

# Story-taling

*about*

**individual agency within a polyphonic mesh of fictional realities**

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## What it is about

*"Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" – Donna Haraway*

Even though we live in the age of information and polyphony, few voices are being noticed; few stories are being created. This paper reflects on the importance of creating and listening to stories. Our research focuses on the articulation of fictional narratives that allow to go beyond monophonic and catastrophic narratives. Stories are fiction and they are not; they are speculation yet inherently bear reflection. Anna Tsing talks about stories as forms of "attunement" to the worlds we find ourselves in, which means we have agency to make decisions: What stories do we listen to? What channels do we use to tell and who is telling? With this research, we aim to develop a method that helps diversify narratives about the future by providing space and showing possibilities for storytelling.

We see it as important to diversify narratives by transgressing the monophony of imagining the future. This seems possible through democratizing storytelling by pointing out that everyone is capable of telling stories and asking questions – we are active agents who can question narratives and imagine alternatives. Speculative fiction appears as a tool that can be learned and practiced.

Based on Timothy Morton's concept of a "mesh" that represents the interrelations between human and "nonhuman" realities, we propose to use a mapping technique that decenters the self and creates space for entangled narratives to evolve. The mapping involves the overlay of individual observations of the relations between (non-human) agents in a given space. In the course of this process, a "mesh" emerges and participants are encouraged to speculate about fictional scenarios that play out in this "web of life".

## Structure

In what follows, we will first outline our thought processes that have brought us to where we are now, as we want to acknowledge our subjective perspective and the circles we bring in. Then we will discuss our readings and intellectual influences that have enriched our thinking. In the third part, we will connect our subjective questions with the theoretical foundations before we present the possibilities of the cartography we have in mind. Instead of drawing a conclusion, we will try to critique and question our work to allow for further developments, and then end with a chapter on possible areas for future work.

## 1. Our views and questions (and their development)

We started writing down all our thoughts and doubts as questions and developed a question catalogue with the aim to decenter our own convictions. Throughout this investigation, we have been introduced to many new and old theories that attempt to explain the functions of our system and give insights about the future. Instead of searching for answers, with this research we constantly try to reframe the questions at stake. The way they are transforming reflects our findings, the point of thought where we are standing and the direction we are heading.

Speculating means wondering, questioning the sufficiency of the existing knowledge. It aids in surrendering to exploring the unknown.

Questions trigger another key tool for the speculative, especially when being practiced collectively: the dialogue. In a previous project, we tried to create an open dialogue by translating concepts into different kinds of questions and spreading them to the public. Since we are not yet able to include other than human species, our goal was to address a heterogeneous human audience with different insights and experiences. A challenging part here was the language: the form of a question can facilitate or limit the ability to imagine and displace from the self. For example, some questions stemming from a well-analyzed concept were intentionally ambiguous and vice versa. Implementing the idea of questioning, we will try in this paper to summarize some chapters with questions that aim to inspire self-thinking.

Coming to the objective of this paper, we argue that the tools of analytical questioning and facilitating open dialogues can be useful in the educational context, as we believe that everyone should be taught and encouraged to question.

The research objective of *future speculation* was therefore reframed as *active future speculation*. We realized that the matter is not a lack of access to stories about the future, but the idea that it is only the prerogative of writers, art creators, and philosophers to speculate and imagine upon.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Our research evolves around the importance of the active creation of stories in order to emphasise with our surroundings, which enables imaginations of futures that combine human and nonhuman realities. In this part, we will elaborate on theoretical work that engages with notions of non-human agency and storytelling as an emancipatory act of creative ideation.

### 2.1 becoming-with in times of human and nonhuman agency

In many ways, humans have become distinct parts of a system created by and for other humans. Stories teach us to prioritize individual growth and duration of individual life above all else. A distinction between human and nature made it possible to, without any further consideration, extract from the planet and use it as a waste bin for what's not needed for individual human thriving. "...these stories fuel assumptions about human autonomy, and they direct questions to the human control of nature, on the one hand, or human impact on nature, on the other, rather than to species interdependence" (Tsing, 2012, p. 144). Alongside getting to know this story-line, we feel how the ecosystems in which we live

and from which we are so isolated are collapsing faster and faster and the consequences for life are becoming more and more fatal. Fatal ignorance of the correlations that make up our world has brought us to a point where the viability of the ecosystems we inhabit is uncertain: “Human-scale spatiality may be comfortable to inhabit, but it has become (in the West, and increasingly around the globe) bound up with ideologies of human stewardship and mastery over natural resources precisely the ideology that has led to the current ecological crisis” (Caracciolo et al., 2022, p. 3). Looking at the world through the lens of human exceptionalism and our capitalist societies and the consequences of climate change leave most of us paralyzed and trapped in patterns and habits that we rarely break out of (Tsing, 2012).

Returning agency to humans paradoxically means decentering the human perspective and acknowledging the fact that we are part of a network of interdependent species. It means talking about “becoming-with” the world we live in (Haraway, 2015). Instead of dichotomizing human and nature, portraying human and non-human as active and interdependent entities that can act and be acted upon, as actants in a web of life, enables choices and agency (Latour).

## **2.2. mesh of life**

“There is no human in isolation, no form of human life that has not arisen in dialogue with a wider world” (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 14). Timothy Morton suggests the term “mesh” to talk about the entangled interrelations between humans and a large range of “non-human” realities. In Anna Tsing’s words these dialogues show how “human nature is an interspecies relationship” (Tsing, 2012, p. 144). For the same reason, Donna Haraway proposes to substitute *the human* with the term “natureculture”, pointing out that biophysically created nature and socially constructed culture are inseparable in their ecological realities. Similarly the Ghent-based project *Narmesh* explores how narratives can promote alternative ways of living in the contexts of the climatological and geological history of the planet. They ask “how can stories undercut anthropocentric ideologies and foster a sense of respectful coexistence with realities beyond the human?” (Narrating the Mesh, 2016). It becomes clear now, that *agency* and *power* need to be rethought if we recognize the equal right to shape the web in which we act. And one of the techniques to do so might be by opening up narratives that allow the multiplicity of entangled species interrelationships (Caracciolo et al., 2022, p. 12).

## **2.3 decentering the human perspective by acknowledging our interdependent speciesness**

The belief in the human ‘I’ being central to all that changes and moves is an outdated pattern that does not encompass the complexities of our times, “...what it seems to demand are detailed practices of attentiveness to the complex ways that we, all of us, become in consequential relationship with others” (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 3). Tsing (2012, p. 144) asks the question: “What if we imagined a human nature [a *natureculture*] that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence?” It might even come as a responsibility to be concerned – to (re)create *matters of concern* as Bruno Latour promotes. Latour (2004) juxtaposes matters of concern with *matters of facts* – the things we have been taught to unquestionably believe in because our science-based validations-system has approved them once as correct. Rather than doing so, it seems important to constantly re-evaluate, to constantly question, criticize, and in the end generate more ideas than we receive. This is the driving force behind the formation and transformation of networks and systems. Speculative fiction as the multiple forms of

storytelling can be initiated - being itself a way of practicing attentiveness and therefore it is a tool to share concerns.

## **2.4 creative ideation to emancipate from the prefabricated – being carrier bags**

In the process of creating speculative fictions, we place ourselves into situations where nothing that we know is what it seems to be. A “narrative does not just function to represent or even simulate the daily experience of space, but it destabilizes it” (Caracciolo et al., 2022, p. 11). This entails *unlearning* and getting comfortable with the unknown “since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process” (Le Guin, 1986). The narrative appears as a *container of nothingness*, a stage for stories to be performed in. Our imagination appears as a non-physical stage on which every story could take place; we are thus *carrier bags* for meaning that form possible worlds (Campagna, 2021). The narration does not need to be human nor linked to a spoken or written language. It seems that especially “multispecies stories are active technologies of worlding: Stories are means to ways of living” (van Dooren et al., 2016, p. 16).

The theories we engage with show how *agency* and *power* are being rethought if we recognize the equal right to shape the web in which we act. Speculative fiction represents our ability to respond. To tell stories is our response-ability that can promote the *becoming-with* of multispecies worldings as we contemplate on progress.

*What possibilities are there to transgress the imperious way of dealing with nature?*

*What if we understood nature as a complex cultural construct and integrate the idea of natureculture into humanology? How can we cultivate critical hope?*

*Would the current binomials (natural vs. artificial, human vs. non-human, alive vs. decay,...) still count?*

## **3. Potentializing the speculative**

Having introduced the main concepts (*becoming-with*, *mesh*, *carrier bag*), what follows is an outline of the potentialities of speculative fiction – this comes as a speculation itself on how storytelling (*carrier bags*) can reintegrate human and non-human agency (*becoming-with* in the *mesh*).

### **3.1 more than me**

Individual perspective is precious yet really dangerous. It is the beginning of our understanding, the catalyst ingredient of our creations. But to move in more dimensions of being, enable communications, interactions and continuations, a single story is not enough. Projecting one’s own experience onto other people, species and entities might lead to a manifestation of justices and injustices, allies and enemies, good and evil. By imagining the future collectively we cannot get completely rid of our blinkers (horse blinders), but combining multiple blinkered visions can create panoramic views.

### 3.2 imagining anew

According to scholars from social sciences and anthropology, as citizens of (western) modern societies, we learned to give value and importance to certain things and ignore most of what going on elsewhere – everything that is not included in the systems we know is unimaginable to us: “only a very small set of things could possibly count as ‘the future’ and everything else was being blocked out, even though it was going on all around” (Tsing, 2021). By *attuning* ourselves anew to the worlds we find ourselves in through storytelling, we can integrate all kinds of learnings and technologies that help to emphasise with our surroundings (Tsing, 2021). This means that we don't necessarily come up with new inventions and ideas, but the new kind of attention we pay to our environment through telling different stories allows us to open our eyes to things we thought were unremarkable and to reshape systems we thought were established. Here “...writing becomes the way of posing the question of how to live [...] a space that generates stories through which a society can examine itself” (Tsing et al., 2017, p. 171).

### 3.3 getting comfortable with unknown ways of living

Ways of living are often just repeated pattern of what one saw before. One of our main obstacles is the fear of the unknown which is tightly connected to the fear of death and non-existence. If we acknowledge nature as life that has temporary phases which at some point will be transformed into something else, we might then be able to have a different, more liberated relationship with our surroundings. Through speculative fiction we can and maybe must (re-)imagine morality and temporality in an uncanny ecosystem. Showing the catastrophes of our times in which we are bodily involved in as playful stories, where light and colours can emerge, eventually will enable re-understanding these moralities and temporalities anew. Speculative fiction allows for a “...sense of wonder that was terrible – though not in such a way that it stopped action but brought us into the world more fully instead” (Tsing, 2021).

Speculating about human and non-human life forms from a fictional point of view can reveal common grounds and disclose shared values. To understand life as a whole in this way, we must reflect on and re-imagine the meaning, origin, and purpose of current cohabitations.

Ultimately, we are *carrier bags* of meaning that we pass on and that can form possible conceptual displacements.

*Can we liberate ourselves from the fear of the unknown and become familiar with the uncertainties of our existence?*

*If we attune ourselves anew through storytelling, what colors would the sounds have?*

## 4. Practical application: writing workshop

Our aim is to enrich the discourse on creating and listening to stories. So far, this research is very theoretical and in our minds. When starting to think of possible implementations in educational contexts, we have an idea that we would like to propose and discuss. We developed a mapping technique in the form of a workshop with different phases to create new frameworks for ideation and storytelling from varying perspectives. We aim to integrate everything that is not a *me* without losing sight of its very important context.

The technique aims to embody the idea of Timothy Morton's mesh: Everything is interconnected and interdependent, and this interconnection should be recognized and accounted for in how we understand and narrate the world:

### **Analytical part**

- Phase 1: introducing storytelling, and human and non-human agency to participants (minimum of three)
- Phase 2: choosing sight (few m<sup>2</sup>, optionally outdoors) and introduce everyone to the idea of "situational mapping": drawing out all the interrelationships that seem to make a difference to the environment and how each part influences the other
- Phase 3: giving everyone time to identify and capture relations they observe in that space, the non-human things in focus (optionally on transparent paper)
- Phase 4: coming back together, laying the observations on top of each other - talking about how observations overlap, cross, differ... *do we see a mesh in creation?*
- Phase 5: make pairs with similar entities in the map and compare observations. Together create new relationships stemming from the "old" relationships observed.

### **Creational part**

- Phase 6: coming back together and collectively create a new situational-map without thinking about the physical sight but only using the maps created
- Phase 7: individually, choose one relationship and use this as starting point to narrate a story - facilitate this process through asking questions based on the situation
- Phase 8: come back together and overlay them/share the stories with each other - *can they become one? Are they one?*

## **5. Criticism**

When we ponder on what we have done so far, it becomes clear how much still needs to be done. Our aim is to enrich the discourse on creating and listening to stories, and we hope that we have raised some questions that open new doors for readers. However, it is important for us to critically examine our practice to see where we can start to improve our impact. Therefore, what follows is a section where we critically look at what we have done.

### **5.1 remaining bubbles**

Through this paper our aim is to weave together our readings with our thoughts and unveil connections from within the weaving (a 'mesh'). We state the importance of polyphonic stories and distributed agency in speculative fiction, however, our list of references do not evince so. Most of the theories (i.e. stories) mentioned come from a discrete field of intellectuals, philosophers and academics who are professionally associated with each other. Some might say that they form a sort of 'bubble' themselves. That raises a criticism about how contradictory this is to our very statement. We talk about the urgency to hear and make hear more voices but our research itself lacks a holistic resourcing. It is our intent to broaden our references from more human and non-human grounds.

## 5.2 idealism

The remaining problem with democratizing storytelling is that it is not treated seriously and is dismissed as not real, as pure fiction. It appears that “at that moment, the ‘real’ expanded and swallowed up whole continents of social imagination marginalizing as fantasy whatever was left” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.19). But this did not occur by accident. It is the result of our fast-paced societies that especially in the west are becoming more and more intense and absorbing. What we propose might fairly be called idealistic, as it suggests a radical twist in these realities that we daily experience. It can be a matter of privilege having the room to unsettle one’s microcosmos and all the comforts it comes along with. Expanding mindsets requires time and accessibility since “we need to look beyond design to the methodological playgrounds of cinema, literature, science, ethics, politics, and art; to explore, hybridise, borrow, and embrace the many tools available” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.14).

## 6. Reflection and (re-)speculation

We have introduced our research approach on the potentialities of *asking questions*, *facilitating dialogues*, and *giving space* when it comes to imagining polyphonic futures. We have summarized the relevant discourses around the *creation of narratives* and showed how the perceptions on *agency* and *power* change when acknowledging the multispeciesness of the *mesh of life*. It appeared that giving back agency to humans means *decentering the human* and focus on *species interdependencies*. We have outlined how speculative life forms reveal common grounds and disclose shared values through *new attunements* to the worlds we live in. It is the unknown that creates fear and that can become intriguing through fiction instead. We have presented a *mapping-technique* that shows how creative ideation processes (in the educational context) could be initiated through *storytelling* and a new view on surroundings. In the end we critiqued how we talk about multiple narratives but stay in a bubble of thinkers that are pretty much using the same language and worldings.

We will finish with a vision of the *morning-after*, after transgressing the *monophony of imagining*.

Writing history of the planet is not prerogative of writers, artists, or philosophers. In fact, it is not prerogative of the human but instead a fluid collaboration of expertise. Telling the story of life together is “*about meaning and culture, about adding to what life could be [...] it is a catalyst for social dreaming*” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 189). The past, the present, and the future appear to us through a multi-dimensional panorama. We all carry a bag. But its bottoms are open, its contents are everywhere.

As we see, „the story isn’t over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars“ (Le Guin, 1986). The story will never be over and the ways we tell and listen to them should never stay constant.

We are in constant creation, and questioning of fictional scenarios, we are *becoming-with* in polyphony. What might happen next is invisible, yet the unknown does not prevent us from imagining – rather it activates the creative narrators in each and all of us. The questions we are dealing with now are: are we intrinsically tied up to our sense of self-survival? who is committed to carrying the items of our epoques?

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