

# String Figures

Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*

*“Playing games of **string figures** is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works ... of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth. **String figures** require holding still in order to receive and pass on. **String figures** can be played by many, on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained” (Haraway 10).*

In her definition and exploration of the term *string figures*, Haraway describes a process of weaving together a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences. *String figures* (or *SF*, for short) is a journey through which we reshape our own understanding of what is and what could be by including the voices of many. It is about multispecies alliance and the formation, recognition, and fostering of novel connections. In other words, it is about appreciating the multitude of narratives that can be told when we expand the breadth of who is allowed to tell them. In order to do this, it is imperative that we eradicate human exceptionalism from our popular discourse. Such a limitation on storytelling prevents us from embracing the universal connectedness that allows us to flourish. When a game of string figures is played, species arrogance must necessarily be demolished.

And what of this flourishing that Haraway talks about as a product of playing string figures? In this case, flourishing is less a process of restoration and more about “recuperation in complex histories that are as full of dying as living, as full of endings, even genocides, as beginnings” (Haraway 10). It is not a gentle flourishing, or even a pleasant one, but one of getting on together in the world we have. String figures allow us to *stay with the trouble*, a term Haraway loosely defines as a process of living together on earth with mutual understanding and respect. When we open our narratives to include the perspectives of all, we reshape our understanding of how we, as humans, fold into the multispecies communities we live in. We provide space to think up new ways of living together.

In games of string figures, it may be most productive to begin locally. Here, let us turn to an example that is local to the authors. We contextualize our narrative in the Southeastern United States - specifically, the city of Atlanta, Georgia. I am sitting at my desk, hard at work, when all of a sudden a conspicuous *scritch scritch squeak* sound emanates from my A/C wall unit. Frozen, I listen with pricked ears as the sound drags back and forth across the area. Tentatively

inching closer to the source, I eventually land splayed out on the floor with my head turned towards a small crack at the bottom of the wall. Through this, I can see inside the outdoor portion of my A/C unit, and in this... another little eye peering straight back at me. After some detective work, I determine that the outside of my unit has fallen off and has now become the home of some neighborhood squirrels.

Naturally, I turn to the internet to explore exactly *how* concerned I should be. The results are, if not surprising, disappointing. “SQUIRREL EXTERMINATION” titles the articles of the Google results, page after page. After having observed my new squirrel roommates for quite a while, this solution just doesn’t feel right. A few modified search queries later, an unusual article about something called the Squirrel Census pops up. Intrigued, I dig further. The discovery is nothing short of a string figure haven for squirrels.



A squirrel observer catches a squirrel eating an acorn. [instagram.com/squirrelcensus/](https://www.instagram.com/squirrelcensus/)

The Squirrel Census was a shining example of *SF* from its inception. In describing the project’s founder, the website states “[it] was founded in Atlanta, GA, USA, by a Lab-Aussie canine named Sophie, a freelance chaser who was obsessed with Eastern gray squirrels.” This is a project that exemplifies the multispecies nature of string figure ideology, promoting an alliance between squirrels, canines, humans, and a multiplicity of other actors. Its initial goal was to quite literally act as a census for squirrels. Volunteers would spend time observing and counting squirrels in their areas, keeping collective notes for compilation. The project even created an app, Squirrel Sighter, where a community of squirrel enthusiasts would share pictures of squirrels, dead or alive. However, what resulted from this project was something more than a simple census.

By bringing visibility to these furry critters with numbers, acknowledgement and respect through observation, the Squirrel Census succeeded in building a web of understanding and community between all its participants, regardless of species. As the website states: “If we are willing, [squirrels] connect us to, and make us curious about, *that* mammal and *that* mammal and *that* mammal. They are, in essence, the gateway animal to learning about, caring about, other animals, all animals, the planet, and their/our place here.” By decentralizing humans in human-squirrel interaction narratives, by including other furry friends in the mix, participants engaged in a world of connectivity that is unreachable, even unimaginable, if approached from the dominant cultural perspective.

In my own journey with squirrels, from a *scritch scratch* in my A/C unit to a staring contest to a bumbling Google search, I find that my own perception has changed, as well. What would I have done if that scratching noise had emanated from a thick, impenetrable wall? Would I have so quickly skipped over the calls to exterminate had I not had that tiny crack through which I observed my squirrel friend? Maybe, maybe not. I do know, however, that the moments in which I made eye contact with, and observed the behaviors of, those critters through the crack was poignant. It created a line of connectivity that prompted me to keep searching until I found the Squirrel Census. This is what *string figures* is all about - finding those threads that connect us, following them, and creating new narratives in which we engage in collaborative cohabitation rather than exceptionalist isolation. When squirrels can move from pest to pal, we have moved closer to an *SF* reality.



Baby squirrels that briefly entered the care of co-author Delfina Booth on her own venture into human-squirrel connectivity

Delfina Booth and Kathryn von Grey