we want to change the way we read familiar tales so as to see them from a new perspective which would foster multispecies coexistence, we must begin by examining the anthropocentric biases underpinning the existing classification system. The guiding question I will ask is: what kind of multispecies story-scape may emerge if we make a library of multicultural fairy tales by classifying them according to the experiences not only of human beings and their fictional alter egos in animal form, but also of other-than-human beings who perceive, experience, and inhabit the world in different ways from the ways humans do?

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on the earlier versions of the essays. Special thanks go to the editors of the journal *Synthesis*, Stamatina Dimakopoulou and Mina Karavanta, for their support, guidance, and enthusiasm throughout the editorial process. The idea for this special issue was first conceived while we were swimming together in the Aegean Sea one early autumn afternoon, so I thank the water, the sun, the sand, and all the nonhuman entities there for acting as an incentive for us to embark on this exciting journey. I hope that this special issue will inspire conversations and collaborations across disciplines and cultures in our common efforts to re-story the world for multispecies survival.