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Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival



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Preface to the Workshop “Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival: Fairy Tales, Art, Science”

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Preface to the Workshop “Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival: Fairy Tales, Art, Science”

Mayako Murai

One winter day, five people from lands near and far gathered in a small town at the foot of a snowy mountain. Their aim was to explore new uses of old stories for multispecies survival and coexistence. The international workshop “Re-Storying the World for Multispecies Survival: Fairy Tales, Art, Science” took place in Aniai, in Northeast Japan, on 25-27 February 2023.¹ The group consisted of the people whom I encountered at various stages of my journey as a fairy-tale researcher: a folklorist from India, a ceramic artist from Britain, a neuroscientist from Australia, a multidisciplinary artist from Japan, and myself, the organiser of the workshop. Although we come from disparate disciplines and backgrounds, we shared a belief in the importance of fairy tales and other traditional narratives in better understanding more-than-human worlds.

To address the question posed by the workshop, I felt the need to set this gathering in a place abounding in old and new stories of human-nature entanglements, since in fairy tales the place, or the environment, is not merely a backdrop, but plays an important role as an agent in its own right. Once prosperous with gold, silver, and copper mining and also famous for traditional bear hunting practiced by the Matagi, Aniai in Akita Prefecture now suffers from serious depopulation and ageing problems like many other small towns in rural Japan. Surrounded by mountains and cut through by a river which used to be the main means of transport, it is not only a scenic place

but also a rather efficient compact town equipped with a train station, shops, and facilities necessary for daily life, even though they have been gradually diminished. Tomoko Konoike, the artist and one of the workshop participants, first wandered into Aniai by chance while she was travelling around Akita, where she was born and grew up, looking for ideas for her new artwork not long after the earthquake on 11 March 2011. She started to visit Aniai regularly to create installation art, up on the local 1,454-metre-high mountain called Mount Moriyoshi and to conduct an ongoing art project, combining storytelling and handcraft, called *Storytelling Table Runner*, in collaboration with the women in Aniai. I also started to visit Aniai with her and became attracted by the place which has complex layers of history of human-nature entanglements and a rich and resilient storytelling culture.

The workshop began with the train journey from Tokyo towards Aniai, through snow-covered mountains and rivers, with the participants holding *Mt. Moriyoshi Wonder Tale Map*, the map of Aniai and its surrounding area drawn for the workshop by Konoike. This storytelling map, which appears on the front cover of this special issue, interweaves the natural environment—snow, trees, mountains, rivers, a lake, bears, birds, a horse, and a hare—with human-made objects and human activities—houses, railways, tunnels, bridges, logging, hunting, skiing, and making fire—and tells stories of human-nature entanglements unfolding in this place alive with more-than-human inhabitants. For Konoike, the journey to the destination is an integral part of the event; whenever she holds an art exhibition, she stresses that an exhibition begins when viewers leave their home, rather than when they enter the gallery. After arriving at Aniai, we visited the shops on the main street, chatting with the shop keepers, mostly octogenarians, and buying everyday goods like clothes, with price tags from half a century ago. The second day was spent giving presentations and exchanging ideas, which formed the basis of the four essays collected here. During our presentations, we were occasionally visited by the local people bringing us some food like stewed beans or just peeping in out of curiosity. An art curator from Scotland who has been involved with the *Storytelling Table Runner* project happened to be travelling around Japan and stopped by to join our discussion. On the third and last day, we climbed up Mount Moriyoshi with a local mountain guide, first using the cable car and then walking in snowshoes. Near the mountain top, we were greeted by numerous fir trees covered with thick, growing frost, so-called ‘snow monsters,’ created by nature’s magic. We then climbed down the mountain and got on the train back to Tokyo. What follows is the outcome of this journey, and each essay tries to convey the sense of transformation felt through the

intermingling of disciplines, cultures, stories, and species.

Notes

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