

Ada Wells Memorial Prize 2025

By Noah Hunt

*In her book **The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins**, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes:*

"To walk attentively through a forest, even a damaged one, is to be caught by the abundance of life: ancient and new; underfoot and reaching into the light. But how does one tell the life of the forest? We might begin by looking for drama and adventure beyond the activities of humans. Yet we are not used to reading stories without human heroes. (Tsing 2015, 155)"

Discuss. Do you think it is possible to tell the life of the natural world without giving humans prominence?"

In her book "The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins" Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes: "To walk attentively through a forest, even a damaged one, is to be caught by the abundance of life: ancient and new; underfoot and reaching into the light. But how does one tell the life of the forest? We might begin by looking for drama and adventure beyond the activities of humans. Yet we are not used to reading stories without human heroes" (p. 155)

Her passage not only questions conventional storytelling but serves as a wider critique on capitalism's insistence on placing humans at the centre of the world. Capitalism thrives on linear narratives, extractive logics, and epistemic mastery over the non-human world. To tell the life of the natural world without giving humans prominence, then, is to resist the dominant capitalist ideology that renders forests, rivers, animals, and fungi as mere resources. This essay indicates that it is indeed possible, and increasingly necessary, to tell stories that de-emphasise anthropocentrism propelled by capitalist logics, drawing on various academic and creative theory approaches.

I. The Possibility of De-Centring Humans in Narratives

Narrative form is deeply tied to anthropocentrism. Even when attempting to portray non-human perspectives, authors tend to fall into anthropocentric bias – ascribing human-like thought, emotion, or motivation to non-human beings. This is tied to expectations shaped by centuries of human-centred storytelling within cultures organised around capitalist and colonial logics (Holmberg, 2022). Both literary and economic systems privilege human perspectives, reducing non-human entities to background resources or commodities whose worth is defined by their usefulness to humans. While it can be an effective literary strategy, misrepresenting non-human subjectivities risks reinforcing the ontological assumptions that posit extractive and exploitative relations with the natural world.

Despite the growing richness of multispecies scholarship, the question of how to responsibly speak about other species as beings with their own life-worlds and intentions – without anthropomorphising – remains a persistent tension in Western academic contexts. However, this tension need not be seen as a barrier. Instead, as many scholars argue, the joint project of ethically attending to more-than-human others and decolonising dominant epistemologies can offer a pathway forward (Holmberg, 2022). By interrogating the conditions tied to capitalist epistemologies that privilege quantifiable entities over relational lifeworld and make accusations of anthropomorphism as inevitable, this approach reframes the challenge; not as a problem of overreach, but as an opportunity to rethink how knowledge systems have historically silenced or objectified the non-human. In this way, multispecies

storytelling becomes not merely a literary or theoretical exercise, but part of a broader political and epistemic shift (Parkinson & Mills, 2025).

We can attribute this approach to posthumanism, a philosophical and cultural movement that challenges the traditional anthropocentric view by emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities. Post-humanists reject capitalist human exceptionalism, recognise non-human entities as actors with agency, and highlight the interdependence of all beings (Maio, 2024). Francesca Ferrando's work, 'The Art of Being Posthuman', suggests abandoning traditional human-centred ideas in favour of new post-humanist ones, acknowledging that humans are a part of the planet alongside other species (Ferrando, 2023).

II. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Relationality

Indigenous peoples inherently understand that human lives are interdependent with and contingent on living in ethical relations with other people, plants, animals, and the natural world overall. Indigenous systems of relationality are described as the "heartbeat of Indigenous existence" and illuminate holistic approaches to physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual health (Elliott-Groves et al., 2020). Robin Wall Kimmerer, in 'Braiding Sweetgrass', highlights that relationships within Indigenous cultures are centred on land, viewed as the home of non-human kinfolk and the source of sustenance, where responsibility to the world is enacted (Kimmerer, 2013, as cited in Elliott-Groves et al., 2020). Kimmerer further elucidates that Indigenous languages such as Potawatomi use the same words to address plants and animals as they do family members, reflecting a worldview where nonhuman beings are kin, not resources (Spagna, 2024).

This relational ethos directly contrasts with capitalist logics that historically dispossess and commodifies the natural world. While Indigenous worldviews recognise diverse forms of value in the environment - extending beyond economic benefits to support mind and spirit (Pirini et al., 2023), capitalism's "entity realist" ontology and the "monocultural logic of corporate accounting" reduce heterogeneous non-human life-worlds into quantifiable and exchangeable units, such as carbon credits or "ecosystem service providers" (Fitz-Henry, 2017; Scholz, 2024). Colonialism, identified as a root cause of global crises, violently plundered lands and imposed these capitalist economic systems under the guise of universality, leading to the "de-worlding" of objects and even human bodies by tearing them from their original contexts for exploitation (Feenberg, 2005; Wodzińska, 2023). This process

extracted value from diverse, non-capitalist forms of production while simultaneously destroying the local contexts and practices that sustained them. From this history emerged Western principles such as individualism, promoting independent, rational, self-interested, utility-maximising individuals (Fox, 2023; Ruth, 2020; Spagna, 2024).

This stands in stark opposition to Indigenous emphasis on collective capacities, reciprocity, and a deep understanding of humanity's relational place. Māori principles such as kaitiakitanga (guardianship) and whakapapa (genealogical interconnection) position humans as part of, rather than apart from, ecological systems (Te Ahukaramū, 2007). These practices illustrate that relationality is not abstract philosophy, but a lived ontology embedded in practices such as sustainable harvesting and political innovation. Māori iwi have entered into co-governance agreements with government bodies over rivers and forests, and in certain cases, rivers like the Whanganui River have even been granted legal personhood, enacting kinship between people and water in law.

Therefore, this Indigenous relational ethos, far from being merely a traditional ecological knowledge, represents a powerful counter-narrative and a crucial pathway for multispecies storytelling. It challenges the reductionist and extractive logics of contemporary capitalism and envisions a world with sustainable, fair, and thriving futures for all beings.

III. Multispecies Storytelling

Multispecies storytelling explicitly aims to reorient anthropocentric narrative to look at nature through a more-than-human lens, inviting the creation of new narratives that can reshape understanding of landscape value, heritage, and aesthetics. This includes enlarging the group of stakeholders in decision-making processes to include species other than humans (Parkinson & Mills, 2025). Contemporary fiction increasingly features distinct animal protagonists or narrators, moving beyond humans “cloaked in fur and claw” to explore animal concerns against the backdrop of human intervention (Spagna, 2024). These stories prompt readers to consider kinship and responsibility, asking “what if we shifted our focus away from ourselves?”.

Spagna draws examples from literature and fables, like *Charlotte’s Web* or *The Bees*, which explore the world through the eyes of other animals, highlighting concepts like compassion, interdependence, and the complexities of non-human societies. This is seen through the medium of language that acknowledges the personhood of non-human beings, such as using “who” instead of “that” and names instead of “it”. This linguistic shift matters because capitalism tends to erase individuality through commodification; reducing beings to resources or assets. Spagna states in her article, “Indigenous languages, like Indigenous storytelling, reveal a deep understanding of humanity’s place in the grand scheme of things: as relational. By adopting this perspective and incorporating it in language, we can reject the principle of individualism that so many cultures in the West herald as paramount” (p. 3).

Toivenen & Caracciolo (2022) investigated how people attribute agency to non-human entities through the lens of fictional narratives. Their research into “story-talk” - discussions around nonhuman oriented micro fiction – shows that engaging with such narratives can lead to “complex nonhuman agency constructions”, where non-human entities are attributed multiple forms of agency simultaneously. Participants in this study, for example, discussed a tree not merely as an object but as having a perspective and dreams, or icebergs as both powerful forces and victims of human actions. In this way, our perception of agency is broadened, encouraging more nuanced and relational understandings of non-human entities beyond reductive or instrumental views.

Tsing reinforces this idea, arguing that multispecies storytelling requires more than adding non-human backdrops to human-shaped plots (Tsing, 2015). It calls for a reimagining of narrative form itself: who or what can tell a story, and how we listen. Such rethinking requires epistemological plurality, where Indigenous relational ontologies and speculative narrative practices combine to challenge reductionist worldviews and open possibilities for co-authored stories with the more-than-human.

V. Ontological Shifts

Authentic multispecies storytelling posits a relational ontology that unsettles capitalist and humanist notions of the self as bounded and autonomous, foregrounding interdependence instead (Kokkola, 2025). Eduardo Kohn’s ‘How Forests Think’ exemplifies this move, arguing that forests possess their own forms of thought and semiosis (Fitz-Henry, 2017; Holmberg, 2022). This reflects the ontological shift in anthropology, influenced by thinkers like Kohn and Donna Haraway, who argue that diverse worldviews are not simply interpretations of one reality but distinct realities in their own right. Such a stance compels us to rethink the very categories of nature and culture, opening a narrative to nonhuman alterity (Heywood, 2017).

In a multispecies story, being a ‘self’ shifts from a bounded, autonomous human concept to an interconnected, interdependent existence (Scholz, 2024). Posthumanism, particularly Rosi Braidotti’s critical posthumanism, rejects the humanist notion of a fixed, universal “Man” and instead proposes “zoe-centred egalitarianism” (Donn, 2021; Young, 2025). Here the self is a “process-orientated relational assemblage” that includes human, non-human, and even technological entities (Donn, 2021). Donna Haraway illustrates this through her concept of “companion species”, where humans

and dogs “make each other up, in the flesh,” inherently entwined through shared histories and communication (Haraway, 2003). This resonates as a direct critique of neoliberal individualism, which privileges autonomous, utility-maximising selves (Fox, 2023).

However, critiques warn that such relational holism risks subtly re-centring the human, as relational alliances may still be judged through human-normative frameworks (Young, 2025). A truly non-anthropocentric self might require a “humans out of the loop” approach, prioritising non-human rationales and embracing radical alterity, potentially aligning with Graham Harman’s “withdrawal” or Jacques Derrida’s “Leibnizianism without God”, where entities retain their irreducible individuality beyond their current relations (Young, 2025). The tension between relational becoming-with and radical alterity highlights both the promise and difficulty of multispecies storytelling: it must decentre humanity without erasing the singularity of non-human worlds.

VI. Nonhuman Temporalities

Multispecies storytelling must also challenge the dominance of linear time; a construct rooted in anthropocentric philosophies that privilege human history and the immediacy of the present. Tsing resists this framework by foregrounding the “polyphonic assemblages of various rhythms” through which other species live and interact (Weymouth, 2019). In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, the spontaneous and contingent life cycles of mushrooms exemplify how multispecies entanglements generate environments outside human notions of progress. We are reminded through these rhythms the co-dependency of species in shaping worlds, and the disregard for linear temporality humans impose. As humans, we are bound to the struggle of grasping the vastness of geological time. Yet capitalist societies have consumed in mere decades the fossil fuels formed over millions of years (Fitz-Henry, 2017), exemplifying how extractive economies collapse ecological timescales into cycles of short-term profit.

The temporal rhythms of late capitalism are characterised by this “short-termism,” where value is measured in quarters instead of centuries to deliver immediate returns on investments. This presentism and foreshortening of time actively impedes the recognition of “agential diversity” (Fitz-Henry, 2017). Michel Serres underscores the importance of retaining “long-term memory” and “thousand-year-old traditions” to counteract the short-termism of modern economic thought. Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “continuous discontinuities” further destabilises linear temporality, proposing instead a process of open-ended resonance where no subject remains fixed (Stephenson, 2025). For narrative form, this suggests stories unfold as ongoing becomings rather than primarily linear arcs with resolution. Indigenous knowledge systems and storytelling embody this deeper understanding of relationality across generations, recognising time in a cyclical, intergenerational manner (Elliott-Groves et al., 2020). Practices such as Māori maramataka (lunar calendars) align human activity with ecological rhythms, sustaining relations with land and waterscapes across generations (Hikuroa, 2017). Such practices reveal how temporality itself can be decolonised, foregrounding multispecies continuities over capitalist short-term extraction.

Thus, to tell the life of the forest without human heroes requires not only decentring the human subject but also decentring human time. Storytelling that adopts polyphonic, cyclical, and intergenerational temporalities opens the possibility of narratives that honour more-than-human life-worlds on their own terms.

VII. Silence and Ethical Unknowing

We then must also acknowledge the limits of human understanding through narrative restraint in multispecies storytelling. Non-human entities resist transparency and definitional capture, reminding us that humans cannot fully grasp the consequences of their actions. Narratives, through literary strategies like metaphor and atmosphere, allow writers to evoke this opacity, challenging

conventional views of nature and provoking a “complexification of ascriptions of nonhuman agency” (Toivonen & Caracciolo, 2022)

Apophatic philosophy frames unknowability not as a failure but as a productive stance of radical openness (Franke, 2013; Wilmington, 2015). This ‘mute non-knowing’ implies that a truly non-anthropocentric approach must acknowledge what cannot be fully articulated or controlled by human frameworks (Wilmington, 2015). Such an ethos stands against capitalism’s demand for transparency and calculability. Indigenous methodologies extend this further through ‘listening politically’, which involves detecting ‘not-yet-articulated agendas’ from non-human perspectives (Holmberg, 2022). This practice models a respective engagement with opacity, refusing to enclose the non-human within human-centred capitalist epistemologies.

VIII. Technological Mediation

The medium through which we tell stories also matters. Bruno Latour’s theory of ‘hybrid collectives’ posits that humans and non-humans, including technology, form new actants, distributing moral agency across these entities. His well-known example is the firearm, which transforms both the person who holds it and the object itself, taking on a new identity and mediating desires in the process (Redaelli, 2023).

Yet this mediation raises crucial questions for multispecies storytelling. If stories are increasingly filtered through technological infrastructures – such as algorithms, AI, and digital platforms – nonhuman voices risk being flattened into human-centred or marketable categories. Critics argue Latour’s framework can obscure this complexity, reducing connections to ‘mere associations’ and overlooking the ways technologies actively distort experience (Redaelli, 2023). AI-enabled technologies, such as algorithms and bots, exert significant influence by curating content, spreading information, and shaping emotional responses, generating ‘filter bubbles’ that reinforce anthropocentric or capitalist biases (Lazovich, 2024). In this context, philosophical greenwashing becomes possible, where discussions about the biosphere circulate widely but are disconnected from any meaningful action (Ferrando, 2023). Capitalist infrastructures exacerbate these problems by embedding technological mediation within logics of commodification: ecosystems become datasets, animals become content, and multispecies relationships are repackaged as consumable stories (Verbeek, 2006). The feedback effects of technology, which often exceed their designers’ intentions, therefore complicate how multispecies narratives are told and heard, raising the risk of translating relational complexity into calculable units that serve market logics.

IX. Speculation and Myth

To truly move beyond anthropocentric narratives, storytelling must embrace imagination as a radical act, capable of re-patterning crises into opportunities and shifting human-centric structures towards dynamic relational networks. Speculative fiction as a narrative experiment destabilises the fixed boundaries between fiction and reality, opening imaginative space to reframe traditional tendencies and resist capitalist realism (McNulty, 2019). Tsing highlights curiosity and the ‘arts of noticing’ as vital for surviving precarity and discerning new life emerging from ‘capitalist ruins’ (Allison, 2017; Sacco, 2017). “Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious—even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined... many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end” (Tsing, 2015). Rather than foreclosing possibility, precarity becomes its own condition for multispecies storytelling, with instability exposing hidden entanglements and compelling the search for alternative futures beyond capitalism’s stability myths.

The imaginative dimension is not new – myths and fables have long connected humans with more-than-human worlds, encoding ecological wisdom through non-human characters and archetypal figures (Collins, 2025; Kagaba, 2024). Kimmerer and other Indigenous scholars remind us that such

storytelling traditions are not relics but living practices, grounded in relational ontologies that position humans as kin within multispecies worlds. By embracing mystery, speculative poetics, and the unknown, multispecies storytelling fosters an imaginative mode; necessary for countering capitalist reductionism, and keeping alive alternative futures in which relationality, reciprocity, and multispecies flourishing remain possible.

X. Conclusion

Multispecies storytelling then, offers not a finished method but an unfolding practice, one that continues to negotiate the limits of human language, imagination, and mediation. Across different frameworks; whether through apophysis and the acknowledgement of unknowing, Indigenous practices of listening politically, or speculative modes that reimagine our entanglement with nonhuman worlds – lie narratives that share a commitment to resisting anthropocentrism and capitalist logics. They do so not by erasing the human, but by reconfiguring the human as one participant among many in dynamic relational networks.

However, the challenge of rapidly changing mediation complicates this vision. Technologies, as Latour reminds us, are not neutral; they actively reshape the conditions under which stories are produced, transmitted and received. Modern algorithms, platforms, and infrastructure risk distorting non-human voices, translating them into calculable units compatible with the capitalist market. Storytelling, then, becomes at risk of being disconnected from the ecological urgencies it claims to represent despite potential widespread circulation. To remain substantial, multispecies storytelling must be alert to its own mediations, ensuring that narrative strategies are not merely absorbed into the very structures of domination they seek to resist.

At the same time, the radical potential of imagination remains indispensable. Speculative fiction, myth, and fable can open new narrative possibilities beyond current horizons, cultivating curiosity and the 'arts of noticing' in precarious times. As Tsing attests, precarity is no longer confined to the margins but defines life across the globe; this shared instability demands new forms of collaboration and care that extend across species and systems.

Ultimately, the task of multispecies storytelling is not to perfect representation but to create spaces for encounter where human and non-human agencies can be felt, even if not fully understood. In this sense, storytelling becomes both an ethical and imaginative act: a way of living with precarity, resisting capitalist reductionism and commodification, and reorienting narratives toward futures that remain, necessarily, unfinished.

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