

GOTHIC NATURE



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Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (eds.)
Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters/Ghosts of the Anthropocene
(University of Minnesota Press, 2017)

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Monstrosity, in its various forms, suggests both destructive consequences and generative potential. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene* (2017) begins by pointing to the monstrosities that humans have created and destroyed via entanglement. While entanglement has a variety of meanings, the editors understand it as, ‘the enfolding of bodies within bodies in evolution and in every ecological niche’ (p. M3). Editors Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt write that, ‘Our continued survival demands that we learn something about how best to live and die within the entanglements we have. We need both senses of monstrosity: entanglement as life and as danger’ (p. M4). As they suggest, humans are deeply entrenched in the life and continued destruction that constitutes the Anthropocene. Despite consistent efforts to assert ourselves as ontologically superior to, or separate from the world around us, we are ultimately constructed through (and by) natural elements. By focusing on entanglement and haunting in this double-sided book, the contributors in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* demand a reconceptualisation of what it means to be active participants in the Anthropocene. They also want us to recognise that our standing is not at all separate from nature, time, or matter.

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet shows a commitment to interdisciplinarity through the inclusion of diverse fields and methodologies. Each essay challenges the reader to think beyond set fields or ways of viewing the environment and mimics the very entanglement about which the authors are writing. Using creative writings from Ursula K. Le Guin and Lesley Stern, the book articulates the importance of storytelling while simultaneously pushing against fixed notions of narrative. The editors emphasise the potential of storytelling in interdisciplinary work, writing that, ‘Unless we learn to listen broadly, we may miss the biggest story of life on earth: symbiogenesis, the comaking of living things’ (p. M8). Rather than relying on academic fields and set forms, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* embraces the co-making of all things to breakdown boundaries of field and form.

Spilt into two halves and comprised of multiple sections of two to three essays, the book's topics span place, time, field, and species. 'Inhabiting Multispecies Bodies', the first section in *Monsters*, is comprised of two essays, one by Donna Haraway and the other by Margaret McFall-Ngai. Haraway's essay, 'Sybiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble', is foundational for the entire collection, as she poses the importance of symbiogenesis, or evolutionary change and adaptation through the 'long-lasting intimacy of strangers' (p. M26). Haraway traces the importance of symbiogenesis as a natural phenomenon that extends to academia through cross-disciplinary work and activism. Her contention is that symbiogenesis is not only essential in making sense of continued life on a dying planet, but an integral part of our existence in general. Understanding human life as part of continued sybiogenesis allows for serious consideration of diverse perspectives which may challenge seemingly fixed paradigms. Nothing exists without the world that surrounds it, which extends to the works academics create despite assertions that fields do not intersect.

From bacteria and ants to wolves and werewolves, the essays in *Monsters* incorporate methodologies from biology, literary criticism, and anthropology to grapple with the importance of entanglement. The final section, 'At the Edge of Extinction', asserts the importance of recognising that we are, in fact, facing the sixth extinction to occur on planet Earth. Peter Funch examines the interlaced relationship of red knot birds and the slowly dwindling horseshoe crab population to question what happens to the rest of the planet once these two species finally cease to exist. While it seems easy to dismiss these arctic birds as distant from most of the human population, symbiogenesis assures us that there will be effects upon the human whenever any other aspect of our entangled ontology dies. Though these shifts in the environment represent the true devastation of the Anthropocene and human monstrosity, Dorion Sagan ends *Monsters* with a glimmer of hope. He writes that we should 'worry but not despair' about our situation, and that 'Maybe this time, instead of hurting [the earth], we can help it continue its multispecies energy-transducing recycling ways for billions of years more' (p. M174). Humans may not live through this coming extinction, but that does not mean we are not already entangled with what remains.

While *Monsters* focuses heavily on entanglement, *Ghosts* stresses the importance of remembering the landscape and our part in ecological degradation. The editors and authors understand ghosts as 'the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade' (p. G1). Prior constructions of economic and cultural progress have been

predicated upon forgetting previous environmental damage. Yet the failure to acknowledge our past bars us from making sense of our place on and responsibility to a dying planet. The authors' focus on the eeriness of ghosts and hauntings pushes the reader's 'senses beyond their comfort zones', encouraging humans to look at traces of radiation, decay, and other ghostly destructive forces (p. G2). Like *Monsters, Ghosts* approaches this haunting through a variety of fields. Lesley Stern's non-fiction piece, 'A Garden or a Grave? The Canyonic Landscape of the Tijuana-San Diego Region', considers the shifting and polluted canyons on the U.S.-Mexico border between San Diego and Tijuana. Stern's piece sets the tone for *Ghosts* by exploring the destroyed spaces humans continually, and willfully, overlook in the name of cultural, economic, and political issues.

Each section of *Ghosts* covers the legacy of anthropogenic environmental damage that is either forgotten or misunderstood in public perception. Karan Barad's essay, 'No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering', addresses the complexity of how we alter our world through ecological encounters both big and small. Examining the after effects of Hiroshima, she provides a compelling example of how our ghosts manifest themselves in every aspect of our lives. By exploring 'spacetime-mattering', or the material effects of time, Barad contends that 'Hauntings are not immaterial', but rather important and continued parts of our entanglement (p. G107). While we remember the devastation of Hiroshima, we fail to acknowledge how time and matter are forever altered by the event. *Ghosts* ends with a reflective essay by Mary Louise Pratt wherein she acknowledges how our cultural perception of the world around us has failed to account for the past.

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghost/Monsters of the Anthropocene is an important experiment in interdisciplinary research that approaches ideas of entanglement and materiality in new and nuanced ways. While its overall project is incredibly important, the book can be a little opaque at times, as the shifts between fields sometimes fail to prepare the reader for drastic changes in language or expected familiarity with complex concepts. Despite this difficulty, it is well worth the effort for researchers interested in our current ecological moment. As climate change continues and the world changes due to our actions, albeit in unanticipated or unintended ways, scholarship like this can help reveal where we have been and offer possibilities for how we can move forward. The conversation about our world is not

exclusive to any one field or mode of storytelling, but rather an entanglement in itself, one that helps us make sense of our impending extinction and the world thereafter.