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TELL ME A STORY, TELL ME THE WORLD

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Amid an unprecedented socioenvironmental crisis, we continue to invent new words and concepts in an effort to respond to geological transformation and environmental destruction. In his proposition of “slow violence” Rob Nixon refers to gradually unfolding, attritional, unevenly distributed environmental catastrophes such as climate change, pollution, and deforestation.¹ Such forms of “pervasive but elusive” violence and their insidious effects, as Nixon notes, pose a profound representational challenge and therefore often fail to capture much-needed attention.² Meanwhile, scholars have worked on lexicon projects to collect a new vocabulary that helps to imagine ecological futures—describing a transformed world that is still livable.³ Yet, how might we take on the seemingly impossible task of making sense of climate change and contemporary environmental crises? In this time of myriad losses, there is an imperative need for renewed, multiplicitous stories and narrative forms.



The Flower Dome and the Cloud Forest, two conservatories in the Gardens by the Bay, Singapore. © CEphoto, Uwe Aranas. All rights reserved. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

My work has often involved listening, collecting, and telling stories shaped by climate change, urban imaginaries, and environmental injustice. I have employed storytelling as “a mode of inquiry into the act of imagining and reimagining, drawing us into ways of creating possible futures and relations of humans and nonhumans.”⁴ I traced the genealogy of tap water through infrastructures, examining how it is captured, cleansed, desalinated, monetised, and taken for granted (figure 1). I have written about organic farms and high-tech farms with no soil in sight, attempting to tease out how various modes of growing enable or limit more-than-human care.⁵ Working on and with these stories has taught me that storytelling demands patience, attentiveness, and time, and is itself an

ethical work.⁶ Crucially, the process requires drawing insights from other researchers, practitioners, environmentalists, and other-than-humans to craft thick and textured descriptions.



Fig. 1. Section of the Marina Barrage—an urban dam in Singapore. On the one side is seawater, and on the other side is freshwater, collected to be treated for drinking water. © Jamie Wang. All rights reserved.

To address complex environmental issues—which are always social, cultural, and political—stories must account for divergent multispecies ways of knowing and relating. If a story manages to attend closely to the wider more-than-human world, it helps to unveil unevenly distributed impacts of environmental issues, reveals what has been erased to give rise to certain types of futures, and shifts our focus as to what we see. Examining the multifaceted consequences of intense urbanisation, from ongoing demolition of nature-culture heritages to the displacement of multispecies communities, I sought to map and capture a process of “double erasure,” which “reveals first the literal removal of the built and natural environment, along with the subsequent erasures of culture, memory, and ways of life rooted in these places.”⁷ Telling such stories of entwined displacement provides a fuller sense of landscape and urban transformations, including biocultural loss.

Following Karen Barad’s insight that ways of knowing are inseparable from ways of being, storytelling can be understood as an “ethico-onto-epistemological” practice.⁸ In other words, it is itself a form of commitment—a way of participating in and shaping the ongoing making of worlds.⁹ Building on this, my approach to storytelling goes beyond the traditional understanding of narratives as literary or cultural representation. Rather, I position story and storytelling as *discursive, practical labour and efforts* that shape and are shaped by lived experience.

My recent project traces Singapore's pursuit of an ecomodernised sustainable future and to a large extent explores the disappearance of complex relations and worlds. In one instance, I look at the demolition of villages, the exhumation of graves, and the clearing of surrounding secondary forests to make way for various development projects. Here, storytelling is a practical method that allows me to layer in the different understandings and values of humans and nonhumans while holding onto "multiplicity," and to make the relationship of the living and the dead visible.¹⁰ These stories seek to invite readers in and help them get a sense of what is at stake, highlighting the asymmetrical power relations that underpin such nature-culture erasures.

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Of course, stories and storytelling also carry limitations and risks. We are in a time of an explosive number of stories, and there is, to some, a crisis of narration in an information-overloaded digital age.¹¹ Others have warned against the instrumentalisation and commodification of "easily shareable narratives" that ignore systemic issues.¹² In many ways, storytelling treads a tender and fragile line. Simplified stories risk orphaning entities without their webs of historical, social-ecological, and political relations. Such reductionism may perpetuate the same dominant discourse rooted in the separation of nature from culture and humans from the environment.

To resist this radical reduction, we need thicker accounts of life and death, relation and care, fear and hope. More specifically, questions such as who benefits (or loses) from the stories, who is and who is not in the stories, and who we story with, must be of central concern. For instance, in the case of a supposedly sustainable railway line that may impact a highly ecologically sensitive area, the Singapore Land Transport Authority has foregrounded the narrative and certainty of science and engineering solutions as mitigation measures. This way, the potential ecological impacts and the disruption of complex more-than-human relations are overshadowed, while the environmental, social, and cultural questions surrounding urban sustainable transportation are reduced to techno-managerial concerns.¹³ Yet, around the world, these often overlooked more-than-human stories are not only about hypermodernised, land-scarce cities. They also speak more broadly to how we live with one another, what kinds of futures are prioritised or foreclosed, and who or what is displaced in the name of progress.

On the one hand, careful and grounded storytelling helps transform individual and localised lived experiences of "environmental injustice into public knowledge."¹⁴ At the same time, scholars have warned that, in the context of political storytelling on social media, the platform logic allows the story of personal experience to gain "disproportionate representativeness and normativity through affective sharing."¹⁵ One of the key issues I see with platform-attuned narratives—as with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in story composition—is the loss of embodied efforts, labour, the desire to know the origins, or more broadly, the agential way of storytelling. If stories have the potential to promote understandings of "embodied, relational, contingent ethics,"¹⁶ the unrooted and unsituated descriptions of AI may disorient and distort a relational world.

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It becomes increasingly clear that stories and storytelling must be approached as a relational and ethical process. This requires us not only to consider who we are storying with, but also how stories cultivate more caring and curious readers and give rise to transformative actions. It is critical to ask, borrowing Ursula Heise's words, "[W]hy, how, and under what circumstances certain readers

produce particular readings of texts.”¹⁷ In a flood of content that repeats, paraphrases, and diminishes, such agentic and circular relations between storytelling and story reading may be lost.

To avoid a singular, dangerous utilitarian lens, we need stories grounded in a diverse mode of meaning making and knowledge systems. In practice, this may involve initiating an interdisciplinary enquiry and incorporating more-than-human relations to redescribe something “so that it becomes thicker than it first seems.”¹⁸ When I explored urban mobility, in addition to human and automobility I also attended to nonhuman-animal movement, which I understand as a process of world making. In one case, this involved crawling in the bushes, imagining myself a civet looking for a path across a fragmented nature reserve. These explorations form a part of the multidimensional approach that guides storylines. In a more systematic way, learning from various scientists, activists, artists, and related community members, as well as nonhuman beings and entities, constitutes an approach of “passionate immersion,” one described and deployed by Anna Tsing and Thom van Dooren as a kind of new science study and multispecies storytelling practice, grounded in “inter-species curiosity” and genuine interest in the lives of nonhumans.¹⁹



Fig. 2. Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. This important green area has been separated from its adjacent Central Catchment Nature Reserve—Singapore’s largest remaining reserve—by a six-lane expressway since 1986. © Jamie Wang. All rights reserved.

As many of us attempt to adjust to the new normal—living in a climate-changed world and a climate-changing future—we urgently need new modes of storytelling. Creative work helps to defamiliarise taken-for-granted tropes and does some of the translation work as we seek to trace and immerse ourselves in relations among diverse biotic and abiotic beings. Such work may also act as a

speculative counterpoint to the dominant technocratic mode of sustainable narrative, reflected, for example, in a growing attention to solarpunk and multispecies ethnography.

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To pluralise our understandings, it is crucial to experiment with ways to engage a range of nonhuman storytellers. Here, multimodal storytelling gives a glimpse of the possibility of further decentring an anthropocentric way of thinking and offers hope of evading algorithmic logic to some extent while better storying the complex forms of life. The recent interdisciplinary project “[Learning Endings](#)” examines stranded marine mammals, their untimely deaths, and interspecies care through necropsies conducted by scientists.²⁰ Moving across and articulating diverse forms of media, from filmmaking to literary work, exhibitions, public workshops, and witnessing of scientific practices, these diverse modes of storytelling create a space and an archive for the dead marine mammals, documenting and recalling of their once-vibrant lives and the resplendent sea. The stories also mourn for their untimely and slow deaths while revealing unethical fishing practices and environmental pollution. As the performative narrative allows for readers’ and viewers’ multisensory and kinaesthetic engagement, it illuminates the labour and effort of scientists as they strive to care for marine animals, thereby expanding the possibilities and understandings of what constitutes caring for one another and a good death.

Ultimately, storytelling is an ethical, laborious work. In a time of environmental unravelling, it is all the more important to create and centre transformative stories informed by a rich interdisciplinary repertoire and a wide range of storytellers. Stories alone do not resolve environmental crises, nor do they attempt to contain the worlds they describe. But they teach us to notice relations, wonders, absences, and forms of life and death otherwise obscured. To story, then, is also to ask how worlds are made (in)visible, how they are shared, and how they might be remade in a different way. Tell me a story,

tell me the world.

Notes

¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>.

² Ibid.

³ For example, see Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Brent Ryan Bellamy, eds., *An Ecotopian Lexicon* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvthhdbm>.

⁴ Jamie Wang, *Reimagining the More-Than-Human City: Stories from Singapore* (MIT Press, 2024), 8, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15189.001.0001>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Thom van Dooren, “Story (Telling),” *Swamphen: A Journal of Cultural Ecology* 7 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.60162/swamphen.7.14359>; Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, “Lively Ethnography: Storying Animist Worlds,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 77–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527731>.

⁷ Wang, *Reimagining the More-Than-Human City*, 25.

⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101zq>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Tom Griffiths, "The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia," *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 43 (2007), <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2007/03/01/the-humanities-and-an-environmentally-sustainable-australia/>. See Wang, *Reimagining the More-Than-Human City*.

¹¹ Byung-Chul Han, *The Crisis of Narration*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Polity, 2024).

¹² Maria Mäkelä and Hanna Meretoja, "Critical Approaches to the Storytelling Boom," *Poetics Today* 43, no. 2 (2022): 191–218, p. 210, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-9642567>.

¹³ Wang, *Reimagining the More-Than-Human City*, 101–3.

¹⁴ Donna Houston, "Environmental Justice Storytelling: Angels and Isotopes at Yucca Mountain, Nevada," *Antipode* 45, no. 2 (2013): 417–35, p. 417, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01006.x>.

¹⁵ Maria Mäkelä, Samuli Björninen, Laura Karttunen, Matias Nurminen, Juha Raipola, and Tytti Rantanen, "Dangers of Narrative: A Critical Approach to Narratives of Personal Experience in Contemporary Story Economy," *Narrative* 29, no. 2 (2021): 139–59, p. 155, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nar.2021.0009>.

¹⁶ Deborah Bird Rose, "Slowly ~ Writing Into the Anthropocene," *TEXT* 17, no. 20 (2013): 1–14, p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.28826>.

¹⁷ Ursula K. Heise, "Empirical Ecocriticism and the Future of (Eco)Narratology," in *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*, ed. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, W. P. Malecki, and Frank Hakemulder (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 311.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway and Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve* (Routledge, 2000), 108.

¹⁹ Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species," *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3610012>; Thom van Dooren, "Multispecies Storytelling in Catastrophic Times," *Thom van Dooren: Blog*, 24 June 2025, https://www.thomvandooren.org/2025/06/24/multispecies-storytelling-in-catastrophic-times/#_edn7; Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>.

²⁰ "Learning Endings" is an interdisciplinary, collaborative project led by Patty Chang, Astrida Neimanis, and Aleksija Neimanis.



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