

Narrating the Multispecies World in Times of Crises

An Introduction

Michaela Fenske

Narrating in Times of Crises

Strange unidentified flying objects appeared in an orchard in Franconia, Germany, in the spring of 2006. The gardeners in the idyllic countryside were still panicking even after having successfully struggled against what they perceived as “UFOs”. The scene, as described by German entomologist Heinz Bußler, is horrible: twelve aliens were killed, and the gardeners were not sure whether some of them had been able to escape (2007). The first violet carpenter bees (*Xylocopa violacea*) arriving in a Franconian garden after having migrated from the river valleys with their mild temperatures were not welcome. Interpreted as unidentified flying objects, they had no chance to integrate into the Franconian biosphere. Gardeners who were unfamiliar with this predominantly Mediterranean wild bee felt threatened. The gardeners’ reaction made entomologist Bußler express his concern about the survival chances this newly arrived insect might have in Germany.¹

The story of the violet carpenter bee and its migration from the south to the north of Europe is just one of the many stories told today about the increasing mobility of other-than-human beings in the face of today’s global polycrisis (Henig and Knight 2023). The effects of the current crises significantly affect life on earth in our “planetary age” (Chakrabarty 2021). The mobility of other-than-human beings, similar to that of humans, links to a variety of experiences. Some are forced to leave their original territory and have to find new living environments; others, who are not as mobile, might die or even become extinct as a species; others again might even experience a resurrection or revival of their species in the course of their migration. We witness stories of newly arriving or disappearing species all over the world, whether they are plants or animals. Although the increasing mobility of living beings is only one aspect of today’s polycrisis, it is an important aspect that unfolds in multiple forms.

¹ The story of the “UFOs” is told in more detail in my article dealing with the violet carpenter bee as my partner in reflecting the relationship of humans and insects, see Fenske (2025).

Today's polycrisis manifests itself in the shape of climate change, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, and the pollution of air, earth and water that, in their turn, result in increasing poverty and famine, a continuous increase in the number of (poor) humans, a lack of participation (e.g. in education), multiplying social inequality, socio-economic separation, populism and related factors. There are not only many different aspects of the multiple crises, but these aspects are also intertwined. As a result, one crisis cannot be solved without considering the others. The loss of biodiversity, for instance, is closely connected to the increasing number of (poor) humans and the resulting social inequality. From a multispecies perspective, the socio-ecological crises have reached a dramatic state, as even those living beings whose existence we take for granted in our everyday lives are in danger of disappearing; in Europe, this concerns, for example, common birds, such as the sparrow, widely spread molluscs, like shiny snails, and various endemic trees, including the horse chestnut and mountain ash (European Parliament 2020).

International scholars of the humanities and social sciences have suggested various concepts to fathom today's polycrisis for a number of years: The term Anthropocene emphasizes the profound influence human beings have on life on earth (e.g. Horn and Bergthaller 2020). Terms such as Capitalocene (Moore 2018), Plantationocene or Anglocene mark a special set of ethics, and practices of exploitation, colonialism, sexism and racism (e.g. Mentz 2017); the term Novocene serves to reflect the world-forming power of hyperintelligence (Lovelock 2019); the designation Chthulucene underlines both the becoming of humans with other beings and emphasizes the differences of this becoming within space and time (Haraway 2016). Regardless of which of these scholarly concepts one prefers, the challenge lies in the undisputed certainty that human beings have become a planetary force, but do not deal responsibly with their unleashed power.

Times of crises are times of narrating. Crises not only ask for narrating as a means of coping with uncertainty and danger, it also constitutes a fundamental resource of survival within crises (e.g. Dinkl et al. 2023). Narrating the violet carpenter bees as "UFOs", for instance, served as a means to overcome the fear towards the unknown insects in the Franconian orchards and gardens. Narratives have currently increasingly developed an inherently ambivalent nature. This is a result of not only changing ethics, but also changed perspectives that result from the post-humanistic decentring of the human. The arrival of the violet carpenter bees in Central Europe constitutes a lucid example to illustrate this ambivalence. From a human perspective, the unknown insect is narrated as a threat; the wild bee itself would probably narrate the human reaction as an unjustified and unnecessarily brutal act of violence. The presumed perspective of the wild bee was imagined by the entomologist Bußler (2007), who was shocked by the brutality of the gardeners. If we take the example of the violet carpenter bees as representative, stories in our times are not as clear and unambiguous as they used to be. Although there has always been more than one perspective, only now do we become aware of the diversity of different perspectives. But stories have also become ambivalent in other ways. Traditional stories lose their relevance for the everyday experience; they are no longer convincing or supportive for managing the everyday lives of people. The metanarratives of modernity have lost their power of persuasion. The importance of storytelling has grown in times of polycrisis and, what is more, new stories are needed.

Experts from different fields – from business life to politics, the sciences and humanities – as well as members of societies worldwide ask for new stories more often and become more demanding than previously. Within academia, these demands are, at times, inspired by feminist approaches, queer standpoints, the perspective and knowledge of indigenous people or other marginalized groups. Within the field of environmental humanities, the new stories needed are intended to question modern world-views; they are expected to transmit fresh perspectives by communicating new paradigms (Heise 2017). The environmental historian Frank Uekötter, for example, is looking for new stories on monocultures (2023). The new narratives are expected to explain the logics of the damaging methods of food production. The new narratives Uekötter is looking for are expected to illustrate the complexity of agrarian food production beyond simple patterns of imagining rogue farmers and miserly consumers.

At the same time, new forms of storytelling are becoming popular in both traditional and new media (e.g. Bencke and Bruhn 2022). In the field of multispecies storytelling, previously uncommon practices of narrating, such as speculating, have become popular in the arts and sciences (Haraway 2016).

Especially those whose declared goal it is to live in a prosperous multispecies world – i.e. scholars of environmental humanities, artists, conservationists, gardeners and others – propagate new stories and forms of narrating. According to multispecies scholar Donna Haraway, these new stories will not only allow humans to stay “with the trouble” of a damaged planet (2016), but they also enable us to identify and apply new perspectives to overcome at least some of the negative effects that we are currently experiencing. In these ways, narrating increasingly becomes an extremely powerful practice.

Narrating as a World Building Practice

In the context of folklore studies, a field in which European Ethnology has come into being, the power of narrating is not a new feature. From the early interest in popular culture in the 18th century, narrating was perceived as an influential and powerful practice (Bendix and Hasan-Rokem 2014). For a long time, folklorists focused on what German scholar of humanities André Jolles named “Simple Forms” of narrative tradition (1930), such as fairytales, fables and legends. Folklorists have since the 1970s increasingly studied the everyday and popular forms of narrating, leading to performance studies and studies of the repertoire of specifically talented narrators. Today, the expanded focus of folklore studies includes communication in all its different forms. The plurality of narrative forms and genres studied now pertains not only to texts but also to two-dimensional illustrations, films, three-dimensional statues, enacted performances and other forms of storytelling. Ulrich Marzolph, German scholar of Middle Eastern narrative culture, and Regina Bendix, Swiss-American cultural anthropologist, outlined the new expanded understanding of narratives as follows:

While a narrative is primarily constituted by content, it may be rendered in writing or may exist as a two-dimensional illustration or painting or a three-dimensional statue or monument; narratives may be performed and enacted and often form the backbone

of customs and rituals. The cultural universe of narrative underlies novels and films; allusions to it may be found in fashion trends as well as in architecture. (2012: 1–2)

This understanding also strengthens the link to artistic forms of narrating that offer inspiring possibilities to create new narratives in the field of multispecies storytelling (e.g. Anker and Flach 2024; Kirksey 2014).

Folklore has always dealt with other-than-humans. Storytelling in Western tradition deals particularly with animals and plants which live together with humans, so-called domesticated animals, such as honeybees, cattle or pets. The anthropocentric perspective of Western storytelling also includes those living beings that are not part of the household (and here, I consciously avoid the reinforcement of modern binaries by not using terms such as feral or wild). This pertains to species living close to humans that are perceived by them as a nuisance, such as fleas or mosquitos, or even threats, such as bears or wolves. A look into the range of entries covered by the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, the concise handbook of historical and comparative folk narrative studies (Ranke et al. 1977–2015), helps to detail this assessment. The comprehensive collection of research on popular narratives in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* shows that folklorists from the 19th to the 21st century have rarely been interested in the diversity of animals and plants. Following an anthropocentric agenda, only those other-than-human beings were considered worthy of being narrated if this made sense from the human perspective. Instead of wild bees, such as the violet carpenter bee, honeybees attracted interest as a role model for industrious life. In this logic, it was enough to speak of trees, as such, without specifying different species of trees. In the Western tradition of thinking, other-than-humans were mainly narrated as objects and means for developing stories, in the terms of literary and media studies as “diegetic actors” (e.g. Borgards 2015).

This perspective has changed in the course of recent post-humanistic theories. Folklore studies now regard other-than-human beings as independent actors with their own agency (Fenske and Norkunas 2017; Magliocco 2018; Middelhoff and Peselmann 2013). With their change of paradigms, folklore studies and the field of narrative culture studies have become part of the transdisciplinary field of environmental humanities, including ecocriticism, econarratology and multispecies studies that, in their turn, incorporate animal, plant and extinction studies. Folklore studies enrich this transdisciplinary field with their wide understanding of narrating and their focus on narratives of the everyday of people worldwide.

Since humans are the main factor in generating the polycrisis, the humanities are challenged to contribute to solutions (e.g. Heise 2016). The field of environmental humanities commands a particular expertise in narrating and narratives. The field of multispecies studies and its subfield of extinction studies focus particularly on narrating. Thom van Dooren, multispecies and extinction studies scholar, once formulated a related programme:

Stories allow us to hold open simultaneously a range of points of view, interpretations, temporalities, and possibilities [...]. [It is] a [...] lively approach to telling stories about life and death in the shadow of extinction. It is an effort to weave tales that add flesh to

the bones of the dead and dying, that give some vitality, presence, perhaps “thickness” [...] in the minds and lives [...]. (2014: 8)

Within the field of environmental humanities, narrating and analysing narratives have developed into tools and methods of both understanding and forming the world (e.g. Gibson et al. 2015). Analysing narratives helps us to understand the polycrisis and its effects on multispecies communities. Narratives – as containers and fields of exploration of ethics, values and attitudes – provide insights into people’s world-views. At the same time, narrating allows us to discuss, establish and communicate new ethics and attitudes. The act of narrating constantly documents and creates relationships; it is part of our becoming with humans and other-than-humans; it expresses our “cultures of entanglements” (Anker and Flach 2024). Narratives communicate the multispecies world and invite humans to become aware of the fact that they are part of these entanglements. Narratives offer identification with and within the multispecies entanglements.

Narrating is also a practice of mourning loss – lost battles against environmental devastation, lost friends and relatives in our multispecies neighborhoods. They transmit what we have lost to a broader public. In the words of Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret, they allow us to adumbrate that “every feeling of every being in the world causes all beings in the world to feel and think differently. When one being is no longer there, the world narrows at a stroke [...]” (2021: 39).

Narrating helps us to overcome obsolete perspectives, paradigms and ethics. It supplies a medium for dreams and hopes. Similar to speculative fabulation, narrating opens up a space for utopias (e.g. Haraway 2016). Especially in times of crises, utopian narratives allow us to rethink society and test “a less cautious and more imaginative engagement with possible futures” (Levitas 2013: 149) This approach includes looking for alternative ways of living and pushing the process of transformation into a better multispecies future.

The field of environmental humanities has prepared the ground for changing the anthropocentric perspective on narrating over the past 20 years. Most importantly, narrating today is no longer recognized as a practice exclusively germane to human beings (e.g. James and Morel 2020; van Dooren and Rose 2012). The wide understanding of narratives and narrating as popular within folklore studies today, and the consideration of more-than-human sounds in the humanities (e.g. Herrmann-Fertig and Fenske 2024) allow us to interpret narrating as a multispecies practice of interacting and connecting with the world (Despret 2022). This makes new forms of interspecies communication and understanding possible.

Day by day, people all over the world experience transformation in their everyday lives and cope with transformation by narrating it. At the same time, scholars in the humanities reinterpret human heritage and study the effects of transformation by analysing the narratives related. Transformation is a key term in times of polycrisis.

Narrating the Transformation – Transformation through Narrating

The mobility of living beings worldwide reminds one of the crucial importance of the everyday places in which we live. Where we live and with whom we share our lives matter. As geographers Owain Jones and Paul Cloke wrote some twenty years ago: "Nature-society relations are continually unfolding in the context of specific places, in which meanings will arise from particular interactions between different assemblages of social, cultural and natural elements" (2002: 1).

I listen to many narratives in my neighbourhood and my office, both situated in the warm vineyard area of Franconia, that deal with the transformation of our environment. My neighbours tell me stories about cute rabbits coming close to their homes and eating the sprouts in their raised beds. Early in the morning, when my dog and I share a walk, I often see rabbits using the road to leave our neighbourhood before humans start their daily activities. A neighbour is engaged in the protection of beavers that have been reintroduced into the south of Germany since the 1960s and are now highly protected: he tells the story of how much this rodent loves to feed on sugar beets in the fields. Visiting a pub with a colleague, I hear the story of the amber forest cockroach (*Ectobius vittiventris*), a newly arrived insect from the Mediterranean that my colleague recently discovered in her warm city apartment. Other colleagues tell of their bird protégés whom they raise in spring and summer because they have become homeless due to heavy rainfall or drought, or because there is a lack of insects to feed them. On an excursion with students to the mountains, our guide laments the presence of wolves. Now also protected by law, the wolves menace the sheep and cause considerable extra effort for the shepherds.

Similar to any other region, my home area is distinct from other places in the world, as it is populated by specific multispecies communities. At the same time, people here share the stories of people all over the world: The former notions of wild and domesticated that were clearly separated during the cleaning campaigns of modernity (Latour 1993) are now blurred due to the expansion of humans. Protected retreats for those animals that are not accepted as parts of the household are becoming rare. Many animals not only experience the destruction of their original habitats, but also suffer from the effects of climate change. As a consequence, some people produce narratives of interspecies solidarity. Stories of "pepplers" (i.e. people caring for the fledglings of wild birds, from an agent derivative of Middle High German *pepelen* "to feed or suckle"), tales of gardeners accepting sprout-eating rabbits in their gardens – similar narratives of interspecies love and care are told all over the world. The attachment to animals or plants living together with humans sometimes generate stories of tension that narrate conflicts with such species as wolves or beavers. The integration of other-than-humans generally seems to be all the easier the less they threaten human ways of life.

Analysing some of the narratives dealing with the transformation of our everyday because of the effects of the polycrisis, scholars of the environmental humanities argue that people in the everyday worlds have already narrated new stories that do not comply with the storylines of Western anthropocentric traditions. American psychologist Anne Beneventi, for instance, argues that a new meme of kinship for human-animal relations is part of recent stories in the USA that narrate the connectivity of humans and other

species (2017). Beekeepers in the Global North stop the old tradition of narrating the swarming of honeybees as something annoying that should be suppressed, while others challenge the supreme command of humans over honeybees. By changing the metanarrative, more and more beekeepers nowadays celebrate the swarming of honeybees as a sign of their vitality in narratives and beekeeping practice (Fenske 2017).

Comparable to this development, historians, anthropologists and scholars of political ecology publish their critical reviews of interpreting our world in the way of Western tradition, discovering alternative ways in the history of humans. They are aware that some practices of protecting nature stand in the tradition of exploitation, domination, racism and sexism. American anthropologist David Graeber and British archaeologist David Wengrow reinterpret the history of humanity and “begin to tell another, more hopeful and more interesting story” (2022: 4). In this perspective, it is the Western tradition of enlightenment that has enforced inequality and violence against Indigenous people and other living beings. Alternatives to modern ways of life have always existed, and Canadian political ecologist Audra Mitchell introduces the concept of “bioplurality” to offer a new paradigm against common narratives of extinction or conservation (2023).

Studies such as these demonstrate how important it is that we gain a better understanding “of the [stories] that long have been in circulation” (James and Morel 2020: 1). Moreover, we do not necessarily have to look for new stories elsewhere, but can trust ourselves to narrate new ones.

Narrating the World as a Better Place

The present anthology is situated within all these aspirations to find new stories for a better understanding of and supporting a flourishing multispecies world. The contributors, coming from different disciplinary contexts, are scholars in the humanities or social sciences, artists and/or activists. They feed their various perspectives, different traditions of thinking and communicating, as well as different experiences of life into this common book project. The contributors look for both forgotten and new stories harbouring chances of a peaceful cohabitation in the multispecies world. All contributions share a broad understanding of narratives, including different forms of art and media. Being aware that each contribution is a narrative itself, some contributors experiment with new forms of multispecies storytelling and the art of speculating. Others play with different forms of narrating, create pieces of art through narrating, reflect activism or are themselves part of activistic movements. With its experimental ways of probing new stories and novel forms of narrating, this volume might irritate readers who expect to find familiar scholarly modes of writing. In general, we hope that readers value this irritation as another step needed for a worldwide transformation towards a flourishing multispecies world.

Concurring with the open character of the individual contributions, the volume is loosely organized into five different sections, each one focusing on a specific practice of narrating the multispecies world. These sections are labelled Communicating, Caring, Connecting, Remembering and Speculating. A concluding chapter by Regina F. Bendix

assesses the contributions from the perspective of a folklorist and international scholar of cultural anthropology.

The contributions in the section *Communicating* reflect on how to ameliorate human communication of and with the multispecies world. Sandra Eckardt's picture story illustrates how abstract statistics of extinction come alive in the form of multispecies storytelling as an anthropological practice of communicating knowledge to a broader public. But how does one communicate with other-than-humans? Utilizing Tomás Saraceno's arachnophilia project, Ally Bisshop demonstrates an artistic way of attempting to communicate with spiders through vibrations. In the third contribution of this section, Ute Hörner and Vanessa Wijngaarden introduce their artistic project of using intuitive interspecies communication to learn more about the ways in which parrots understand the world.

The section *Caring* brings together contributions that deal with different types of caring for a prosperous multispecies assemblage. Martin Abbott, Amy Cheatle and Lissette Lorenz argue that people and plants come together, practice and reflect on multispecies relations in making both a garden and a zine. Siran Liang presents the attempts to not only keep land arable but also sustain a certain way of pastoral living by discussing narratives told in the context of the restoration of Tibetan grasslands. Arniaka Peselmann narrates the story of modern apple breeding, with a particular focus on the tough challenges that producers face today. Eline D. Tabak's contribution is about storying the extinction of the monarch butterflies that also constitutes a practice of self-caring of the touristic industry.

The section *Connecting* presents a variety of proposals regarding how humans and other living beings become together through close relationships. Hilan Alkan shows how plants and humans develop new homes by rooting themselves together in new environments. Close and beautiful entanglements of humans and other living beings are the topic in the multispecies portrait art of Chinese photographer Ren Hang, as introduced by Ahmet Emin Bülbül. André Krebber and Zhonghao Chen demonstrate that being connected is always a practice of narrating with by bringing together different traditions of narrating the multispecies world. But how can we as human beings learn to connect with other living beings? Maria Ilhéu and Mariana Valente demonstrate once more the challenges of creative artistic practices for their work in places of environmental education in Portugal.

The section *Remembering* reminds us that in order to overcome the polycrisis, we also need to keep in mind historical dimensions of becoming with. Chiara Beneduce deals with the increasing number of floods and proposes that these might be managed if people remember premodern ways of not dominating rivers, streams and the multispecies communities living there. Christine Neubert's ethnodrama reminds us that the ongoing process of building and caring for the infrastructures in our compact cities is a steady process of interacting rudely with other species. Arguing with the wisdom of Gaelic folklore, Mairéad Nic Craith shows that a shift of perspective may help to overcome the effects of today's polycrisis. And Pauline Schuster-Löhlau reflects the traditional wisdom of the Mantesvami, a marginalized group living in the South of India, and their ethical agenda toward other-than-human beings.

The section *Speculating* deals with a powerful practice for finding answers for a thriving multispecies future. Fernanda Haskel invites us into a distant future in the fourth millennium when humans and other-than-humans live respectfully together. Siobhan Leddy introduces embodied mimesis as an artistic tool to re-narrate the human. Andrea Palašti and Sanja Andelković mediate how to decipher the traces of Woodiana mussels, a so-called invasive species, in the Danube river, and how one might learn to understand them.

Altogether, the present volume suggests a considerable variety of new stories that might help to overcome the effects of today's polycrisis. Many of these narratives from multispecies laboratories all over the world are also stories of hope. As the prominent German scholar of narrative practices, Herrmann Bausinger, pointed out some years ago, our everyday lives need the light of utopia to give transformation a chance (1996).

The present introduction began with the unhappy story of the first encounter of the Mediterranean violet carpenter bees and Franconian gardeners. Despite the concerns of the entomologist Bußler, that story meanwhile has had a happy continuation, as the bee has integrated not only into the Franconian landscape, but also into the multispecies assemblages of other regions in Northern Germany and Europe (Fenske 2025). A leaflet recently published by the Federal German Ministry of Food and Agriculture even listed the originally Mediterranean bee as an important "indigenous" bee (BMEL 2023: 5). As this example shows, it sometimes takes less than twenty years to learn to live together.

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