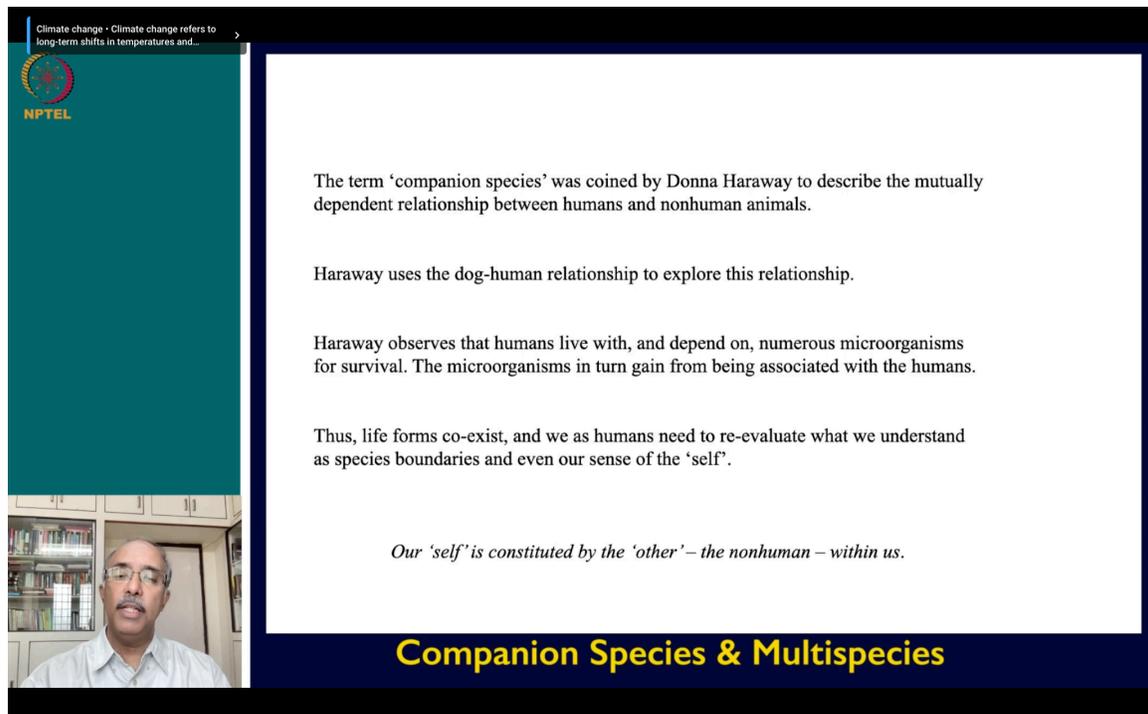


Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 20
Lec 20 : Companion Species & Multispecies

Everybody, this is Pramod Nair from the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad, and we continue our studies in posthumanism. Today's lesson will focus on companion species and multispecies. Just to refresh your memory, we acknowledge that humans are made up of several other life forms. We evolve with and are dependent on several other life forms. For posthumanism, therefore, there is no such thing as a completely autonomous, completely sealed-off, coherent, self-contained human.

We have evolved with other creatures. We live because of and with other creatures. Or, as Donna Haraway and others following her have proposed, we become with other creatures. The term 'companion species' was initially coined by Donna Haraway, and the idea was to describe the mutually dependent relationship between humans and nonhuman species. Haraway illustrates this in a quasi-autobiographical fashion, talking about her relationship with her dog.

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The term 'companion species' was coined by Donna Haraway to describe the mutually dependent relationship between humans and nonhuman animals.

Haraway uses the dog-human relationship to explore this relationship.

Haraway observes that humans live with, and depend on, numerous microorganisms for survival. The microorganisms in turn gain from being associated with the humans.

Thus, life forms co-exist, and we as humans need to re-evaluate what we understand as species boundaries and even our sense of the 'self'.

Our 'self' is constituted by the 'other' – the nonhuman – within us.

Companion Species & Multispecies

And She pays attention to the fact that the dog-human relationship is a very special kind of relationship. But historically, too, humans have coevolved with several other creatures. We can think in terms of the domestication of animals, animals used for war, and animals used for various purposes utilitarian in perspective, of course. But it's also important to note that just as we have shaped the ecosystems of animals, animals have shaped human ecosystems.

Whether it is in the form of guide dogs and seeing-eye dogs, dogs and cats and other creatures as pets, or even in some cases, the zoological parks and reserves which are, of course, disputable in the sense that animal rights people have considerable problems with assuming that you can construct a wilderness or a wildness in the heart of a city in the form of zoos and sanctuaries, but that's a different debate altogether. For now, the relationship of humans with non-humans enables us to observe that we shape each other. The animal shapes the human; the human shapes the animal. Haraway observed, and as we know from the work of biologists such as Lynn Margulis and several others working now, humans live with and depend upon multiple kinds of microorganisms.

The microorganisms, for example, that live in our digestive canal, which help us digest our food, are what make us live. They construct our physiological processes so that we can live and survive. So we depend on microorganisms for survival, and the microorganisms, in turn, gain something from being associated with humans. In fact, as you know, several bacteria cannot live outside the host body. In many cases, we are the host body, but other animals can serve as hosts as well, which goes on to say that there are no discrete units of life. You cannot think of life as packaged units living by themselves

sealed off from the world. You have to reconsider what we understand as life by visualizing life as constantly in relationship with dependent upon other life forms. And these need not necessarily be other humans. They can be, as I said, domesticated animals, agricultural animals, and various kinds of animals for different purposes.

But you can also think, or you ought to think of life as dependent upon things that we don't see, we don't take cognition of, such as microbes. Increasingly, as people like Jamie mentioned, Lorimer has noted, we in the modern age have become very antiseptic and antibiotic, which means we have been so focused on hygiene. We have been so focused on cleaning every surface of possible microbes that even the essential microbes have been lost. This is an argument he has made in his new book, *The Probiotic Planet*.

And he says we have forgotten what it is to live with microbes. And several of those microbes are essential to us, as any biologist or medical doctor will tell you. So life forms coexist. And as humans, we need to re-evaluate what we understand as species boundaries. More importantly, and perhaps more disturbingly, we should rethink our concepts, our notions of the self.

The argument that post-humanists make, via discoveries in biology and in the philosophy of biology, is that our self is constituted by the non-human. That is, the human evolves, becomes with, grows, if you will, with the non-human within us. So what is the human self? What can we think of as a self that I possess or you possess?

Are we single autonomous selves, or are we many? Along with companion species, there are other terms frequently used, which you will encounter when reading materials in post-humanist studies. That includes terminology like interspecies, cross-species sociality, nature-cultures, and what has been called plural relating. We will go through some of these concepts and ideas as we proceed. I'll first examine something that has developed in the last two or two-and-a-half decades: multi-species ethnography.

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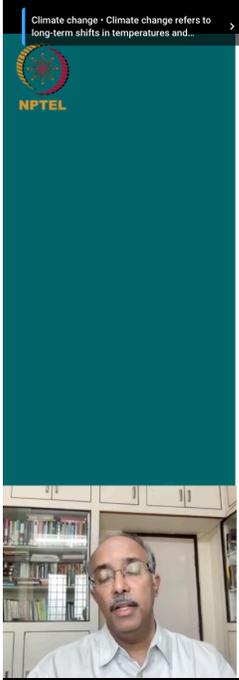
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Other terms used include:

- Interspecies
- Cross-species sociality
- Naturecultures
- Plural relating

Companion Species & Multispecies

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Multispecies Ethnography

Attention to 'how humans and other beings build worlds together' where, for instance, the mole, the rabbit and the potato, among others, are not just 'tools or blocks for human projects' but instrumental in 'world-making projects' of their own (Anna Tsing)

Companion Species & Multispecies

The aim is to pay attention to how whatever world we are discussing is built by humans alongside other humans. So, Multispecies ethnography like Anna Tsing note that humans and other beings co-build worlds. Anna Tsing's brilliant study, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, explores this kind of multispecies ethnography. The mole, the rabbit, and the potato, she says, are not just tools or building blocks for human projects.

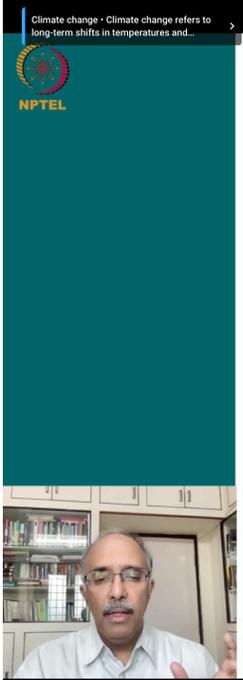
But they make worlds of their own. Of their own. This is a major shift in thinking. Because, traditionally, we think of these as available to us. They exist for humans to utilize to cook, eat, play with, or whatever it may be.

We don't think of, say, the potato or the mushroom as doing world-building on their own. Because for humans, Our rather arrogant notion of purpose is that we build worlds as humans build worlds. But two points must be kept in mind. Our worlds are not built just by us.

Our worlds are co-built by other creatures, plants, microbes, animals, all sorts of things. So essentially, Anna Singh, looking at mushrooms, and some later people, looking at vegetal life, note the fact that world-building is actually world co-building. And whether you take the beaver that builds large dams, whether it is birds that build nests, or whether it is grass and other rhizomatic creatures that build vast networks of plant growth. This could be grass, this could be mushrooms, any of those.

We are looking at worlds. They are worlds. And if you read a novel like Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, there are passages there that show that trees that collapse, that fall dead, are not actually dead. They fall, as if they are broken, But from the detritus, from the body, the trunk, the leaves of the tree, you find other organisms growing.

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Trees know when we're close to by. The chemistry of their roots and the perfumes their leaves pump out change when we're near... When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be certain species are bribing you.

When the lateral roots of two Douglas-firs run into each other underground, they fuse. Through those self-grafted knots, the two trees join their vascular system together and become one. Networked underground by countless thousands of miles of living fungal threads, her trees feed and heal each other, keep their young and sick alive, pool their resources and metabolites into community chests... There are no individuals. There aren't even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest.

Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

Vegetal communications as the collective agency of plants respond to their environs, and shape them in ways that humans have refused to understand.

Companion Species & Multispecies

So, even the supposed dead wood is not really dead because it provides the basis for sustaining life, which means other forms of life grow upon and depend upon this so-called dead wood. So this is world-making too. And here you can see two quotations from the novel I just mentioned, Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. Trees know when we are close by.

The chemistry of their roots and the perfumes their leaves pump out change when we are near. When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be that certain species are bribing you. And then later, when the lateral roots of two Douglas firs, one kind of tree common to the North American continent, when the lateral roots of two Douglas firs run into each other underground, they fuse. Those self-grafted knots, the two trees, join their vascular systems together and become one. Networked underground by countless thousands of miles of living fungal threads, the trees feed and heal each other, keep their young and sick alive, and pool their resources.

There are no individuals. There aren't even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest. What do you think Richard Powers is saying here? He's saying, note how the roots of one tree are connected to the roots of several other trees, forming a gigantic network that spreads across huge areas of ground.

On the surface, you see one large tree, and you say, 'Oh, one tree.' But its roots go deep down and spread laterally. So the tree roots go this way and grow that way. This means the roots of one tree merge and fuse with several other roots. Is it one tree?

Or is it too much? Is it just a solitary tree with its roots going deep down and its trunk growing straight up? Or... Is the tree networked? Is the tree connected to others?

The second point, which is in the first quote you saw on your screen, is that when trees sense something approaching, they release a certain chemical, which other trees detect, meaning the trees communicate. Vegetal communication, as it's called or plant communication refers to the collective agency, the collective ability of plants to respond to their environment. And that response shapes the environment in ways humans do not understand. This is why, in the example I quoted for you, once you walk out of your concrete jungle into the forest or a park, you feel better. What gives you a little more enthusiasm?

Maybe, says Richard Powers, it is what chemicals the trees have transmitted and which you have absorbed. Maybe that makes you feel better. That's one part. The other is what I just read out.

Vegetable communications. That plants do communicate. And that's why the first quotation there is that Trees at the front of the forest encounter something. They release a chemical so that the trees at the end of the forest there are trees here and the message is transmitted from the front of the forest to the rear through some form of communication, some form of transmitted messages.

This is vegetable communication. And vegetal communication is seen as an index of collective rather than individual agency. That they work together. They work as a unit, as a team. One tree receives a message, transmits it to the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth.

And it grows. Now, we as humans have always believed that humans communicate together. Animals communicate that we know, right? The whale song, the music of the bees, and the birds that make different kinds of calls for mating, food, or rearing their young, and so on. We have even thought that plants communicate.

More and more people, especially in critical plant studies, have proposed that plants do communicate. Humans have not paid much attention or heed to those. Multispecies ethnography, as you have just seen, is a variant of traditional ethnography, but also of cultural geography. Multispecies ethnography accounts for what Donna Haraway and others have called entangled lives. It proposes that human and non-human living forms

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Multispecies ethnography is a variant of traditional ethnography and cultural geography. It accounts for what is called "entangled" lives:

- examining human and all forms of life in a given territory, their interactions and mutual influences;
- landscapes and their forms, climate and weather

It rejects the older dichotomy of Nature / Culture because it shows how man-made Culture cannot be separated from other lifeforms, the ecosystem and the interrelations. Human Culture has always co-evolved with Nature, and Nature has always been affected by what humans have built, operated, used, tested, etc.

Hence the term 'naturecultures'...

Companion Species & Multispecies



in any territory are mutually influential. They interact with each other and are mutually influential. And this is not just about the human and non-human. Landscapes and their material elements air, water, soil also interact. Which is effectively to say that

The dichotomy of nature and culture is no longer valid because man-made culture cannot be separated from other life forms. The ecosystem, the environment. Human culture has always been co-evolving with nature. And nature is affected by what humans have built. Which means to say that when we say human culture and when we say nature, I know they're two entirely distinct things.

And we know that right from the English Romantic poets downwards, we have seen nature as something pure, pristine, which should not be contaminated, which should not be polluted. And then there is, of course, human culture, the city. And if you read any of the Wordsworth poems, like 'Upon Westminster Bridge' and 'Daffodils' and all that, Wordsworth goes on about how nature is good, is pure, is lovely, is untouched. And we should keep it that way, because... Humanity, when it gets into nature, pollutes it, contaminates it, and human culture is bad.

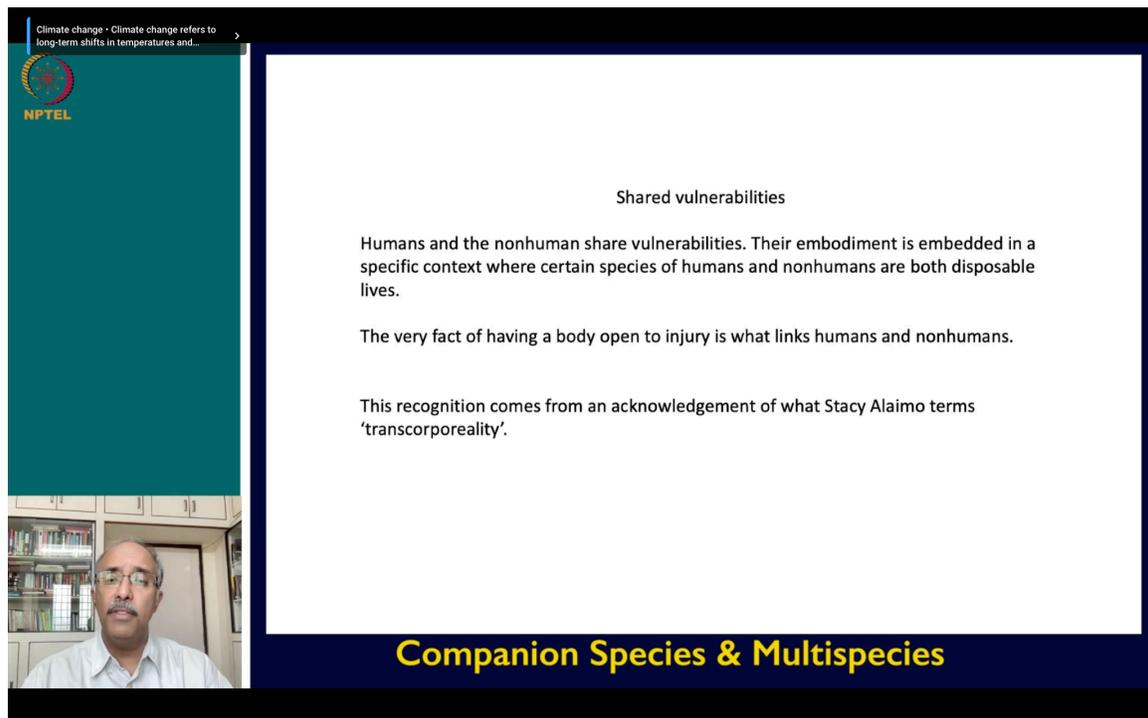
So, as he would say in 'Upon Westminster Bridge' and his London poems, the great heart of London lies still. And then you look at Blake's poem about the chartered streets of London in the famous poem 'London'. The city is seen as an embodiment of human culture, but polluted, contaminated, dirty, etc., and nature is pure. No, nature is not pure. Nature is a part of what we are, and we are a part of what nature is.

Hence, Donna Haraway uses the term nature-cultures. That you cannot separate nature from what we are. We have partaken of it, we have grown with it, we have absorbed it, and we have also modified it. So nature modifies us, and we modify nature. It's not

possible, says Haraway and her followers including Rosi Braidotti, Cecilia Åsberg, and Francesca Ferrando, all the big names in posthumanist studies, that we cannot think of nature and culture as distinct, clearly marked boundary conditions in which they function separately.

No. We need to think of them as nature-cultures. One word. Because it's a part of what we are, it's a part of who we are, and it's a part of how we become what we become. You cannot separate them. Then, if we say that we are a part of nature, we also need to account for the fact that humans and non-humans share vulnerabilities. Our embodiment is in a particular context.

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Shared vulnerabilities

Humans and the nonhuman share vulnerabilities. Their embodiment is embedded in a specific context where certain species of humans and nonhumans are both disposable lives.

The very fact of having a body open to injury is what links humans and nonhumans.

This recognition comes from an acknowledgement of what Stacy Alaimo terms 'transcorporeality'.

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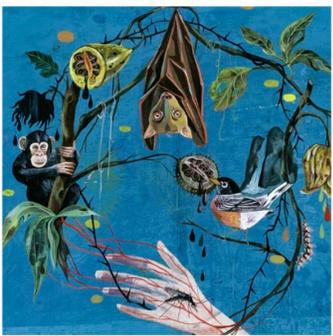
Our growth, our lives, our deaths they are all part of larger conditions. So shared vulnerabilities is the recognition that humans and non-humans possess the same conditions of insurability. That the minute we speak of having a body, it means the body is open to injury. This fact of having a body open to injury, being common, leads Stacy Alaimo to coin the term trans-corporeality. That humans and non-humans are both open to injury, are both open to harm.

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Transcorporeality does the opposite of distancing or dividing the human from external nature. It implies that we're literally enmeshed in the physical material world, so environmentalism cannot be an externalized and optional kind of pursuit, but is always present, always at hand.
Stacy Alaimo



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Because the grasshopper, the eagle, the whale, and the human all have one common nature. One underlying connection. We have material bodies. We have bodies that can be very definitely injured. We have injurable bodies.

So shared vulnerability is central to the understanding of cross-species, inter-species, or any of those terms that I have outlined for you. So Stacey Alaimo argues that trans-corporeality is the opposite of distancing or dividing the human from external nature. It implies that we are literally enmeshed in the physical material world. We have bodies which are placed in the material world.

And you cannot think of these as separate. Our body, their body. Which means also that the human and the non-human are caught up in the same networks of power, which make some humans become slaves, cause them to be sold as commodities, and that occurs in the lives of plants and animals as well. So structural inequality will determine the fate of individual species and of very specific animals. Race or ethnicity among humans, which is to say, depending on your race, your ethnicity, or your species, you can be killed, injured, sold, owned, whatever it might be. So if you think very carefully about this, factors like climate change

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The human and the nonhuman are enmeshed in the same networks of power operating at the level of the local and the global.

Structural inequality determines the fate and vulnerabilities of the human and the nonhuman: race, class, geographical location, species, etc.

Depending on your race, species, ethnicity, you can be rendered open to injury, sold, maimed, killed.

Climate change, soil erosion, deforestation, toxic dumping damage the ecosystem for the human and the nonhuman in different but related ways.

Toxins from the environment enter the bodies of both humans and nonhumans, a toxic transcorporeality.

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global warming, deforestation, toxic dumping, damage the ecosystem, but for both human and the non-human. You would have seen pictures of birds covered in oil, of the poorer parts of the world in the global south living in completely unacceptable conditions of filth and pollution. Now, if you think about this, both the human and the non-human are affected and affected adversely by things like toxic dumping, nuclear tests or whatever else you can think of as an example of the history of pollution. They affect humans and non-humans differently. They affect different kinds of humans differently.

So the upper classes, the wealthy, who can afford to air-condition their houses, seal themselves inside bunkers, will be affected but are still relatively safer as compared to, say, the poorer people who live on the roadsides, who live in slums, who have very little protection. Toxins enter the bodies of animals and humans and different kinds of humans and they affect them differently. And more and more artists now are drawing attention to multi-species, recognition of multi-species, attention to things like co-becoming in projects like CMD experiments in bio-algorithmic poetics and the microbiocene. And these projects, as critics have noted, highlight communication across species and envision the humans as part of a larger ecosystem or ecology.

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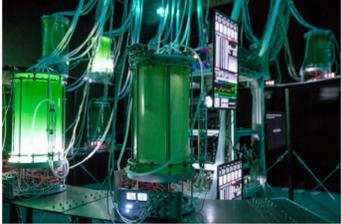
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Multispecies projects like *CMD: Experiments in Bio-Algorithmic-Politics* (2019) and *Microbiocene: Ancient Ooze to Future Myths* (2018)

- highlight communication across species and envision humans as being part of a greater ecology,
- demonstrate collaboration between human (i.e., artist), other-than-human (i.e., algae), and non-human

Antje Jacobs et al



[CMD](#)

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Another kind of multispecies community is also visible in the late 20th century

Rotting seagrass, waves, ebbs and flows, shells, plastic waste, abandoned fish nets, flip flops, and other junk, even washed-up military waste from previous world wars, sea mines or dumped canisters of arsenic-laced mustard gas, etc.

Astrida Neimanis et al

'An attention to situated, evolving practices that have far-reaching and often unforeseen consequences for multiple peoples, species, and ecologies'

Stacy Alaimo (2008)



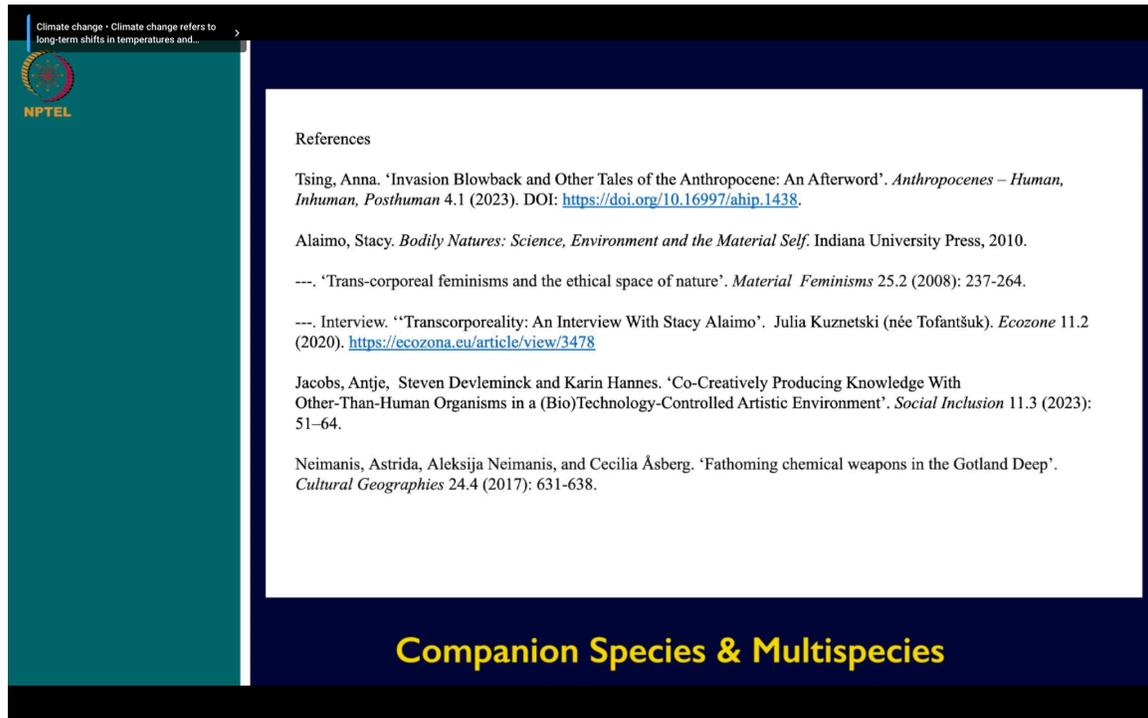
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They demonstrate how a collaboration is really speaking possible. Another kind of multi-species community is also visible in the late 20th century. If you look at water and the waste, the quantum of waste in water, people like Astrid and Emanis, who work in what is called the blue or oceanic humanities, have noted how there are very severe, very

serious consequences to, say, the presence of plastics in all parts of the world, in all kinds of water bodies, except that the water bodies enter us, they enter animals, or they enter animals and plants and from there enter us, which means to say that we share vulnerability with them too.

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So cross-species or multi-species and inter-species belonging is a crucial part of post-humanism for the simple reason that it points to not just shared lives, but also shared vulnerabilities.

Thank you. You.