MULTISPECIES ENCOUNTERS

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THE DIGITAL LITERATURE REVIEW

The Digital Literature Review is a journal showcasing undergraduate student work in literature and cultural studies. The journal is produced by undergraduate students at Ball State University who are involved in *The Digital Literature Review* immersive learning project. Our goal is to provide a forum where undergraduate students can showcase their research projects and disseminate their valuable contributions to ongoing academic conversations.

The Digital Literature Review is published annually in the spring. The deadline for submissions is in early January. We welcome original articles relating to each year's theme. Articles should range from 2500-5000 words; every article is reviewed by undergraduate students on the journal's editorial team. Notification of initial decision is in February. All authors receive constructive feedback concerning submissions.

Further information regarding *The Digital Literature Review* is available at bsudlr.wordpress.com or openjournals.bsu.edu/dlr.

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"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 nonhuman 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

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 lend 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-

pocentric 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 natures 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

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.

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Lacertilia. — Fiderhlen. by Ernst Haeckel, 1940. Public Domain.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM UNVEILED: A CASE ANALYSIS OF ISLE OF DOGS AND IT'S ROLE IN MEDIATING MULTISPECIES NARRATIVES

Eden Hathaway

This essay explores Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* through the lens of anthropomorphism and multispecies theory, examining how the film captures the complexities of human-animal relationships and the interconnectedness of all beings. Anderson's distinctive filmmaking style, characterized by vibrant visuals and intricate narratives, serves as a backdrop for the exploration of themes such as empathy, collaboration, and the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human worlds. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's ideas in *When Species Meet* and academic film reviews, the essay analyzes key scenes and characters to uncover the profound insights offered by *Isle of Dogs* regarding the nature of interspecies communication and the transformative power of companionship. Ultimately, the film challenges viewers to rethink their perspectives on the world around them and embrace a more inclusive understanding of multispecies interactions.

Wes Anderson is a renowned filmmaker recognized for his distinctive style—featuring vibrant colors, notable soundtracks, intricate costume designs, and consistent font usage—and narrative techniques that offer valuable artistic insights into humanity and the world around us. His films, which often focus on themes such as love, capitalism, and over-consumerism utilize postmodern styles to evoke feelings of nostalgia and hope within their viewers (Szemetová 5–6).

Among Anderson's repertoire is his 2018 stop-motion animated film *Isle of Dogs*. The film transports viewers to the realm of Trash Island, where the canine inhabitants' journeys mirror human challenges of forging connections, navigating loyalty, and confronting environmental decay. This practice of attributing human or personal characteristics to non-humans, called anthropomorphism, plays a pivotal role in storytelling. It acts as a bridge between the familiar and the bizarre, allowing viewers to suspend their disbelief to a degree that allows them to confront difficult dynamics within the human narrative more empathetically. In *Isle of Dogs*, the canine characters are given human-like qualities, transforming them into relatable figures and allowing audiences to emotionally invest in their struggles and triumphs. They each have names, distinct accessories that match their individual personalities, dynamic relationships, and the ability to communicate with one another—and with the audience, which is important for later discussions. These attributes help the audience make inferences about what the characters are going through, which should, in turn, allow viewers to empathize with the characters by relating the experience to emotions they have felt in similar situations (Harrison and Hall 34). Anderson's use of dogs was an especially strategic decision for the anthropomorphizing of this narrative because studies show humans are already confident in their ability to communicate and understand feelings among dogs, compared to a list of other animals (Harrison and Hall 37-40). Despite the benefits of using anthropomorphism in regard to the narrative, there are limits to the strategy, relating to its morality and effectiveness in media. While it undoubtedly serves as a valuable narrative tool, at what point does the use of anthropomorphism hinder our ability to connect

with the animals and cultures represented in the media outside of the context of the film?

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway delves into the complex relationships between humans and animals, challenging traditional notions of species boundaries and emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings. Haraway's ideas resonate deeply with the anthropomorphic portrayal of canine characters in Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs*. Haraway's emphasis on interspecies communication and collaboration underscores the importance of understanding and respecting the perspectives of non-human entities—a theme echoed in *Isle of Dogs* as the characters work together to navigate their shared challenges. By drawing upon Haraway's ideas and various academic film reviews, this analysis aims to explore how the anthropomorphism in *Isle of Dogs* serves not only as a narrative device but also as a reflection of broader inquiries into the nature of interspecies relationships and the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human worlds.
To review, *Isle of Dogs* is set in a dystopian near-future Japan where dogs have been quarantined on Trash Island due to an outbreak of a canine flu called Snout Fever. When a young boy named Atari Kobayashi, or the little pilot, crashes on the island to find his lost dog Spots, a group of five alpha dogs—named Chief, Boss, Duke, King, and Rex—aid him on his quest. The story revolves around their journey, and the narrative is driven by their interactions with each other, the island, and the human characters. The first interaction we see among the characters of the film is a political gathering, or "a special midnight session at the Municipal Dome," where Kenji (Mayor) Kobayashi addresses the canine flu to a large crowd of Japanese citizens (*Isle of Dogs* 00:03:45). The first observation a viewer can make is that the humans in the film are speaking Japanese, yet there are no subtitles provided. Rather, viewers rely on interpreter characters and machines to explain and emphasize important information in English. For instance, after Mayor Kobayashi calls for a hasty and crowd-pleasing quarantine, an electronic display board translates what appears to be Mayor Kobayashi's exact words: "Our legal-system provides for: dissenting opinion." This is where the minority opposition, scientists exploring a

cure for Snout Fever, has a chance to advocate for the dogs. The scientists seem confident they will be able to find a cure, so they are pleading with the crowd to be patient and ask themselves, "What ever happened to man's best friend?" This line is intended to evoke feelings of nostalgia, which, as previously mentioned, Anderson commonly focuses on in his films. Still, the crowd responds by cheering with displeasure and throwing things at the scientists on stage. The interpreter contextualizes this visual response by announcing, "The crowd is calling for the immediate ratification and approval of the mayor's proposal." This implementation of limited English and communication from the human characters is intended to decenter the humans from this narrative. The audience is meant to focus on the ways in which the dogs are shaped by the world around them. Thus, the only information we need to know about the humans is that this crowd supported their exile, but there are still a few humans who trust in the bonds of their human-animal relationships.

Aside from this observation about Anderson's use of language in the film, this scene also lays the foundation for all future interactions between the characters, as well as their interactions with the surrounding environment. Mayor Kobayashi's anger and the crowd's overwhelming support of his decree show viewers the crowd's general disdain for the dogs. On the contrary, the scientists, as well as their supporters [1], showcase the side of this community that still cares for these animals. This shows viewers that the beliefs that lead to the dogs' excommunication are not unanimous among humans, and there will likely be advocates appearing later in the film.

While most of the animals in *Isle of Dogs* exhibit a degree of human traits, it is important to note that the deepest emotions associated with human beings are projected onto our five leading canines and the companions they connect with on their journey. After the first dog is transported to the island, the film cuts to six months later, after all of the inhabitants have arrived and grown accustomed to their new home. After a bag of garbage is dropped on the island, a pack of five nearly identical dogs show up to investigate (*Isle of Dogs* 00:09:35–00:13:30). They gather close to-

gether behind the bag before looking up at the main pack, and the camera cuts to a long symmetrical shot of five dogs standing a few paces from one another. Our leads Rex, Duke, King, Boss, and Chief are introduced using single medium shots of each member in that order. This is how they are established as a pack yet noted to be individual beings with alpha-like personalities. In the single shots, viewers see the dogs' names on their collars—aside from Chief, who doesn't wear a collar. After the packs are introduced and the exigency, the trash, is presented, the packs move toward the trash slowly yet ferociously. Once they meet face to face directly in front of the trash, Rex interrupts the face-off to present the option of opening the bag first to see if it is worth fighting for. They all agree, open the bag, and are met with rotting fruit and meatless bones. While it looks like an unsavory meal, the animals quickly decide it is worth it and jump into a chaotic ramble that ends with Chief biting the ear off of the rival pack's leader Igor. His yelp concludes the fight, leaving Rex, Duke, King, Boss, and Chief with their prize.

In this short interaction, the rivaling packs, the trash, and even the humans "become with" (Haraway 4) each other in tight-knit packs in order to survive, which is an unfortunate contradiction to their need to fight other packs in order to do so. Additionally, they once "became with" human beings, but that connection is not entirely severed here on the island, as the dogs' dependence on human-generated waste reflects the ways in which human activities shape the ecology of the island and influence the behaviors of its inhabitants. These aspects of the film resonate with Haraway's exploration of the entanglements between humans, animals, and their shared environments, emphasizing the ways "in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another" (Haraway 4).

After the alpha pack's chaotic scramble with Igor's pack of pedigree dogs, Rex interrupts their relaxing mealtime to say, "I don't think I can stomach any more of this garbage," initiating a discussion about their old lives. This dialogue scene serves as a crucial moment of reflection and introspection for the pack. Rex, once accustomed to the warmth and comfort of indoor living, is now on the cold and desolate Trash Island, longing for

the security and care provided by his human owners. King, once the star in dog food commercials, bears the disheveled appearance of neglect, a stark contrast to his former glamorous life. Boss, formerly a spirited mascot for a baseball team, now lacks his former spirit, crushed by the harsh realities of life on the island. Duke, desiring nothing more than basic care and attention, grieves the absence of the comforts and routines he once took for granted. As the conversation progresses, Rex admits fearfully, "I want my master" (00:12:30). This underscores a deep emotional bond between humans and their canine companions. However, Chief, who embodies resilience and survival instincts, intervenes to scold his companions for their lack of resilience as alphas, urging them to persevere. At the end of his speech, Chief insults the pack by referring to them as "pets." Rex begins to retort with the clear intention of calling him a harsher term, and Chief finishes his sentence, confidently claiming his identity as "a stray."

This scene provides a rich exploration of multispecies encounters as well. Through their reminiscence of past lives as pets and their current struggles on Trash Island, the dogs embody the complexities of human-animal relationships and the intertwined histories that shape them. Haraway's premise that touch shapes accountability is evident in the dogs' interactions with each other and their environment, reflecting their shared experiences and responsibilities. Rex, King, Boss, and Duke were each touched by their masters with various expressions of love and care, which shaped who they are today on the island. Conversely, it is later revealed that Chief has not experienced this kind of love from humans, so he finds a deeper connection with the island, where he can express his resilience. These histories drive their journey and the narrative throughout the film. Additionally, the use of anthropomorphism serves to enhance these and future messages about multispecies encounters. By portraying the dogs with human-like emotions about their past lives, viewers are invited to consider the complex bonds that exist between humans and animals from an empathetic perspective. While in real life, dogs do not have the cognitive abilities required to reflect upon change and relationships, those relationships still exist. The film just paints it in a way that human viewers can personal-

ly connect with.

Atari Kobayashi arrives on the island at 00:14:41 after the animals discuss their situation and witness his plane crash in the distance. They watch from a distance as he gets out of the plane and collapses on the ground, taking a vote on whether they should eat him or rescue him. Deciding to help, they embark on a journey with the little pilot to find his lost dog Spots. In the midst of this, viewers are shown a scene from three years prior, when the little pilot and Spots are first introduced. After his parents were in a fatal train accident and his uncle adopted him as a ward of the mayoral household, Atari is gifted with Spots as a highly trained guard dog. They are told that Spots is not a pet and should not be treated as one, but their connection as companions is clear from the beginning. They each receive a communication apparatus that is attached to their ears, and as Atari mumbles into the device, Spots begins to tear up repeatedly saying, "I can hear you." Throughout the film, as they search for Spots, Atari's presence builds on what we know of each dog's relationship with humans. This flashback to Atari's past emphasizes the deep emotional connections that can exist between humans and animals. Despite the instruction that Spots is not a pet, their relationship is characterized by companionship, communication, and mutual understanding. Haraway discusses the ways in which an encounter among species changes once they gain the ability to communicate, as they move from being an object to being a subject (25). Their ability to communicate opens the door for Spots and Atari to have a meaningful and impactful relationship that drives the film. Once again, the anthropomorphism in this scene helps the audience engage with the characters on a more emotional level. The little pilot is a vital character in the film, being the only human to show up looking for his lost dog. He represents the perseverance of deeply woven relationships between species, and his relationships with each dog, mainly Spots thus far, highlight those aspects of multispecies theory.

Upon the little pilot's arrival, we see a stark contrast between human and animal perspectives on survival and morality. While Chief, representing the more feral instincts of the canine pack, initially leans toward

viewing Atari as a potential food source, Rex advocates for compassion and assistance, reflecting a tension between primal instincts and empathy within multispecies interactions. Atari's presence on the island highlights the interdependence and mutual reliance between humans and animals in extreme circumstances. Despite their initial differences, they recognize a shared bond and understand the importance of collaboration for not only survival, but also the preservation of love and friendship. This underscores the notion that multispecies encounters often require cooperation and mutual aid, transcending traditional boundaries between humans and animals. Atari's relationships with the dogs, especially with Chief, embody this film's lessons about multispecies interaction. An important aspect of that is Chief's backstory, which is revealed at 00:40:23 after he, Rex, Boss, Duke, King, and Atari have been traveling for some time. In a close-up shot, he tells the pack that he grew up on the streets, running from dog catchers. After being caught three times and escaping the first two, he was adopted by a large family that had two dogs already. The youngest child woke him up one morning and tried to pet him. Scared, Chief bit the child and was locked in the family's shed. Once again, he escaped, returning to his life as a street dog. In this monologue, Chief explains that he knows the child was only being nice, so he doesn't know why he bit him.

As the audience, we can understand why, connecting his story to multispecies theory. Chief was not raised with humans, yet his species is one that relies on them entirely. Among the basic necessities, Boss relies on them for cheer, Rex relies on them for comfort and safety, King relies on them for his ego, and Duke relies on them for structure, but Chief has only ever relied on them for garbage. The only connection he had to humans before this was being captured by them unwillingly, and that is who the little boy was reaching out to when he was bit. These knots that tie him to humans are rotten, and new knots that consider his different past need to be tied with this human Atari to make the new pack work (Haraway 18). I say, "new pack," because this scene also emphasizes Atari's growing role as a member of their pack. Recall the earlier scene where we first met Chief, Rex, Boss, Duke, and King in an extreme long shot. In this scene,

when Chief is talking about his past, we cut to a much closer but similar shot of Boss, Atari, Rex, King, and Duke. This visually establishes that the lines between dogs and humans here are blurring, new knots between humans and animals are being tied, and Atari is becoming a member of our alpha pack. Additionally, he is paying attention to Chief and learning about who he is, reflecting Haraway's assertion that companion species need to learn to pay attention (19).

Atari's connection with Chief is solidified later in the film after the pack is separated and they continue the journey as a pair (00:55:04). After convincing Chief to fetch a stick, Atari calls him a "good boy" and hugs him. From this point forward in the film, their relationship is changed. In the next scene, Atari bathes and grooms Chief, revealing the true color and pattern of his coat. Throughout the film it was black, but the bath revealed it is white with black spots, just like Atari's lost dog Spots. Observing their similar appearance, Chief reflects on his history. He has brothers, but their breed isn't a rare one. Chief becomes unsettled by his confusion, so Atari offers him half of the dog biscuit he brought to the island. Declaring it as his "new favorite food" (00:57:39), Chief thanks Atari before the camera cuts to a close-up shot of the two moving forward on their journey, this time as true companions.

These pivotal interactions between Chief and Atari represent the new knots being tied in their multispecies relationship, which showcases the positive aspects of their new relationship. They also actively oppose the preconceived notions Chief has about humans, untying the old rotten knots that connect him to the people who believe he is a bad dog. Once the barrier that Chief has between him and Atari falls, Atari is able to help Chief step out of survival mode and reflect on his past. This kind of understanding of Chief's complex being is a key aspect of forming strong companion relationships (Haraway). Once this bond is formed, Chief and Atari's relationship drives the point of the narrative. The pack reunites and successfully completes their journey to find Spots, who has been living on the other end of the island with a pack of aboriginal dogs. Upon their arrival, it is confirmed that Chief and Spots are in fact brothers, and Spots reveals

he has a mate and will soon be a father. Unable to neglect his newfound responsibilities, he asks that his brother Chief replace him as Atari's bodyguard dog. They both accept in a discussion that mirrors traditional wedding vows, once again highlighting the depth of the connection between companion species (01:16:57).

In the final parts of the movie, it is revealed that the cure to Snout Fever has been proven effective and that Mayor Kobayashi hid the serum to push his personal agenda forward. After the scientists' supporters—a group of local young journalists—and Atari reveal this to the citizens at the megadome, he gives a touching speech that resonates deeply with the multispecies theory present in Haraway's work. Here is the relevant excerpt:

> I have spent much of my time in recent weeks traveling in the company of the very kind of animals our mayor refers to as bad dogs. They are the finest living beings I have ever come to know in all my dozen years on this earth. To your readers, the good people of Megasaki, I say, 'The cycle of life always hangs in a delicate balance: who are we and who do we want to be? (In English) Who are we?' . . . I dedicate this poem to my distant uncle Mayor Kobayashi, who took me in when I myself was a stray dog with nowhere else to turn. (01:24:34)

Here, Atari actively decenters his humanity in this narrative by referring to himself as "a stray dog." The speech awakens something in Mayor Kobayashi, forcing him to reflect on the deeply rooted bonds between humans and their companion species. After a few moments, Kobayashi announces, "Not fair to the boy, not fair to the dog," officially unstamping the Trash Island Decree.

Multispecies theory invites us to connect with the world around us without using our individual experiences as humans as the lens through which we see the species we are connecting with. By anthropomorphizing the canine characters, Anderson enables viewers to empathize with their struggles and triumphs, fostering a deeper understanding of the shared experiences between humans and animals. This narrative strategy not only serves as a powerful storytelling device but also prompts reflection on the

nature of interspecies relationships and the blurred lines between human and non-human worlds. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's ideas and academic film reviews, we can see how *Isle of Dogs* delves into the complexities of human-animal interactions, emphasizing the importance of communication, collaboration, and mutual aid in navigating shared challenges. Through characters such as Atari Kobayashi and Chief, the film portrays the transformative power of companionship and the capacity for empathy across species boundaries. At its core, *Isle of Dogs* invites us to reconsider our relationships with the world around us, urging us to connect with other species without imposing our human-centric perspectives. As Atari's poignant speech at the film's conclusion suggests, embracing multispecies theory allows us to recognize the inherent value of all living beings and strive for a more harmonious coexistence on this delicate balance of life.

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Isle of Dogs. Directed by Wes Anderson, performances by Brian Cranston, Ed Norton, Bill Murray, Jeff Goldblum, and Bob Balaban, Fox Searchlight, 2018.

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[1] At 00:05:51, the audience is shown a small section of the crowd that is in support of the scientist, sporting “pro dog” clothing accessories and raising their fists in solidarity. (*Isle of Dogs* 2018)

Filicinae. — Laubfarne. by Ernst Haeckel, 1940. Public Domain.

THE TREES SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES: HOW NON-HUMAN NARRATORS IN FICTION INFLUENCE MULTISPECIES ENCOUNTERS

Bella Hughes

Elif Shafak's 2021 novel *The Island of Missing Trees* describes fictional events that occur on the real island of Cyprus during the war between the Greek and the Turkish inhabitants of the island. This story is told from multiple points of view at various points in time in both Cyprus and London, where the characters move to and live following the events of the war and their families' disagreements with their relationship. What is unique about Shafak's storytelling is her use of a fig tree as a primary narrator of events. While the use of non-human narrators is not a new strategy, most of these occurrences involve animal speakers rather than plants or objects. In delivering a fiction narrative from the point of view of a fig tree, Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* introduces readers to multispecies encounters by providing an example of how arboreal figures communicate and experience history alongside humans in an anthropocentric world, and further encourages prosocial behavior between human and non-human species. Based on Shafak's novel, theories of attentiveness and slow-violence, and studies on the effect of non-human narrators on readers, including these "non-living" narrators in widely accessible pieces of fiction not only informs audiences of the multispecies encounters that occur in everyday life, but also opens more avenues of multispecies conservation.

Our planet has existed for about 4.5 billion years, and in that time, five mass extinctions have occurred. Thanks to human action—and the lack thereof—Earth must now suffer through the sixth mass extinction in its history (Ceballos et al.). From rising temperatures to increasingly severe weather due to greenhouse gas emissions, human impact on the environment and biodiversity has never been more visible (United Nations). While there are debates over the definite start of this age of human influence, experts agree that Earth has entered the Anthropocene Epoch, a geological era marked by human activity that will be observable far into the future (Lewis and Maslin 171). Although it is true that many people learn of things like climate change and environmental systems from news reports and social media, a less popular and lesser-known source of information comes in the form of fiction stories. Fiction offers an avenue of learning without the pressure that comes from taking on academic texts or journalistic articles. In particular, fiction provides a place to showcase the world from non-human perspectives. This is demonstrated well in Elif Shafak's 2021 novel *The Island of Missing Trees*. The novel is a fictional account of the Greek-Turkish war in Cyprus, told from multiple perspectives, but most memorably from the perspective of a fig tree. As explained in a review of the novel, "Shafak portrays different ways of life, expressed through the stories of various life-forms and connected to each other under the common denominator of grief...a sense of longing for wholeness, oneness, and harmony, not only between people but also between all elements of the wider ecosystem" (Atayurt-Fenge 76). In delivering a fictional narrative from the point of view of a fig tree, Shafak introduces readers to multispecies encounters by providing an example of how arboreal figures communicate and experience history alongside humans in an anthropocentric world, and further encourages prosocial behavior between human and non-human species. By including these "non-living" narrators in widely accessible pieces of fiction, authors can not only encourage attentiveness and inform audiences of the multispecies encounters that occur in everyday life, but also open more avenues of multispecies conservation.

Before exploring the possibilities of narrative fiction, it is important to understand multispecies studies and the theory of attentiveness. Multispecies studies considers the encounters between species and "the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations" (Van Dooren et al. 3). The purpose of a multispecies approach is to confront ecological challenges using a myriad of disciplines and bodies of research, achieving a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of issues touching countless species. With this approach, multispecies scholars can take existing knowledge of one species and apply it in the context of the other species it encounters. In contrast to other fields like ecocriticism, which often only uses how humans interact with nature and how we perceive it as a way to encourage change, multispecies studies expands beyond the world of humans and pays attention to the intricacies of other species, exposing us to other perspectives besides our own. This attention to how other species perceive and interact with the world is why the multispecies approach is the best way to analyze *The Island of Missing Trees*, whose narrator is not a human reporting how human action has changed the environment, but a tree sharing how it has experienced war, migration, and connection with all of the species it interacts with from its point of view.

Taking a multispecies approach requires paying attention to the actions, reactions, and interactions among species, both human and non-human. Part of this attention comes from "ask[ing] how specific worldings come to matter, and to matter differently, for given beings" (Van Dooren et al. 13). When one is exposed to the lives and histories of other species, one can develop the "art of attentiveness" and begin to gain more awareness of other beings that function alongside the realm of human activity. As Van Dooren et al. explain, "attention to others is vital to responding appropriately" (16). Thus, if one hopes to encourage multispecies relations and ensure mutual conservation, one must first attempt to understand the complexities of other species and their ecosystems. While there are many ways to learn attentiveness, reading fiction narrated by non-human characters

can prove to be a particularly impactful practice.

Due to the broad interpretations of the terms "non-human" and "non-living," understanding how they will be used in relation to Shafak's novel is important. In their article "Towards a theory of nonhuman narrative," Biwu Shang breaks down non-human narrative into four distinct categories: narrative about natural things, narrative about supernatural things, narrative about artificial objects, and narrative about artificial humans. While each category includes multiple examples of non-human species, the fig tree of Shafak's novel falls into the category of natural things. Because this category also includes animals, narrators like the fig tree are referred to as non-living in this analysis. Non-living in this case refers to species that are inanimate, that is, not alive in the way humans and animals are perceived to be. Trees and other non-humans that are not insects, animals, or things that are obviously living are still coparticipants with us living on this planet. Scholarship has tended to look at animal life rather than other natural objects, and while it might raise questions to refer to trees as non-living, this is deliberate in this essay to call attention to how we largely ignore objects that we do not classify as living. In this way, non-human narratives can "deconstruct anthropocentrism" and teach humans about their varied roles in "the more-than-human world" (Shang 70). It is through these non-living characters that humans can become exposed to other perspectives of the world, perspectives that serve as a reminder that the world is not a solely human one.

Though the world is "more-than-human" in reality, the non-human aspects of the world hold little stake in the scheme of human life, according to most humans. However, as discussed by Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, the goings-on of the non-human realm are real and pertinent for humans to acknowledge. Nixon defines slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The questions that Nixon asks us to consider revolve around bringing

the truth of slow violence to masses in one form or another and making it interesting enough that something may come of it. This can be challenging when one considers how the stories of slow violence "are anonymous and ... star nobody" (3). Nixon suggests creative solutions, "ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (10). I argue that Shafak does just that in her novel *The Island of Missing Trees* through her use of compelling non-human narration to tell the story of multiple species over years of growth and hardship.

The Island of Missing Trees follows the story of war-torn Nicosia, Cyprus in 1974 and the lives that the conflict touches. Partially narrated by a fig tree growing in a tavern in the divided capital, the novel covers the ways the war impacted nature alongside the secret love between Kostas, a Greek Christian, and Defne, a Turkish Muslim, and later the grief felt by Kostas and his daughter, Ada, following Defne's death in London. Shafak, who has a personal connection with Cyprus after growing up in Turkey, has wanted to tell this story for many years, but "could never dare" until she "found the fig tree" (Penguin Books Limited Editor). According to Shafak, the fig tree was a "calmer, wiser" narrator of events, able to navigate the complexities of borders, inherited trauma, and civil war better than a human narrator on the Greek or Turkish side might have. Due to its relative recency, there is not much literary scholarship on this novel. What scholarship does exist approaches the novel's commentary on inherited trauma, generational grief, diaspora, or displacement rather than its use of trees and multispecies encounters. This essay expands discussion on this subject by looking at the tree's role as narrator and further considering how wars in distant places can affect our own lives and futures.

Beyond simply being entertainment, fiction can be beneficial to promoting multispecies attentiveness because the act of reading narrative

fiction can be crucial in the development of morals and empathy (Johnson et al.). This development comes primarily from the imagery that is generated when reading, that is, the way the reader becomes immersed in the experience of the characters they are reading about and thus interprets the world from another perspective. Through this practice, readers can develop affective empathy, which is "an individual's ability to feel for another" (Johnson et al. 306). Additionally, recent studies in social learning theory and the general learning model indicate that narrative fiction that includes prosocial behavior can influence readers to behave similarly (Johnson et al.). To use an example from Shafak's novel, Kostas, one of the main characters and an expert in studies of trees and certain animals, shows an attentiveness and responsibility toward non-human species on multiple occasions. From reading about Kostas's interactions with these species, the reader can be inspired to take on similar behaviors in their own life. Fiction has historically been used by organizations and groups to promote prosocial behavior toward animals. A previous example of this is the book *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, which is the story of the titular horse's journey being owned by humans that could be both kind and cruel. What makes the depictions of cruelty more impactful is that the events are narrated by the horse, which allows readers to experience human cruelty from the horse's point of view. This tactic influences readers subtly rather than explicitly, placing them in situations where they might come to their own conclusions about issues as well as providing an avenue that is less outright informational and more entertaining than nonfiction (Małecki et al.). Within stories of animal narratives, the non-human characters detail their experiences of interacting with humans, "in particular, how their lives are changed by human activities, thus drawing readers' attention to the importance of human-nonhuman co-existence" (Shang 64). The success of *Black Beauty* demonstrates the effectiveness of prosocial fiction, as membership in humane societies and laws prohibiting animal abuse increased following its publication. Of course, that novel used non-human narration of an animal rather than a "non-living" object like in Shafak's novel.

One of the most important things the fig tree accomplishes as narrator is to raise non-human species to be just as important as humans. Most fiction focuses on the impact humans feel following war or disasters, mostly, if not completely ignoring the other species that must also recover from such events. The fig tree serves as a sort of advocate for non-human species, working to make space for their stories to be heard:

> But on an island plagued by years of ethnic violence and brutal atrocities, humans were not the only ones that suffered. So did we trees - and animals, too, experience hardship and pain as their habitats came to disappear. It never meant anything to anyone, what happened to us. It matters to me though and, so long as I am able to tell this story, I am going to include in it the creatures in my ecosystem - the birds, the bats, the butterflies, the honeybees, the ants, the mosquitoes and the mice - because there is one thing I have learned: wherever there is war and a painful partition, there will be no winners, human or otherwise. (Shafak 190)

Through the fig tree's narration, the reader is exposed to non-human stories in a form that they have seen before, but through unfamiliar eyes. As noted by Kostas, "the world humans saw was only one of many available" (Shafak 226). Humans tend to view events only in regard to how their own lives are changed or impacted, but that does not mean that other ecosystems and species cease to exist, nor does it mean that the human world is the most important. However, even though some may try to speak for other species and make space for them in the conversation, as Shafak points out, "in a land besieged with conflict, uncertainty and bloodshed, people took it for indifference, an insult to their pain, if you paid too much attention to anything other than human suffering" (147-148). In Shafak's novel, readers find themselves paying attention to non-human suffering simply from engaging with storytelling.

To allow readers to effectively take in the experiences of non-human narrators, human-like consciousness is often a necessity in the narrator. By projecting traits of human consciousness onto non-human beings, readers

can better approach unfamiliar experiences. That said, it is important to simultaneously remember that the narrator is not human and thus their experiences "may question (defamiliarize) some of readers' assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness" (Bernaerts et al. 69). As defamiliarization occurs, the text becomes a tool for delivering scientific knowledge about the non-human species and how they perceive human events (Bernaerts et al.). The use of non-human and non-living narrators in fiction is not widespread or conventional, perhaps due to the preference to consider humans as the superior species rather than to place them as equal to non-humans. Rare as they are, when non-human narrators are utilized, the impact of these stories can be found in the greater defamiliarization and empathy produced by the reading of other perspectives (Bernaerts et al.). For example, in *The Island of Missing Trees*, the fig tree's narration forces readers to pivot their perspective and view reality from another's experience. In the case of the fig tree, not only does the reader experience the war on Cyprus and other events through the fig-tree's eyes, but the reader learns valuable information about how trees feel and communicate with each other and other species. Because "object narrators collapse the cognitively basic distinction between animate and inanimate entities," it is possible that the effect of defamiliarization can be felt more intensely in object narrators than in animal narrators (Bernaerts et al. 89).

While the use of objects, specifically plants, is not conventional in modern literature, it is certainly not a new practice. Plants have been used in stories throughout history and across cultures and religions. Shafak's fig tree provides examples of the roles trees play across the globe:

> The Bedouin settle their disagreements in our shade, the Druze kiss our bark reverently, placing personal objects around us, praying for *ma'rifah*. Both Arabs and Jews make their wedding preparations beside us, hoping for marriages sturdy enough to weather any storms which may lie ahead. Buddhists want us to blossom near their shrine, and so do the Hindus. Kikuyu women in Kenya daub themselves with the sap of fig trees when they want to get pregnant and it is the same

> women who defend us bravely whenever someone tries to cut down a sacred *mugumo*. (Shafak 65)

Despite their inclusion in previous narratives, their role has often been limited to acting "as metaphorical means to anthropocentric ends: to tell human, perhaps all-too-human, (hi)stories" (Middelhoff and Peselmann 177). A popular example of this sort of role is found in the 2003 novel *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo, in which a mouse narrates his quest to save a human princess. The mouse and his journey stand as metaphors for breaking stereotypes and becoming a hero no matter how small you are. In this case of non-human narration, the focus is on the human world and how the mouse can act as human as possible to earn the love of the princess. Little emphasis is placed on multispecies encounters, with the main purpose of the novel being to entertain and deliver a message of individuality.

In contrast, the goal in using trees in stories, and what Shafak manages to do in her novel, is to present the trees as characters in their own right, with thoughts, feelings, and agency, rather than reducing them to background objects in human lives. However, if trees are to be presented as accurate characters and narrators, authors must take care to research the species' physiology and culture, ensuring that it is *the trees'* stories that are being told (Middelhoff and Peselmann). In Shafak's case, thorough research on trees has been done, so when the audience is introduced to the fig tree, they are interested in both learning and hearing what the tree has to say. Not only does this sort of narration educate readers on trees as cognizant beings, but it allows for a perspective on events like war that is separate from divisive human politics. Shafak has claimed that the narration of the fig tree allowed her a certain degree of freedom to tell the story of the war on Cyprus from neither a Greek nor a Turkish side, but rather from the side of natural objects impacted by the human conflict (O'Neill). One of the biggest things that sets trees apart from humans is their longevity. Trees have existed longer than humans, and they will remain long after humans are gone. As the fig tree explains, "a tree's rings do not only reveal

its age, but also the traumas it has endured, including wildfires, and thus, carved deep in each circle, is a near-death experience, an unhealed scar" (Shafak 45). During their long lives on Earth, trees have seen civilizations rise and fall, and felt the effects of human action. Their connection to and awareness of the many species in their environment allows them to recognize how every action has an impact within multispecies encounters:

> A tree always knows that it is linked to endless life forms – from honey fungus, the largest living thing, down to the smallest bacteria and archaea – and that its existence is not an isolated happenstance but intrinsic to a wider community. Even trees of different species show solidarity with one another regardless of their difference, which is more than you can say for so many humans. (Shafak 100)

As evidenced in the final line of this passage, there is sometimes a bitterness toward humans in the fig tree's narration that is not often apparent in other forms of narration. Part of this comes from the writer's intention; Shafak wants to indicate that humans are doing something wrong, while other authors might just want to tell a human story from an outsider's point of view. A tree is a good medium for communicating this message because of the length of time they have experienced and understood multispecies encounters.

As discussed previously, Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* presents a tree as a main character, a narrator of events being experienced not just by humans, but by other species that are often overlooked. One of the most important things Shafak does to adjust readers to the narration of the fig tree is to give her a familiar voice, one similar yet different to our own: "I am a *Ficus carica*, known as the edible common fig, though I can assure you there's nothing common about me" (Shafak 23). Throughout the fig tree's narration, the reader is able to get a sense of a personality that is similar to other narrations they have encountered. The fig tree shares her thoughts and emotions, ruminating on her environment and the other characters around her, as is characteristic of any human or animal narrator. Though there is humanization of the nonhuman object, there is still a dis-

tinct otherness found in the fig tree that comes from the unfamiliar ways it views the world.

Though some of the fig tree's narration is meant to comment on the other main characters, each chapter narrated by the fig tree provides some insight into the fig tree's world and their interactions with the other life in Cyprus and then in London. After being buried underground to prepare for winter in London, the fig tree comments on the unfathomable number of microorganisms that live and work within the soil and how trees can hear the vibrations of creatures both above and below ground level (Shafak 80-81). The fig tree narrates an instance where another tree communicates with her: "I picked up an odd sound...it turned out it was my old friend the hawthorn tree, a native species, a gentle hermaphrodite, sending signals through roots and fungi, asking how I was doing" (99). Later she explains how "In nature, everything talks all the time" (341) indicating that there is a whole realm of communication and social order separate from human understanding. Further research into the complexity of arboreal communication is explained by the fig tree:

> Under and above ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. Although we have to compete for resources sometimes, we are good at protecting and supporting each other...Even when we might seem stand-offish, growing away from others or at the edge of forests, we still remain connected across entire swathes of land, sending chemical signals through the air and across our shared mycorrhizal networks. (99)

This explanation of connection between trees beckons the idea of sentience, a concept previously thought to be reserved for humans and certain animals.

Sentience, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "the condition or quality of being sentient, consciousness, susceptibility to sensation," is typically assigned to beings that display a nervous system. Species like plants, fungi, and bacteria have been labeled as unconscious

due to the lack of nerves in their anatomy ("What beings are not conscious"). However, research done by German forester Peter Wohlleben strives to disprove this theory. In *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World*, Wohlleben attempts to redefine trees, displaying them as beings with intelligence and physical reactions to stimuli. He discusses how trees learn and react to pain with distressed sounds like screaming, like humans, though they can only be heard with advanced machinery. This is a trait that the fig tree also references, asking if humans would wish to know "that many plants, when threatened, attacked or cut, can produce ethylene, which works like a type of anaesthetic [sic], and this chemical release has been described by researchers as akin to hearing stressed plants screaming" (Shafak 45). While the strength of Wohlleben's argument depends on a certain degree of pathos, and the presence of sentience in plants has not yet been proven, his assessment of tree consciousness does open the door for further studies into the possibility of plant sentience.

Aside from her commentary on the ways different species communicate with each other, the fig tree also demonstrates her own understanding of how other species' actions affect her own life and environment. She shares her sorrow at the widespread death of bats in Cyprus, referring to them as her friends and acknowledging their importance in the ecosystem and their close connection with the pollination of trees (Shafak 150). When reflecting on a time a honeybee got stuck inside an office, she claims that she "had a deep respect for her kind. No other species embodies the circle of life quite like the Apidae. If they were to disappear one day, the world would never recover from their loss" (294). The fig tree's understanding of the importance of each species and how they work together heightens the trust a reader can place in her narration and expands a reader's empathy for species that they might not have otherwise considered. This ability of the fig tree to teach and inspire empathy, and in turn prosocial behavior, fulfills Nixon's recommendation for drawing attention to slow violence. In using the fig tree as an intriguing narrative device,

Shafak finds a creative way to tune audiences in to the long-term effects of war and human action on all species without losing interest.

Though narrators like the fig tree in Shafak's novel are not found often in popular media, there is no doubt of their benefit to multispecies studies and the understanding of multispecies encounters. With their unique ability to view the world from non-human perspectives, non-human narrators do the job of educating humans in the ways in which major events in the human realm of experience also impact the many non-human realms of experience. Humans beg for and provide humanitarian aid during times of strife, yet little to no aid is given to "non-living" inhabitants of the planet, despite how they may beg for help in their own way. Texts like *The Island of Missing Trees* not only show us how we might pay better attention to our co-inhabitants, but also inspire us to act in the best interest of all beings, human or not. As the earth progresses into the Anthropocene and the climate crisis continues, texts that spotlight non-anthropocentric perspectives will continue to hold increasing value as mediums of education and advocacy.

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EXPLORING RELIGIOUS ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S THE PLAGUE OF DOVES

Katelyn Mathew

In her 2009 novel *The Plague of Doves*, Louise Erdrich weaves a complex story that demonstrates the attempted erasure of Native American culture and religion through contrasting religious animal motifs. Serpents, doves, and lambs have inherent associations with biblical and some indigenous religions that, together, build a conflict that is reflected by the tension between the occupants of the reservation and by the white characters. For example, the Biblical interpretation of serpents is that they are evil spirited and essentially the embodiment of Satan; however, some religions view serpents as creatures that cast out demons. These contrasting beliefs, along with other examples in the novel, create the religious and spiritual conflict that occurs in the novel as the Native Americans are bombarded with Catholicism and other pressures to abandon their culture. Associating or assigning these animals with religious symbolism to different characters, both white and indigenous, Erdrich enriches the conversation surrounding the conversion of Native Americans to Catholicism and the separation of indigenous peoples with their families and culture by exposing the entitlement and power imbalances present between Native Americans and Westerners.

Religion, especially as it pertains to Catholic conversation and influence on Native Americans, is a hallmark of many of Louise Erdrich's works, including *Tracks* (1988) and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). In her 2009 novel *The Plague of Doves*, Erdrich utilizes contrasting religious animal motifs to add to her critical commentary on religion in relation to the conversion of Native American tribes to Catholicism and other Western practices. These motifs build upon religious symbolism to create and demonstrate the colonizer entitlement and power imbalances present between Native Americans and Westerners.

The Plague of Doves is a 2009 novel set in North Dakota in the fictional town of Pluto, which neighbors an Ojibwe reservation. Throughout the novel, white characters and Ojibwe characters collide and interact, intertwining family trees and tragic events from the past, such as the murder of an entire white family excluding their baby daughter which led to the hanging of three innocent men belonging to the Ojibwe tribe. The novel is separated into chapters that are narrated by a range of characters from Pluto.

In each chapter, religion comes into play in some way. In Evalina's first chapter, which is the first chapter of the entire novel, we see Mooshum, her grandfather, interact with Father Cassidy. Along with his brother Shamengwa, Mooshum taunts and mocks the priest, who visits often to encourage their family to attend weekly mass. During one of Father Cassidy's visits where he suggests it is time they return to the church to confess as it has been an extended period of time and they have surely sinned since their last confession, Shamengwa claims that he has not sinned. Mooshum agrees and says, "I, too, completely pure," while his chin "trembled," as if he were holding back laughter (Erdrich 24).

In Evalina's first chapter, we see her struggling with her sexuality as she develops a crush on one of the nuns that teaches in her Catholic school. Catholic schools, or mission schools, were a common way to convert the Native Americans to Catholicism. In "Native Americans on the Path to the Catholic Church: Cultural Criss and Missionary Adaptation,"

Ross Enoch discusses how mission schools were essential to the conversion of Native Americans to Catholicism because they were often boarding schools where Native American children would be cut off from their family's culture for large portions of time (85). There is also non-Catholic religion representation in the novel, particularly in Marn Wolde's perspective as she is the wife to Billy Peace, a cult leader who began as a Catholic priest before forming his own religion based around the "spirit." Even without the animal symbolism in these instances, it is abundantly clear that religion is a major theme in The Plague of Doves. Erdrich weaves the animal symbolism with the religious storylines to enhance the theme and to give it a deeper reading.

Present in both the title itself and throughout the novel—especially in the beginning—doves play a pivotal role in understanding Erdrich's religious motifs and how they contribute to the overarching theme of the desire for power. In Western religions, the dove has multiple meanings including, but not limited to, peace, the Holy Spirit, love, new beginnings, and purity. In her review of the novel, Carole Goldberg reflects on these various meanings in comparison to how Erdrich utilizes the doves and states that they appear in "guises throughout the book: emblem of nature, symbol of the Holy Spirit, harbinger of troubles" (Goldberg, par. 6). In the book of Genesis, after the Great Flood, Noah sent out a dove to test if the water had receded. When the dove returned, it had an olive branch in its beak, implying that there were trees and foliage and not just endless water (*Life Application Study Bible*, Gen. 8.11). The dove with an olive branch has become a widely recognized symbol of peace. The dove seems to only have positive connotations in Western spirituality, which contrasts with the symbolism of doves in Native American religions. While some Native American tribes view doves similarly to Western religions—doves as symbols of peace and new beginning—some view doves as omens of death. The Algonquian peoples, of which the Ojibwe are a part of, is one of these groups (Lewis 1).

In the beginning of the novel, Mooshum tells the story of doves desc-

ending over Pluto in 1896 in what he describes as a plague. The doves decimated crops and tormented the townspeople. Mooshum explains that "one could wring the necks of hundreds or thousands and effect no visible diminishment of their number…The dead only fed the living and each morning when the people woke it was to the scraping and beating of wings, the murmurous susurration, the awful cooing babble, and the sight, to those who still possessed intact windows, of the curious and gentle faces of those creatures" (Erdrich 5–6). During this time, Mooshum was serving as an altar boy in his older brother's church. This church was covered with birds who were knocking each other off the cross on the roof from where they perched. During one of the attacks the doves had on the people of Pluto, the women pulled their skirts up so they could run from the violent birds. Mooshum, young and raised around Catholicism, lusted over the women's legs. However, a dove struck him in the forehead "with such force that it seemed to have been flung directly by God's hand, to smite and blind him before he carried his sin of appreciation any farther" (Erdrich 8). In this scene, where Mooshum is struck in the face with a dove, he looks up and sees his future wife Junesse wiping the blood from his forehead and ear. Evalina narrates her grandfather's telling of the story and describes what she imagines, saying, "The Holy Spirit hovered between them" (Erdrich 12). In Christianity, the Holy Spirit's role is the helper; the Holy Spirit may reveal information or provide peace and comfort. In the book of Luke, the dove is used in a metaphor for the Holy Spirit: "And the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove" (Luke 3.22). Likewise, the Spirit is known to give power: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8). In this way, Erdrich's inclusion of the Holy Spirit in the retelling of Mooshum's meeting with his future wife amidst the plague of doves shows how both Mooshum and Junesse gained agency from their interaction on that day. Junesse, who is white, gained enough power to leave her abusive aunt as well as her responsibilities caring for six younger cousins,whereas

Mooshum gained enough power to leave and to avoid becoming a priest like his older brother whose church he was the altar boy for. Had the plague of doves not fallen over the town, the couple's future together might not have been guaranteed.

The word "plague," which is used to describe the doves and their reign of terror over Pluto, has a religious connotation as there have been many plagues depicted in the Bible. One specific plague that is similar to the plague of doves in the novel is the locust plague in the book of Exodus: "If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields" (Exod. 10.4–5). The plague of locusts was the eighth of ten plagues God laid over Egypt to assert His power and force Pharaoh to release the enslaved Israelites. With this context, the plague of doves over the town of Pluto might symbolize the way the Westerners pressured Native Americans to convert to Western culture, as well as Western religions. By refusing Western colonization—as Mooshum does, especially when he decides not to follow his brother's footsteps to become a priest and instead runs off with Junesse—the Ojibwe folks, alongside the white residents of Pluto, experience the plague of doves. However, as evidenced by both history and by *The Plague of Doves*, the power and influence of colonizers surpassed the Native Americans' efforts, similar to how God's pressure against Pharoah eventually wore him down to surrender.

It is important to note that while many of the Native American traditions and populations have diminished since the colonization of what is now the United States, these communities are far from extinct. Believing so would fall subject to the trope of the "vanishing Indian," a myth which Harvard University's Pluralism Project describes as "the American imagination that many believe there are no more Native Americans, or at least no more 'real Indians'"("Myth of the 'Vanishing Indian'" par. 4). This is evidenced to be false. Today, there are a recorded 6.79 million Native Am-

ericans from 574 federally recognized tribes living in the United States ("Native American Population by State 2023" par. 3). Members of this population partake in active roles in legislation, in the government, in activism, and in the spreading of awareness of their communities to continue to give their people a voice in a time where the "vanishing Indian" myth is still believed by many. The Pluralism Project states, "Indigenous men and women say plainly that they are here to stay, and that American expansion and American history rests on their stolen land" ("Myth of the 'Vanishing Indian'" par. 4). While it is clear that Westerners did not erase the Native American, they did damage their population and cause changes in some traditions and practices, which will be explained in more depth later in this paper.

Another way to look at the plague of doves decimating the crops and the livelihood of the people of Pluto is to see it as a representation of Western civilization taking steps towards the erasure of Native American land, religion, and culture. As the white population in America moved west, indigenous tribes experienced "some of the most rapid and dramatic cultural changes in history" (Enoch 71), including economic and social changes, which were prominent factors that diminished many traditional Native American religions. This was a result of a multitude of reasons, one of those being the relocation or destruction of indigenous-owned land. In many Native American communities, religious traditions and rituals are linked to specific landmarks or sites. Because they were essentially cut off from these sites, their religions declined, and some seemed to die off completely (Enoch 74). This view on the natural world and land differed from the view Christians hold. Christian worship is not restricted to specific places as the "church" is anywhere where there are at least two Christians gathered in fellowship together (Matt. 18.20). Angela Sparks writes, "Understanding the reciprocity and relational nature of the Ojibwe people's treatment of the environment and its inhabitants is key to recognizing the stark contrast between Indigenous and settler approaches to land use in the early nineteenth century" (Sparks 409). It is possible these differing views

on the religious and general significance of location impacted the manner the United States government seized indigenous-owned land, exerting their power over the indigenous peoples.

This loss of land caused many Native Americans to lose aspects of their religions. Discussing the *Birchbark House* series by Erdrich alongside other Native American works, Roxanne Harde claims, "Erdrich holds up these small migratory animals as the better symbols for the family and their people" (Harde 241). While the "migratory animals" are not doves, Harde does discuss the role of birds in the *Birchbark House* series. In the series, she claims that the birds are symbolic of the Ojibwe people and the dynamics within their specific family. Additionally, the birds are a source of protection and guidance. This is a far different depiction of birds from their symbolism in *The Plague of Doves* because the birds are not described as characters and do not provide any guidance, other than possibly being the reason Mooshum meets Junesse. Even still, the birds wreak havoc and cause harm to the people and the town. The rationalization of colonizing Native land includes bringing the indigenous people to perceived "better" ways of life, despite the harm and genocide committed. Perhaps this believed benefit is reflected in Mooshum's meeting his future wife, and the detrimental colonization of Native land, which expresses the imbalanced power Westerners had over Native peoples.

Taking the Ojibwe's view of doves into consideration, a different interpretation of the plague arises. Rather than relating to the Egyptian plagues, the Holy Spirit, or the Westernization of Native American culture, this interpretation depicts the doves as a bad omen. Because the plague takes place in 1896, it is a precursor to the tragic events that are to follow in 1911: the murder of the white Lochren family, excluding a single family member who is a baby, and the lynching of three innocent Ojibwe men who were wrongfully blamed for the crime.

Along with doves, serpents also emerge as a religious symbol, though it is through Marn Wolde's perspective that we see them. Marn Wolde, a white woman, married Billy Peace, an Ojibwe soldier-turned-preacher.

Many characters in the novel experience conflict between their Native American religious beliefs and the pressure to assimilate into Catholicism—by Father Cassidy and mission schools, for example—and Billy's conflict led him to form his own religion that Marn described as "a religion based on what religion was before it was religion" (Erdrich 158). Because there is little documentation that suggests there was a time where civilization did not believe in one or multiple higher powers, this may allude to the days where Jesus walked the Earth with His original followers. Billy viewed himself highly, especially after getting struck by lightning, so there is a parallel between Billy and his followers and Jesus and His. To spread his religion, Billy and his followers travel. Marn obtains two serpents—a diamondback and a northern copperhead, both venomous—from a family who practiced an unorthodox religion and handled snakes whom she met while traveling alongside Billy and his followers. When the old woman from the snake handler family gives Marn the serpents, she tells her that she will get bit but live because of Marn's power. The woman also tells Marn that the snakes "have judgment in them…[a]nd they have love" (Erdrich 160). After hearing of this, Marn picks the snakes up and willingly lets them bite her. Marn describes this experience as "getting close to spirit" (Erdrich 160), which she did not find in Billy's religion. She goes as far as to call them her "lambs of god" (Erdrich 173). Because the snakes judged and approved of her, and she had the "power," she did not die, just as the woman told her.

As Marn's chapter progresses, Marn grows to hate Billy. While they are intimate one night, Marn takes a needle "filled with the venom of the snake and tipped with the apple of good and evil" and plunges it into Billy's heart, killing him (Erdrich 178). If we read the serpents as a Jesus-like figure, as suggested by the "lamb of god" reference, then the serpents are Jesus and judge Billy, finding him guilty and thus killing him with their venom. However, if we read the serpents as derived from the devil, then perhaps they tempted Marn of sin in the form of her husband's murder. This would line up with Christianity's view on serpents. In the book of

Genesis, the serpent is described as "more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (Gen. 3.1). Likewise, in Revelation: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray" (Rev. 12.9.). The story of Original Sin also contains a serpent where the devil, in the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. This forbidden fruit is referenced in the novel when Marn describes the needle as "tipped with the apple of good and evil." The serpent is the devil in this circumstance, so the serpents Marn possesses hold that connotation. However, the family who handles snakes do so because they believe snakes "cast out devils by handling poisons" (Erdrich 160). This reading is the opposite of what the serpent represents in the Bible, so it creates more of that religious and spiritual conflict that occurs in the novel as the Native Americans are bombarded with Catholicism. Robert Lake-Thom, a descendant of Karuk and Seneca tribes and a traditional Native healer and spiritual teacher, views snakes similarly to the snake handler family: "They can have good power, bad power, or both…used for seeing, healing, and protection" (14). With either interpretation, the serpents held the power that enabled Marn to murder Billy.

While it can be interpreted that the murder of Billy is another case of a white character killing a Native American in an act that further erases the Native American population just as the settlers who settled on the Americas enacted on the indigenous peoples since the beginning of colonization in the United States and perpetuates the myth of the vanishing Indian, Deborah L. Madsen complicates this idea. In "Discontinuous Narrative, Ojibwe Sovereignty, and the Wiindigoo Logic of Settler Colonialism: Louise Erdrich's Marn Wolde," Madsen argues that Marn's narration is unreliable, and that her actions and delusions reflect a colonizer's perspective. Madsen writes, "Marn Wolde's narration achieves the displacement of the indigenous into the category of the monstrous and of the political into the sphere of the private by portraying herself as the spousal victim of Billy Peace's overwhelming appetite for power of all kinds" (Madsen 26).

Madsen describes Marn's "appetite for power of all kinds" as "settler land hunger" (Madsen 24) because Marn would inherit their jointly possessed money and land after Billy's death, taking away the power he had built for himself. Marn's implicit "appetite for power" is heightened and enabled through the snakes, which are a vessel of power for her. Like how many white people rationalize the relocation and westernization of Native Americans, Marn rationalizes the killing of her Ojibwe husband. She believes that because the snakes judged her highly and judged Billy to be less worthy, and that the land under their name belonged to her, that killing Billy was a reasonable means to that end.

Furthermore, Billy posed a threat to Marn's power because he subverted the roles of conquered and conqueror, as Rachel Bonini claims in "Constructing the Past: Places, Histories, and Identities in Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves*." She writes, "Billy contorts his agency into a vicious form of domineering power, in a sense reversing the roles" (Bonini 104). Although Billy takes back the land that had been stolen from his people, Erdrich does not paint him as a hero in the scenario. Once he obtains power, he abuses it, just as Marn abuses her power that she uses to get the land back. In an analysis of *Tracks*, Erdrich's novel from 1988, Gheytasi and Hanif allege that Erdrich does not play into positioning people opposite of each other with a black and white perspective. They write that Erdrich "avoids giving priority to one cultural code over another; her literary and cultural hybridization intends to deconstruct binaries like the Europeans versus the Natives" (Gheytasi and Hanif 151). While this is written about *Tracks*, it is true to the way Erdrich writes Billy and Marn as well. Neither are given favor as both abuse power in their own ways. This manipulation of "traditional narrative convention" (Gheytasi and Hanif 1-52) also translates to the other decisions she made while writing *The Plague of Doves*, including "time, truth, narration, and reliability" (Gheytasi and Hanif 152). Using Marn's perspective, as she experiences living as a cult leader's wife and gets bitten by poisonous serpents, allows the narrative unreliability to come through and challenges the idea that Marn

is a helpless, victimized wife of Billy, which Madsen claims is a common interpretation (Madsen 23). Billy peace took the religion he learned from the white settlers and mixed it with other religions—both from Native American culture and from his own mind—but his religion, whether or not it was harmful, was taken from him by Marn's snakes. Her power—symbolized by the serpents—stole his religion, reflecting the way colonizers historically stole Native American religions.

Erdrich utilizes a couple other animals as symbols throughout the novel, though snakes and doves are the most prominent. Three of these animals are salamanders and lambs. The salamander is only discussed in the first chapter, which is told from Evelina's perspective. Siblings Evelina and Joseph observe the behaviors and physical attributes of black salamanders because Joseph expresses an interest in observing their life cycle throughout the year. Mooshum informs them that nuns believed the salamanders were "emissaries from the unholy dead, sent up by the devil, and hell was full of them" (Erdrich 29). Likewise, Father Cassidy tells the siblings, "There are some who believe those creatures represent the devil" (Erdrich 36), though he does not believe it himself. However, Joseph and Evelina—as well as their grandfather and most of their family—do not subscribe to the Catholic faith that the mission school and Father Cassidy encourage, and they do not view the salamanders as from the devil. Instead, they show them kindness by saving them from the schoolboys who would've stomped on them had the siblings not gotten to them first.

At one point, when Joseph grows impatient observing the elusive amphibians, he dissects a live salamander using his father's equipment. Witnessing the salamander's exposed insides and guts reflects a discussion between Father Cassidy, Mooshum, and Shamengwa not long after the di ssection. It's a brief moment, but they mention God creating each of them, "down to the details" (Erdrich 33). This discussion—being created with precision and detail—correlates with the dissection of the salamander because the procedure allows Joseph and Evelina to see a creature that God made from within. The dissection, as well as the rest of Joseph's observat-

ion, also demonstrates a power imbalance because he is able to do what he wants with the salamanders. The salamander he dissected alive had tried to crawl away during the night, but died at the windowsill with its insides—which Joseph examined and pinned in place—unraveled and stretched (Erdrich 30). In an analysis of animals and metaphors in Native American literature, Gerald Vizenor writes, "We learned as hunters, and later as authors, never to let a wounded animal suffer. Wounded animals were put out of their miseries, at heart our miseries of the animal other in literature" (666). While the salamander is put out of its misery, it is not by Joseph's doing. He dissects the salamander while it was still living, unintentionally allowing it to suffer, and then left it cut open and alive while he slept. Despite not maliciously dissecting the salamander, Joseph's position allows him to ignore the suffering of the salamander. Once it dies, he buries it with Evalina, but the death does not affect him deeply because he begins dissecting them again a month later. His previous kindness for them was overcome by the power he held over them, which allowed him the distance from their suffering. Similarly, the transportation of the salamanders from their original habitat to a fabricated one for Joseph to observe them more closely also reflects his exercise of his power over them. It also parallels the forced removal and constriction of Native Americans from their native land to reservations. However, as the salamanders never remain in their relocated habitat, many Native Americans make efforts towards restoring their stolen land and traditions.

Used in Marn Wolde's chapter, another animal Erdrich uses that has connotations of religious symbolism to contribute to the effect of power demonstrations in the novel is the lamb. More specifically, the "Lamb of God." Marn describes the snakes as such to Billy while in bed with both him and the snakes. While Billy is disgusted and wary of the snakes, Marn feels comfortable around them, if not empowered and lustful. The term "Lamb of God" comes directly from the Bible and is the title of Jesus. Claiming the snakes as her lambs of god gives the snakes the role of Jesus, the Son of God the Father, which would assign Marn the position of God

the Father. The Holy Trinity is then made whole: Marn, as God the Father, the snakes as God the Son, and their connection as God the Spirit. Jesus is called the "Lamb of God" because lambs were often used for sacrifices, and Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice to pay for everyone's sins. The Bible reads, "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us all from sin" (1 John 1.7). The serpent's venom parallels Jesus's blood because it "saves" or sets Marn "free" from Billy. In Marn's greedy delusion, she must believe that Billy is the ultimate evil. It is interesting that the snakes are described as lambs, though, considering the practice of sacrificing lambs and the crucifixion death of Jesus. This would assume that Marn would kill them, too, as she killed Billy. However, this does not happen. Marn's connection with the snakes is severed when she is no longer on Wolde land (which was once reservation land). The Holy Spirit binds people with God, so the disconnection assumes a distance from the Spirit as well. After killing Billy, when Marn is in the restaurant with her children, she loses her title as God the Father—as well as her power—because she is no longer a part of the Trinity that gave her the power. Her connection with the land could possibly reflect the connection between Native Americans and their land, especially their religious sites that have been stolen from them either in relocation or destruction.

The Ojibwe religious traditions respect the manidoog, or the "spirits" ("Anishinaabe Ojibwe Ways" par. 2). These spirits are likely what Billy Peace based some of his religion from, considering he stripped the figures of God and Satan from the Catholic religion he once preached and he is from the Ojibwe tribe. Marn narrates, "There was only spirit…There was spirit, and that was vast, vast, vast, so vast we had to shut out the enormousness of it" (Erdrich 159). The spirits in Ojibwe traditions are most commonly symbolized by animal spirits. ("Anishinaabe Ojibwe Ways" par. 2). This is likely because of the "interdependent relationship between animals and people" (Enoch 72) of many Native American religions. As Sparks explains, "In contrast to the settlers who separated spirit and nature, the Ojibwe are portrayed by Erdrich as people who believe that spirit

and nature are inseparable" (407). By having a white woman find "spirit" while with the snakes, and then using them to rationalize and enable her to kill an Ojibwe man for her own personal gain, Marn steals more from the people her ancestors have historically stolen from. In many Native American cultures, animals are regarded as "sustenance, as spiritual helper and guide, and as a symbol of the ability to respond to, adapt, and even thrive in drastically changing circumstances" (Harde 231). Bonini contributes to this idea and asserts that the plague of doves represents the history of humans overtaking untouched wilderness, or white Americans overtaking Native American communities, and relates that to the main characters of the story (Bonini 103). This overtaking involves religious conversion, of course, but Bonini's point about the plague representing humans overtaking untouched wilderness adds to the conversation because of the strong ties between Native American religion and nature.

Many Native American economies, which relied on hunting and farming, were interconnected with religious rituals. By continuing to participate in these farming and hunting practices, their religions persisted. However, as a result of white overhunting and the formation of reservations, many tribes had to abandon these practices. These practices not only broke down their traditional economies and ties to sacred sites, but they also broke down their religion and overall culture (Enoch 75). With the breakdown of their culture, it became easier to convince them to adopt the Catholic ways. Taking one's power displays the power of the taker, or conqueror; in this scenario, that would be settlers. This is one of the hallmarks of Madsen's "appetite for power of all kinds." Not only do they want power, but they are also incentivized to strip it from others to create a steeper imbalance. With the metaphoric nature and treatment of the animals in Erdrich's novel, they serve as allusion and symbol to expose the ways in which religion is handled throughout the book: as complicated power dynamics and imbalances, particularly in relation to the Westernization of Native American peoples and culture that sought to erase their religion.

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM BEE MOVIE AND MULTISPECIES THEORY

Lilly Elrod

Multispecies theory is applicable to a multitude of formats for analysis. In this essay, the film *Bee Movie* is analyzed for its purpose in multispecies studies and how it can be used to understand the function of the bee outside of the film. Multispecies theory suggests a new form of viewing the world, of being attentive to those around you that might not warrant a second thought, like an annoying bee buzzing around your head. It asks us to analyze the interactions we see around us on a day-to-day basis and how the world functions around these interactions. This essay analyzes the interactions in *Bee Movie* and how they might translate to real-life interactions made by bees. This essay analyzes how bees interact with the hive, flowers, and various other parts of the world around them in their daily lives and how these interactions shape not only the lives of humans, but other species as well.

The honeybee has been in countless headlines and topics of conversation, from concerns over the disappearance of bees to the unique way they communicate, honeybees are not only important to ecosystems, but to culture in America. The western honeybee, Apis mellifera is a vital and well-studied insect, but what impact does it have on the world, and what has popular media said about this insect? Many forms of popular media center around the honeybee, from movies, to television shows, to works of art. A significant portion of this media is aimed toward education, whether in kids' media or through documentaries about the importance of the mighty honeybee. One of the most popular pieces of media from this genre is *Bee Movie*, released in 2007 and directed by Simon J. Smith and Steve Hickner. This is an infamous movie, with memes and jokes surrounding it spanning the last decade. While *Bee Movie* is a children's movie, it analyzes our world through a multispecies lens without meaning to. This movie showcases the interdependence and connectedness that links all living things on the planet together through the relationships that the common honeybee has with the world around it, whether it is the hive, flowers, or other animals and bugs.

The story of *Bee Movie* is a simple one: the protagonist, Barry B. Benson, terrified at the thought of working every day until he dies producing honey for the hive, ventures into the human world. Upon entry into the world, he discovers that humans use their hard-earned honey in their food, drinks, and body products. This outrages Barry to the point where he sues the human race for commandeering their honey, and he wins. All the honey that humans have taken is returned to the bees and, for the first time in twenty-seven million years, the bees stop making honey. This leads to all the plants in the world dying, and Barry having to come up with a clever way to save the planet, with the help of his human love interest, Vanessa. The day is saved, and Barry and Vanessa live happily ever after in their bee-human relationship. The way the movie shows how important even the smallest creature is to the dynamic of our society and ecosystem is a key tenant of multispecies theory. Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and

Ursula Münster, authors of "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness", pose the question:Are all lively entities biological, or might a tornado, a stone, or a volcano be amenable to similar forms of immersion? What does it mean to live with others in entangled worlds of contingency and uncertainty? More fundamentally, how can we do the work of inhabiting and co-constituting worlds well?

Bees are taken for granted in our world. They're the little annoying bugs that buzz around us and scare our pants off because, what if we get stung? How do we determine what is important to each species, and how do we determine what is alive and what is not? Examining the dynamics of bees in Bee Movie allows us to view bees in a new light as well as acknowledge the gaps of information present in the movie.

For some background into real-life honeybees, the western honeybee, Apis mellifera, is one of the most studied insects in the world (Wood 1100). According to Britannica, the term "honeybee" can apply to any of the seven members of the genus "Apis-", but is usually in reference to Apis mellifera. Honeybees are extremely social creatures with a unique form of communication—they dance. Honeybees are the main pollinator for most flowering plants in natural and agricultural ecosystems (Danforth R 156). The importance of honeybees cannot be understated. According to Brianna Randall in her article "The Value of Birds and Bees," honeybees pollinate up to eighty percent of all flowering plants, and up to one hundred and thirty types of fruits and vegetables. In Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*, she writes:

> Ms. Cayenne Pepper continues to colonize all my cells—a sure case of what the biologist Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis. I bet if you were to check our DNA, you'd find some potent transfections between us. Her saliva must have the viral vectors. Surely, her darter-tongue kisses have been irresistible. Even though we share placement in the phylum of vertebrates, we inhabit not just different genera and divergent families but altogether different orders (15)

In this passage, Haraway is talking about her pet, Ms Cayenne Pepper, and how by existing together, surely their bodies share cells after so much

time together. As I sit here, I think about all the tea sweetened with honey that I've consumed in my life–all the honey straws bought at fairs and festivals. After eating their life source, their sole sustenance in the world over years and years, how much do I have in common with a bee? If you look at my biology, at all that I've consumed, how close am I to a honeybee—or any animal? I've lived with my cat for thirteen years now–over half of my life. How much of me is her, and how much of her is me? And, truthfully, how much does it matter? The labels we as humans put on everything, the way we explain our existence, is meaningless in the study of multispecies theory. It is all a way for humans to label and explain the world we inhabit. Multispecies theory tries to find a way to give those we deem "lesser" or "non-sentient" a voice.

Multispecies theory challenges us to change the way we think about our day-to-day interactions with non-humans. We must analyze what it means to be a bee in a world where the function of the bee has been changed by human interference and how that changes how the world works. Jordan Luttrell in their essay "Knowing the Honey bee: A Multispecies Ethnography" says, "The honey bee is commonly known as an introduced, domesticated species, kept by humans in beehives in apiculture. This conceals the agency of the honey bee, rendering it passive, productive and compliant to the desires of humans, or in need of human intervention for survival" (4). The bee is no longer a free agent. Instead, the bee has been domesticated for commercial use by humans. The relationship between bees has changed, and so has their relationship with the surrounding environment. Luttrell continues with:

Recent scholarship argues that non-humans do not just exist in the world, they are unruly agents which experience the world in particular ways. This scholarship has opened pathways of inquiry that explore how we know and engage with non-humans, and how modes of knowing and engaging shape them (11). Honeybees used to roam wild in the woods, cultivating honey as their sole food source. Honey is their lifeline—it is their entire life, essentially, boiled down into one substance. The importance of honey is an essential part of the plot for *Bee Movie*, as the com-

mandeering of honey by humans is the motivation Barry B. Benson needs to sue the entire human race for stealing their honey.

There is much that we do not understand about the honeybee. For instance, bees have been experiencing rapid declines in numbers for decades now. Much research has gone into what is causing their rapid decline, and several culprits have been identified. In an article by Jessica Robbins titled "Bees in the Balance," the phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) is explored, which is a condition where bees seem to disappear or die out of nowhere, leaving a colony in disarray. Robbins details that "[w]ithin six months of its first appearance, Colony Collapse Disorder had claimed the lives of up to 80 percent of the nation's honeybees, and there was still no clear explanation for the disorder in sight" (2) CCD is a truly disturbing phenomenon and one that has required a lot of research. There is still no answer as to what causes CCD, but cases of the disorder have dwindled over the years ("Colony Collapse Disorder"). The truth is that humans could very well face the daunting conflict in Bee Movie where the flowering plants in the world see a massive decline because of the loss of bees.

Before diving into an analysis of the movie, I took a look at how the public felt about the movie. Some reviews are scathing, considering this movie to be a retelling of already famous movies. A review on IMDB from RiffRaffMcKinley says "...the movie was basically a rehash of movies like "A Bug's Life" and "Antz," both of which were very good movies in which insects dreamed of a better life and had the fortitude to make it happen. That sentence should be its own genre by now!" But other reviews are in favor of *Bee Movie*, such as this one from Gordon-11 on IMDB that says "...to look at the world with a bee's perspective is interesting. I also liked the morals of the story, especially Vanessa's line about all lives are equal." *Bee Movie* is an infamous part of the culture in America, especially among the youth, so I was not surprised when I met with exaggerated reviews of the movie, one IMDB user calling it "The 'Citizen Kane' of bug movies." While the jury of public opinion is still out on whether or not this film can be considered a "good movie", there are also professional review-

ers to take into account. Roger Ebert says “All of this material, written by Seinfeld and writers associated with his television series, tries hard, but never really takes off.” Ebert is not a fan of the movie and the humor throughout, which is the main draw of the movie, not its multispecies applications. The critic consensus on Rotten Tomatoes says “Bee Movie has humorous moments, but its awkward premise and tame delivery render it mostly forgettable.” Sitting at a solid fifty percent on Rotten Tomatoes, the critics there are also not fans of the humor in the movie, but the humor isn’t the center of this paper, the multispecies interactions are.

There were two scenes that particularly stood out to me when watching this movie. The first scene that grabbed my attention was the first scene of the movie (00:02:21). Barry and his best friend, Adam, arrive at their “college” graduation after completing three days of grade school, three days of high school, and three days of college. They graduate, and are immediately moved on to Honex Industries, where the hive works tirelessly to make honey. The seats they were sitting in are transformed into a trolley to take them through the factory, a seamless and efficient transition for a hive that is constantly pumping out more and more worker bees. Barry and Adam are excited to begin this journey, as making honey is all they’ve ever been told to do. It’s their sole purpose in life. The music is happy, even a little inquisitive. Barry and Adam are constantly talking to each other, sharing their excitement, their eyes full of hope for the future. As they enter the factory, Barry proclaims “This is it!” and a collective “Wow!” travels through the group as the doors open and the honey factory is presented to them. The music picks up, climaxing for a dramatic entrance into their future. The factory is whimsical, with nonsense machines and mechanisms for making honey to appeal to the children in the audience. There’s even a device called the “krelman” that has bees wearing hats that look like fingers spinning on a wheel that “catches that little strand of honey that hangs after you pour.” and deposits it back into the honey collection. Adam is particularly intrigued by this job, he lurches from his seat and desperately asks “Can anyone work on the Krelman?” to which the tour guide answers “Of course, most bee jobs are small ones,

but bees know that every small job, if it's done well, means a lot." This is a sentiment repeated throughout the movie, about how each working bee, no matter how insignificant, is a working cog in the machine that is the hive. The hive can be seen as another species when looking at multispecies interactions. The hive exists because the bees create it to house and produce their honey. The hive houses the bees, and the bees keep up maintenance on it so they can continue to live and produce honey. Thom van Dooren et al. wrote "And so, beyond mere survival, particular lifeways in all their resplendent diversity emerge from interwoven patterns of living and dying, of being and becoming, in a larger world." Creating the hive is a form of survival, the bees must do it, but once the hive is completed, there is a clear cut relationship between the two in which they need each other, and thus their relationship is born.

A beehive is an entire, living, breathing mechanism. It has incredible complexities that are a small wonder. An example of this comes from some small witty dialogue at this juncture, with Adam at one point calling another bee "hot" (00:05:02) and Barry saying "But she's your cousin." and Adam going "She is?" and Barry proclaiming "Yes! We're all cousins!" Which, on some level, is true, as the bees within the colony do not reproduce with each other. The queen bee will mate with drone bees, and will mate with about ten to twenty drones at once, in a process that usually kills the drone ("How Honeybees Reproduce"). Another fascinating fact about the birth of honeybees is that the queen bee chooses the sex of the eggs. If she chooses to fertilize it, it will become a worker bee or a queen. If not, the egg becomes a drone ("How Honeybees Reproduce"). Honeybees have very complicated and fascinating hive dynamics and anatomy that Bee Movie barely scratches the surface of. Viewing the honeybee through Bee Movie waters down the truth of the everyday existence of the honeybee, imbuing it with human struggles and morals. Specifically this scene where the bees tour the "factory" and Barry faces his existential dread. Bees do not have existential dread, they are animals with a very specific purpose and they function in amazing ways throughout the hive. While the movie is entertaining to young children, there are very obvious

faults that can be found within the multispecies application of the movie. The movie doesn't fully appreciate the true hive dynamics, as well as the real relationship between bees and flowers. These gaps have to be filled in with knowledge the audience may or may not have.

As the scene progresses, things take a turn for the worse. After discussing the Krelman, the tour guide says "But choose carefully, because you'll stay in the job that you pick for the rest of your life." (00:05:57). While the other bees say "Ooh" and smile at each other, Barry's face falls. He doesn't want to work at the same job for the rest of his life. This is a horrible realization for him that spurs the conflict for the rest of the movie. The tour guide goes on to say that "…bees as a species haven't had one day off in over twenty-seven million years." to which Barry responds "So you'll just work us to death?" to which she responds "We'll sure try!" which gets laughs from the rest of the bees. This is the worst news that Barry could get. Barry is a bee that needs diversity and freedom, not to work at the same job until he dies. Of course this is an anthropomorphic bee that has human ideologies imprinted upon him, and this isn't how real bees feel, just how Jerry Seinfeld wanted him to feel. The human-centric feelings of living in what feels like a never-ending cycle of being taken advantage of by capitalists being imprinted onto a bee isn't the best lens for multispecies studies, but it's a great way to relate to the character and to understand how he's feeling and why he does what he does later in the film. This leads to the multispecies interactions later in the film.

The second scene that drew my attention is later in the film. This scene is an integral part of the film–it's the first time Barry leaves the hive. Earlier in the film pollen jocks (the only bees who leave the hive to collect nectar) invite Barry to leave the hive with them, and he takes them up on their invitation. The pollen jocks look different from the rest of the bees. They're bigger in every way. They're taller, their upper body is larger, and they have bigger wings. Barry is hiding behind what appears to be a storage station for the guns they use to collect the nectar, talking to Adam through his antennae like a phone (00:12:15). He says he has to go out there before he works every day for the rest of his life, but Adam doesn't

think it's a good idea, he says it's too dangerous. Barry hangs up on Adam and tentatively ventures to the pollen jock formation. The bee in charge, a caricature of an air force sergeant, tells Barry that the flight deck is restricted and he needs to leave, but the other pollen jocks speak up for him and say that he's good to go out with them. Barry promptly signs a few waivers, and that is that. He's ready to hit the skies. The sergeant gives us some foreshadowing by mentioning that it's supposed to rain that day, and that bees absolutely cannot fly in the rain. Barry looks nervous the entire time he's on the flight deck. He has incredibly expressive eyes, and every emotion he's feeling is portrayed in them. This is a situation he isn't comfortable with. It's a completely new, and dangerous, situation for him to be in, but he knows that he needs to leave his comfort zone and find out for himself what the outside world looks like.

As the sergeant is running down some cautions for the pollen jocks, he reminds everyone of bee rule number one: absolutely no talking to humans. Now, it's time to enter launch positions. The pollen jocks all march together, chanting "buzz" over and over again as they march into formation around Barry. Barry still looks absolutely terrified, and very confused about what's going on around him. The camera pulls out to show that the pollen jocks formed three arrows, with Barry in the center one. They pull down their glasses, and the sergeant bellows "Black and yellow!" and the jocks respond "Hello!" while they hop in the air. This is a common chant throughout the movie, but the meaning of it isn't ever disclosed. The bees all get down into a runners position, hands on the floor and one knee cocked. One pollen jock asks Barry "You ready for this, hot shot?" and Barry says "Yeah. Yeah, bring it on." in a very weak, unenthusiastic way. He is absolutely terrified, and it's written all over his face. The jocks go through various checks, just like air force pilots. At the end of their checks, Barry says "Scared out of my shorts, check." Other bees come on the platform and start up the wings of the jocks, like revving the engine of a car to get it ready. They pull stops out from behind the feet of the jocks, tying more illusions in that the pollen jocks are like real planes. The music tempo begins to pick up here, as does the volume. Something really big is

about to happen. Barry starts to look more enthusiastic as he stares into the opening of the hive. The camera pans to the back of the pack, and it's time for takeoff.

The bees pour out of the hive and the music crescendos. It's time to enter a brand new world. They fly out into the world in perfect formation, weaving between the branches of the tree that holds their home. The tree that holds their home is at least several decades old. It has weathered all kinds of seasons and the construction of the city around it. The funny thing is, this hive would not exist without this tree, and yet it gets no appreciation from the bees that live on it. A majority of the bees within the hive will never actually see the tree, they will just continue on with their lives within the hive, doing their small part to make the hive work without a second thought about the tree, and yet the pollen jocks must weave through its branches every day to retrieve the nectar that keeps the hive alive (00:14:14). This is the first multispecies interaction out of many within this scene. Once they leave the tree, they burst into the sunlight and Barry's eyes widen as he takes in the view of the park that they live in (00:14:21). Barry and the pollen jocks weave through the multicolored kites being flown by the children and adults below. The kites take various forms, from the traditional and rectangular, to those shaped like insects. The bees dive and fly among the bikers in the park, observing everything that they can. They fly under a bridge and find the flowers they were looking for. One of the pollen jocks lowers his glasses and sees that some of the flowers are ready to have their nectar harvested. The guns the pollen jocks use to collect the nectar are very whimsical, with multiple tubes that shoot out to enter the centers of the flower and then suck up the nectar to be collected into the gun (00:15:24).

The greatest multispecies interaction of all in this movie is between honeybees and flowers. This is a true symbiotic relationship as one cannot survive without the other. When collecting nectar from a flower, bees get pollen on them. The next time they land on a flower, some of that pollen shakes off of them and pollinates that flower, and so on and so forth. Collecting the nectar from the flowers fuels the bees quite literal-

ly, and the pollination from the bees moving from flower to flower keeps the flowers reproducing. Without one or the other, the suffering that these species would suffer would be insurmountable. Thus is the entire plot of the movie, the bees stop pollinating and all the plants die, and then when the bees run out of honey, what would they do? Van Dooren et al. continued in their paper with "The intimate relationship between a flower and its pollinating bee is one in which both forms of life are shaped and made possible through a shared heritage, an entanglement that Isabelle Stengers characterizes as "reciprocal capture." As such, they do not just happen to meet each other, this bee and this flower; rather, their relationship emerges from coevolutionary histories, from rich processes of "co-becoming." The honeybee and the flower share a rich history of survival together, through thousands–millions of generations. They are, essentially, one creature because they cannot exist without the other. As stated earlier, the movie does not fully capture the true complexities of the multispecies interactions that bees are a part of every day. This is a major shortfall of this film, but that's to be expected in a children's movie about anthropomorphic bees with human morals and problems. The movie doesn't fully capture the "co-becoming" of bees and flowers, the rich history these two species have with each other. There are a lot of shortcomings when it comes to this film, but it is a great starting point to examine multispecies interactions in film and the shortcomings the films may have. Examining these films leads to examining our everyday life, reconsidering how we experience the world around us, and how the world around us experiences life.

Multispecies interactions run our day-to-day lives. Every interaction we have is meaningful, and many different organisms and species work together to produce the environment we live in each day. The honey that we use in our tea was the result of the combined effort of hundreds of different bees, all working in harmony to produce our honey, beeswax, propolis, and royal jelly. Without the common honeybee, Apis mellifera, our world would look vastly different, or, human life would cease to exist on this planet. Honeybees work together with their hives and a multitude of different flowering plants to produce products that we take for granted,

as shown in *Bee Movie*. Multispecies theory has us analyze our world in a different light by immersing ourselves in our surrounding environment, and asking how each interaction shapes our world as well as the world for those around us, and *Bee Movie* is a fun and entertaining way to analyze that mindfulness.

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THE ART OF BEING ATTENTIVE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS. DALLOWAY

Mia Godleski

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the penultimate works of modernist literature. Given its status, many scholars have analyzed the work, typically through the lens of class, gender, sexuality, or some combination of those categories. Something that often goes overlooked when viewing *Mrs.Dalloway* through those various lenses is the multitude of meaningful interactions with flowers that the novel's namesake, Clarissa Dalloway, has throughout the novel. In this essay, utilizing the multi-species theory work "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness" (Dooren, et al.), I will look at the interactions that Mrs. Dalloway has with flowers throughout the novel and discuss what interacting with flowers at specific moments does for Mrs. Dalloway.

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the most famous modernist works to have ever been written, and because of this, many scholars have taken the time to pull the work apart piece by piece and offer their interpretations. Typically, *Mrs. Dalloway* is viewed through the lens of class, gender, or sexuality. While it is necessary to have viewed the novel through those various lenses as they all play an important role throughout the story, one lens I think we have neglected to view *Mrs. Dalloway* through is that of multispecies studies. As scholar Diana Swanson states, "Nonhuman nature—in the shapes of earth, sky, water, insects, birds, animals—holds a significant place in Woolf's fiction" (59). Nature does not simply exist in the background of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Rather, nature and the various non-human species that reside within it, particularly trees, plants, and flowers, are interwoven throughout the story. Throughout the novel, the main character Clarissa Dalloway is seen interacting with and taking notice of various plants and flowers. In some of the most pivotal scenes in the novel, Mrs. Dalloway can be seen interacting with or thinking about at least one type of flower. When people discuss Clarissa's interactions with flowers, typically, they are focusing on the flowers as a symbol, and the specific meaning that has been assigned to each flower. While I do intend to discuss the symbolism of a few specific flowers as well as what flowers symbolize in general in the novel, I more so intend to focus on the interactions between Clarissa and her flowers and how the flowers are acting or contributing to her life during specific moments in the story and as a whole. In order to bring Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* into the realm of multispecies studies, I will be utilizing a work entitled "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness" by Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münsterto describe the attentiveness that Clarissa gives to the flowers that she interacts with throughout the story. While *Mrs. Dalloway* is most certainly a novel about class, gender, and sexuality, it is also, above all else, a novel about life. Because *Mrs. Dalloway* is a story about life, it makes sense for Woolf to have included so many references to non-human species throughout her stories, as a story about life is not com-

plete without mentioning the multitude of non-human species that reside on this earth with us. By including so many interactions with and references to flowers and the natural world, Woolf is attempting to show us how interacting with species outside of our own in meaningful ways adds to our lives, as well as how not doing so has significant consequences. Before I begin my analysis of the interactions between Clarissa and the various plants she mentions, I feel it is important to discuss what multispecies studies is as well as what it means to be attentive to the non-human species around us. Multispecies studies is a method of exploring the world in a way that does not simply center humans. Rather, the goal of multispecies studies is to pay attention to the non-human species that are all around us, whether those species be plants, animals, or insects. In "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness," the various authors explore "modes of both paying attention to others and crafting meaningful response" (van Dooren, et al. 1). We see Clarissa Dalloway do both of these things in *Mrs. Dalloway.* Clarissa pays great attention to the flowers she comes across and she listens to what the flowers say, and to the emotions they make her feel. We see Clarissa interact with flowers or plants in moments in which she is feeling overwhelmed, and they remind her to live in the moment rather than in the past or the future.

The opening line of *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the most memorable quotes to have ever come from a piece of literature, and it reads as follows: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (Woolf 4). This quote sets up what will be a very important symbol throughout the entirety of the book. Mentioned time and time again, flowers hold very significant meaning for Clarissa. While each flower in *Mrs. Dalloway* holds its own, individual meaning, I think that flowers as a whole are meant to represent life, and are a reminder to live in the present. As I am about to explore, it would seem that Clarissa reaches for flowers during moments in which she is having difficulty processing her complex emotions or living in the moment.

Before Clarissa enters the florist's shop, there were a million thoughts racing through her head. She was thinking of her beloved daughter, Eliza-

beth, and of Elizabeth's dog, Grizzle. Then her thoughts soured when she began to think of her disapproval of Elizabeth's friend Ms. Kilman. She then began to think of her illness, and how it combined with her dislike for Ms. Kilman made this hatred brew inside her. However, as soon as Clarissa entered the florist's shop, everything changed. She was immediately captivated by the beauty that surrounded her, thinking "[t]here were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac: and carnations, masses of carnations" (Woolf 9). Once Clarissa saw the flowers, the anxious thoughts pacing back and forth in her mind ceased. Suddenly, Clarissa was no longer stuck within her own mind. The sight of the flowers reminded her to step back into the present moment, as if they were saying to her that she is alive, and so are they, and that she should be present in the world with them. Clarissa listens to what the flowers have to say to her and she immediately steps back into the present moment. By listening to the flowers, Clarissa gives them agency. She also gives the flowers agency in one of the quotes that follows shortly after the previous, which reads, "And it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds" (Woolf 9). Here, the flowers are able to have individual agency and are capable of individual action. As scholar Betty Rychen so eloquently puts it, "The flowers which Mrs. Dalloway buys for her party and the scene in the florist's shop as she chooses them prepare the reader for a deeper sense of her identity" (Rychen 18). This scene in which we see Clarissa listen to the flowers around her allows us a closer look into Clarissa's personality. It shows us how she is attentive to the non-human species around her and it also shows us her keen attention to detail, making her a master at the art of being attentive (van Dooren, et al). Clarissa not only creates a meaningful interaction with flowers by giving them agency, but also by listening to how they make her feel and associating them with important people in her life. One such flower that she does this with is the rose.

Roses are mentioned frequently throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* and play a significant role in the novel. As I previously mentioned, it would seem that

Clarissa often associates specific flowers with specific people in her life. In her mind, Clarissa associates her husband, Richard, with roses (Shearer). Roses are a complex flower when it comes to determining what they mean. Typically, they represent love, and when a rose is of a specific color, it can change the type of love being conveyed (Shearer). One moment in the novel in which roses are mentioned is when Richard gives Clarissa a bouquet of red and white roses. Woolf writes "He was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses" (Woolf 72). The roses that Richard chooses to give Clarissa are red and white, a choice I believe was purposefully made by Woolf. Red roses are a symbol of a true, passionate love and white roses are meant to convey unswerving loyalty (Thompson). However, the combination of these two specific colors of roses is seen as "a symbol of unity" (Shearer). Scholar Jeanne Shearer explains that Clarissa's identity is tied to her being married to her husband, Richard, and that she primarily only sees herself as being Mrs. Dalloway, a loyal wife and a perfect party host. She goes on to explain that "[t]he roses Richard gives her represent this unity with him," the unity she is referring to being the loyal, dedicated marriage the two share (Shearer). Because Clarissa associates much of her identity with being a wife, and since Richard often chooses to give her roses, it makes sense that they would be mentioned so often throughout *Mrs. Dalloway.*

What is happening when Richard gives Clarissa the roses is important to note as well. Before Richard walks in with the roses, Clarissa is worrying about whether or not she should invite someone to her party that she initially didn't want to invite (Woolf 71). However, when Richard walks in and Clarissa sees that he's holding out roses for her to take, she is immediately pulled out of her anxious thoughts. In this scene, the flowers are once again acting as a reminder to Clarissa to live in the present, and to not worry so much about what is to come. While roses are certainly an important symbol in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is one more flower that I must discuss as it is mentioned at the penultimate moment of the novel: the beginning of Clarissa Dalloway's heavily anticipated party.

The final moment I want to discuss in which Clarissa is attentive to

the non-human species around her is towards the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, at the beginning of the party. The party does not truly begin until the moment in which Clarissa notices how "[g]ently the yellow curtain with all the birds of Paradise blew out and it seemed as if there were a flight of wings in the room, right out, then sucked back" (Woolf 101). The story has been building up to this moment, readers are watching Clarissa prepare for this party all day, and now it has finally, at long last, begun. This could be considered a multispecies interaction in one of two ways, either seeing the "birds of Paradise" as actual birds or as the plant with the same name. Based on the numerous mentions of plants Clarissa has made throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* up until this point, I am going to see this interaction as being one between Clarissa and the bird of paradise plant rather than an interaction between Clarissa and an animal. There is also the fact that Clarissa lives in England, and it would make more sense for the "birds of Paradise" she is referring to to be a plant since colorful, tropical birds that we tend to call birds of paradise are not native to England. The bird of paradise plant can grow to be quite large, and when properly cared for, they can bloom with orange or white flowers whose petals resemble those of the feathers on a bird, making the name quite fitting and also making it difficult to distinguish the flowers from an actual bird upon first glance (Hensley, et al 1). The bird of paradise is an incredibly majestic plant–it is impossible to ignore the presence of one in a room. The large size of the plant and its bright flowers grasp your attention, and you cannot help but to be in awe of its beauty. Choosing such a magnificent plant to mark the true beginning of Clarissa's party was a masterful choice on Woolf's part.

Again, it is important for us to examine what was happening in the moments before Clarissa takes notice of the bird of paradise plant. At this point in the novel, the guests have begun to arrive at Clarissa's party. She greets a few guests, including her old friend Peter Walsh. After greeting the various guests that had just arrived, Clarissa becomes overwhelmed. She thinks to herself, "Oh dear, it was going to be a failure; a complete failure…She could see Peter out of the tail of her eye, criticizing her" (Woolf 101). Now that her guests have begun to arrive, Clarissa is scared

that her party is going to be an absolute failure. Her seeing Peter and being under the impression that he is criticizing her really spikes Clarissa's anxiety. However, once again, when Clarissa spots the magnificent bird of paradise plant from across the room, she is transported out of her own head and back into reality. Yet again, we see Clarissa being attentive to a member of a non-human species, listening to what they are telling her and taking their advice: to live in the real world, with her beloved flowers, rather than in her own head.

Although Clarissa is ever so attentive to the non-human species that surround her, particularly various flowers and plants, there is one character in *Mrs. Dalloway* that does not practice this attentiveness towards the non-human species that surround him. The character that I am referring to is Peter Walsh. Peter serves as a foil to Clarissa. Whereas Clarissa lives in the present, sometimes being pulled back to it by the flowers she loves so dearly, Peter does not. Peter lives in the past, and is absorbed by the regret he carries for not marrying Clarissa. While Peter does occasionally reflect back on his past and will recall a flower or plant that he saw, his recollection of the non-human species he witnessed at whatever particular moment in his past that he is reflecting on does not pull him back to the present. Woolf makes it clear in the very beginning that Peter is not attentive, nor cares to be attentive, to the non-humans around him. In a scene early on in the novel in which Clarissa is walking around a garden, he asks her if she is "[m]using amongst the vegetables?" and then continues, stating "I prefer men to cauliflowers" (Woolf 4). Peter is unlike Clarissa in the way that he does not give the non-human species around him agency, and in turn, he does not listen to what they have to say. This really detracts from Peter's life, and does not aid in his healing from his past. If he would be attentive to the plants around him, he may be reminded to live in the present rather than the past, just as Clarissa is when she pays attention to the plants around her.

As scholar Matthew Delsesto states, "Being human means being in consant contact and communication with plants" (Delsesto). This is something that Woolf understands very clearly, as evident by Clarissa's many

interactions with plants in *Mrs. Dalloway*. By looking more closely at the meaningful associations that Clarissa creates with flowers and important people in her life, such as her husband, as well as the reverent way she interacts with flowers, we can learn how to be more attentive of the non-human species in our lives. By interacting with the flowers she comes across in an attentive way, she crafts a "meaningful response" to the interaction (van Dooren, et al. 1). The way that Clarissa interacts with flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway* shows us a new way of interacting with the non-human species in our lives. Through listening to the flowers and the feelings that they provoked within her, Clarissa Dalloway showed all of us a meaningful way of interacting with the plants around us. She showed us that when we are feeling overwhelmed by our emotions or with the stress of our daily lives, we need only look for the beauty of a flower to remind us to live in the moment.

Flowers play an important role in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The main character of the novel, Clarissa Dalloway, interacts with the plants around her in a very meaningful way. She touches them and observes them very carefully, allowing them to evoke certain emotions within her. By listening to the emotions that each flower Clarissa interacted with evoked, she combined two very important aspects of her life: flowers and the people she loved. Clarissa is so aware of the plants that she sees in the single day that we see in her life, and we could all stand to learn to be more like her in that way. Clarissa's interactions with flowers are also meaningful in the way that the flowers she sees and touches pull her out of her emotions—out of her head—and into the present moment. Woolf also shows us in her novel what not being attentive to the non-human species around us can take away from our lives through Peter Walsh, who is stuck in the past and cannot pull himself into the present because of his tendency to hold onto his regrets as well as his not paying attention to the multitude of species that he encounters in his life that would remind him to live in the moment with them. Not only did Clarissa create meaningful interaction between herself and the various flowers she loves so very much, she showed us, the readers of Mrs. Dalloway, a way in which we can be more

attentive of what the non-human species around us, including flowers and plants, can add to our lives.

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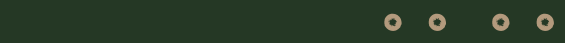
My Philodendron's Favorite Music is Beethoven: Considerations of Plant Sentience

Milo Hardison



It is necessary to look at how things we may consider 'below us' have sentience, and in turn a developed consciousness, on their own in order to take away the notion that one species is above the other; each one shares the world and influences the development of the other. Through plants, we can further understand our minds and how the environment around us fosters sentience. In this essay I argue that plant life, specifically through examining mushroom forests and extreme reactions from other plant types, contains a level of sentience, consciousness, and intelligence previously ignored. "Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom" written by Anna Tsing develops the basic information about the lives of mushrooms and their interactions with habitats within the essay, while "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness" informs the argument of sentience within beings other than humans. Through looking at studies of plant interactions with each other, their environment, and humans in *The Island of MissingTrees*'s chapters "Roots," "Trunk," and "Ecosystem" in addition to scientific research about the subject, I argue that different species of plants are sentient beings and deserve the same respective level of attentiveness. This attentiveness can change how plants are seen and characterized in the everyday, academia, and media.

There have been many experiments done to determine if plants are sentient, conscious, both, or neither through the years. In the media, this idea has been explored in various genres, ranging from science fiction to dystopian to the supernatural. Although further scientific research into this field is important for understanding human consciousness and other notions, this essay aims to examine and add to the social considerations of this question. The purpose is to bring social awareness to the experiences of plants and mushrooms in order to facilitate better reciprocal relationships between humans and other species. In this essay, I argue that plant life, specifically through examining mushroom forests and extreme reactions performed by other plant types, contains a level of sentience, consciousness, and intelligence previously ignored by the general public. Through looking at studies of plant interactions with each other, their environment, and humans in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*'s parts "Roots," "Trunk," and "Ecosystem," in addition to scientific research about the subject, I argue that plants and mushrooms are sentient beings and deserve a respective level of attentiveness. This attentiveness can change how plants are seen and characterized in the everyday, academia, and media. Once they are understood as active participants in society, people might take more care and responsibility when interacting with plant life. This can help resolve some environmental issues if not all.

The Science

There is a lot of vocabulary that goes into this topic that I will define here. Firstly, *consciousness* can be defined as feelings plus an awareness of events that includes awareness of internal states or "recurrent and self-sustaining activity of certain biological structures, based on the temporal synchronization of functional networks" (Nani 66). *Sentience* is better defined as "the presence of some subjective phenomenal experience, be it of the external world or of oneself" (Segundo-Ortin 1) or "feedback processes directed to maintain the integrity of the organism" (Nani 69). Part of the criteria for both classifications is *behaving*, which can be defined as

"any measurable response of an organism" from *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*. In order to say that something is behaving, a difference between cognition and adaptation must be established; the response must be unable to be explained away by adaptation. Though they initially may seem the same, consciousness and sentience operate at diverse levels that need to be considered when asking if a thing can be classified as either. Another criterion that comes up is intelligence, which is defined as "the ability to learn or understand or to deal with new or trying situations also: the ability to apply knowledge to manipulate one's environment or to think abstractly as measured by objective criteria" by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

The line between consciousness and sentience is very blurry. For some individuals, there is no line. The defining features of each term are fairly subjective despite the definitions given earlier, as they are still constructs that humans do not fully understand yet. In order for plants to have a sense of awareness as we understand it, there needs to be an exchange of information between their internal and external environments: a process of collecting information from external stimuli, processing it, and using it in ways that are not simply *reacting* to things. There have been numerous experiments done (by both those who agree with plant sentience and those who do not) that have studied the sunflower, the Cornish mallow, the thale cress, the common purslane, and the Boquila trifoliolata—to name a few—to discern plants' levels of cognitive response, showing that they are able to adapt to and predict their environment beyond a simple mechanical response to stimuli (Nani 62). Similar to animals, plants use electrical signals such as action potentials and ion movements throughout localized areas and the entirety of their bodies, have specialized fibers that function similarly to animal muscles, and not only contain chemicals such as GABA, serotonin, dopamine, melatonin, and glutamate—some of which are considered key parts of animal nervous systems—but use them in similar or the same way that animal bodies do. One of these, GABA, is "an amino acid that decreases the receptivity of neurone membranes

to being excited by electrical signals," which plays a key role in how the brain functions. Receptors for this acid have been found in plants, showing that it operates as a signaling molecule within them, as it does for animals (Calvo 99). Though plants do not have a nervous system like humans or animals do, they have complex vascular systems interlinked by numerous, irregular cross-links of tissue where their electrical firing events occur. A. Nani in "Sentience With or Without Consciousness" uses this information to conclude that "plants are therefore equipped with a complex communication system, which can convey information inside the plant, by means of electrical and chemical signaling, as well as within and between species" (65). Communication occurs mainly through the roots, which make up over half of the organism and collect the necessary information about the living and non-living environment around the plant. A root system will form relationships with the other plants around it, including fungal threads. In a mutually beneficial relationship, fungi possess the "chemical tools to harvest from the soil precious resources such as phosphorus and nitrogen" (Calvo 39) that plants cannot secure themselves, while plants "have the alchemical ability to create sugars from sunlight through photosynthesis, to which they allow the fungi to access" in return (39). A big name in the world of plant science, Suzanne Simard, was the one to discover how this furthered tree agency. Simard's research details what has been called the "wood-wide web" through which the forest regenerates itself, where older Mother trees sustain saplings through a network of roots and fungi (O'Neill 12). Reviewing her work, Simard comments that trees "perceive, relate, and communicate; they exercise various behaviours. They cooperate, make decisions, learn, and remember—qualities we normally ascribe to sentience, wisdom, intelligence. By knowing how trees, animals, and even fungi…have this agency, we can acknowledge that they deserve as much regard as we accord ourselves (qtd. in O'Neill 13). "Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom" by Anna Tsing goes into detail about how exactly this "wood-wide web" works:

Fungi make those webs as they interact with the roots of trees, form-

> ing joint structures of fungus and root called 'mycorrhiza.' Mycorrhizal webs connect not just root and fungus, but, by way of fungal filaments, tree and tree…There are many ways to eat here and to share food. There is recognizable hunting in the city: for example, some fungi lasso little soil worms called nematodes for dinner. But this is just the crudest way to attune one's digestion. Mycorrhizal fungi siphon energy-giving sugars from trees for their use. Some of those sugars are re-distributed through the fungal network from tree to tree. Others support dependent plants, such as mushroom-loving 'mycophiles' that tap the network to send out pale or colourful stems of flowers (e.g., Indian pipes, coral-root orchids). Meanwhile, like an inside-out stomach, fungi secrete enzymes into the soil around them, digesting organic material and even rocks, and absorbing nutrients released in the process. These nutrients are also available then for the trees and other plants, which use them to produce more sugar for themselves—and the network. In this process, too, there is a whole lot of smelling going on…(Tsing 1-2)

A. Nani in "Sentience With or Without Consciousness" goes further to include that "communication can also involve insects, some of which are attracted or repelled by certain substances produced by plants" (65). Plant communication is very complex, something not fully understood yet. It is not far-fetched to say that it is underpinned by cognitive processes that lend themselves to plant sentience.

Lastly, how does this tie into multispecies studies? The term *multispecies studies* is explained in the article "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness" as,

> Unsettling given notions of species, it explores a broad terrain of possible modes of classifying, categorizing, and paying attention to the diverse ways of life that constitute worlds. From detailed attention to particular entities, a multiplicity of possible connections and understanding opens up: species are always multiple, multiplying their forms and associations. It is this coming together of questions of

> kinds and their multiplicities that characterizes multispecies studies. (van Dooren et al. 1)

In line with this definition, the question of plant sentience usurps accepted ideas around plants, explores new modes of classifying and categorizing plants—which leads to new categorization of other species as well—and attends to the diverse ways in which different plants operate in reality and within media. The relatively new field of plant neurobiology conducts research into plant signaling and behavior, looking for similarities between animal neurobiology and plants, specifically "it seeks to ascertain whether in plants there are chemical substances with functions analogous to neurotransmitters, so that they may mediate adaptive responses in short or long periods of time" (qtd. in Nani, 61-62). Sometimes unknowingly and sometimes intentionally, books, television, movies, and other media draw references from questions that this subfield of plant biology seeks to address. There are many factors that build up the argument for plant consciousness that media also uses to portray plants and (or) mushrooms in several interesting ways. Miguel Segundo-Ortin lists the most widely cited empirical evidence of plant consciousness as plants' communication, kin recognition, decision-making, anticipatory behavior, learning and memory, foraging and competition, risk sensitivity, mimicry, numerosity, and swarm intelligence (3-8). In characterizing plants and mushrooms, media may give them these qualities, heighten these qualities, or use these qualities as a starting point to fully personify plant and mushroom life. This evidence is reached through several disciplines, such as molecular biology, electrophysiology, biochemistry, evolutionary and developmental psychology, and plant ecology, which media may also pull from in world-building (Segundo-Ortin 9).

The Considerations in Media

Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* follows the intricate lives of Kostas, Defne, and their daughter Ada, examining the consequences of civil war in their home country of Cyprus while Ada and Kostas are also

dealing with the death of Defne after the family immigrated to London. Intertwined with their story is the life of a fig tree, *ficus carica*, that watched the love between Kostas and Defne bloom, the devastation of civil war on Cyprus, and then the relationship between Ada and Kostas change after Defne's death. Shafak takes plant sentience to its furthest consideration of a separate arboreal experience of the world when writing the fig tree as a narrator within the novel. She does this through the rhetorical device of anthropomorphism, which is "an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics" according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. The fig tree is not only allowed subject status in the story; it also has its own voice, knowledge, and experience of the world around it that is deliberately shared with the audience. It is imperative that we receive this point of view. Much of the history of Cyprus, the ecosystems of Cyprus (and Britain), and the history of families are revealed through the fig tree's voice. If not for the tree's witty phrases, wonderful prose, and philosophical wonderings about humanity in relation to plants, parts of the history of Cyprus and the people there would have been lost in the story. The fig tree stands as a major witness, a "more-than-human medium" (O'Neill 3) able to share an arboreal point of view that "enacts an intraspecies communion with nature" that is shared with the audience (3).

The novel does this by amplifying the characteristics of communication, kin recognition, learning, memory, risk sensitivity, and swarm intelligence seen in plants, constantly playing with the restrictions and possibilities of human knowledge about trees. True to the part of the tree it is named after, the "Roots" section of the novel goes into detail on the communication aspect of the fig tree within the novel. It touches on other qualities, like kin recognition and of course, memory, to inform the conversation centered around communication. At this time in the novel, the fig tree is buried underground to ensure it survives the winter. For this reason, its exchanges with various beings through its roots are central since it cannot "see" anything going on above ground. Shafak uses this as a moment

to give the audience insight into the underground workings of the "wood-wide web" that informs the tree while it is buried, showing her knowledge of phytology, and legitimizing her use of the tree as a narrator. The tree gives background into how plants interact and work with the environment intertwined with its own personal feelings on the matter:

> Under and above the ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. Although we have to compete for resources sometimes, we are good at protecting and supporting each other. The life of a tree, no matter how peaceful it may seem on the outside, is full of danger…we have to work together. Even when we might seem stand-offish, growing away from others or at the edge of forests, we still remain connected across entire swathes of land, sending chemical signals through the air and across our shared mycorrhizal networks. Humans and animals can wander around for miles on end in search of food or shelter or a mate, adapting to environmental changes, but we have to do all that and more while rooted to the spot. (Shafak)

Even though the author personifies the tree in the novel, there are still elements to its characterization that remain distinctly plant-like; it is not telling a human's story through a tree, it is telling a tree's story in a way humans can comprehend it. The tree has its own emotions and opinions about humanity, war, plants, and animals that the audience becomes privy to as it recalls its life through the years, uncovering the silent world of arborealities in an attempt to make them more accessible. Through this, the novel is able to discuss the traumatizing nature of war and suffering not being unique to humans. Clearly, the devastation wrought by war affects plants and animals as well. The tree's identity as a witness to this history of civil war in Cyprus legitimizes its presence as the subject and narrator of the novel. The tree's *sentience*, "the presence of some subjective phenomenal experience, be it of the external world or of oneself," (Segundo-Ortin, 1) is the foundation of its ability to bear witness . It is feeling and behaving in accordance with its reactions to the devastation of war

wrought on its tree kin and its family in Kostas, Ada, Delfine, Yiorgos, and Yusuf. In order to say that something is behaving, a difference between cognition and adaptation must be established. The response must be unable to be explained away by adaptation. Like in humans, emotions and emotional reactions to terrible situations are much more than an adaptive advantage; one might say that in certain situations they are even detrimental to survival. Another criterion that comes up is intelligence, which is defined as "the ability to learn or understand or to deal with new or trying situations" by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Following this definition, the generational trauma that afflicts the fig tree is a sign of its intelligence; the effort it puts into trying to relay this traumatic feeling fits the second half of the definition, "the ability to apply knowledge to manipulate one's environment or to think abstractly as measured by objective criteria," by showing the tree applying its knowledge of humans and war to understand Ada, as well as persuade the audience into respecting its authority. With the tree's philosophical commentary, it shows a deeper self-awareness and awareness of societal issues present in its environment. Scientifically, it demonstrates an exchange of information between its internal and external environments.

Similar to its identity as a witness, the fig tree's importance in the narrative is determined by the tree's risk sensitivity in a philosophical manner, as it questions its safety, the safety of Kostas and Ada, and the consequences of war. Moreover, the narrative power of the tree is cultivated primarily from its ability to learn and contain memories. It is the one that recounts imperative moments for the audience, giving necessary context for the actions of Kostas, Ada, and Aunt Meryem in London. Throughout the section "Trunk," the tree talks about the devastation and consequences of the war on itself and those it held dear. These chapters bring the living quality of the tree to the front of the audience's mind in a different way than previous chapters. They rely on emotional connections and reactions to the tree consoling itself, expressing sadness for the people close to it, and recounting the travesty of war. The way the fig tree

discusses this past connects to something it says earlier in the novel, explaining that "the dilemma between optimism and pessimism is more than a theoretical debate for us [trees]. It is integral to our evolution" (Shafak). Although it is narrating a terrible time, the fig tree also deliberately describes the positive times that were created to combat the fear of the unrest in Cyprus afterward, comparing human resiliency to strengths it finds in nature through a hopeful tone. It can be seen through this that the fig tree chooses optimism and solidifies a literary evolution of creative narratives from plant life. In "Ecosystem," *The Island of Missing Trees* directs the characteristic of memory towards developing the fig tree's relationships through time. The third person narrator writes:

> Arboreal-time is cyclical, recurrent, perennial; the past and the future breathe within this moment, and the present does not necessarily flow in one direction; instead it draws circles within circles, like the rings you find when you cut us down. Arboreal-time is equivalent to story-time – and, like a story, a tree does not grow in perfectly straight lines, flawless curves or exact right angles, but bends and twists and bifurcates into fantastical shapes…They are incompatible, human-time and tree-time. (*The Island of Missing Trees*)

Through the discordance of human and arboreal understandings of time, the fig tree is important not because of its relevance to humans, but because it is a vibrantly alive organism that operates beyond human comprehension (O'Neill 16). Perceiving trees as subjects, as vibrantly active, starts to remove the barrier between them and humans and opens the space for further talk about their consciousness and reciprocal relationships with them. In multiple passages in "Roots" and "Trunk," the fig tree shows recognition of kin in retelling its "family" history (including Kostas and Ada amongst its family); it also recognizes other species of trees as kin, despite negative opinions about them, for the fact that they are all trees. In "Branches," the fig tree explains that "[f]igs are sensual, soft, mysterious, emotional, lyrical, spiritual, self-contained and introverted," alluding to a kept knowledge of "family" history coupled with showing a recognition of

other tree species and alluding to a collective intelligence as it continues to say, "Carobs like things to be unsentimental, material, practical, measurable. Ask them about matters of the heart and you will get no response… If a carob tree were to tell this story, I can assure you it would have been very different to mine" in such a manner-of-fact way (Shafak). The fig tree's knowledge of other species and the consequences of war throughout the novel operates off of the swarm intelligence of surrounding plants and its relation to Kostas in addition to the animals that it comes in contact with. O'Neill explains it as the novel disrupting "the silent logos of plant life to express a rich arboreal knowledgebase that extends to the fig tree a quality associated with the human, disrupting traditional hierarchies of human/vegetal being in favor of a relationality. Shafak's novel branches outward to ask that we not only know trees better but learn from them" (O'Neill 14). *The Island of Missing Trees* is an important addition to academia for its work of understanding nature through its inclusion of biology and philosophical propositions, additionally doing so in a way that creates a new standard for respecting the agency of plant life in creative works.

The Implications

When thinking of animal intelligence, it is often attributed to the movement that animal bodies require and minds facilitate, but this excludes animals that do not move, such as coral, sponges, and sea anemones. Are these not animals? If they are indeed animals, then do they not also have a level of intelligence? This inconsistent cataloging of beings causes issues in research and academia as humans are predisposed to be more interested in something they can relate to or know can affect them immediately. There is an underlying bias that for something to be important (and for this topic, conscious) it must be "like" the individuals studying it. This "likeness" does not have to be large; it can be as simple as the ability to move. A. Nani notes in "Sentience With or Without Consciousness" that:

Researchers in the scientific field of consciousness studies still dis-

> agree as to what the real nature of consciousness is and as to which living organisms are to be considered conscious. Most research between species is comparative: investigators search similarities of structures and functions. (65)

Consequently, when choosing a being to research—or at the very least pay attention to—plant life has gotten the short end of the stick. To change the opinions and practices surrounding plants and mushrooms, there needs to be "passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied" (Tsing 17). This reflects the true nature of the natural world, as "human existence, though no doubt precious beyond words, had no special priority in the ecological chain" (Shafak). This is mirrored in creative works; exploration of environmentalism, animal intelligence, artificial intelligence, and futurism are seen in different genres, but considering plants and mushrooms as their own active, willing, and conscious participants is seen less, even within themes of environmentalism. As seen with popular media such as HBO's *The Last of Us* and *Scavengers Reign*, the inclusion of plant life as an active character to build a wildly different point of view can make media more believable and entertaining. There is much speculation in and about the field of plant neurobiology still, questions and considerations that will not have answers until well into the future. However, that does not mean that reactions to these questions should not be thought of or acted out before then. Zoocentric thinking, giving animals preference above other considerations (largely how Western society thinks), is the antithesis to considering plant sentience and is harmful for many reasons in the long run. As Tsing said, "No one stops to ask, 'Wellbeing for whom?'…experts and objects are separated by the will to power; love does not flow between expert and object" (17). Considering plant consciousness, sentience, cognition, or any other form of understanding is a step towards thinking of plants as active participants in the environment as well as history. Once that is recognized, then further solutions for social issues can be reached. Exploring this argument creatively through novels, television, and other forms of media investigates different reactions to plants, moreover, futures

where certain responses foster a better—or worse—environment and better understanding of humanity's place in the environment. This interspecies understanding is central to multispecies studies.

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SURRENDERING THE SELF: THE POSTHUMAN WORLD IN VANDERMEER'S ANNIHILATION

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In his novel *Annihilation*, author Jeff Vandermeer provides a science-fiction narrative on nature as an unstoppable and uncontrollable environment where plants, animals, humans, and the land exist as a collective and connected entity of interactions. The novel utilizes Lovecraftian horror elements of an uncontrollable nature, human contamination, and an unknowable future controlled by nonhuman forces to portray both a multispecies environment and the posthuman future. Read through a multispecies lens and framed by Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, this essay is an analysis of how *Annihilation*'s setting—Area X—necessitates the removal of human-centered processes and the human concept of individualism for favor of a flourishing multispecies environment. Its analysis exemplifies the genre of science fiction- as a method to expand the boundaries of our perceived human-centered world. The narrative and rhetorical structures utilized by Vandermeer in his representation of real-world environments and natural processes as uncanny horrors and an off-center reality accurately represent the unknown future beyond the human species.

In the science fiction and weird horror foundation built by American fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft, stories are characterized by cosmic, unseen, and unnameable horrors. His fictional Cthulhu mythos is a representation of the world and the future beyond the human species, and portrays human-created laws and social orders as meaning little in the grand scope of an indifferent universe. Human characters often experience physiological torment and contamination in response to interactions with an unexplainable environment and complex creatures (Kneale). In *Staying with the Trouble*, multispecies scholar Donna Haraway names our current ecological period the Chthulucene in opposition to the Anthropocene, and in reference to Lovecraft, emphasizing that the interactions, connections, and evolutions between living and nonliving beings extend beyond humans, and will continue after our extinction. Jeff Vandermeer calls to Lovecraftian science-fiction elements of weird horror and psychological manipulations in his novel *Annihilation*, but utilizes them to represent Haraway's Chthulucene in his biologically uncanny setting in Area X. Vandermeer illustrates a setting where no one species is an individual, but instead an intermingling amalgamation of plants, animals, and other-worldly creatures—in so doing, arguing for a multispecies perspective in studying living and nonliving relationships and considering the posthuman Earth. The Lovecraftian horror and science fiction genre expectations of exploring the mysteries of the unknown allow Vandermeer to push the boundaries of natural realities like coastal environments, the human microbial system, death and decomposition, and the posthuman world to explore the natural world's true power over humankind. Through *Annihilation*, Vandermeer offers up the science fiction genre as an adequate portrayal of multispecies theory, and specifically how the posthuman Earth requires the removal of human-centered belief systems and actions to preserve the natural environment and its processes.

H.P Lovecraft (1890-1937) was an American horror fiction writer who created a literary mythos that cemented cosmic horror as an avenue of storytelling far beyond his lifetime—the avenue now labeled Lovecraf-

tian. In his fiction, the nonhuman creatures and spirits from the incomprehensible beyond were Lovecraft's sources of horror and fear, belonging to "spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part" (Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror") and initiating the most visceral feeling of fear that humans encounter: fear of the unknown. His descriptions of the unknown tread the line between clarity and confusion, so his texts become "explorations of the limits of language and representation" (Kneale 110). An example being his description of the monster Cthulhu representing a "vaguely anthropoid outline" with an "octopus-like head" (148) and originating from some society "frightfully suggestive of old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part" (149). Lovecraftian horror became a genre where human actions are inconsequential in the grand scheme of the cosmos, represented by the inability of human society to understand its grandeur, and the metamorphosis of human social constructs (Lovecraft et al., "Letters" 8). Upon their awareness and interaction with cosmic beings, human characters experience physical and psychological transformations and hauntings. After researching the cult of Cthulhu, narrator Francie Thurston in Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" says:

> With it shall go this record of mine—this test of my own sanity, wherein is pieced together that which I hope may never be pieced together again. I have looked upon all the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me. But I do not think my life will be long. As my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so I shall go. I know too much, and the cult still lives. (Lovecraft, *The Call* 169)

In his tales, Lovecraft willfully leaves out placid resolutions where humans are better off than they began and instead leaves them to accept the nature of their devolving condition. This decision emphasizes two key elements of Lovecraftian horror that persist in Vandermeer's novel *Annihilation*: human ideas, investigation, and anatomical or physiological abilities are no match for whatever exists 'beyond' their society; and cosmic

environments and beings will continue to exist beyond humanity's societal lifespan.

Annihilation by Jeff Vandermeer is a novel that utilizes Lovecraftian horror elements to describe a world indifferent to human processes, but differs from Lovecraft in its multispecies application. Where Lovecraft's characters unwillingly forgo their autonomy to be plagued with torture by cosmic horrors, Vandermeer's narrator forgoes her autonomy willingly to be intertwined in an environment where an ever-evolving nature wins out, and humans are clearly represented as one evolutionary step into a post-human world. The novel follows a group of four women: a biologist, a psychologist, a surveyor, and an anthropologist as they explore Area X on the twelfth expedition put on by an obscure governmental agency referred to as The Southern Reach. Surrounded by a slowly growing and indestructible border, Area X is an environment reclaimed by nature and that is evolving into a diverse and biologically abnormal ecosystem. Upon arrival, the team finds an opening in the ground with descending stone stairs, and along the wall are cursive words with the make-up of, according to the biologist, "rich green fernlike moss…a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism" (Vandermeer 24). The vines are composed of an ecosystem of filaments and golden nodules, including one that sprays the biologist with gold spores and initiates her contamination (25). This contamination is dubbed a "brightness" (83) and produces psychological and physical changes within the biologist, transitioning her from an observer and mapper of Area X into an active component of it. The novel ends with the biologist venturing out into the sea of Area X rather than traveling back home through the border in search of her husband, who was on the previous expedition.

Reviewer Sam Gormley names Jeff Vandermeer's writing as " brimming with eerily intelligent life forms overspilling the boundaries between natural and unnatural, organic and artificial, human and nonhuman" (111) and his Southern Reach Trilogy as "showing up the limitations of human intelligence" (114). This essay builds upon previous scholarship on Anni-

hilation's place in multispecies theory and ethics, such as Lisa Dowdall's chapter "Figures" and its description of *Annihilation* as reimagining interactions between plants and humans by exposing what lies beneath nature (151-152), as well as Finola Prendergast's "Revisiting Nonhuman Ethics in Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*" and its explanation of how science fiction represents reality slantwise in order to express an ethical way of managing interactions between nonhumans and humans (344). This essay explores three elements of *Annihilation*: the ongoing and indescribable ecosystem Area X, the biologist and other human characters, and the interconnectedness and transformation of humans into the environment. Each element serves as an example of the utilization of Lovecraftian horror genre expectations to describe how living in a multispecies world—as defined by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* as the Chthulucene—requires an acknowledgement of that which is unknown and an absolving of human constructions and identities as absolute.

Multispecies theory and studies involve an inclusive look at the world, one that acknowledges all of its interactions and entanglements between living and nonliving beings. Multispecies scholar Donna Haraway defines the world in *When Species Meet* as a "knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down" (42) from before, during, and beyond their existence. Analyzing *Annihilation* as a science-fiction avenue of multispecies scholarship opens up its value beyond casual readership into a guidebook for how to acknowledge the web of interspecies interaction in the present day, but more specifically the posthuman world. Haraway defines the Chthulucene as the trash-collector of the Anthropocene, and a name for "an elsewhere and elsewhen that was, still is, and might yet be" (Staying with, 31). The setting Area X in Annihilation represents a potential Chthulucene, and thus a potential posthuman world. Although Vandermeer calls to Lovecraftian horror themes of inconsequential humans and contamination, he differentiates himself from the genre's negative aspects and transforms those themes into ones that describe Haraway's Chthulucene. Vandermeer uses science-fiction tropes

to extend beyond the portrayal of humans as a part in a web of living and nonliving beings in the present, instead hypothesizing about "the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come" (Haraway 31). The Chthulucene is one that we, the collective *Homo sapiens*, will not see, and thus cannot study, understand, and most horrifyingly, control. In narrating through the biologist who understands the limits of human capabilities, and thus becomes one with the natural environment through what van Dooren defines as "passionate immersion" (6), Vandermeer explores one possibility of the inevitable evolution of the natural world past our current geological age, and past the human species.

Readers of *Annihilation* traverse Area X alongside the biologist narrator as she attempts to make sense and meaning out of an ecologically diverse, extensive, and at times unexplainable environment. Area X is located in a coastal, or transitional environment—a zone where ocean water meets the land, characterized by sand, mud, marsh, and swamp terrains. Upon arrival, the biologist describes Area X as having a dense pine forest eventually giving way to a swamp with swaying reeds and "wind-gnarled trees" (3), and before the coast and the ocean run rivers of natural freshwater canals. The purpose of representing Area X as a coastal environment lies in the real-life qualities of coastal flora and fauna—namely their natural biodiversity and ability to adapt in an environment in constant motion. Vandermeer utilizes the differences in terrain to introduce complex interactions between atypical organisms, such as marine animals that adapt to freshwater and coexist in environments with otter and deer (12), and the underground tower with flesh-like walls that live and breathe, its depths "revealing themselves in a kind of ongoing horror show of such beauty and biodiversity" (43). Area X pushes the limits of a real-life coastal environment by representing its ecology slightly off-kilter, its wildlife, structures, and creatures increasingly perplexing and scientifically uncanny to the biologist. For example, she encounters a pair of otters that stare at her for over a minute, producing "a strange sensation that they could see

[her] watching them…that things were not quite what they seemed" (30). In his descriptions of Area X, Vandermeer connects to the central source of Lovecraftian horror by shining a light on an unknown realm, making the literary "endeavor to visualize and verbalize the unseen and unsayable" (Jackson 23). Vandermeer is setting the scene of the posthuman world as one humans would undoubtedly recognize by featuring similar ecological components, but is insinuating that this environment has changed certain processes through evolution.

In the biologist's endless curiosity, rhetorical questioning, and acknowledgement of her inability to describe Area X and its ecological processes, Vandermeer is emphasizing the power of what we do not fully understand, and thus cannot fully control. In the underground tower, a being the biologist names the Crawler appears to be writing organic and plant-like words on the wall, themselves a perplexing amalgamation of indecipherable phrases. The biologist acknowledges her own inability to conceptualize the tower, claiming:

> I felt that I had abdicated my responsibility to that point, which was to consider those elements found inside of the tower as part of a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial. But contemplating the sheer enormity of that idea on a macro level would have broken my mood like an avalanche crashing into my body. So…what did I know? (93)

The words on the wall themselves represent both the inability to adequately represent the posthuman '"beyond" in words and how Area X evolved to include human words and languages, but leaves them vague and incomprehensible. Vandermeer is arguing that the posthuman world will inevitably hold remnants of the human species as we currently understand it, but those remnants will not be focused on the benefit of human society or its once-powerful species, hence why neither the biologist nor explorer's from past expeditions made any progress on the words' meaning or purpose. When the biologist finally reaches the Crawler near the bottom of the tower, she is perplexed by the appearance, or non-appearance, of

the being: “the Crawler kept changing at a lightning pace, as if to mock my ability to comprehend it” (176). Vandermeer recognizes what scholar James Kneale calls “the problem of witnessing” in Lovecraftian horror, where the writer must include enough hints about a being’s complexity to make it horrific without explaining the fear away (112). Where Lovecraft’s characters experience negative physical and psychological repercussions of coming too close to the unknown, or the cosmic, Vandermeer’s biologist is overtaken with an *appreciation* for Area X’s complexity and an acceptance that she may never understand it. Her experience engaging with the environment is enough, as she claims “[o]bserving all of this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion I had to *know everything*” (195). Through Vandermeer’s description of Area X as an uncanny version of a coastal environment and creating a narrator who appreciates its complex beauty, readers’ interpretation of an ecosystem is reframed into a multispecies perspective for the purpose of appreciating a world one might not fully understand, and might not be the central figure of.

Like Lovecraft’s humans, Vandermeer’s human characters traverse through an unknown environment and are made aware of their insignificance in relation to it—the contrast being Lovecraft’s sole ending for humans to be in death or endless torment, where Vandermeer only results to torment if the characters refuse to adapt to nature’s will. Vandermeer’s depiction of humans in *Annihilation* serves his purpose of both acknowledging Lovecraftian genre expectations of their insignificance, but also arguing that humans are tangled in Chthulucene’s web of beings and must adapt to an uncontrollable nature. The biologist becomes the perfect model for this adaptation by nature of her general distaste for human connection in favor of nature and of her acceptance *into* it via Area X. At her core, the biologist craves solitude and assimilation with the nature she studies, often expressing this nature in opposition with her confident and outgoing husband. “Observation always meant more to me than interaction,” she claims, even comparing an orgasm to the “sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things” (Vandermeer 110). In the biologist, Vander-

meer exalts a worldview that understands humans' incapabilities while not leaning entirely anti-human in his narrative. The biologist criticizes her husband's outgoing nature directly, claiming he "wanted to stand out… he had been wrong for the eleventh expedition because of this quality" (110), but Vandermeer also uses subtler ways to critique exclusively human-to-human interaction by removing any personal names and instead referring to the human characters by their job titles (psychologist, biologist, surveyor, anthropologist), and bringing harm to those in the novel that solely adhere to human methods of communication, technology, or both. The anthropologist is killed by the Crawler in the tower, the psychologist jumps from the lighthouse platform for fear of the biologist and her physical transformation resulting from her immersion into Area X, and the surveyor is shot by the biologist in self-defense. Their deaths are results of not just their human-centered professions, but also their inability to passively coexist with Area X. Their end goals for the expedition are ultimately self-interest or at least an increase in their knowledge of the environment for the benefit of a governmental agency—contrasting to the biologist's belief: "[y]ou had to fade into the landscape…you had to pretend it wasn't there for a long as possible. To acknowledge it, to try to name it, might be a way of letting it in" (116). The nature of Area X as the Chthulucene requires a sort of giving up on the self, a shedding of human-centered belief systems and ways of studying or understanding the world for the purpose of *nature*'s self and system of being. Area X makes this system inherent, so no human can control or access its patterns except for the biologist, who experiences a transformation physically and psychologically that separates her from her human self. This separation from the self is not a complete separation from the human as a *being*, because humans do play an important role in multispecies interaction and study. Haraway herself discredits the belief of *Homo sapiens* as entirely purposeless in the Chthulucene, as "[d]iverse humans are necessary in every fiber of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story. The chief actors are not restricted to the too-big players in the too-big stories of Capitalism

and the Anthropos" (*Staying with*, 55). Interpreting the title of *Annihilation* as explaining the novel's depiction of destroying humans is inaccurate, it instead is explaining the destruction of human-centered communication, interaction, and the belief of humans as *above all others*, or at least above nature. The biologist retains her natural passion, her body, her consciousness, but forgoes an element of her human autonomy and social orders in favor of Area X. Her contamination and subsequent transformation represent a disconnect from an Anthropocentric worldview in favor of a multispecies one.

The final argument for Vandermeer's Chthulucene and its foundation on and positive extension beyond Lovecraft is the depiction of human characters' integration into Area X. As the biologist is transformed psychologically and physically, and human characters are enfolded in the natural environment during and after their deaths, Vandermeer is representing the complexity of the human self and its validity in the scope of Area X's Chthulucene, connecting to scholarship regarding the microbiome and its power over human behavior. As it relates to a posthuman world, Vandermeer is also depicting the reality of humans as one evolutionary step between our current geologic age and whichever one might come after. In Lovecraft's horror, human contamination often transfigures into a haunting and represents his support of eugenics. In "Arthur Jermyn" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth", scholar Mitch Frye claims that Lovecraft's miscegenation and the comingling of humans and monsters in his fiction often results in social denigration, suicide, and torment (248). While Vandermeer depicts the genre expectation of contamination and transforming human characters as a result of interaction with unknown elements of nature and the cosmic beyond, his analogy is concerned with the assimilation of the human species in the webs of the Chthulucene, or humans playing neutral in interactions with plants and animals, or more specifically the human microbiome. After her infection from the tower's spores, the biologist begins perceiving elements of Area X and her own self differently, representing the ineffective human in relation to a nature that holds control.

First, the psychologist's hypnosis strategies fail to work on her, and she begins to see the tower as pulsating, living and breathing flesh, insinuating her transition from a human on a government-funded expedition to a part, a being, of Area X. She describes the general environment differently as well, claiming "[t]he wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me…[e]ven the darkness seemed more alive to me, surrounding me like something physical" (Vandermeer 74-75), but never in her descriptions does she expound self-doubt or fear, instead her transition is neutral. In the first sentence of the chapter "Integration", Vandermeer writes, "In the morning, I woke with my senses heightened, so that even the rough brown bark of the pines or the ordinary lunding swoop of a woodpecker came to me as a kind of minor revelation" (37). The biologist's brightness, as she dubs it, gives her a certain power in Area X, specifically over the psychologist's actions and the Crawler—which is itself a former human fully absolved of all autonomy in writing the words on the wall. The psychologist describes her as "'a *flame*…floating and floating, like nothing human but something free and floating'" (125), and claims her arm did not allow her to pull the trigger and attempt to shoot her. Here, Vandermeer is detailing the change that occurs when we examine ourselves as just one piece in Haraway's "muddle" of multispecies interaction (*Staying with*, 56). One 'real-life' example lies in the human microbiome, how by acknowledging the livelihood of the trillions of bacteria within the human body and how their purpose and activity exists on a separate plane than the body they occupy expands the collective understanding of consciousness and self-control. Bacterial infections like syphilis and Lyme disease cause sensory, psychiatric, and cognitive issues, sometimes continuing after extensive antibacterial treatment, so the true make-up of the human self comes into question when bacteria in the human body impacts consciousness and self-making (Schuller). In giving up her human self, she becomes a gear in Area X that works to progress its processes, a reflection of reordering humans in the Chthulucene. As Haraway says, "human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main

story" (*Staying with*, 55). The Crawler is eventually confirmed as the end result of a full-human-to-Area-X-cog transformation in the third novel of Vandermeer's Southern Reach series, *Acceptance*, and his original form is hinted at when the biologist finds him at the end of the tunnel in *Annihilation*. She describes his face as featuring "the endurance of unending pain and sorrow, yes, but shining through as well a kind of grim satisfaction and *ecstasy*" (186), ultimately claiming that he "existed in a place none of us could comprehend" (187). It is undeniable that the Crawler is no longer human nor participates in human biological processes, but in Area X, he still holds elements of his human life physically and physiologically by retaining human expression and writing words in English. Neither the biologist nor the reader sees what the Crawler's purpose for Area X is, so the resolution is that it (or he) is ultimately incomprehensible until the human self is surrendered. Beyond the biologist, Vandermeer portrays Area X's reordering process in the deaths of other human characters.

Not all human characters in *Annihilation* become contaminated, and a stark difference appears between the fate of the anthropologist, psychologist, surveyor, and the biologist because of the formers' refusal to adapt to the environment. As an analogy for the human species as a singular and finite evolutionary step, Vandermeer represents their death as a sort of transformation, leaving hints of human elements in nature itself. The organic words on the tower wall speak truth to this analogy, appearing above the anthropologist's body to say "...the shadows of the abyss are like petals of a monstrous flower that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear" (61). The shadows being the virtually unknown Chthulucene, the unknown future evolution of *Homo sapiens*, and the blossoming and expanding of the mind reflect either the biologists surrendering her human self for Area X, or the others dying and becoming Area X. Upon their deaths, their bodies become inhuman and pass quickly into the landscape and are assumed to become a living creature or plant. The biologist sees the completion of human transformation before seeing the process, describing a dolphin's eyes as "painfully human, almost

familiar" (Vandermeer 97), finding human-shaped "eruptions of moss or lichen" (96) in an abandoned village—both things causing a "feeling of something left unresolved or still in progress" (97). Wounded and dead bodies grow vaguely organic and supernatural qualities, the anthropologist having "something green spilling out from her mouth" (60) and "a torrent of green ash that sat on her chest in a mound" (61), and the psychologist's arm "colonized by a fibrous green-gold fuzziness" (133). The biologist does not witness any transformation of the surveyor, but has now recognized the pattern of human integration into Area X and hesitates to bury her in case it may block her from achieving her purpose to become a part of a multispecies and posthuman world. This process is not overlooked by Haraway, in fact, the act of living and dying is crucial in creating the multispecies web, imagining and appreciating the tangling of living and non-living beings in our world and beyond. Haraway writes that "There is only the relentlessly contingent SF worlding of living and dying," "of becoming-with and unbecoming-with, of sympoiesis, and so, just possibly, of multispecies flourishing on earth" Vandermeer represents both the reality of human deterioration and decomposition after death and the part humans play in the flourishing of a multispecies world even if their consciousness dissipates. It reflects the truth of the Chthulucene, where whether humans are conscious of it or not, we must accept the truth of the passing of the human species, and thus surrender human needs and necessities, for the favor of an ever-changing ecosystem.

In Area X as the Chthulucene, humans are one piece in a range of uncanny multispecies interactions, but also themselves an amalgamation of natural elements that when initiated—in the biologist's infection—are integrated into an environment where nature has full control. This essay explored how Area X is a representation of a complex transitional environment after our current ecological age, and how Vandermeer purposefully acknowledges his characters' inability to describe Area X to emphasize the unknown future of the posthuman world. Like Lovecraft's, Vandermeer's human characters and their constructed systems and thought processes

are rendered inconsequential against Area X. By relinquishing her self, the biologist is transformed by and integrated with Area X, resulting in physical and sensory changes—and the other human characters physically become part of the ecosystem through animals and plants. This transfiguration of human characters represents the truth that Donna Haraway defines in *When Species Meet* and *Staying with the Trouble*: that humans are one piece in the web of human and nonhuman interaction, and to fully understand the extent of a non-human-centered world, there must be some sort of reframing the human as a natural element of an ecosystem. Vandermeer's *Annihilation* argues for science fiction as an adequate method to represent this reframing, its writing portraying the posthuman world as one that requires humans to absolve their sense of self and acknowledge the power of an ecosystem that runs on the collective web of interlocking and interacting living and non-living beings.

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