# Book review forum

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016; 312 pp.: 9780822362241, $26.95 (Paperback)

## Temporal promiscuities in the Chthulucene: A reflection on Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*

**Reviewed by:** Thom van Dooren, *University of New South Wales, Australia*
DOI: 10.1177/2043820617739207

Coming to this book, I was most excited to learn more about what Donna Haraway has been calling, for some time now, 'staying with the trouble'. Even well before she started using this phrase, the detailed and careful manner in which questions of responsibility get tangled up with ways of knowing and being—of worlding—in her work, has served as one of the key inspirations for my thinking. In all honesty, however, I was much less excited about the Chthulucene as an aspect of this new book. Like many other people, I suspect, I am already worn out by Anthropocene-talk . . . and we're only just getting started. The proliferation of new names for this epoch has done little to enhance the discussion. In almost all cases, these acts of naming give the Earth and its future over to the 'spoilers', whether they're depicted as 'anthropos', 'capital', 'economy', 'plantations', or something else. As a result, much of this 'cenic' discussion has focused on topics like the real starting date and the key causes and 'culprits' for the predicaments of our day. While these are certainly important discussions in their own way, and Haraway's account is tuned into them to some extent, *Staying with the Trouble* (SWTT, what an acronym!) offers something else. To my delight, the Chthulucene is a different

kind of beast. In this short response to this book, I'd like to draw out what I take to be some of the most important dimensions of Haraway's account of the Chthulucene, centering on its ethical 'charge'.

On the second page of *SWTT*, Haraway tells us that: '*Chthulucene* is a simple word. It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthôn* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of time place for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (p. 2). Invoking the 'chthonic ones'—ancient entities, elements, critters, forces of the deep, of the earth; diverse beings, living, dead and otherwise, human and not—this term asks us to pay attention to a lively, dynamic, world. The term itself draws on Greco-Roman heritages, and elsewhere in the book Haraway invokes these mythologies too (e.g. 51–57), but she also draws on a range of other stories and makes very clear that she is interested in the diverse ways in which these forces have taken form in cultural expression: 'the tentacular Chthulucene of a Thousand Names' (p. 90). At the same time, this term is clearly an effort to exceed all existing and even possible human forms of sense making—as Earth itself does. The chthonic ones are also often radically *inhuman* in their forces, their temporal and spatial scales, and much more (see Clark, 2011). And yet, turning toward them, paying attention in serious ways to these 'monstrous figures' (Haraway, 1992), Haraway argues that we might learn to see other possibilities (p. 2). This is definitively a turn toward 'what is'—toward the 'mud, not the sky', as Haraway has put it elsewhere (2008: 3)—toward the world and its worldings.

From this foundation, thinking through the Chthulucene aims to do a very different kind of work to the other-cenes of our times. The Chthulucene does not start at any particular historical moment

that we might identify (no matter how controversially). In fact, Haraway reads the Anthropocene and its kin as 'boundary events' (p. 100): severe discontinuities that mark the borders between geological epochs, not an epoch themselves. The Chthulucene, in contrast, is simultaneously something much bigger, older, than any of these categories of geological time *and* a much more fragile, uncertain, possibility. Haraway emphasizes that the Chthulucene is 'now and yet to come' (p. 16), it is an 'elsewhere and elsewhen that was, still is, and might yet be' (p. 31). It is this temporal promiscuity that I find so compelling, refusing to inhabit a singular moment or frame of reference.[1] There is a tension here in Haraway's work between an expansive sense of the Chthulucene as always already here, always the earth's reality, radically more-than-human, *and* a more limited sense in which the term describes only a possibility: the 'more livable worlds that I call the Chthulucene' (p. 98). This interplay is captured nicely in the following lines:

> I also insist that we need a name for the dynamic ongoing symchthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake. Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible. I am calling all this the Chthulucene—past, present, and to come. (p. 101)

The Chthulucene takes on a kind of 'iridescence' here, as Deborah Bird Rose would put it, as temporal frames shift between different registers and scales, 'foregrounding and backgrounding, flipping back and forth' (Rose, 2017).

This temporal patterning matters; it grounds and animates a particular kind of ethics.[2] In the play between chthonic temporalities and a fragile, possible, future, we are exposed to a particular kind of ethical demand. If 'we'—whomever the spoilers and their allies end up being—'destroy' the world, the chthonic ones will endure in various guises, although perhaps far from unscathed. Earth itself (whatever this might mean) is not vulnerable in this way. But the capacity to get on well with the Earth *is* deeply vulnerable and fraught, as are the

possibilities for the 'ongoingess' (p. 1) of countless specific forms of life, human and not.

In orienting us toward the Earth in this way, the Chthulucene situates a present moment of destructiveness within a longer, radically more-than-human, story. To some extent, the other cenes of our time do this too, but they keep dragging our attention back to destruction (variously framed and explained). As Haraway notes: 'Both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the "game over, too late" discourse I hear all around me these days' (p. 56). Haraway does not want to lose sight of this destruction; however, she offers a subtle but important shift in orientation. Alongside destruction, she celebrates life processes in their entangled, symbiogenic, richness, in their 'sheer not-us, more-than-human worlding' (p. 56); she celebrates 'refuge' with her friend Anna Tsing and colleagues (chapter 4); she celebrates the collaborative world knowing/making practices of the sciences, of artists, of activists, of indigenous peoples, and diverse others (chapter 3).

In all of these contexts, Haraway practices and advocates for an attentive storytelling in which (re)description becomes a kind of theory (Dumit, 2014; Grebowicz and Merrick, 2013: 14; Haraway and Goodeve 2000). Stories, as she notes, are worlding technologies with the potential for a kind of 'viral response-ability': 'carrying meanings and materials across kinds in order to infect processes and practices that might yet ignite epidemics of multispecies recuperation and maybe even flourishing on terra in ordinary times and places' (p. 114). Stories help us to see anew, and in their telling perhaps do the same for/to others (p. 116). These are necessarily open-ended stories. They do not have a fixed cast of characters, a simple moral, or a definitive ending (chapter 6)—they are openings into other stories, other possibilities for learning to see and so for being rendered responsible.[3] As she notes: 'I am committed to the finicky, disruptive details of good stories that don't know how to finish. Good stories reach into rich pasts to sustain thick presents to keep the story going for those who come after' (p. 125).

In each new book from Haraway, I come to appreciate in additional ways her profound aversion

to big ideas and overarching concepts as well as to one-size-fits-all understandings and approaches. In a time of interwoven and escalating patterns of climate change, extinction, exploitation, and destruction, staying with the trouble is an effort to become 'tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to material semiotics, to mortal earthlings in thick copresence' (p. 4). Such an approach is about 'sowing worlds' *in the multiple*. What we learn inside one story might help somewhere else, but it may not: at the very least, work will have to be done to allow ideas to travel (work that might be done with more or less creativity and fidelity, but for which those involved should always be accountable). Escaping tendencies toward closed, definitive, answers, *Staying with the Trouble* offers an account of how and why worlds emerge, and might emerge otherwise than they are, as well as a series of modest interventions in crucial sites, stories tuned to their inheritances and their many possibilities.

## Notes

1. I am focusing here on temporalities—which must always, of course, be somewhere—in a way that doesn't take up any of the specific spatial questions that might be asked. This is something that I must particularly ask forgiveness for in a geography journal, but an unavoidable situation given the constraints of the format. The ethical dimensions of inhabiting multiple, overlapping, temporalities are explored in more detail in chapter 1 of van Dooren (2014).

2. There is, I think, a related but quite distinct pattern of temporal play at work in Derrida's notion of the 'to come', in which democracy, hospitality, forgiveness, and various other concepts are posited in an impossible, unconditional, register in a way that 'works' on the present, holding it open to difference and change. This contrast is a fascinating one but a discussion for another day.

3. Deborah Bird Rose and I have written about these dimensions of storytelling under the banner of 'lively ethography' (van Dooren and Rose, 2016).

## References

Clark N (2011) *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet*. London: Sage.

Dumit J (2014) Writing the implosion: teaching the world one thing at a time. *Cultural Anthropology* 29(2): 344–362.

Grebowicz M and Merrick H (2013) *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Haraway D (1992) The promises of monsters: a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In: Grossberg L, Nelson C, and Treichler PA (eds) *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Haraway D (2008) *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway D and Goodeve TN (2000) *How Like a Leaf*. New York & London: Routledge.

Rose DB (2017) Shimmer: when all you love is being trashed. In: Tsing AL, et al. (eds) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

van Dooren T (2014) *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia University Press.

van Dooren T and Rose DB (2016) Lively ethography: storying animist worlds. *Environmental Humanities* 8(1): 1–17.

---

## Troubling times such as these

**Reviewed by:** Deirdre A Wilcock, *University of Lausanne, Switzerland*

Donna Haraway has authored another engrossing, moving, and well-timed monograph. Resonant with the weaving stories that she calls upon for her main argument—making what she terms *'oddkin'* or *kin* relations with others in the 'Cthuthucene'[1]—*Staying with the Trouble* is tightly woven into a poetic embrace of theory and practice. She again calls upon her elegant metaphors and generous sprinkling of wit and humour. The combination of these is