

## On Stories of Life, Death, and Resilience: Human-Animal Bonds for a Multispecies Becoming-With

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### Abstract:

Susan McHugh's *Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories against Genocide and Extinction* (2019) maps out a radical path for future endeavors in literary animal studies. Inquiring into the affordances of narrative to engage in the preservation of cultural and biological diversity, McHugh unravels the entanglements between fictions featuring old or traditional ways of life and the modern-industrial world-views playing into their composition and reception. The analyzed films, novels, art installations, and truth commissions revisit genocide and extinction while focusing on their devastating impacts on human-animal bonds. Referring to these representations of interspecies affection, McHugh frames 'love' as a source of traditional knowledge on human-animal relationships and thus as a powerful force of resilience in an age when 'slaughter' constitutes a ubiquitous threat to peoples, species, and entire ecosystems. Her application of Indigenous metaphysics to her analyses paired with her consideration of socio-political dimensions transport *Love in a Time of Slaughter* right into the center of her discipline's most cutting-edge scholarship.

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## On Stories of Life, Death, and Resilience: Human-Animal Bonds for a Multispecies Becoming-With

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Mapping out a radical path for future endeavors in literary animal studies, Susan McHugh's most recent work, *Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories against Genocide and Extinction* (2019) examines the affordances of narrative to engage in questions of life and death shared across species lines. A pioneer in her field, McHugh consolidates her previous work on the world-forming capacities of multispecies stories (Susan McHugh: *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press 2011) and contributes to filling a gaping research hole by investigating contemporary narratives that imagine "human-animal lives outside Eurowestern discursive norms" (p. 16). Convincingly, her analyses of animated films, novels, art installations, and truth commissions alongside their socio-cultural and political contexts advocate that narratives featuring affective human-animal bonds – and the consequences of their annihilation – can be an effective means of resistance facing the sixth mass extinction. *Love in a Time of Slaughters* thus seamlessly ties in with the most field-defining and recent scholarship, such as David Herman's *Narratology Beyond the Human* (Oxford/New York: Oxford UP 2018), or Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee)'s *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP 2018), while seeking to bridge the gap between literary criticism and lived, creatural life.

As in her previous works, McHugh's complex arguments generate innovative and valuable epistemological questions for her discipline instead of providing any clear-cut answers. The stories about dying animal gods, taxidermied howler monkeys and donkeys, executed cetaceans, jackal-man-god metamorphoses, massacred Inuit sled dogs, and swarming honeybees uncover Indigenous histories and knowledges on cross-species interdependencies which have fallen prey to colonial violence. Inquiring into the non-Eurowestern cosmologies

and models of interspecies relationalities that animate these narratives calls for a profound rethinking and decolonializing of the study of human-animal relations. Besides breaching traditional literary forms, their emphasis on the relations between un/dead and super/natural creatures – both human and nonhuman – reveal “the colonial failure of not mapping the range of loving connections within and between species” (p. 13). McHugh therefore argues for enhancing the posthumanist paradigms that have shaped her discipline by Indigenous metaphysics and animist perceptions. If “all sorts of others – the nonhuman, the dead, and the supernatural – are seen as animate and interrelated with living beings,” a more nuanced and attentive conceptualization of literary nonhumans and their usefulness for envisioning ways of a Harawayian ‘becoming-with’ of humans and nonhumans takes shape (p. 40).

The themes of ‘slaughter’ and ‘love’ provide a frame for her thoughtful analyses of the narrative engagements with genocide and extinction – some as well-known as the Holocaust, others more hidden from the public eye. ‘Slaughter,’ and with it the animal-industrial complex, constitutes more of a fundamental condition, today’s neoliberal institution of biopower over lives and deaths, whereas the actual slaughterhouses remain absent from the primary material. Thus spotlighting the more remote and seemingly inaccessible products of a ‘time of slaughter,’ these “transformational counternarratives” (p. 9) render perceptible which complex ways of multispecies living fall victim to habitat destruction, colonialist exploitation, depletion of resources or even targeted killings.

‘Love’ is the second fundamental condition which frames McHugh’s analyses, and it appears in shapes far from sentimentality or nostalgia. In Hayao Miyazaki’s 1997 animated film *Mononoke-hime* (*Princess Mononoke*), a girl raised by a wolf goddess and living among her pack without much ado chooses to stay with her animal-siblings, despite her growing affection for the human hero. Taxidermic parts of extinct animals alongside remains of vanished Indigenous people awaken a productive form of mourning in the female protagonist of Lydia Millet’s novel *Magnificence* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company 2012) to engage in multi-species justice projects. Indigenous children’s sensibilities towards the suffering of marine animals in Robert Barclay’s *Meja! A Novel of the Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2002) cause the elders of their tribe to rethink their fishing practice. On the other hand, the painful obligations cross-species bonds entail are addressed in Tuareg writer Ibrahim al-Koni’s novels, which address the struggling for survival of nomadic tribespeople alongside their herding

animals in the Saharan desert. The collected oral reports on a federal mass killing of Inuit sled dogs (1950s -1970s) documented by the Indigenous *Qikiqtani Truth Commission* (QTC) emphatically transmit the livelihoods lost in these killings to the outside world and simultaneously function as community-restoring among the Inuit. This generative potential also shines through when McHugh's completes this portrait of affective bonds by addressing a "dead metaphor with dead referents" (p. 156) in her last chapter "The Birds and the Bees, or Life after Sex." Here, encounters with the intelligence of bee swarms rekindle senses of belonging with the nonhuman world in the human protagonists, while distancing them from the oppressive colonial histories tied to their Indigenous heritages.

"All kinship is fictive, all stories are possible," McHugh concludes *Love in a Time of Slaughter* (p. 192). Especially when seeking to understand the experience of nonhuman animals, *human* animals depend to a large degree on narrativized discourse, even if it is portrayed by biologists or ethologists. Novelists, filmmakers, and activists can thus play a valuable part in retying the cross-species bonds torn apart by Cartesian dualistic thinking. Framing 'love' as a gateway to the world and as a powerful force of resilience in a time of 'slaughter,' McHugh's work provides a thought-provoking and often challenging perspective on the possibilities and complexities of more-than-human storyworlds. Hence serving less as an entry point into the field and more as a momentous point of departure for unravelling the entanglements of fictions and lived realities, *Love in a Time of Slaughter* constitutes a timely and crucial contribution to literary animal studies.

**Zu Erzählungen über Leben, Sterben und Resilienz: Mensch-Tier Bindungen für ein artenübergreifendes „Miteinander-Werden“**

**German Abstract:**

Susan McHugh's jüngstes Werk, *Love in a Time of Slaughters. Human-Animal Stories Against Genocide and Extinction* (2019), eröffnet einen radikalen Weg für zukünftige Bemühungen in den Literary Animal Studies. McHugh untersucht das produktive Potenzial von Erzählungen zugunsten der Erhaltung von kultureller und biologischer Vielfalt. Dabei entwirrt sie die komplexen Wechselwirkungen zwischen Fiktionen ursprünglicher und/oder traditioneller Lebensweisen und den modernen industriellen Weltansichten, die in ihre Komposition und Rezeption mit einfließen. Die Animationsfilme, Romane, Kunstinstallationen und Wahrheitskommissionen, die sie unter die Lupe nimmt, besuchen bekannte und weniger bekannte anthropogene Gräueltaten wie Genozid und Ausrottung in ihren Erzählwelten und konzentrieren sich dabei besonders auf deren verheerende Auswirkungen auf affektive Mensch-Tier-Bindungen. McHugh arbeitet die ‚Liebe‘ in ihren sorgfältigen Analysen als eine Ressource traditionellen Wissens über Mensch-Tier Beziehungen heraus. In einer Zeit, in der das ‚Schlachten‘ eine allgegenwärtige Bedrohung für Völker, Arten und ganze Ökosysteme darstellt, können speziesübergreifende Bindungen darüber hinaus eine starke Quelle des Widerstands bieten. Ihre innovative Anwendung der indigenen Metaphysik auf ihre Analysen gepaart mit ihrer überzeugenden Einbeziehung gesellschaftspolitischer Dimensionen transportieren *Love in a Time of Slaughters* direkt in das Zentrum aktuell geführter Debatten in den Literary Animal Studies.