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FIRST, LAST, ALWAYS HARAWAY



It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories


By Donna Haraway

ABSTRACT

Aiming to craft symstories and symbiographies, this essay proposes several short instances of compost writing. First, retelling another's personal and family stories foregrounds the question of who owns stories, who has access to whose stories, who is safe enough to tell their stories, and who lives and dies as a result. Second, represented by the Crochet Coral Reef, earth stories propose reconfiguring organisms as holobionts to foreground collective becoming-with. Third, an Inupiak computer game shows the complexity of collaborations for telling decolonial geostories in continuing times of rapid destruction and extinction. Finally, the author's science fiction [SF] story proposes speculative fiction to strengthen the difficult search for multispecies reproductive justice.

The past is gone. We still live in its wake.
— Rebecca Hall, *Wake*¹

Not life writing, but compost writing, writing-with in layered composing and decomposing in order to write at all, living-and-dying-with to be at all, as mortal earthlings—these are the lures that animate my lust for stories. Linked to my writing, many of the essays in this special issue emphasize practices and ideas of compost narration instead of autobiography. In her essay for this issue, Katie King calls these practices “soils for making kin.” For me, autobiography is like autopoiesis—in other words, powered by the drama of important stories, but caught in illusions of self-telling and self-forming. However, nothing makes itself, nothing tells its own story. Stories nest like Russian dolls inside ever more stories and ramify like fungal webs throwing out ever more sticky threads. Symbiography is like sympoiesis—that is, making-with and telling-with unruly companions who|which are necessary to becoming at all. In compost writing, *bios*, *zoe*, and *poiesis* are undone and redone because dying and unforming are as elemental as living and forming. Earthly stories are geostories, not

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By Donna Haraway with thanks to the artists and writers who engage my work in ever-folding naturecultures for earthly survival.

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confined to *bios*, *zoe*, or poiesis. Sym-earth—the storytelling practices, not the Maxis computer game from the 1990s—suggests the collaborative narrative materialities needed on a vulnerable planet now. So, what are composting life-and-death stories, formerly mistaken as autobiographies, in worlds of syms? Syms live and die in the wake of history.

Personal and Family Stories

I begin with writing by my English-learner student, who writes stories from her childhood in my kitchen for her California-born daughters, who know little of Oaxaca and never met their grandmother. Even with legal documents, the mother lives with such loss. A strange tongue takes shape around remembered, repossessed, and relayed stories. A foreign language becomes her own in hard-won sentences that unearth a past in order to make her mother present for her daughters' futures. This is sym-poietic time for becoming-with in life stories. In her best story, revised over two years, she writes of her present life in Santa Cruz. She imagines inviting President Trump to her house for a week so that he could experience her life in detail and understand her people better. In the tale, she worries about her neighbors, who are afraid of Trump and mad at her for inviting him. She wonders whether she will have to dress him in disguise. She makes Trump accompany her while making breakfast for the family, getting the girls to two different schools, cleaning up the house, and getting herself to her job cleaning rooms in a motel, then getting her daughters home, shopping for dinner (one daughter, she remarks, will be angry and hurt because she cannot afford meat tonight), helping with homework, making sure the littlest girl takes her hated shower, cooking and serving dinner, cleaning up, getting the girls to bed with a story in English to please their teachers,² and going over bills to see which ones must be paid and which will have to wait. She makes Trump help, but he keeps saying he is too tired. Throughout, Trump repeats, "Okay, we finished that, so now can I sit down and have a Diet Coke?" And she says, "No, no, now we have to do this one more thing." After the girls are sleeping and the few bills that can be paid are identified, he says, "Wow, now at last I can have my Coke." And she says, "No, now we have to watch the news to see what terrible things you did to me and my people today!" That is what I call learning English sym-poietically.

But whose stories are these? They are vivid stories that I want her to publish under her name for other mothers and daughters, for me and my friends, for all of us. She does not feel ready to do that. Even if she said I could, how did I dare to summarize her story in an article that I know

will be published under my name? Who has access to the apparatus of publishing? Compost stories are as full of pain as of anything else.

Earth Stories

From learning English in Trumplandia to crocheting a coral reef for environmental care and restitution, syms narrate geostories. Further, syms are like turtles: they go all the way down, and there is no foundational turtle. The biologists whom I follow argue that, in terms of anatomy, physiology, genetics, evolution, immunology, and development, “we have never been individuals.”³ We have always been a loopy *we* of many surprising interlinked kinds. No beings of the earth show this fact more forcefully than coral reefs; coral reefs are holobionts—that is, symphonic or fugal assemblages of living and nonliving entities that are necessary to each other’s being. The semiosis of coral symbiosis links bacterial and viral associates, photosynthesizing dinoflagellate algae, and coral animal polyps in elaborate patterns of communication essential to myriads of communities of diverse microbes, fungi, algae, fish, invertebrates, and many millions of ocean-dependent human beings. Coral reefs have the highest biodiversity of any kind of marine ecosystem, and that is before one adds in all the layered, historical, naturalcultural diversity of human communities who live with and from the holobionts that are coral. Coral reefs are damaged profoundly in the warming seas and polluted oceans; they could disappear. That must not happen. Syms must act together.

My own fascination with biology from teenage years is rooted in the mesmerizing sympoietic beauty of coral in salty seas, the crusty ubiquity of lichens on rocky land, and the dancing collaboration that is embryonic development in transforming form upon transforming form upon transforming form in the intimacy of elaborating bodies. Becoming involved in each other’s lives and deaths is the name of the game for earthlings.

For now, I settle only on the Crochet Coral Reef for its sympoiesis of fibers, people, critters, habitats, and more. With the tie between mathematics and fiber arts in mind, in 2005 twin sisters from Brisbane, Christine Wertheim, a crafter and poet, and Margaret Wertheim, a mathematician and artist, initiated the Crochet Coral Reef. This is a collective art-science activist worlding, bringing people together to do fabulated crenulated and tentacular beings with mathematics, biosciences, and arts. The purpose was to crochet active attachments that might matter to resurgence in the Anthropocene and Capitalocene by fomenting active caring through practical crafted beauty. More than ten thousand people, mostly women, in more than two dozen countries, from Ireland, Latvia, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, the US, the UK, Croatia, and more, have come

together to crochet in wool, cotton, plastic bags, discarded reel-to-reel tape, vinyl jelly yarn, Saran wrap, and just about anything else that can be induced to loop and whirl in the codes of crocheting. The exhibitions have moved people around the earth.

The code is so simple: crocheted models of hyperbolic planes achieve their ruffled forms by progressively increasing the number of stitches in each row. The emergent vitalities of this wooly experimental life form take diverse corporeal shapes as crafters increase the numbers from row to row irregularly, oddly, whimsically, or strictly to see what forms they can make—not just any forms, but crenulated beings that take life as marine critters of the vulnerable reefs. Making fabulated, rarely mimetic, but achingly evocative models of coral reef ecosystems, the Crochet Coral Reef has morphed into what is probably the world's largest collaborative art project. Infecting each other and everybody who comes into contact with their fibrous critters, the thousands of crafters crochet psychological, material, and social attachments to biological reefs in the oceans, but not by practicing marine field biology or by diving among the reefs. The abstractions of the mathematics of crocheting are a lure to an affective cognitive ecology stitched in fiber arts. The crochet reef is a practice of caring without the need to touch by camera or hand in yet another exotic voyage of discovery. Material play builds caring publics.⁴

But, again, the question intrudes: whose stories are these? Who lives and dies, and how, in these geostories? The coral themselves story the earth. What is at stake and for whom in making their stories our own? Who are this “we”? Conservation politics are alive with this important, permanently fraught question.

People's Stories

Who owns life stories and who has access to another's story are crucial questions in struggles for the sovereignty and integrity of indigenous peoples around the world. The complexity of the appropriation of stories, including the stories of how one comes to be, is an old theme in literary history and in autobiography; but it is a brutal aspect of colonial extraction in Native America and elsewhere. This is why my next sympoietic geostory is a computer world game called *Never Alone* (*Kisima Ingitchuna*), the first computer game developed by and for the Iñupiat, an Alaskan Native people, in collaboration with E-Line Media.⁵ The collective of game-makers defines the new genre “world games” as taking place inside ongoing indigenous stories. The makers of *Never Alone* include Gloria O'Neill, the president and chief executive of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council; dozens of advisers and elders from the Alaskan Native

community; Alan Gershenfeld, cofounder of E-Line Media; E-Line's creative director Sean Vesce; the design team's studio in Seattle; Iñupiat storytellers; young and old people playing the game; Native visual artists, carvers, and puppet-makers; and a shared sense of contemporary urgency for the lands and waters with their human and other-than-human beings. The young girl Nuna and her arctic fox companion face an unprecedented storm to confront the monster that threatens to destroy her people. Dangerous journeying on the ice, snow, and frigid waters occupies Nuna, her mundane and spirit helpers, and the game players as they reach their goals of learning what caring for the People entails.

Indigenous peoples around the earth have a particular angle on the discourses of coming extinctions and exterminations of what many, especially scientific moderns, call the Anthropocene.⁶ The idea that disaster will come is not new; disaster and genocide have devastated home places, have already come, decades and centuries ago, and they have not ceased. The resurgence of peoples and of places is nurtured with ragged vitality in the teeth of such loss, mourning, memory, resilience, reinvention of what it means to be Native, refusal to deny irreversible destruction, and refusal to disengage from living and dying well in pasts, presents, and futures. Designed in the wake of history, world games require inventive, sympoietic collaborations. Ensuring that the game was grounded in Iñupiat environmental conditions, experience, and ideas was a central concern of the indigenous collaborators, including the kids who helped by playing early versions. As Amy Fredeen of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council explained in an interview, "We made the creative decision to keep the only [spoken] audio in the game in Iñupiaq, and it's presented in 10 languages for subtitles. What we were looking to do was re-create the experience of being told a story by an elder in their own language. It's hard to describe that sense, but we wanted to try to re-create that for players so they got a sense of how powerful it would have been to hear one of these stories back then."⁷

Never Alone is not a New Age game for universal oneness, a posthumanist solution to epistemological crises, or a general model for collaboration. Nor is it a way to finesse the Anthropocene with Native climate wisdom. For example, consider the concept and word *Sila*, explained in a "Cultural Insight" pop-up panel that has to be earned by players of *Never Alone*. I always die before I get that far in the game, but I cheat on YouTube, so I know.⁸ A pan-Inuit term, *Sila* means something like "the weather" to anglophone southerners, but only if the weather means the sky and the air, breath-soul, the element that enfolds the world and invests beings with life, as well as the environment from the earth to the moon, with its dynamic changes and powers. The concept of climate

change will not swallow *Sila*, nor vice versa; but these situated concepts have touched each other. Perhaps they can recompose each other in ways that bode well for flourishing in the north. It matters what thoughts think thoughts, what stories tell stories, what knowledges know knowledges.

Stories, even stories offered for sale on the Internet, belong to storytellers, who share them, or not, in practices of situated worlding. The conditions for sharing stories must not be set by raiders, academic or otherwise. That does *not* mean the game is restricted to Native commentators in Native places for Native audiences in a perverse caricature of a reservation. It *does* mean the terms of telling, listening, and playing have been relocated decisively. Compost stories are situated, not global, even as they compose an earthly difference. Surely a reminder of this fact is that composting is pretty much impossible in the Arctic for most of the year. Compost stories are in the idiom of a visiting southerner asking whether an attachment to another's story is good—or not.

Stories for Communities of Compost

Inspired by world games, geostories, and personal stories, I concluded *Staying with the Trouble* with my own (science fiction, string figures [SF]) story about coming into being through earthly sympoiesis. A story generated by writing-together from the start, the Camille Stories proliferate a bumptious litter of versions. “My” Camille Stories are constitutively companion species.⁹

Speculative fabulation as a genre cannot quite disown generations of postapocalyptic SF in which survivors recompose the terms of living and dying together, usually with alien as well as earth species. However, my Camille Stories are pre- or nonapocalyptic fiction, committed to speculative fabulation in the antiracist, environmental, feminist, utopian tradition so that the lust—fear and desire—for apocalypse is tamed, and ordinary living and dying with and for each other, in myriad earthly varieties, can strengthen. The companions are not aliens of a colonialist imagination, but earthlings of a troubled homeworld. The basic plot proposes small communities forming spontaneously all over for unknown reasons, setting up in ruined areas with the commitment to repair damage and rebuild cosmopolitics linking communities through lines of caring and healing. Partly in order to reduce the burden of immense human numbers over many decades, with multispecies environmental justice as the means and not just the goal, these Communities of Compost insist that every new child have at least three parents, and parents can participate in making a new person biologically only once in their lives. So, multigenerational, child-friendly families must emerge from robust oddkin-making practices

of many kinds. Pregnancies are deliberately few and precious, although individual reproductive freedom remains. People can opt out of the birth-limiting practices, but most people from very different histories and backgrounds welcome them, even with all their difficulties.

My favorite part of a new kind of fraught reproductive freedom in the Communities of Compost is the pregnant person's choosing of a biological symbiont for the new child. That one parent, not the child, chooses the symbiont marks the complexities and impositions involved in making new people. That complexity and imposition are not new; this kind of choosing for another is new. The child can, in the end, refuse and minimize the heritage, but not easily. Sym animals (later plants too) were chosen from species in danger of near-term extinction. The altered human child (the other members of the symbiosis were not altered) grew up with special social and biological capacities for responsibility (response-abilities) to bring a threatened critter in its situated human and nonhuman habitats into a more viable future over generations. When they died, syms passed their species response-abilities to the next generation of syms of that critter. The often-contentious relationships of altered syms and unaltered humans form part of the drama of generations in the stories. Connections among communities grew especially strong along the lines of migration and other aspects of the symbionts' needs, weaving earth-wide nets of human sociality rooted in curiosity, skill, and care. Extinctions did happen, and human syms whose critters had disappeared became speakers for the dead, teaching communities how to mourn without despair, so as to stay with the trouble.

The sym in my story is named Camille, the fruit of a human and monarch butterfly joining in the womb. Camilles across their generations also made alterations to their biological selves as adolescents, the last time of sufficient organic plasticity to allow such changes. Many kinds of cyborgs were normal in the community. Some changes were purely for joy and beauty; some were essential to understanding the needs and desires of the insects in their techno-organic holobiomes. All the new children were gender-fluid in their early years and most for life, as were many of the original genetically unaltered community members. The routes of need and migration of the symbionts take the generations of Camilles back and forth between Mexico, especially Michoacán, and the eastern US and southeastern Canada, as well as along the great Pacific migratory flyway of the insects. Bonded by the symbiogenetic and symanimagenic attachments of people and butterflies celebrated on the Day of the Dead, when the insects take up their winter residence in Michoacán, the Ejército de Mujeres Zapatistas en Defensa del Agua [Zapatista Women's Movement in Defense of Water] plays a large role in the story of Camille's education. The Mazahua and other peoples of the area practice and teach world-

building in permanently troubled times. The ongoing organizations of the women and others in the exploited and extracted Sierra Madre del Sur link the story to Mexico City's desperate water politics and their human and nonhuman beings.

When I finished my version of the Camille Stories in the book, my husband, Rusten, and I planned to make a website to open up stories of the Children of Compost to whomever wanted to attach fiction, drawings, music, poetry, whatever, as long as the basic founding terms of the story arc could be accommodated. Making oddkin was the point. We never got to the project, although I have received many emails asking about the still-imaginary website. Then, compost stories tied to the Camille Stories began erupting in my inbox and elsewhere. Generated by many streams, sympoiesis does not wait for single actors or authors. Kira Magrann, a queer tabletop- role-playing-game designer, told me she would like to create a collaborative storytelling game rooted in the Camille Stories.¹⁰ Wanting to meet up in Santa Cruz, an avid bicyclist and musician, Alex Wand, who heard me narrate the Camille Stories in the film *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, told me he would ride between Los Angeles and Michoacán, tracking multispecies and cross-species collaborations like those the generations of Camilles had traced.¹¹ I missed meeting him when he was in Santa Cruz, to my shame. Nadja Argyropoulou told me about a five-day event titled "Making Oddkin—For Joy, for Trouble, for Volcano Love." Curating the event on the small volcanic island of Nisyros, she told me, "Making Oddkin activated a series of further connections between people of the islands towards the creation of an Aegean Geopark so that we can stop the course of extractive processes taking place here as well."¹²

I end with another completely unexpected spin-off of the Children of Compost into their own worlds. Darin Sennett, writing as "Dean Hammer," told me about the serial stories of participants in the online fabulated Psychic High School called the Compost Kids. The stories, written by several authors, tell of the mysterious disappearance of the Compost Kids on September 27, 1988, and their efforts to solve the mystery. In exuberant science fiction plots and subplots, they examine artifacts left behind and try to piece together what was going on in this early period. Before their disappearance, the Compost Kids had not been universally popular, to say the least. One fellow student at PsyHigh told an investigator, "Furthermore, the lack of any kind of personal hygiene exhibited by the Compost Kids makes it impossible to even be in the same classroom."¹³

Oddkin know more about mud than sky in my worlds too. Soils more than stars inspire me. No one should expect sym children in the Communities of Compost to be light and airy. The questions animating

this afterword emerge one more time: who owns compost stories, for whom are they told, and who might live and die, and how, within them and as a result of them? Sym-narration can never be only autopoietic, never be only autobiography. Compost stories live in the wake of history, never clean and original, always for some worlds and not others. Compost stories, like cyborg stories, attach oddkin for earthly survival. Maybe these attachments will prove strong enough for my student to publish her autobiographical|compost stories safely under her own name. Maybe she can live, maybe she can be present, without having to be absent.

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Notes

1. For a short video describing Hall's *Wake* project and a taste of the graphics, see <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/694426471/wake-the-hidden-history-of-women-led-slave-revolts>.
2. Having seen *Madagascar*, Cecilia and her daughters were fascinated by Madagascar and its animals. At that time, I was writing about Alison Jolly's collaborative life stories of young Malagasy lemurs in the beautiful illustrated books of the Ako Project, written to teach natural history, love of nature, and the importance of taking care of the land and its critters to Malagasy children in rural schools that did not have books. The books that Alison sent me are bilingual, in English and Malagasy. My student's daughters were fascinated by the Malagasy language and by the lemur youngsters. For a few months, my student read nightly stories in English from my Ako books, with the Malagasy language on the adjoining pages luring the girls who knows where in years to come. See Lemur Conservation Foundation.
3. Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber, "Symbiotic View of Life."
4. Wertheim and Wertheim, *Crochet Coral Reef*; Roosth, "Evolutionary Yarns"; Haraway, "Sympoiesis," in *Staying with the Trouble*, 58–98.
5. *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, <http://neveralonegame.com/>. Thanks to Marco Harding for teaching me how to play the game; he is better at it than I am. The game won prestigious prizes and was widely reviewed.
6. Contemporary Arctic peoples have well-developed accounts of climate alterations and of the changes in their environments, and the relevant idiom is not the Anthropocene. For example, see Kunuk and Mauro's ISUMA film *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*. This documentary, the world's first Inuktitut-language film on the topic, takes the point of view of Inuit culture and expertise regarding environmental change and indigenous adaptations.
7. For extracts from an interview with Amy Fredeen of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and Sean Vesce of E-Line Media for National Public Radio, see Demby, "Updating Centuries-Old Folktales."
8. See "Never Alone Cultural Insights—Sila Has a Soul," in which Fannie Kuutuuq and others discuss *Sila*. *Sila* is about connectedness to everything, about situated relationality and interdependence. For all the cultural insights

of *Never Alone*, see “Never Alone—Cultural Insights (All 24 Pieces).” Thanks to Susan Harding and also Marco Harding, who participated in the Bush School in Pangnirtung in the summer of 2015, for all the research, conversations, references, and thinking about diverse Inuit worlds and people, especially about *Sila*, hunting, and relational human and nonhuman personhood through living on the land. Our thinking together is another subject-making sympoiesis.

9. The Camille Stories began in a “narration spéculative” workshop at the Gestes Spéculatifs colloquium organized at Cerisy by Isabelle Stengers in the summer of 2013. My writing group included me, Vinciane Despret, and Fabrizio Terranova. The first published story is by Lucienne Strivay, Fabrizio Terranova, and Benedikte Zoutini, “Les enfants du compost.” Fabrizio subsequently made the narrative film portrait *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, released for exhibits and institutional rentals in 2017 and now available for streaming on Amazon Prime as well as at <https://earthlysurvival.org/>. My fullest written version of Camille is in “The Camille Stories,” in *Staying with the Trouble*, 134–168, 215–228.
10. Personal communication, July 24, 2018. See <http://kiramagrann.tumblr.com/> (accessed October 5, 2018).
11. Personal communication, September 11, 2018. See <http://www.alexwand.com/> (accessed October 5, 2018).
12. Personal communication, September 29, 2018. See <http://institutuzkosti.cz/events/7-10-2018-making-oddkin?src=cz> and <http://kappatosgallery.com/index.php/projects/curators/nadja-argyropoulou/> (accessed October 5, 2018).
13. This report is from R. S. in a letter to the editor, *Psytimes*, May 21, 1987 (fictional date). To follow the stories, begin with the entries in the Psychic High School website on “The Compost Kids” from May 8, 2018 and after. See <http://www.psyhigh.com/story.php?area=The+Compost+Kids&sort=1> (accessed October 3, 2018). Dean Hammer, personal communications, June 14, 20, 22, 26, and August 13, 2018. See <https://deanhammer.withknown.com/profile/deanhammer> (accessed October 5, 2018).

Disclosure statement

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