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staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene

Donna J. Haraway, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016, 312 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-6224-1, \$26.95 (Pbk)

In the wake of the recent surge in anti-environmentalism, nationalism, misogyny and even fascism, it seems paramount that feminists grasp the manifold connections between these seemingly disparate phenomena. Striking a delicate balance between the biological sciences, the critical humanities and computer engineering, the oeuvre of Donna Haraway occupies a kind of refreshingly connective position in that it refuses to see the feminist project—and indeed life as such—as bound by any discipline or taxonomy. As Haraway (in Gane, 2006, p. 139) herself asserted in an interview ten years ago, she remains 'deeply resistant to systems theories of all kinds', including the idea that any single discipline or perspective provides in itself a sufficient toolbox to tackle the pressing issues of the day. This fertile way of combining theoretical and artistic praxes led to Haraway's major insight in her 'Cyborg manifesto' (1991), that academics are in many differential ways implicated in the very tools and concepts they critique and, therefore, might as well make the best of such complicities. Likewise, her excellent 'Situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988) understood that all interesting academic work by necessity needs to inhabit primary spaces of tension, whether they are technological and/or discursive.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway again combines a myriad of disparate insights and practices—feminist theory, eco-criticism, genetics, weaving, science fiction, and science and technology studies, to name the more obvious few—into a critical and poetic mix that is not afraid to run the risk of deadly complicity in the so-called academic-military-scientific-industrial-entertainment complex. In this volume, as in all of her work, Haraway refreshingly does not position science as the 'evil other' of the humanities, nor does she advance new technology simply either as beneficial or oppressive. Instead, with nods to Alfred North Whitehead, Karen Barad and Isabelle Stengers, she presses the case for a multispecies understanding of 'becoming-with' that insinuates the entire 'material-semiotic' terrain of human-animal-tool relations (p. 128). She weaves these together with practices and world views of indigenous communities and animal behaviours in an attempt to displace the dangerously Western-centric solipsism of the self-proclaimed 'Anthropocene'. She rightly attacks the latter term for being too myopic and self-gratifying, instead coining the 'Chthulucene'—the era in which the 'tentacular' whole of human and non-human relations is part of an accelerated cataclysm—as the historical moment in which critical thought should overcome its, in her eyes, too pervasive 'game-over' cynicism, defeatism and fatalism (p. 56). Thus the book very much presents a 'risk-taking proposition [and] not an innocent proposition' (p. 87), in that it wilfully partakes in what I call the 'compulsory optimism' (Hoofd, 2016, p. 16) of contemporary academic thought in light of accelerated negative technological and economic fallout. Remaining well within the quintessential Western philosophical responsibilities of affirming *thought* and *life*, and weaving

together a poetic tapestry of pigeons, urine and Navajos, Haraway ends her erudite book with a story of multispecies becoming and the amusing, brand-like slogan 'Make Kin Not Babies'.

However, despite all of its erudite connections, warnings of non-innocence and poetic interventions, the book at times comes riskily close to an overly romantic 'mindful' proposition that potentially abuses Native Americans and various animals as convenient metaphors for the general glorification of boundary-crossing. It also caters rather dangerously to the hype of the 'material-semiotic' in feminist and critical theory today. One wonders whether these romantic declarations are not problematic legitimating discourses for a feminist situation of near-total entanglement in the ever more powerful techno-scientific endeavour marked by incessantly desperate forms of coding and over-coding (or of 'language' as executable). Might not the term 'material-semiotic' serve today as an equally opaque buzzword as the 'cyborg' did thirty-odd years ago, rendering the masculinist cybernetic war machine of information capitalism dangerously appealing? What about non-thought, anti-thought, passivity and even suicide as 'some ways of living' that are just as much valid propositions against the relentlessly oppressive injunction of contemporary biopower to *live at all costs* (p. 41)?¹

Notwithstanding its title then, *Staying with the Trouble* is a worryingly *pleasant* read; the descriptive weavings reveal themselves to be as much the product of capitalist-cybernetic modernity as 1980s eco-feminism—against which the 'Cyborg manifesto' was in fact partly targeted, as Haraway admits in the aforementioned interview (Gane, 2006, p. 135). The merit of the book is therefore, oddly, that it does *not* succeed in fully taking away desperation and fatalism, and that it does not shy away from combining debatable traditions. In this way, it allows for multiple feminist interventions at the limits of Western science and philosophy. And it may be through affirming such philosophical 'systems failure' that the 'anthropos' may finally be dethroned.

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¹As, for instance, displayed by the Foxconn attempt to deny death to its workers by drawing up suicide nets (see Merchant, 2017).