

DONNA HARAWAY

Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene

THEORY

Donna Haraway's essay, *Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Chthulucene*, forms the second chapter of her 2016 book, *Staying with Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. In this essay, she proposes the Chthulucene, a term which she herself coined, as an alternative and more accurate way to consider issues surrounding climate change, ecology, environment and the overall naming of the current geological epoch. She suggests that the Anthropocene and Capitalocene are "too big" to generate a clear narrative and understanding of the issues at stake, whilst still acknowledging their necessary roles respectively (Haraway in Terranova, 2017). Although Haraway champions the notion of the Chthulucene, she is also acutely aware of its shortcomings, describing it as being at once "too big but not big enough" (AURA, 2014a).

She views the Chthulucene as being represented by the Chthonic ones which she describes as:

. . . beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. . . They also demonstrate and perform consequences. Chthonic ones are not safe; . . they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade. . ."
(Haraway, 2016,2)

In saying that the "Chthonic ones are not safe", she views them as being under threat by the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. Where she feels they

cannot be dictated to or aligned by these ideologies, she feels that the enormity of these two epochs undermines the existence of the Chthulucene:

"The scandals of times called the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene are the latest and most dangerous of these exterminating forces. Living-with and dying-with each other potently in the Chthulucene can be a fierce reply to the dictates of both Anthropos and Capital."(ibid, 2)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tentacular Thinking has evolved out of Haraway's ongoing project to consider how alternative storytelling can generate new perspectives and narratives gaining better understandings and appreciations for our lived world. She considers notions of new forms of kinship to be essential to these stories, a concept extending from her 2003 book, *The Companion Species Manifesto*. The book formed a response to her 1984 essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto*. Likening the feminist teachings of the cyborg, Haraway believes that through observing the companion species of dog/human we can gain an understanding of the human condition. This methodology of gaining understandings through kinship has aligned Haraway with theorists, writers and scientists such as Ursula LeGuin, Bruno Latour, Anna Tsing and Marilyn Strathern. Building on Virginia Woolf's cry to "think we must" and by extension, "we must think", *Women Who Make a Fuss*, she maintains that "we *must* change the story; the story *must* change" (Haraway, 2016, 40, italics in original).

Along with the "think we must; we must think" mantra, her theories surrounding the importance of different stories are heavily influenced by Marilyn Strathern. She summarises Strathern's thinking as: "It matters what stories tell stories; it matters what thoughts think thoughts; it matters what worlds world worlds." (AURA, 2014a) She goes on to describe how she feels this must be achieved:

". . . destabilise our own stories, to retell them with other stories and visa versa. A kind of a serious denormalisation of that which is normally held still in

order to do that which one thinks one is doing. It matters to destabilise worlds of thinking with other worlds of thinking. It matters to be less parochial if ever there was a time to need to be worldly, it is surely now." (ibid, 2014)

The third work that Haraway draws upon is Ursula Le Guin's essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, where Le Guin poses that the first tool was not a weapon but a bag for carrying food. Whilst this story may be somewhat metaphorical, it allows Haraway to recognise the importance of exploring beyond the primary narrative of the hunting hero, to understand the interactions that allow him to perform his role, by focusing on the story of the carrier/gatherer. Haraway describes it as rethinking "the questions of evolution in a much smaller vein with the tiny hollowed out negative spaces. . . the kind of sociality that comes from communities making their lives together" (AURA, 2014a).

KEY POINTS

Throughout the essay, Haraway refers to the initials SF. She sees SF as representing a number of factors that she feels play a role in interrelational ways of thinking, namely; string figures; science fact; science fiction; speculative fabulation; speculative feminism; so far. She describes SF as:

". . . a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark, in a dangerous true tale of adventure, where who lives and who dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice" (Haraway, 2016, 3).

String figures form an integral part of Haraway's storytelling. Also sometimes known as cat's cradle, she views the game as a means of communication where, in order to play, one must "receive and pass on", creating complex patterns that may or may not work but that must be created in a companioned way (ibid, 10). She also sees the list attached to SF in a similar manner, where "Science fact and speculative fabulation need each other, and both need speculative feminism"(ibid, 3).

In order to apply this method of storytelling and exploring to the Chthulucene, it is first necessary to understand the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The Anthropocene is a term introduced in the 1980s by ecologist Eugene Stoermer and was later globalised by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, Paul Crutzen. They proposed that the Anthropocene was the new name for the current geological epoch in which the human effect on the Earth had perpetuated climate and ecological change. It is seen to have come about with the advent of the steam engine and the burning of fossil fuels. Through these actions, from the mid-eighteenth century on, atmospheric changes in water and air became evident resulting in the acidification and warming of oceans and thus the bleaching of coral reefs (Haraway, 2016, 44-45). In her introduction to a panel discussion, Jenny Reardon claims that the Anthropocene ". . . makes us thoughtless about too much; too much of the world goes absent" (AURA, 2014b). So can the Capitalocene prove any more fruitful?

It is more difficult to date the origins of the Capitalocene. Although the Capitalocene has no doubt favoured the rise of the Anthropocene and indeed nurtured it, masking its own culpability, it did not arise out of the Anthropos. Haraway considers that the origins of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century trade routes, mass shifting of labour and colonisation and resultant deforestation of lands are more likely to be some of the originating factors. She believes that the resultant market economies of fracking, drilling, mining and the Nuclear Age are as much to blame for the global changes as the Anthropos. (Haraway, 2016, 47-49)

ANALYSIS

The word chthonic comes from the Greek word *chthonios*, meaning "of, in, or under the earth and the seas". Through exploring mythological chthonic creatures such as; the Gorgon, Medusa; the winged goddess of the birds, Potnia Theron; and the bee

mistress, Potnia Melissa, Haraway presents these stories as theoretical representations of the Chthulucene. She views their potential to create narratives around the degeneration of our natural world and the reclamation of their mythical ones as symbiotic. " The chthonic ones are precisely not sky gods, not a foundation for the Olympiad, not friends to the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, and definitely not finished. The Earthbound can take heart—as well as action" (Haraway, 2016, 52-53)

To highlight the importance of the Chthulucene, Haraway succinctly analogises the effects of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene on the Chthulucene by returning to the damage done to the coral reefs. She identifies that over 250 million people depend on coral reefs for survival and coral reefs depend on the health of the oceans. She sees this as a direct connection between the three epochs and describes it as:

" . . . the mutual connectedness, we are at risk to each other in really extraordinary ways and we are entwined with each other in the very deepest tissues, so that it's really not a matter of leaping at all [from the Anthropocene and Capitalocene to the Chthulucene], it's a matter of tracking threads, it's a matter of string figuring in. . . in different kinds of scales in time and space. And foregrounding somethings and not others in a given struggle. For example, where would the struggle of the fisheries, let's say, in the Indian Ocean, really be absolutely critical to think well about the Capitalocene, Anthropocene, Chthulucene; the kind of reworlding with the dreadful abyssal ones who are in fact the generative ones." (AURA, 2014b)

Through this example, she not only demonstrates the importance of considering the Chthulucene within discourses on ecology and the environment but moreover, she demonstrates the importance of considering different narratives; of selecting which companion species to compliment one another and how their coupling can ultimately reward better understandings.

Bibliography

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