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Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature

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REVIEW OF DONNA HARAWAY, *STAYING WITH THE
TROUBLE: MAKING KIN IN THE CHTHULUCENE* (2016)

IRENE WOLFSTONE

*“Making trouble” is the most urgent task of our time,
according to Donna Haraway.*

Haraway’s recent book contains revised versions of previous publications, with a new final chapter. Her revisions create a coherent argument for responding to the convergence of climate change and a mass extinction event. Her central argument is crystalized by the title: in response to the troubled world, we and all our human and other-than-human kin urgently need to make more trouble as a resurgence of life. Making kin refers to multi-species relationality that is critical to “ongoingness” in our chthonic (earth-based) lives. Survival depends on becoming chthonic again. Chthonic aligns with Chthulucene, Haraway’s word for the current era of ongoingness as earthlings that belong to the world we inhabit.

Haraway’s introductory chapter succinctly frames her key concepts. Staying with the trouble requires learning to be present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful pasts and apocalyptic futures, but as chthonic beings entangled in many unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, and meanings. The chthonic world, which she names Terrapolis, is full of indeterminate genders and genres where “otherness” adds richness to collective political action in contrast to masculinist politics of exclusion.

In the first three chapters, Haraway delivers her process and practise. In Chapter 1, *Playing String Figures with Companion Species*, she guides the reader in cutting the bonds with anthropocentrism by focusing on

multi-species activism. She describes kinship with pigeons who treasured kin and despised pests that have been “building naturalcultural economies and lives for thousands of years” (15). Haraway’s use of “naturalcultural” as an adjective is an unexplained shift from her past usage of “natureculture” as noun. She uses the concept of “worlding” to refer to the game of living and dying well together in Terrapolis. She concludes the chapter with a call to activism: “We are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories, and sometimes joyful histories too, but we are not all response-able in the same ways. The differences matter—in ecologies, economies, species, lives” (29).

Chapter 2, *Tentacular Thinking*, is an epistemology that explores new ways of thinking like an octopus, represented by Medusa, the Gorgon. Chthulucene does not refer to a future epoch, but rather names the current unfinished time. Haraway is impatient with two responses to climate change. The first response is embedded in the word “Capitalocene,” which holds to a silly belief in technofixes to reverse this man-made apocalypse, but fails to own up to its necropolitics of slavery, Indigenous genocides, and the forced relocations of people, plants, and animals. The second response is embedded in the cynical term “Anthropocene,” which implies that it is “game-over” and the defeatism of “too late” to change the future (56). Both responses require a forgetting, a disavowal, a blindness to reality. Her intent is to demonstrate a third response—a response-ability to staying with the trouble in a lively way by making kin with companion species.

Haraway compares the disavowal of the threats of climate change and extinctions to the “banality of evil” in Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann’s war crimes (36). The mental practice of refusing to know, refusing response-ability and refusing to be present in the moment is not unprecedented. Eichmann’s inability to think was a banality of evil that parallels the disavowal of current and impending disasters, genocides, and speciescides. Disavowal is the “evil of thoughtlessness.” Like Arendt, Haraway call us to think. Thinking matters! Thinking is not a process for evaluating information and argument; it is a choice between active caring for a troubled world or active participation in genocide.

In Chapter 3, *Sympoiesis*, Haraway stays with the trouble by focusing on four ecologically-troubled places. She explores what a reciprocal relationality would look like if multiple species engaged in the activism of resurgence. She recognizes that Indigenous peoples are making a difference. Haraway tells stories that make sense of animism as materialism by integrating evolution, ecology, sympoiesis, history, situated knowledges, cosmology, and science art. Resurgence depends on imagination. Haraway makes an urgent call for transformative learning on how to become more response-able, more imaginative, and more capable of practicing the arts of living and dying well in a multispecies symbiosis on a damaged planet (98).

The final five chapters are conversations with other places and beings that illustrate the practise of making kin. Chapter 4 is a plea to make kin, not babies (the title of her forthcoming book). Kin means more than entities related by ancestry or genealogy. Kinmaking is building relationships with beings that co-habit our world. Chapter 5 is a personal reflection on the kinship with animals. Chapter 6 introduces the notion of terraforming with earth-others by planting seeds in kinships with plants and insects. In Chapter 7, Haraway draws on Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf to understand the high stakes of training the mind and imagination to go visiting, to strike up conversations with natal and non-natal kin, to create the unexpected, and to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met. In Chapter 8, the Children of Compost invite readers to attend to the realities of living and dying in the world by building the capacity to nurture and support life.

The strength of this book is Haraway's ability to shift our thinking and catalyze a resurgence of living well. Her use of neologisms, symbols, stories, and art illustrate the imagination that is required for ongoingness. This book is a must-read for those who care about the planet and the human dimensions of climate change adaptation.

Donna Haraway is Distinguished Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is highly regarded for her innovative scholarship related to feminist philosophy of science, cyborg theory, theory of situated knowledges, and multi-species theorizing.