

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Donna J. Haraway**, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*,  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6214-2 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-6224-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-8223-7378-0 (ebook)

It is perhaps for her critique of the Anthropocene that many people will turn to Donna Haraway's new book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. "Chthulucene", Haraway smiles, "is a simple word" (p.2). While she endorses the term Capitalocene—granting it to Andreas Malm and then Jason Moore, though noting that she thought she had come up with it herself—she brings forth the Chthulucene as her radical alternative conception of the world. "Unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet" (p.55).

Haraway plays fugues with the ideas in her title: trouble, kin, and the Chthulucene. We could say that the Chthulucene is a concept that states what the world is; that "making kin" is a way of being in and caring for that multispecies world; and that "staying with the trouble" is a way to understand it. An ontology, an ethic, and an epistemology. Yet this is to draw out distinctions where Haraway constructs connections.

The Chthulu seeks to trouble the Anthropos. It is "the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjuisi, and many more". It "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (p.101). Specifically, the Chthulu is also a Californian spider, the *Pimosa Cthulhu*. It morphs,

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

too, into Potnia Theron / Melissa / Medusa: the only mortal Gorgon, the Mistress of Animals. It weaves underwater to coral reefs to become the day octopus, *Octopus cyanea*. ““All of these stories”, Haraway writes, “are a lure to proposing the Chthulucene as a needed third story, a third netbag for collecting up what is crucial for ongoing, for staying with the trouble”.

For those seeking portable theory, or a new geological ontology, this may all seem a bit ethereal. But for those sympathetic to her style and familiar with her oeuvre there is much in this new book to relish. Her method is inspired what she calls Marilyn Strathern’s “arts of feminist speculative fabulation in the scholarly mode”. She lays this out in her looping style: “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what worlds make worlds, what worlds make stories” (p.12). As her title suggests, it is in the difficulty and the mess that Haraway works. To navigate it her methodology is experimental and linguistic; she builds worlds in the interstices of words.

Chthulucene is not a simple word, yet it is a productive motif for Haraway. With it she laces ideas from urban pigeons, woolen coral reefs, writing workshops, Inupiat computer games, canine estrogen and Black Mesa sheep. The thready and the tentacular form the subject and the framework of her theory-making, as well as the structure of her writing.

Through these stories she intervenes in the ongoing debate over post-humanism. Haraway declares herself against—or rather beyond—the post-human. As with the Anthropocene, she has an alternative in mind: “we are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist” (p.97). Typically, “compost” here

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

is doing a great deal of work. It emerges out of companion, and out of *cum panis*. Crucially, compost refers too to sympoiesis and to the overcoming of individualism which is the bedrock of her conception of the world. Haraway's background as a biologist is central: the multiple, co-operative, sympoietic lives of bacteria, corals, ants and azelias underpin her ontology. She asks: "what happens when human exceptionalism and the utilitarian individualism of classical political economics become unthinkable in the best sciences across the disciplines and interdisciplines? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with" (p.57). There is an insight to her method here. Her work depends on the inseparability between thinking with and being with. As *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Haraway 2003) argues, the human should be understood as a multispecies relationship; here, we see Haraway seeking to join Vinciane Despret—one of her key influences, along with Jim Clifford, Anna Tsing and Isabelle Stengers—in seeking to think-with non-human beings, and in seeking to think as a multiple, in necessary and constant collaboration. As compost.

Out of this, one idea gains precedence in the second half of the book in the unabashed form of a new Haraway slogan: "Make Kin, Not Babies!" She is not done with her old slogans: "Cyborgs For Earthly Survival"; "Run Fast, Bite Hard"; and "Shut Up and Train". All are still needed, but here she raises that knobliest of political topics: the need for a decrease in human population. Haraway calls for a long-term reduction to two or three billion. She wants a world in which kin-making replaces reproduction, genders multiply, and bodies are recognised, relished, and re-made as multi-species collaborations. This is a lot to ask for and to imagine, so she builds these worlds under the many-faced sign of SF: "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far" (p.2). It is in this multiple SF—with its openings and its failings—that we can feel the often productive tensions of Haraway's latest work most clearly.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Like much of Haraway's work, the book is full of felicitous phrases. Her writing can throw light into corners and crystallize things the reader (this reader, anyway) previously only half grasped. She can make the previously firm slippery and the slippery firm. For instance—with regards to Vinciane Despret—she writes that theorizing is “mak[ing] cogently available”. Cyborgs, she says, “are critters in a queer litter, not the Chief Figure of Our Times” (p.105). There are moments of great clarity amid the tentacles.

Yet there are moments, too, when the reader can wonder quite where Haraway is going. The book lacks the weighty groundedness of research that provided the foundation for *Primate Visions* (Haraway 1989) or *Companion Species*. At times, the chapters can feel over-extended, their detail not quite managing to hold up the edifice of thinking built on top them. The chapter dealing with “Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble”, for instance, is based on four short case studies of “resurgence”: crocheted coral reef; Madagascan lemurs; Never Alone (an Inupiat computer game); and Black Mesa sheep. Each open fascinating questions and enormous possibilities, but are dealt with in a few pages. A more sustained engagement with any of the cases might have yielded more enduring insights. As it is, each story risks serving as an exemplar for a pre-given understanding of the kind of being-with Haraway argues that we need, rather than emerging as the generators of world-making alternatives that they could become.

In her bringing together of art, science, and activism Haraway's work has always spun out beyond genres. Here even more so than before. Speculative fabulation runs through it, culminating in the last section; a speculative fiction account of 400 years of Earth's future called “The Camille Stories”. There science fiction blends with sloganeering. It is an endearing narrative, and the principles of hope and doubt are finely balanced in the futurist form. There is perhaps a speculative

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

beauty in her vision of symbiogenetic communities making kin across species. Yet it is unlikely that those cool or lukewarm about the book up to this final chapter are going to be convinced by its closing pages.

The book is a constant threading and re-threading of concepts and contestations. It is, therefore, repetitive. As one example, we read that Viveiros de Castro “studied with Brazilian Amerindians, with whom he learned to theorize the radical conceptual realignment he called multinaturalism and perspectivism. ‘Animism is the only *sensible* version of materialism’”. This is important, but we read it both on page 88 and on page 165. In part this seems likely to be because the genesis of the book is, as often with contemporary academic work, a series of shorter pieces put together. However, what is tricky here is that some of the repetition is clearly deliberate: it is Haraway’s way of thinking through, over, with, and beyond the concepts she puts forward. Yet this makes the blurring perhaps more confusing for the reader trying to think closely with Haraway: is this repetition part of a thought being re-worked and re-connected as a string figure, or is it the editorial consequence of a text written as—and likely to be continue to be read as—separate texts?

Indeed, it is valid to question what new ground this book covers. Haraway’s central argument in response to the Anthropocene was made in 2015 in *Environmental Humanities*. This is the basis of Chapter 4 here. Of course, bringing together a collection of recent work published in disparate places has its benefits. However, as the introduction notes, only one chapter of the book—the final one: “The Camille Stories: Children of Compost”—is uniquely published here. This may be a function of pressure to publish, and contemporary academic reading practices, but for a scholar of Haraway’s status it is disappointing.

The book proposes at least three generative trajectories of thought: the Chthulucene, making kin, and staying with the trouble. It develops many recognisable

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

motifs from Haraway's previous work—care, response-ability, play, sympoesis—and raises fresh challenges. Some of Haraway's previous work has been seminal, and has reached beyond academia. *Staying with the Trouble* gives scholars plenty to think with, but it is unlikely that many beyond the critical social sciences will be calling this epoch the Chthulucene—yet.

## References

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