Journal of Posthumanism
December 2021
Volume: 1, No: 2, pp. 245 – 251
ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/jp

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 18 January 2021 Accepted: 17 July 2021
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v1i2.1346

Forms of Intelligence: Co-species Care in More-than-human Worlds

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Figure 1. Forms of intelligence. Title card

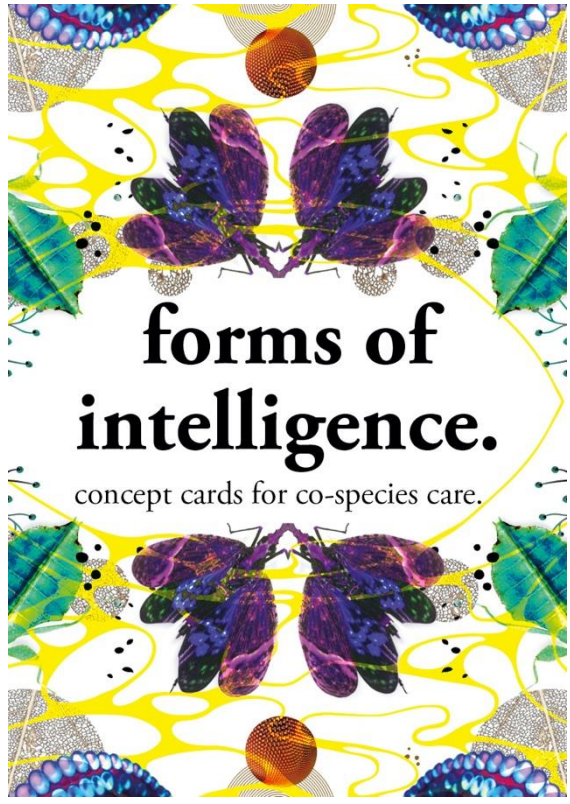

Image: Kaajal Modi

The project consisted of a series of collaborative online workshops between eight people from Knowle West, Bristol, Kent, and Colombia over August and September 2020 with expertise in different forms of animal and plant intelligence. These people ranged in age from 18-80 and included community activists, artists, and researchers with specialisms in spiders and ants,

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trees, fungi, butterflies and local wildlife, soil, coral, gardening, bees, dogs, birds, robotics, wearables, performance and visual arts.

The group came together on the project to share knowledge, create principles for collaborating well across species and to begin exploring what could be made that would benefit humans, animals, plants and environments in more connected ways.

The cards were inspired by, amongst other things, tarot and Brian Eno's Oblique Strategy cards, as well as other types of card games (such as Cards Against Humanity) and creative inspiration techniques from artistic and design practices.

Symbols and symbioses[2]

What makes an organism symbiotic? Are trees individuals, or colonies (is that too anthropocentric a question?). Scientists will measure some species in terms of their lifespans as colonies, rather than the organisms that make up that colony. Hub trees will share resources with trees from their own seedlings, like a mother nursing a child, yet mycorrhizae facilitate energy transfer between different tree species within the same forest. Colony spiders will engage in collective decision making 'on the web', then act as individuals to the benefit of the colony. Orange tip butterflies will eat mustard as larvae so as to taste unpleasant to birds, their last act one for the good of the flight. It seems counter-intuitive today, but wherever we turn, it seems as though the story of life on earth is one of a mutualism based on co-operation and cross-pollination, rather than competition and individualism.

Figure 2. Forms of intelligence. Concept cards for co-species care (1)

Image: Kaajal Modi

[2] An earlier version of this essay was written as part of an artistic commission with the Forms of Intelligence project for Knowle West Media Centre, Bristol. It featured in a short project book that accompanied a set of provocation cards. The cards and the booklet can be downloaded from: https://kwmc.org.uk/projects/formsofintelligence/

Humans are a colony of bacteria, and we are also individuals who make up cultures and societies. We are a result of millennia of bacterial development and co-constitution that allow us to digest food, and of viral infections that shaped our ancestors' placenta (Shotwell, 2016). If, as microbiologist Scott F. Gilbert notes, life is symbiosis "all-the-way down" (Gilbert, 2017), then what does it mean for our conceptions of collaborating across different forms of knowledge, intelligence and being? The 'forms of intelligence' at play in this project situate human and non-human beings as part of complex webs of interdependence and shared kinship, and challenge essentialising categories such as 'human' and 'other'. Humans are a part of nature, and nature is part of us; thinking through more-than-human intelligences might offer novel modes through which to re-imagine our relationships with other organisms, and with each other.

At a time when a zoonotic virus thought to have originated in bat populations in Wuhan is forcing the entire human population to change how we live and connect, it feels more important than ever that we reconsider our relationships and find more hopeful paradigms through which to connect with our environments and the beings we share them with. Multispecies perspectives offer us lively and responsive ways of 'knowing' the complex human and more-than-human entanglements that make up life at multiple scales.

This project grew out of a need; and that need was to reconnect. After having gone into lockdown early in March 2020, by June I was feeling an urgent need to be around others– other people, ideas, organisms– and to be inspired. Looking at all of the tarot-inspired projects that have flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic, I think I wasn't alone in my need. This project gave me so many moments of inspiration, and I am grateful and humbled by the care, attention and time invested by all of the participants in creating something hopeful in a time of intense fear, isolation and grief.

By creating moments of connection between the participants, their co-species organisms, and each other, this project became what it sought to represent: itself a set of symbols that offer symbiotic ways of knowing and living in the world. As such, these cards do not simply represent the Forms of Intelligence project, but embody all of the diverse collections of connections and complexity and contradictions that make up our more-than-human worlds, and turn them into a set of ideas/prompts/talking points/urgent ethical moments that will inform further iterations.

There is a strong strand that weaves through the project and all of its constitutive relationships, and that is one of care. A question we often find ourselves asking in ecological discourse is "how can we care for, or make people care about the environment?". You could argue that this puts undue emphasis on individual actions, and one-way relationships framed through an anthropocentric paradigm of care.

The humans and other organisms who make up this project, with expertise ranging from spider behavioural research for SWARM robotics, to tree guardians, to local wildlife experts, to birdwatchers, as well as artists working with soil, fungi and plants, with ages ranging from 18 to 80 (-something), frame care as variously: a responsibility, a privilege, and an obligation; a job that we do despite ourselves, and a job we cannot do. Climate change is a systemic issue that demands collective attention and action.

Figure 3. Forms of intelligence. Concept cards for co-species care (2)

Image: Kaajal Modi

The collaboration and exchange that is necessary for this kind of care may not fit with ecological activism in the vein of direct action of organisations such as Extinction Rebellion, Friends of the Earth, or Greenpeace, but they nonetheless form an integral part of the ecosystem of action that may be required in order to combat the climate emergency our present epoch faces. In the same way that any real mass mobilisation of the people against unjust political systems requires infrastructural organising based on collective care to sustain (e.g. street kitchens, shelters, libraries, child and elderly care and systems of democratic decision making), perhaps we can see the people who work with other species as doing the less glamorous work that creates systems of mutuality through which we can relate to other-than-humans, a mutual aid network for a more-than-human world.

It is however important to note that the ecological crisis we face is itself deeply political, as are the epistemologies that inform its public understanding. With over 70% of world carbon emissions being produced by just 100 corporations, and the majority of the remainder by unsustainable lifestyles in the global north, we cannot afford to act as though climate activism is a non-partisan activity in which all humans are implicated equally. Capitalism, corporatism and neoliberal economic policies have much to answer for. Resources extracted from the global south fuel the technology industry in Silicon Valley via products made in sweat shops in China and Bangladesh, which are then sold in slick lifestyle branded shops staffed by

underpaid workers, so that we may buy their outputs at vastly inflated prices in order to fully participate in modernity.

The economic costs of the tech industry are felt disproportionately by workers globally, and the resulting climate catastrophes are creating under-resourced dystopias in the very places from which the resources fuelling this economic growth are extracted. The wealth of the first world is built on the land, labour and lost lives of people who will never benefit from that wealth, and whose children carry the debt of that loss. Some people are living the impacts of this loss more acutely, and much more materially, than others.

Figure 4. Forms of intelligence. Concept cards for co-species care (3)

Image: Kaajal Modi

For those of us from the South, the legacy of colonisation on our natural resources meant many of us (our parents, grandparents) moved to Europe to provide better opportunities for our children; we come from cultures that think intergenerationally and many of us come from traditions where we see the natural world (trees, rivers, rocks, animals) as part of these communities. By working collaboratively with others, and by drawing attention to the organisms in our environment and in/on our bodies who we collaborate with daily, I want to create conversations about what it means to care for each other when resources and opportunities globally are scarce for all species.

We live in a geological era notionally determined by human impact on the climate, where the boundaries of that impact are drawn by colonial genocides (both sudden and protracted). In

comprehending our responsibilities and complicities with animals and technology, microbes and fungi, with medicine and science, we might begin to know what it means to be ethically human in more-than-human worlds. In learning to think through other-human and other-than-human perspectives, we might also find alternatives to current exploitative and extractive forms of capitalist and colonial violence as enacted on land and on marginalised bodies.

We cannot presume to know the mind of a bird, or a fish, and we do not know how trees experience the world. If a tree falls in the forest, and other trees hear it fall, will they be suddenly fearful, overtaken with worries about their own mortality? Like a human death, do family members celebrate that individual tree, and in doing so remember that their lifetime is finite, that every moment is a precious? Some trees live for millennia, and certain colonies of trees are thought to have lived for tens of millennia. Anthropocentric perspectives on life, death, and morality do not serve us when trying to find new modes through which to connect to other species.

Figure 5. Forms of intelligence. Reference book

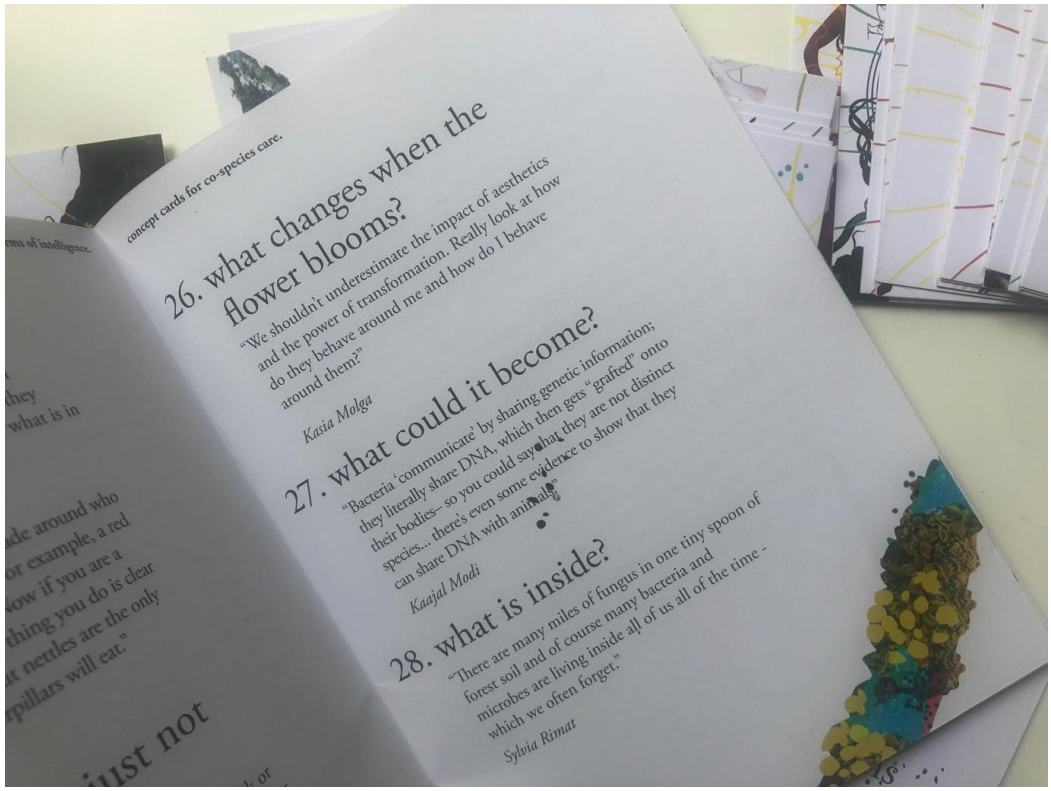

Image: Kaajal Modi

In creating these cards, and this book, I wanted to maintain the contradictory complexity that cross-pollinated all aspects of the project, and to become comfortable with not knowing, and with not presuming to know. I wanted to create something that evoked the moments that inspired me in a time when I was feeling lost, when I couldn't imagine the moment we were in (let alone the one that could come after). The pandemic mobilised mutual aid networks across the world and taught us to conceptualise care as a collective act in a moment collective

grief, confusion, and transformation. I hope that these cards will help you to navigate this moment, like they helped me, or at least bring you comfort and joy in knowing that you are part of a complex, magical, and unknowable world full of life that is at once gracious and monstrous. We should never forget that we are part of this web of care, and as such, are capable of both monstrousness, and of monstrous grace.

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