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Introduction

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Introduction

Abstract

Species categories are not simply an invention of the human mind. Plants, animals, fungi, and viruses engage in "species making" by mingling and separating.¹ Yet, at the same time, the boundaries that define or differentiate species are not simply "natural"; they are actively made, maintained, politically charged, and fashioned to serve some needs more than others, inviting new essentialisms even as they alert us to important differences. Like other rubrics for organizing social worlds—race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability—the concept of species and the alternative classifications it invites are complicated and controversial. Whether wild or domestic, pet or pest, such categories are subject to temporally fluctuating human motives, shifting values, and cultural diversities.

Disciplines

Animal Sciences | Animal Studies | Ecology and Evolutionary Biology | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine

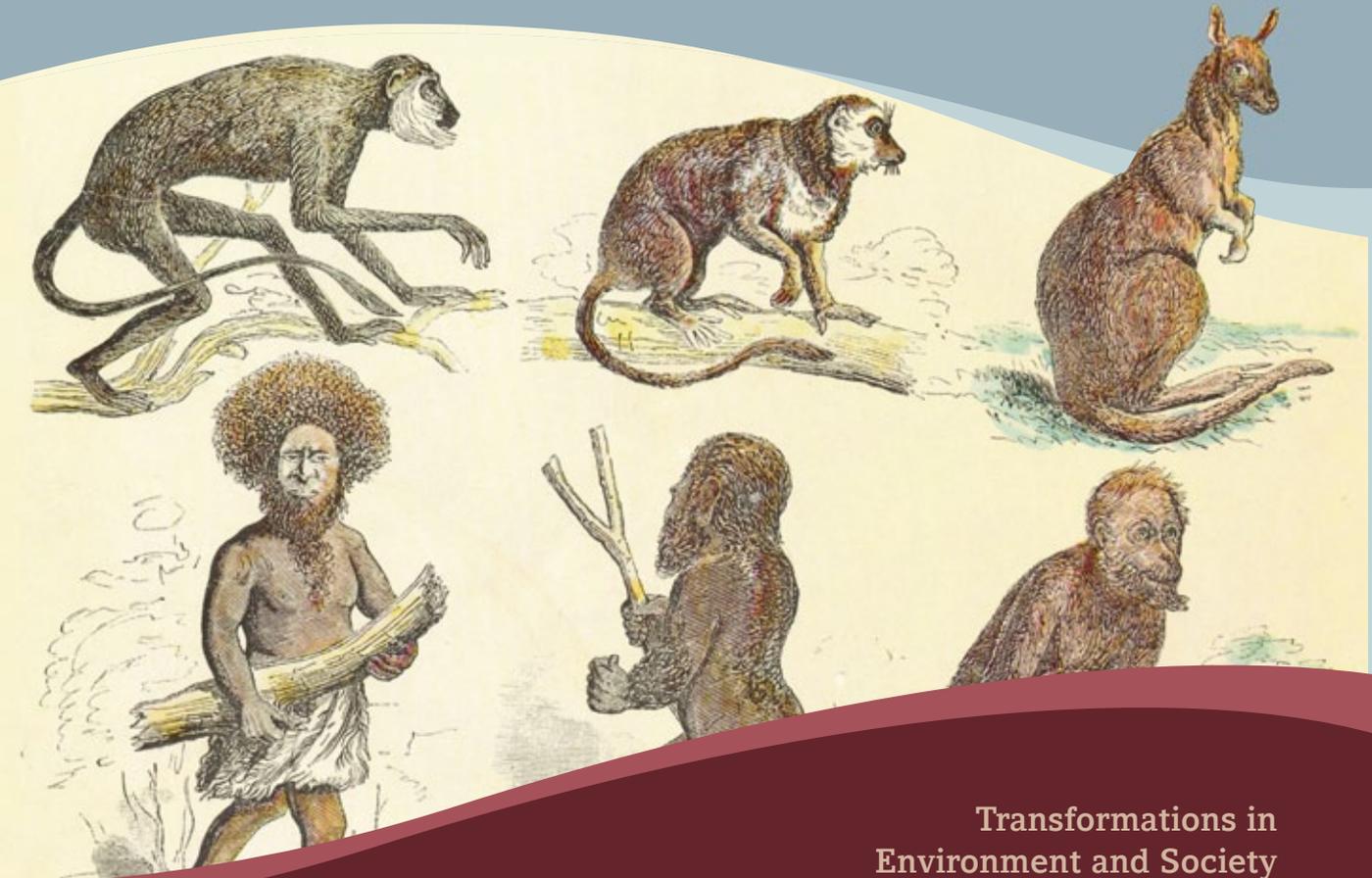
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TROUBLING SPECIES

Care and Belonging in
a Relational World

THE MULTISPECIES EDITING
COLLECTIVE



Transformations in
Environment and Society

2017 / 1

RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society is an open-access publication that exists to record and reflect the activities of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. The journal provides a forum for examining the interrelationship between environmental and social changes and is designed to inspire new perspectives on humanity and the wider world. RCC Perspectives aims to bridge the gap between scholarly and non-scholarly audiences and encourage international dialogue.

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Etienne S. Benson, Veit Braun, Jean M. Langford, Daniel Münster, Ursula Münster, and Susanne Schmitt, with the support of the Multispecies Editing Collective

Introduction

Species categories are not simply an invention of the human mind. Plants, animals, fungi, and viruses engage in “species making” by mingling and separating.¹ Yet, at the same time, the boundaries that define or differentiate species are not simply “natural”; they are actively made, maintained, politically charged, and fashioned to serve some needs more than others, inviting new essentialisms even as they alert us to important differences. Like other rubrics for organizing social worlds—race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability—the concept of species and the alternative classifications it invites are complicated and controversial. Whether wild or domestic, pet or pest, such categories are subject to temporally fluctuating human motives, shifting values, and cultural diversities.

The systems that exist for identifying an animal’s place of “belonging” are useful in discovering the multiplicity of life-forms and life-worlds, even as they raise troubling questions about the limits of categorization. Before it came to designate a group of living beings, the term “species” meant a kind of quality, appearance, or characteristic. In a sense, this notion of species is not unlike the South Asian notion of *jāti* (often translated as “caste”), which classifies human and other-than-human collectives (*jātis* of plants, animals, gods) in a fluid and context-dependent manner. What can we learn about the various forms of life and living that we find ourselves engaged with by reconnecting the biological sense of “species” to this original meaning? And what insights do we gain about humans—who, for a long time in Western traditions of thought, were considered both separate from and above “nature”? The essays in the first section of this volume, *Multispecies Belonging*, present examples of the histories and controversies surrounding some of these categorizations of life and reflect on their implications.

At a time in which human agency is dominating environmental change (and destruction), inquiries into our relationships with the nonhumans with whom we share our lives seem both necessary and just. Even according to conservative estimates, species are disappearing at a rate almost one hundred times faster than the background rate

1 Eben Kirksey, “Species: A Praxiographic Study,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, no. 4 (2015): 758–80.

normally prevailing between mass extinctions. This is a shocking figure—we care about the loss that is implied—but what does it really mean to us when we read about the “sixth mass extinction” in the newspaper, or see statistics on endangered species turned into colorful infocharts in magazines or on the web? Such quantifications inform of the dimensions of biodiversity loss, yet they also raise questions about how we are affected by other life-forms (and their disappearance). What, for example, is actually lost when a species goes extinct? How should we feel about hundredfold acceleration if we have never experienced a “natural” rate of extinction in our own lifetime? And did it make a difference for Martha, the passenger pigeon, to be the last in her line?

In these “catastrophic times”² of species disappearance and anthropogenic destruction, the realities of biodiversity loss and ecological death are troubling our perceptions and understanding of the environment in new ways. Scholars in the environmental humanities and social sciences are increasingly calling for accounts that are more attentive to the ways in which human life depends on and is entangled with other species. We are becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which all human histories and socialities are embedded in metabolic and symbiotic relations with microbes, fungi, plants, and animals. Human beings are made up of more bacterial cells than human ones; our lives are processes inherently entwined in multispecies interactions and made up of a myriad of participants living, dying, and surviving in mutual dependence. We share this with all living beings who “emerge from and make their lives within multispecies communities.”³

The *hows* and *whys* of the care we designate to these nonhuman participants sharing our lives determine responses not just in thoughts but in actions. Questions of species belonging are often connected to diverse practices of care, which is the focus of the articles in the second section of this volume, *Multispecies Care*. How does care for members of our own species differ from care across species? In exploring this question, the essays in this section draw on—but also significantly expand beyond—a notion of “care” that initially came to matter in the field of feminist ethics. As Tronto wrote, caring can be seen “as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world

2 Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Paris: Open Humanities Press/Meson Press, 2015).

3 Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–23, p. 2.

includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”⁴

It is important to note that care troubles easy antagonisms: it is ambivalent and never innocent, insofar as it creates and often depends upon unequal power relations. While it can be life-giving and nurturing, it can also be violent and even murderous. We cull for conservation; trap pests in greenhouses but also pets within our homes; we rehabilitate research animals. Care not only sustains, but also disciplines and categorizes human and other-than-human bodies, often in ways that are necessarily political.⁵ Care is a practice of responsiveness and attentiveness that is always entangled in global economic force fields determining who receives care and at what price.⁶

As writers, we collectively recognize that caring about species, whether as being or as category, entails being care-ful in our accounts of nonhuman others; taking care not to presume we can comprehend the perceptual worlds of other species, but also taking care not to categorically dismiss these perceptual worlds as being beyond the realm of human thought; taking care also to consider the knowledge both of those humans who think scientifically about species, and those humans who form intimacies with other species as companions and caretakers.

Starting from the premise that a deep engagement with the lives of other species productively troubles human-only (hi)stories, the essays in this volume thus turn towards multispecies storytelling. Our hope is that immersion into the lifeworlds of other species will help us to cultivate a more relational ethics that opens up possibilities to “(re) craft modes of living and dying on a richly varied yet fundamentally shared world.”⁷ In thinking the themes of belonging and care together, we acknowledge that caring for nonhumans has concrete implications for the imagination of species belonging and the actions this can shape. Multispecies encounters sometimes call for care that is aimed beyond or to the side of species. Caring for individual creatures may involve recognizing that they do not necessarily accede to species norms and that the range

4 Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.

5 Aryn Martin, Natasha Myers, and Ana Viseu, “The Politics of Care in Technoscience,” *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (2015): 625–41.

6 Kirstein Rummery and Michael Fine, “Care: A Critical Review of Theory, Policy, and Practice,” *Social Policy and Administration* 46, no. 3 (2012): 321–43.

7 van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, „Multispecies Studies,” 6.

of affective relationships in which they engage has the capacity to go beyond the expected. Care that is too narrowly focused on species parameters risks missing realms of creaturely potential.

This volume is the collaborative outcome of the Rachel Carson Center's Multispecies Reading Group, an initiative led by Thom van Dooren and Ursula Münster during 2015 and 2016. The sessions brought a diverse group of scholars from the disciplines of environmental philosophy, environmental history, animal history, history of science, anthropology, and sociology to the Rachel Carson Center, forming a vibrant reading and discussion group on the multifarious relationships between humans and other species. The group debated and rethought a range of concepts that have shaped relationships among a myriad of species. In the true spirit of collaboration, the contributing authors united to form the Multispecies Editing Collective and implemented an internal peer-review process for the volume.

We would like to thank the Rachel Carson Center for enabling our lively discussions across disciplinary boundaries and species lines. Special thanks also go to Harriet Windley for her thoughtful and patient editing, without which this volume would never have been completed.