

Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

Disruptive Encounters: Concepts of Care and Contamination Out of Control

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Arising from the late Latin *incontrāre*, the first definition of the word ‘encounter’ is semantically associated with the notion of ‘conflict’, or the coming together of opposing forces. As such, interactions between lively beings are never neutral, but are instead inherently unsettling in that they shake the ontological foundations of the self. In this view, multispecies entanglements represent, in Katherine Wright’s words, “a relational constitution of identity where beings are *made* in the fleshly space of encounter.” Throughout this process of co-becoming in anthropogenic times, the benefits of making kin are not always mutual, especially considering that “commerce and consciousness, evolution and bioengineering, and ethics and utilities are all in play” when relational ties are established across species lines (Haraway 46). The emergence, then, of novel ecosystems within muddy moral landscapes blasted by capitalism should not be understood exclusively in terms of loss and destruction, but also through the lens of resilience and adaptability (Kirksey 2015).

Such is the case, for instance, of the domestication of dogs. In fact, the human-canine bond led to a coevolution journey characterized by a troubling tension between care and control, which relies on a biopolitical framework manifesting itself in practices that range from population ‘management’ to compulsive breeding, which inserts our canine kin into a loop of commodification. If our claims of ownership deny dogs their bodily autonomy and agency, the disruption of individual freedoms causes constant adjustments to unpredictable fluctuations in living conditions that have inevitable ecological repercussions (Srinivasan 2013). Similarly, symbiotic relationships thrive on the entangled force between harm and co-dependency playing critical roles in ecological and evolutionary processes. By living in intimate contact with their host, a symbiotic encounter between two organisms may turn into a

parasitic dynamic that exerts a profound effect on interspecific interactions, at times even generating a state of tolerance in the host.¹

And so, as Maan Barua rightly notes, “an encounter poses problems; it reconfigures identities, space, political economies” (265). Yet, while encounters can be rooted in competitive premises or power imbalances, they can also lead to cooperative outcomes. In this sense, “becoming involves a metaphysics that is grounded in connection, challenging delusions of separation” (Wright). Instead of fixating over otherness, which reinforces a hierarchical approach to (bio)diversity, turning to the relational process that arises from a multispecies encounter opens up the possibility “that affectivity outshines physical delimitations, that at a certain point there is just too much vitality and circulation to perceive contours” (Alain 37). And so, thinking with the concept of permeability can be both generative and subversive, and may even initiate a *contagious* healing process, in that it holds the potential to challenge dominant human-nonhuman relationships built upon alienation and exploitation. The seven contributions in the creative writing and arts section of this special issue articulate the notion of disruptive encounters in thought-provoking ways, each showing a different—yet interconnected—facet of the world-making process that lies within any embodied encounter.

The cover image by illustrator and designer Jan Martin enchantingly sets the tone for the whole journal issue. Using both photographic and self-generated material, the artist experiments with textures and effects, to create surreal landscapes—mostly formations of cliffs, trees, and mountains—originating from “unexpected juxtapositions and perspectives that can surprise, disturb and illuminate” (Martin 2023). By combining collage methods, the artist creates digital illustrations using cut-up samples of scientific illustrations of fossils, shells, plants, and small organisms, such as crinoids, shells and moss. Through this technique, Martin wishes to emphasize the continuity of form throughout nature, which not only places humans within an overall pattern, but also highlights the beauty of common structures. Besides emerging in the assemblage of seemingly disjointed organisms, the concept of ‘encounter’ is also inherent to the material process of creation enabling the “enactment of multiple conjoined histories” (Tsing 34). The three illustrations signaling the transition to the arts section are part of the same series and, in a uniquely recognizable style, further visualize multispecies interactions growing out of creative expression. Originally published as accompanying illustrations to individual poems, they are here proposed as stand-alone pieces without their textual counterpart to engender new meanings and interpretations. As Martin shares in her artist statement, the images represent “an attempt to bring comfort in a world where we are all feeling (if only subliminally) that humanity has created a riderless horse of cause and effect that now seems to threaten our very existence.”

¹ The cultural construction of the ‘parasite’ as an invasive entity has led to the normalization of figurative language with discriminatory connotations. On the use of the parasite metaphor to dehumanize marginalized human communities see Zengin (316-340).

Moving on to the second contribution, Serena Zanzu's poem "Forcing the Bond" explores more-than-human relationships between microbes and humans emerging across agricultural fields and scientific laboratories. The author engages with themes such as bioengineering, mutation, and symbiotic nitrogen fixation, drawing attention to how scientific efforts to manipulate and exploit the soil microbiome may "unleash new crises." Zanzu turns to the poetic language to further elaborate on questions of microbiopolitics and the ethics of technoscience on which she has already published several academic articles, such as "The Microbiopolitics of Pots and Compost Making" and "Scent of Soil." In an unmediated straightforward poetic style, the author explores the relational ontologies that emerge from moments of forced nurture, a topic that closely speaks to Haraway's empowering concept of 'sympoiesis' (58). The hammering repetition of the word "we" functions as a hypnotic reminder of our disruptive role in "turning bios around," while emphasizing that we are all part of these "symbiotic communities" and inescapably affected by our own interventions.

Encounters, then, not only reconfigure how we conceptualize the human, but also concomitant notions of personhood and knowledge. Anna Nygren's "Other Horses" superbly represents this ontological reframing. The author, whose artistic and academic interests span from neurodiversity and queer studies to poetic approaches to the more-than-human, shares a selection of texts that are part of an ongoing artistic research project on the interactions between language, neuroqueerness, and the nonhuman. The thematic thread running through the texts is the relationship between humans and horses, in particular the unequal relations of power and alienating harms deriving from othering our more-than-human kin ("The owning thing shows the inequalities between horse and human"; "Remember most (western) horses are definitely not free"). The textual fragments that make up a coherent whole all participate in the creation of a complex narrative ecology. By merging texts and illustrations, poetry and prose (and everything in between), and by playfully experimenting at the edge of linguistic normativity, the author audaciously disrupts genre and stylistic expectations while making room for unfamiliar—in the sense of beautifully queer—forms of artistic expression. If words are described as "having their own mind," a sequence of signifiers has the potential to generate an agglomeration of textures and unexpected, fluid re-compositions of materiality. And so, *bread* meets *fabric* meets *soft* meets *make up* and so forth, in a dynamic, ever-evolving process of world-building and meaning-making.

Leaning into the potential of poetic language to disrupt social conventions is Dean Anthony Brink, a poet, painter, and professor of literature and thought who contributes two poems to this special issue: "The New Speciesism" and "Feel Free to Splash About Disturbing Patience." In his work, the author explores the relational entanglements between our own species and others, extending his creative concerns also to the effects of technological infrastructures on multispecies coexistence. More specifically, his poetry chronicles shifting cultural horizons as well as the challenging task of overcoming predetermined categories of thought for the sake of ecological

flourishing. In tracing the repercussions of societal change, the author ponders on whether it is possible to achieve radical renewal, especially when deeply ingrained practices are not yet fully eradicated and new cultural practices have a hard time breaking away from normative models. One must wonder then how new can a ‘new speciesism’ be, or by what means one passes from “feeding neon tetras” to “stop pretending to care.”

The following contribution approaches the topic of ‘disruptive encounters’ from the perspective of migration, intricately weaving together themes of cultural displacement, environmental imagery, and the struggle for acceptance in unfamiliar surroundings. Through vivid imagery and visceral language, José Elizondo-Gonzales—author of the novels *Hacia ningún lugar* (Heading Nowhere, 2021) and *Cuando los cuerpos recuerdan* (When Bodies Remember, 2024), both published by Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica—presents “El peso del aire” (The Weight of Air), a collection of poems reflecting on the journey from rural childhood to urban adulthood and the subsequent transition to a new reality in the American Midwest. With these poems, the author wants to “capture the essence of the migrant experience, where the air itself feels heavy with the weight of isolation,” as explained in his artist statement. In a frantic search for a sense of belonging, the author recurs to the semantic sphere of vulnerability and threat, hinting towards the very real challenges of adapting to a new—often unwelcoming—social environment: “No me siento seguro” (I don’t feel safe); “Una casa donde camino en peligro” (a home where I walk in danger); “No puedo florecer en tu estación” (I can’t bloom in your season).

Within the same scope of interest is Qian Liu’s interview with Paolo Peng Shuai, a multidisciplinary artist based in Milan, Italy and born in Xiangtan, China. The interviewing process itself may be interpreted as a praxis of encounter, that is, an exchange of ideas and information through reflective and generative dialogue. A recurring theme in Paolo’s artworks is the world of Chinese plants, symbolically intertwined with his diasporic identities, which is perfectly encapsulated in the reproduction of the painting “Cultivating Chinese celery in a suburban canal in Reggio Emilia.” The interview revolves around the questions: How can we approach migration from an ecological perspective? What would be the epistemological convergences between identity and environmental crisis? The answer lies in the concept of “economadism” that, as the artist explains, “should not be understood simply in a geographical sense as a movement from one place to another, but as an inquiry into the environmental, cultural, anthropological, and psychological dimensions of nomadology.” The interview, which discusses the realization of this concept in his artistic practice, is accompanied by two photographs of the artist with his “Giardino Movente” (Moving Garden) in the town of Colle di Tora, in central Italy. With this project, artist and garden join forces to cultivate a culture of belonging that transcends physical boundaries, thus forging epistemic recalibrations that cut across human-nonhuman divides while strengthening bonds across difference. It is within this framework that it becomes possible to transcend notions of oppositional structures and embrace the porosity of boundaries.

Closing the Arts section is Wendy Wuyts' short story "An Ash Tree in Os" envisioning with speculative undertones a future of harmonious coexistence between Norwegian Sámi and non-Indigenous individuals. Yet, this is not a lighthearted look at the future. It is a story of loss and grief, of ecoterrorist attacks, pandemics, and femicide. At the same time, it is also about reparations and healing, of collaboration and hope, of connection with the landscape and communion with the more-than-human ("I myself had come to the conclusion that if the landscape was so polluted that I must also be polluted"; "We are all made of bacteria, constantly in exchange with the more-than-human world"). Throughout this process of renewal and rebuilding, during which contamination goes hand in hand with regeneration, the land does not forget: "The swamp and I were full of so many stories – minerals, fungi, rot, bacteria, and ashes of our ancestors." In all this, the Ash Tree stands strong, a keeper of intergenerational wisdom, entangled and prospering and suffering together with the whole community, which would gather under the tree to share "where new rhubarb was spotted. When the first mushrooms and berries emerged. A story about a sickness for reindeers. A song for healing broken fingers." Ultimately, then, it is the power of multispecies storytelling that enables the possibility to re-imagine and practice interspecies conviviality as a "matter of care" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) as well as "cultures of gratitude" (Kimmerer 115) that nurture the formation of new alliances built on principles of mutual aid and reciprocal trust. The hand carved woodblock print by artist Laura Brusselaers sublimely evokes the atmosphere of the text: the campfire gathering, the smoke shapeshifting into two human faces looking inward, the soil featuring a rich tapestry of Sami culture, with the roots of the Ash tree growing through it and the bones of the ancestors resting beneath them, all contribute to building a wondrous visual representation of intergenerational and interspecies entanglements.

In conclusion, recognizing our integration to more-than-human assemblages represents a vital step towards embracing what the geographer Torsten Hägerstrand refers to as the 'principle of togetherness'. This is not, he writes, "just *resting* together. It is also *movement* and *encounter*" (Hägerstrand 332). The artists who have contributed to the Arts section of this special issue have undeniably captured the essence of what it means for lively beings to be viscerally and inextricably linked. By recurring to different literary genres and artistic expressions, they increase our awareness of the power dynamics that sustain multispecies relational entanglements while reminding us that we too are in an ongoing process of (co-)becoming, always coming into contact with disorderly ecologies, societies, and moralities.

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