

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene by ANNA LOWENHAUPT TSING, HEATHER ANNE SWANSON, ELAINE GAN, and NILS BUBANDT, Eds.

University of Minnesota Press, 2017
\$27.95USD

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Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet is a book with two beginnings. Open it on one side and you will discover essays framed by the subtitle, *Monsters and the Arts of Living*; turn it over to find writing that takes up the theme of *Ghosts on a Damaged Planet*. The border between is an illusion as these texts are intertwined, demonstrating through its structure the ideas, concepts and lived realities that permeate its pages. Working through these diverse essays by distinguished scholars from the humanities and the sciences we are encouraged to think across disciplines and notice, really notice, the world around us. Read together this anthology tells critical stories about human-induced environmental change and how it threatens multispecies livability.

The introduction for *Monsters and the Arts of Living* focuses on the uneven effects of assemblages and entanglements with more than human life. “Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene. (2). The writers in this section draw from folklore and science fiction to understand how bodies tumble into each other across nested scales of micro (bacteria) and macro life (water and soil). But more than phantasms these monstrous mutations are all too real and all too observable. Like *Ghosts*, *Monsters* embraces cross-disciplinary curiosity and analysis. This is another example of how structure echoes content

with category and species crossings between *Monsters* and *Ghosts*, which ultimately enrich understanding. Or put another way, “the monstrosity of monocultures depends on the very multispecies relations that it denies”(6).

The introduction for *Ghosts on a Damaged Planet* tells us that the winds of the Anthropocene carry ghosts where the past is still with us as “traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade”. The focus in this half considers how we might best use our research to stem the tide of ruination. “This refusal of the past, even the present, will condemn us [...] How can we get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly?” (1). This is an example of what the editors call haunting. Indeed the introduction is itself quite persistent in how it moves beyond disciplinary prejudices, gravitates toward the invisible and indeterminate, while focusing on on the ground observations and varied historical diffractions. “Ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present – a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction” (6).

Each half of the anthology is comprised of nine narratives by scholars from anthropology, ecology, science studies, and art, each one a thick description exploring the arts of living (and dying). In *Ghosts*, I was taken by Karen Barad’s “No Small Matter: Mushrooms Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness and Strange Topologies of Spacetime mattering.” Exploring haunted nuclear landscapes and nuclear clocks, she muses on the silence of their existing material conditions. Quantum physics is drawn upon to address the entanglement of space and time where “the very nature of matter and the very matter of nature [is] (iteratively re-)constituted through a(n iteratively reconfigured) multiplicity of force relations” (110). Barad argues for a relational

agential ontology or the inseparability of things. This radical troubling of Newtonian metaphysics recognizes how “Hauntings are not immaterial” (107). Barad concludes with a meditation on mushroom clouds as representation and material reality via alchemical notions of transmutation and transformation, “just some small bits of a very entangled story” (116). The effect is a complex meditation on the material-discursive phenomena of terrestrial and the atmospheric and how they inhabit each other.

Not surprisingly Donna Haraway’s “Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble” takes up residence in the section on *Monsters* where she offers a compelling account of collaboration:

Critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each other, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoetic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages. (25)

Drawing from her recent book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin with the Chthulocene*, she explores emergent terminology for noticing encounters between interlocked and multileveled systemic processes. *Sympoiesis* means making-with; holobionts hold together beings in complex patternings; *symbiogenesis* is the evolutionary theory that doesn’t emphasize competition. An inspiring and aspirational example of transdisciplinary thinking, Haraway brings art and science together as a sympoetic practice in research across discrete fields of inquiry. “This requires

reading with our senses attuned to stories told in otherwise muted registers” (32). Whether looking at watercolors of microscopic entities, cartoons that take up the biology of orchids, crocheted and beaded coral reefs, or computer games that explore the effects of the Anthropocene, Haraway’s methods are purposefully promiscuous. In this way she encourages her reader to cultivate sensitivity and response-ability for our damaged planet.

These are just two of the many engaging stories that encourage us to be curious and notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying. Attention to the Arts as highlighted in the book’s title underscore an aesthetic approach to thinking about relationships, relations and interdependence. For example, in “Shimmer, When all you Love is being Trashed,” Deborah Bird Rose looks at the brilliant shimmer of the biosphere and its terrible wreckage. She tells us how shimmer, an Aboriginal aesthetic, helps call us into these multispecies worlds. Working with examples from North Australia, where *bir’yun* or brilliance represents “the capacity to see and experience ancestral power” (54), Rose builds a matrix of power, desire, and lures to make the case for our ability to care through radically reworked forms of attention. A further interpretation of aesthetics is advanced in “Coda. Beautiful Monsters: Terra in the Cyanocene” where Dorian Sagan associates monstrosity not only with the gray of the internal combustion engine but considers its associations in the green movement: “Verdant in hue — for green is the color of the cyanobacteria that mutated 2 billion years ago, causing the greatest pollution crisis in planetary history” (169). This is an insightful analysis of ancient microbes and CO2 emissions, or as Sagan puts it,

Terra, Earth, always contains the possibility for some of its energy-feeding forms to grow rogue, to become teratological, monstrous growers that threaten the whole from which they've sprung. (170)

There is much here to metabolize in relation to writing on the Cyanocene, organic systems and the *arts* of living on a damaged planet.

The hybrid scholarship in this collection bridges the arts, humanities, and natural sciences, as well as the capacious categories of monsters and ghosts, in order to reframe the problem of livability in the Anthropocene. This is about making worlds visible that have been negatively affected by disciplinary thinking and seductive simplifications of industrial production. By challenging the rigid segregation of disciplinary specialization, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* offers critical and creative tools for collaborative survival, the arts of imagination and symbiotic scholarship.

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