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Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene edited by **ANNA LOWENHAUPT TSING, HEATHER ANNE SWANSON, ELAINE GAN, and NILS BUBANDT** University of Minnesota Press, 2017. \$27.95 USD

Reviewed by **RANDY LEE CUTLER**

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 the book’s 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” by the editors Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan and Heather Anne Swanson 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 on a Damaged Planet,” the Monsters section embraces cross-disciplinary curiosity

and analysis: another example of how structure echoes content, with category and species crossings between Monsters and Ghosts, which ultimately enriches understanding. Or, put another way: “the monstrosity of monocultures depends on the very multispecies relations that it denies” (6).

The editors’ 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” (1). The focus in this half of the anthology is on 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 and 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 comprises nine narratives by scholars from anthropology, ecology, science studies, and art; each narrative is a thick description exploring the arts of living (and dying). In the Ghosts half, I was taken by Karen Barad’s “No Small Matter: Mushroom 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. The article draws upon quantum physics to address the entanglement of space and time where

the very nature of matter and the very matter of nature [are] (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 “[h]auntings 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 result is a complex meditation on the material-discursive phenomena of the terrestrial and the atmospheric, and how they inhabit each other.

Not surprisingly Donna Haraway’s “Symbiogenesis, Symptoiesis, 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 sympoietic 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 multilevelled 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’s narrative brings art and science together as a sympoietic practice in research across discrete fields of inquiry: “[t]his requires reading with our senses attuned to stories told in otherwise muted registers” (32). Whether looking at watercolours 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 being 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.

RANDY LEE CUTLER is a writer, artist, and educator working in the intersections of gender, art, science, and technology. Her practice takes up themes of materiality and sustenance through performance, video, and print media, as well as creative and critical writing. Randy is a professor at Emily Carr University in the Faculty of Art on the unceded Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver, Canada.