

“MULTISPECIES ENCOUNTERS” INTRODUCTION

Sam Allen, Lilly Elrod, Mia Godleski, and Piyesone Hunthant—The 2024
Digital Literature Review Editorial Team

Multispecies theory and its respective research and scholarship is extensive, and at times, complicated. Put most simply, the theory works to dissolve the idea that the human species is something ultimate, individual, solitary, or somehow separate from other living and nonliving beings. Multispecies theorists hope to influence the study of human history, biology, and the humanities to include the lives and histories of non-human beings—no matter if they are categorized as living or nonliving. However, in a multispecies exploration of the world, scholars must ask this first: what *is* a species?

Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster describe the nonhuman areas of study in “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness” as fungi, plants, microorganisms, and animals (3), but also as stones, weather systems, technology, artificial intelligence, rivers and mountains, and the unseen beyond—ghosts, gods, and spirits (4). In “Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom” by Anna Tsing, she explores the intricate cities of fungi that exist beneath our feet, and in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway tries to define the ongoing and ever-connected nature of the ecosystem. She explores how each thread of life and nonlife is connected, and to tell the stories of the unknown is to explore “the patterning of possible worlds and possible times” (31), which is also, somehow, a way of multispecies scholarship.

In this journal, essayists explore and analyze works of literature and film with multispecies theory as their guidebook. In analyzing the nonhuman and nonliving characters and story elements in literature, readers can understand not only how nonhuman species impact our day-to-day life, but also how nonhuman lives and histories are worth studying and appreciating on their own. Multispecies theory draws lines between academic

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subjects, over cultural sectors and political boundaries, and dissects human ideas of time, life, and ways of being. When relating this theory to literary criticism, essayists in “Multispecies Encounters” explored the nonhuman narrator, plant and animal life as independent actors, the complications with an anthropomorphized animal character, and how science-fiction genre expectations can lead to viewing our environment as an independent organism.

In our own ways, the writers of the following essays were inspired by the work of multispecies scholars. We pulled threads to reveal the non-human players in the stories we know well, we listened when the authors gave them a voice, and paid attention to their history, their meaning, and their futures. Our results were as expansive as the topic. In Eden Hathaway’s “Anthropomorphism Unveiled: A Case Analysis of *Isle of Dogs* and Its Role in Multispecies Narratives,” the anthropomorphized animal allows viewers to better empathize with the dogs in the story and grow to consider the individual and shared history that exists between them. Hathaway reveals the knots that connect the humans and the dogs, and how human behavior can both negatively and positively shape the lives of the nonhuman beings in their environment.

The dogs in *Isle of Dogs* serve as the story’s narrators, and as the film hands over the narrative responsibility over to the nonhuman, it reveals a previously unknown perspective to the human reader. Elif Shafak’s novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, analyzed by two authors in this journal, tells parts of the novel’s story from the perspective of a female fig tree. In Bella Hughes’s essay “The Trees Speak for Themselves: How Non-Human Narrators in Fiction Influence Multispecies Encounters,” she considers how this narrator educates the human reader on how plants experience both positive and negative life events and how their own interactions and communications with other nonliving species can better influence how humans treat the environment. Their analysis serves as an example of how literary endeavors to give voices to nonhuman beings expands beyond the Anthro-

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po-centric worldview.

Nonhuman beings in literature often serve as symbols and motifs, which help readers better understand our relationship to those beings. Katelyn Mathew in “Exploring Religious Animal Symbolism in Louise Erdrich’s *The Plague of Doves*” explores religious animal symbolism in literature, and how it represents human emotion and premonition, both positive and negative, and how the symbolism changes over cultures and religions. Her analysis sheds a light on the complicated relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, and how sometimes contrasting animal symbolism represents power imbalances. This can also mean that nature and divines are inseparable, and it may cause conflicts if we divert our attention from them.

The representation of plants and animals in literature is complicated, and varies across genres. In Lilly Elrod’s “An Analysis of the Film *Bee Movie* and Multispecies Theory,” she provides an insight into how the film represents the true interactions that bees have with the world around them, but also how anthropomorphism can have inaccuracies that are harmful to how people interact and think of the insect. In Mia Godleski’s essay “The Art of Being Attentive in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*,” Godleski writes about how flowers are not just a literary symbol, but have agency as a living being to keep Mrs. Dalloway calm during moments of duress. Rather than analyzing the flowers by their relevance to a human life, Godleski emphasizes their inherent individuality—opening up literary criticism to involve these seemingly passive players in their analyses.

But why do we give plants agency? In “My Philodendron’s Favorite Music is Beethoven: Considerations of Plant Sentience,” Milo Hardison explores the science behind plant sentience, and how *Island of Missing Trees* explores the biological ways in which plants behave and operate on their own, giving them an individual presence outside of human involvement. In the same vein, fiction allows authors to explore ideas that we

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have difficulty understanding from a human perspective, like plant sentience and environmental independence. In “Surrendering the Self: The Posthuman World in Vandermeer’s *Annihilation*,” Sam Allen explores the science-fiction genre’s ability to explore the power of an unstoppable nature, and how humans truly serve as one evolutionary piece in our environment.

The world humans live in contains an endless multitude of multispecies interactions—and our essayists in “Multispecies Encounters” aim to prove this argument in their extensive literary and film analysis. Though our everyday lives are so heavily influenced by the interactions we have with various species, we do not tend to acknowledge these significant interactions. So much of history and of our own lives centers on interactions between humans. Because of this, only a small fraction of the world’s history, as well as our own, individual histories, gets told. By ignoring the multitude of species around us as well as the interactions we have with them, we are disregarding the magnitude of the environments that we are a part of—the environments that do so much to care for and provide for us, but also have beautiful ways of existing on their own.

Works Cited

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