

Review: *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*

By Donna J. Haraway. Duke University Press, 2016. ISBN 9780822362241. 296 pp. €27,99.

Doortje Hörst

‘Why tell stories like this, when there are only more and more openings and no bottom lines? Because there are quite definite response-abilities that are strengthened in such stories,’ (Haraway 2016, 115).

In times of species extinction, climate change, and environmental destruction, with many humans and other-than-humans looking for refuge, Donna J. Haraway tells stories to encourage certain ways of living in the world, and discourage others. Haraway is a widely influential philosopher of science, technoscience feminist and biologist who argues that being human is always becoming-with others, not least because humans are made up of bacteria and eat, digest and partially ingest plants, animals and other organisms. To live and die is to inherently engage with other ‘critters’, not only biologically, but socially. Haraway argues that living and dying well on a planet that is heading towards destruction must involve breaking with human exceptionalism and bounded individualism. She critiques anthropocentrism and post-isms, which she situates in the Anthropocene and Capitalocene. Instead, she proposes a time-space called the Chthulucene, which embraces a mode of being wherein (non-)humans live together in ‘response-able’ ways, whilst staying with the troubles emerging from entanglements with their inherited pasts.

Haraway not only problematizes current ways of living, she shows feasible alternatives to them. In light of endangered coral reefs due to ocean acidification and rising sea temperatures, she appeals to the example of how reading about bleaching reefs led two sisters to take action. With their backgrounds in math and art, they had the idea to crochet coral reefs with wool and waste. Thousands of people across the world partook in this art project, raising awareness for this issue by showcasing the beauty of the corals and emphasizing the dangers that it faces due to pollution. The sisters encourage an approach whereby engaging with the environment is done without disturbing its lively counterpart, while making one feel more responsible for its future. The alternative way of living Haraway proposes is doable. In fact, it is already done

by certain people somewhere in certain ways, but it requires collaboration as shown in the example of the sisters.

Haraway does not only propose alternative practices for the present; instead, she breaks away from conventional boundaries of science by imagining a different future through science fiction. She does this in the final chapter of her book, which is an example of speculative anthropology. This genre combines anthropology and science fiction in order to imagine radically different futures which are firmly grounded in the present, circumventing the weight of prediction or determinism (Andersen et al. 2018). Haraway further explores the slogan *Make Kin Not Babies*, already introduced in chapter four, by telling the stories of five generations of the Camilles, who live from the year 2025 to 2425 and who are part of the Children of Compost community. In this community, reducing pressure on the environment and other species is of the highest concern. They therefore structure birth rates in such a way that at least three adults take care of a single newborn, thus causing an eventual birthrate and human population decline. Conflict and tensions rise among the members of the community as not all adhere to these ideals. At the same time the futuristic story is firmly rooted in the present, as actual science practices, poems, anime and music from the twentieth and early twenty-first century are woven into the story as inspiration for the Camilles, and for today's readers. The science fiction story is an alternative to a more common conclusion of an academic book that remarkably brings all the chapters together. She incites thinking of different ways to live with more than human others in 'response-able' ways, a major thread throughout her book, and stories of resurgence that Haraway told in different chapters return when the Camilles are engaging with a rich and problematic past. In this fabulated speculation, Haraway further develops her arguments by making chapter-crossing connections.

Staying with the Trouble powerfully breaks away from conventional disciplinary boundaries. Haraway builds her argument on social, philosophical and biological theories. Multiple disciplines struggle to find ways to move beyond human exceptionalism and disconnected individualism, as these terms have become untenable to understand the world we live in (Haraway 2016, 30). Drawing inspiration from dealing with this issue in biology, Haraway introduces words like 'sympoiesis', 'symbionts', and 'symbiogenesis' for analyzing social situations. These words emphasize beings and systems that are never bound, but open-ended, surprising and always making more connections as they 'become-with' others. 'Becoming-with' is used in the sense that they never quite become the 'other,' but also do not stay

‘themselves’ (Despret 2004, 131). A human is a symbiont as multiple beings inhabit and change the human body, but also because other beings influence how humans lead their lives socially. Following these relations extends a conception of the disconnected exceptional human, and encourages to search all the webbed connections of which ‘human’ is only part of the story. That is inherent in the word symbiont.

Breaking boundaries also comes with a certain risk, as the audience Haraway writes for remains unclear. The book reads with a sense of urgency, as change in ways of living is necessary now to prevent further, unrecoverable damage to the environment and other beings on earth. A goal could therefore be to reach as many people as possible with her message, who might become enthralled, trying to live the set example. Earlier works, such as ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ ([1985]1991) also make a political and analytical intervention by questioning boundaries between human and non-humans, including the technological. The use of language has a function to compel the reader to sit down, to read, think and to pick it up several years later to do that again, as the interventions require a different way of thinking to change large systems, such as patriarchic capitalism. *Staying with the Trouble* is written using the same writing strategy that needs the reader to think and think again, to read and read again before fully understanding the arguments made. However, this is in tension with the urgency of taking action as it requires a serious effort of an engaged reader, while there is an aspiration to reach a broad public in order to prevent further environmental damage on a wider scale. It therefore seems that the form of the book overlaps, but not completely aligns with its goals. The question Haraway asks therefore remains: ‘How to matter, and not just want to matter?’ (47).

Giving in to curiosity and exploring the media Haraway uses in her examples offers a better grip of the argument. Haraway uses YouTube videos, online platforms, and videogames which can be watched and played. A YouTube video of a Navajo grandmother telling a cosmological story through string figures, helps in imagining the string figure stories and metaphors that Haraway uses. Playing the game-documentary *Never Alone*, in which an Iñupiat girl and her polar fox cooperate and engage with spirits to find the source of an everlasting blizzard, made me explore the nuances of what Haraway means by collaboration. The book ends with the Children of Compost science fiction, in which Haraway explicitly and recurrently invites her readers to write with her on digital platforms. This book *is* a symbiont, it becomes-with digital platforms in open-ended and surprising ways. There is no final conclusion, but a story that continues to develop online. She breaks another boundary, namely

between the reader and the writer, as the reader becomes the writer, partaking in an ongoing story. Haraway practices the very message she is trying to share: there are no bounded unities; the world exists out of open-ended unexpected collaborations.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Ryan et.al. 2018. 'Introduction: Speculative Anthropologies.' Theorizing the Contemporary, *Cultural Anthropology* website, December 18, 2018. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1606-introduction-speculative-anthropologies>.
- Despret, Vinciane. 2004. 'The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthro-zoo-genesis. *Body & Society* 10(2-3): 111-134.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1985. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. New York: Routledge.