

# Multispecies Cities

Solarpunk Urban Futures

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...before you dive into the stories, might we ask for your help?

This book is both a collection of stories and a small research project. We (the editors) want to understand how stories might contribute to building better futures for humans and nature alike.

You can help us do so!

Simply visit the link below and fill out our reader survey:

<https://presurvey.multispecies.city>



After reading the book,  
we will ask you to tell us what you thought in a second survey.

Thank you in advance —  
It really means a lot to us!

Christoph (responsible for the survey) & the editor team

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# Introduction

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## **What If Stories Could Plant the Seeds of Hopeful Futures?**

It has been less than a decade since the movement and speculative fiction genre solarpunk set out to imagine futures worth living in. Story after story refusing to surrender to the temptation of violent, dystopian post-apocalypse imaginaries. Seeking ways of practicing solidarity, embracing human ingenuity from traditional ecological knowledge to scientific research, celebrating diverse forms of being in the world, from personal expression to relationships. Planting these seeds of hopeful futures is hard work, especially amidst a constant stream of news about the challenges between now and better tomorrows: accelerating climate change, species extinctions, (re)emerging fascism, lasting legacies of imperialism and colonialism, and the ongoing struggle to overcome an economic system based on the exploitation of living beings. As daunting as these are, solarpunk has inspired many of us engaged in overcoming these challenges, its art and stories finding their way into classrooms and everyday lives.

Yet among the hardest things to reimagine in the process of worldbuilding are those engrained the deepest, those not-so-obvious assumptions we take for granted. Unnoticed, they threaten to stymie

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solarpunk's roots, keeping them from spreading wide and deep. This book exists to tackle one of these assumptions: that we as humans can and must face the crafting of futures worth living in alone. Looking with wonder and awe at the myriad ways plants, animals, microbes, rivers and other more-than-human actors on this planet shape their environments with ingenuity and resourcefulness, who could think of better allies and companions in facing uncertain futures? The stories in this book explore what shape such alliances might take, the joys to be discovered, the negotiations and compromises required, and most importantly, the more-than-human ties, relationships and kinship on which such alliances might be built. They do so in places where another assumption tells us not to look: cities, which even ecologists deemed "outside of nature" until the 1980s.

We have also sought to look for authors from, and stories set in, a place that has been underrepresented in the solarpunk movement up until now: the Asia-Pacific. With its rich bio- and cultural diversity, mega-cities, and exposure to the effects of past colonialism and current and future climate change, the region provides fertile ground for asking deep questions about what our urban future will look like, how and where we will be living and whose company we will be keeping.

Nevertheless, we still see this collection as a first step in a rich journey of discovery and imagination. We would love to see more alliances (human & non-human) described and depicted through fiction (and art, and all the various ways solarpunk is expressed). While these stories made great strides in terms of representing a rich array of urban possibilities, it would be wonderful to have a more-than-English collection that fully captures the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Asia-Pacific and beyond. Collaboration between authors, artists, futurists, scientists, geographers and sociologists may also yield fruitful pathways, as we question and tussle with the opportunities and constraints of technology, urbanity and the earth's biophysical systems. Through this collection of authors from around

the globe, we sought to contribute to disrupt the way published speculative fiction, dystopic and otherwise, too often reproduces patterns of exclusion and oppression. Commissioning and platforming diverse writers is the surest way to authentically grapple with these issues, and so we look forward to continuing the journey with further collections bringing in more voices and perspectives from around the globe.

### **Why Multispecies?**

Why are we, as humans, thinking we can or should face ecological crises alone? Some of the most eminent natural science research today is engaged in trying to create systems to measure and control physical and biological processes, all to support human well-being. That is also what the concept of sustainability itself is about. Plants, animals, fresh air, and clean water are seen only as resources that need to be managed correctly. As a result, it is easy to forget the ecological basics: species in the webs of life depend on each other in complex ways, even those in extreme environments such as deep sea vents. No happiness is to be found on an Earth devoid of more-than-human life. Add capitalism and colonialism, and it becomes clear why we find ourselves in a world where profit is more important than fulfilling basic needs, where land and people are exploited by those in positions of privilege and power. The reasons that have been historically used to justify exploiting nature and people are eerily similar. Be it skin colour, culture, religion and beliefs, consciousness, brain complexity, mobility, the ability to feel pain, or indeed being alive—distinguishing someone or something as different, other, and often somehow less, is to this day used to perpetuate injustice. To decide who may be controlled. One of the deepest lines in the sand among these is the question of agency: whose actions shape our world?

The multispecies concept argues that we can only truly understand the world if we look at the many ways humans and other life forms

are entangled, in a way that cannot be easily separated. For example, one could not possibly write a human history of the year 2020 without considering another organism: the novel coronavirus. The consequences of this shift in thinking are mind-boggling: imagine a stage, just a second ago with nothing but a single spotlight shining on a lone human actor before an unmoving set, now fully lit, suddenly overcrowded and teeming with actors animal and vegetal, fungal, bacterial and viral. The human actor is still moving with intent, yet in all the whirl, dance, pull and shove, it becomes clear that the too-bright spotlight hid from us what was really going on all along. Each actor affects the world around them, regardless of their characteristics. Just like this, the doors open to whole new worlds of stories. This book embarks on a wide-eyed journey to explore where these doors might lead.

### Why Cities

Since its beginnings, solarpunk has reimagined the places most children born today grow up in: cities. Defying the glowing dystopias of cyberpunk, skyscrapers are painted with living green, plants and trees against the grey of urban existence. But take a look at ecomodernist dreams of smart cities, efficient and clean in their celebration of green growth and capitalism. Built solely for humans, yet no people to be found. The trees and vertical gardens uniform and functional, deployed as green infrastructure, used and discarded as required. There are no more-than-human heroes here. Without the radical changes required to transform cities, such urban designs may simply serve as green-washing, a polished corporate makeover to attract customers for new real estate developments.

Yet so many urban issues require solarpunk's attention, most prominent among them the question: whose cities? Just as cities were seen as outside of nature, they present us with a challenge to grow from: the highest ecological footprints, the hearts of capitalism and power. In re-imagining cities as gentle, as contributing to the

ecosystem and landscape, as more-than-human habitats home to diverse forms of life, we can learn to negotiate, coexist, and flourish together. As we learn more about ourselves, we find that cities with healthy ecosystems and green spaces are also vital to human health: a view of trees from our windows, dirt and plants as kids' companions during daycare, the endless joys of chance encounters with multispecies neighbours. In jointly caring for and about place as more-than-human stewards of urban landscapes, we may find ourselves to be cared for in return, each place reflecting our beliefs, values, and cultures, each of us reflecting the places of our lives.

### **More-Than-Human Kinship**

In reflecting on the many ways multispecies care was illustrated in these stories, one striking aspect is how familiar and everyday so many of these encounters are: a curious bird accompanies a teenager as they discover the deep satisfaction of gardening; a butterfly is briefly captured and released; a tame rat enjoys a scratch behind the ears. These moments capture the under-appreciated fact that all human settlements inevitably contain a myriad of life forms—plants, animals, fungi and more. What sets these stories apart is the foregrounding and focus on examining and including these relationships as a core element of world-building.

Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose described these interspecies bonds as a kind of kinship, where kinship is “mutual life-giving,” with our responsibilities for each other enduring over space and time. Perhaps the strongest and most touching example of “mutual life-giving” in these stories is in “The Mammoth Steps” between Roomba (mammoth) and Kaskil (human). The story opens with a list of the reciprocal obligations between mammoths and the Siberian communities—stretching from basic needs like safety and food to the spiritual comfort of the mammoths’ “sly humor”. Kaskil and Roomba then embark on an epic quest, deftly reversing the human + companion animal trope to animal + companion human. Along the

way, we see the scope and scale of the care and love in this friendship, as well as the challenges of bridging differences in communication and physical needs.

Here, as in a number of other stories, interspecies communication is aided by technology not (yet) available. In other worlds, deep and active listening and receptivity is the key to comprehending that “everything speaks” (Chabria’s “Listen”). What is common across all is that translating species-specific knowledge, emotion, memories and concepts is essential for the responsibilities of kinship to be understood and realised.

The greater affinity or receptiveness of children to receiving these messages is a common thread. In “The Songs Humanity Lost Reluctantly to Dolphins”, a physical, sensory and emotional transformation of human children is initiated by dolphins, creating hybrid beings who are able to bridge species’ divides. Similarly, in “Listen” the ability to hear the beyond-human languages is discovered and is at its peak with the leisure-rich days of childhood—perhaps it is the time taken to truly open the senses rather than innate ability or innovative tech that offers the most opportunity for connection. Again, it is the young people inhabiting the post-apocalyptic world of “Children of Asphalt” who are able to interpret the needs of their new mammalian neighbours and communicate these to the less in-tune adults of their world. Here too, the word “kin” has replaced other words the English language has for the more-than-human, indicating beyond doubt the familial ties we have to our co-inhabitants of the planet.

First Nation communities the world over have long taken as given that humans are part of a family tree that extends well beyond *homo sapiens*, including forests, rivers and oceans. As in “Down the River,” we ignore our responsibilities of respect, guardianship, and care of these elements at our peril. Translation and understanding may require skills and technology not yet available, but the imagination goes a long way to helping us know what we need to “get along” as



kin in our one habitable world.

This is not a matter of a glib declaration of “we are one” without engaging with some of the uncomfortable ways we do and will continue to interact with our multispecies kin. The delightfully disturbing “A Life With Cibi” by Natsumi Tanka demonstrates how our need to consume can conflict with any universalist notions of bodily autonomy and individual freedom. Through a world where food called “cibis” walk around and talk to you as you carve off their flesh, Tanaka gives voice and shape to the close relationship between how we eat and how we could be eaten, destabilising any ideas of innocence or ability to separate ourselves from the world of predator-prey relationships. Eco-philosopher Val Plumwood blames the “hyper-separation” that feeds the common perception that humans are somehow “not prey”—but also the vegan’s delusion that they are “not predator”—for fuelling the global environmental crisis. In the book *Eye of the Crocodile*, she reflects on the crocodile attack that almost claimed her life and concludes “we are food and that through death we nourish others.” In “A Life With Cibi,” the protagonist’s distaste for eating a cibus that she shares her house with backfires, as the creatures need to be consumed regularly to prolong their life. The cibus withers and dies, reminding us multispecies justice does not simply mean straightforward notions of care, guardianship, and “living and letting live”, but rather acting both responsively and responsibly in both life and death.

### Narrating More-Than-Human Stories

Right from the time we begin to question progress-based narratives, stories of the individual, the lone hero, people against people and in fact most of what stories are expected to be, we stretch the familiar fabric of fiction. But the calls for “reform of literature” (such as from Nick Admussen) have been growing strident with each passing day while the Keeling curve of our carbon karma rises higher and species extinction rates accelerate as if in concert with speedometer needles of

the latest gas-guzzling supercars. Considering more-than-human narratives as a subset of stories of the solarpunk—with its decentralised politics and a hopeful belief in a cleaner and better future—we do place quite a few challenges before the teller of these new tales.

While organised politics or the “moral adventure” of an individual makes for engaging narratives, decentralised action and cooperation do not always lend themselves to familiar modes of storytelling. Also the violence that we inflict on the living and non-living by treating them as cogs in the wheels of progress, be it through capitalist production or a centrally commanded system, happens over extended time periods and the processes through which the more-than-human world responds, revealing our connections with it, can be even slower.

Stories which try to highlight these connections or engage with the slowness of the response on a planetary scale have to employ special narrative strategies to hold the reader’s attention. One way to approach the issue of slowness and lengthy time periods is by plotting through narrative leaps across tipping points or catastrophes like the coronavirus pandemic. These are the points of rupture, where an equilibrium is lost and the natural world starts to transform quickly and its impact speeds up the story.

“The Songs that Humanity Lost Reluctantly to Dolphins” is one such story, which while highlighting our connections with the more-than-human, brilliantly employs the above-mentioned technique to bypass slowness and lengthy timescales. Here a curious change in human babies “begins quietly” but spreads fast across the world, as a symbolic acknowledgement of the entanglement of humans, the ocean and its creatures. This serio-comic tale also deserves attention for its carnival-like quality and the deft handling of the collective voice, rather than that of a singular hero. From scientist to mad woman and singing dolphins to clueless parents, a polyphony of voices, spoken and unspoken, sweeps us along in this powerful work

resolving into an optimistic fantasyland of a second Creation.

Many of these narratives, without sounding preachy, vividly portray how much we are beholden to the living planet and the obligations we cannot ignore. There have been important debates between Marxist thinkers and literary theorists (Sophia David cites this debate in *Ecofiction; Bringing Climate Change into the Imagination*) about a creative work being consciously political or radiating its politics just by “mirroring society” and many believe that consciously political fiction will be aesthetically weak. While the “society” depicted in these stories breaches the Cartesian barrier of the cogito (the principle establishing the existence of a being from the fact of its thinking or awareness), the tension between aesthetics and politics, and the creative devices employed to address it have no doubt enriched this collection with its bouquet of enjoyable and at the same time inspiring tales.

Some stories keep the politics in the background which still impinges on the plot, some others focus on the micro-level working of beliefs through dialogue and action. In a semi-utopian “Vladivostok,” a layered narrative about Amur tigers and a VR game developer duo, the politics is mostly in the past and a better world with multispecies elements has been woven together but the jarring notes of the bygone still rend the air, driving the conflicts of the story, giving it poignancy and meaning.

Elsewhere in “Untamed,” the ceaseless work of clearing the vestiges of attitudes, through psychological and behavioural change at the level of the individual, propels the plot as it expands a character’s consciousness, easing her switchover to a new role. From disinterest to dedication for an optimistic future, the human character’s transformational journey, underscored by that of a mynah companion, is engaging in its details. Often in such journeys, there is a helper coming by—the figure of a guardian or lover, disliked at first but accepted and silently honoured later.

As the creative shoots and vines of solarpunk blossom into

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fullness, entwining around an understanding of our closely-knit connections with our more-than-human kin, there is a natural venturing into realms which modernism had partitioned off as the preserve of science. In these stories, as in other hybrid genres like climate fiction, the human and the more-than-human dance to step and tune, rewarding us with unforgettable tales of hope, overcoming, and redemption.

Here a gentle science (“Birdsong Fossil”) tries to retrieve the lost worlds and culture of extinct species and the author breaks our hearts with the failures and the possibilities of such an endeavour while elsewhere (“Down the River”), the natural world as character, in the person of a river, moulds and guides the narrative flow.

Like a river in spate the stories grow out, absorbing fresh vocabulary, forms, even on-page layouts to reflect their preoccupation with foreign and long-neglected dominions. Sometimes they take science as a companion to enter the minds of the more-than-human characters. More often, they tap the apparently endless reservoir of the poetic imagination (“Listen”) to reveal the hidden canvas of our connections with the web of all creation.

In re-imagining the life of future cities not as dystopic dead ends or aquariums of a smart progress but as possible templates for a hopeful and inclusive multispecies future, the storytellers of this volume serve not only their well-established roles as aesthetes of a stricken time but also of designers and navigators of a tomorrow to look forward to.