

## ***Staying with the Trouble* : A guide towards an ethics of research?**

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I'd like to propose reading *Staying with the Trouble* as a guide towards an ethics of research in the humanities and beyond. A guide that can teach us something about resisting bad habits of thinking with their tendencies to reduce and empty reality. Instead of denouncing bad habits, however, Haraway takes another path, she challenges them by a quasi-literary, extremely incarnated and humorous style of writing-persuasion that draws you into a process of being not only acquainted with but rather habituated to very different habits of making-thinking, habits that add both, “ontological and epistemological possibilities” and consistencies to reality. In short, she cultivates contaminating antidotes to the kind of fatalist cynicism so frequent in our contemporary world. *Staying with the Trouble* with its sometimes surprisingly incantatory tonality – so unfamiliar to the academic ear – a bit like a song from an unknown world with its estranging melody, refrains, and ritornellos invites us to apprehend it, be captured by it, and, not least, to join in chanting it. Imagine *Staying with the Trouble* as so many versions of an incantation accompanying a rite of passage that allows the singers to rehearse and habituate themselves to a new mode of existence, a mode composed of a particular kind of attentiveness, feeling, sensing and thinking thereby enabling them, or rather US collectively to envision ‘lines of flight’ for living and dying well in the Chthulucene. Not in denying but in defiance of the natural, social, and political devastations we are and will be facing. I propose three tiny little incantations, each of which proposes Donna to sing with another thinker. She will tell you with whom she prefers to duet.

### **1. Incantation**

*Staying with the Trouble* invites us to go visiting all kinds of practices and their practitioners who on their part go visiting in one way or the other, materially, or in their imagination, or both – practicing arts of living on a damaged planet. Many of these practices are hybrid art-activist endeavors such as the *PigeonBlog* you heard about this morning, or the *The Coral Reef Project* which I would like to re-visit briefly. To remind you, the project, initiated by the Wertheim sisters assembles thousands of people, mainly women, crocheting corals all over the world. Haraway writes about it:

“the crafters stitch “intimacy without proximity,” a presence without disturbing the critters that animate the project, but with the potential for being part of work and play for confronting the exterminationist, trashy, greedy practices of global industrial economies and cultures. Intimacy

without proximity is not “virtual” presence; it is “real” presence, but in loopy materialities. ... The crochet reef is a practice of caring without the neediness of touching by camera or hand in yet another voyage of discovery. Material play builds caring publics.”<sup>1</sup>

This rendering incited me to watch the TED-talk “The Beautiful Math of Coral”<sup>2</sup> given by Margaret Wertheim. A passage concerning the, if you like, epistemological stake of *The Coral Reef Project* in this talk from 2009 stuck in my head – a passage extremely efficient for understanding what shifting habits of attentiveness might require and entail. And I would thus like to add a little loop to the story told about *The Coral Reef Project* in *Staying with the Trouble*. Concerning hyperbolic, non-Euclidean space, which was for a long time considered an impossibility ‘mathematically’ speaking, Wertheim says: “Saying that hyperbolic space doesn’t exist, presupposes not only that mathematicians don’t look at coral reefs, the curvy structures of these living beings in the ocean, but worse, that they don’t see the lettuce on their plates while eating either...” The critique implied in this somewhat comical statement has a very pragmatist ring to it. Already William James asserted that modern science had not only excluded realities and the experiences thereof (such as spirits, mediumistic forces, telepathy etc.) which put its well-defined categories into question, but had also transformed its will to exclude “into a regular technique, the so-called method of verification, and she (Science) has fallen so deeply in love with the method that we may even say she has ceased to care for the truth by itself at all.”<sup>3</sup> James’ *radically empirical* pragmatism on the contrary insists famously on the non-exclusion of any element that is part of experience – neither spirits, nor hyperbolic space as it is materialized in lettuce as well as corals for that matter can within this framework be excluded in the name of a preexisting theory *about* the world. And they cannot be excluded for epistemological *and* ethical reasons alike, two realms that can no longer be treated separately in this perspective. To quote James yet again “Truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it.”<sup>4</sup> Crocheting coral reefs then gains a supplementary capacity, guiding us towards an ethics of research. Or to put it differently, crocheting coral reefs turns out to be a practice of resisting classical, non-situated, neutral epistemologies, a practice that like so many others, Haraway renders us attentive to, produces better, more precise knowledge not *although* but rather *because* it engages with the realities under investigation intimately, all the while avoiding (destructive) proximity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> To be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soxS8VtMi9E>

<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 26f.

<sup>4</sup> William James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture VI.

## 2. Incantation

Donna Haraway confronts us with – at first sight at least – quite challenging neologisms or concepts such as the *Chthulucene*. However, this concept (and others, e.g. *kin*), in their strangeness insist and allow for something astonishing, or rather, they do something with us, or yet otherwise said, they make us make-think differently. The Chthulucene-proposition with all the mythological figures – medusa-gorgon, and earthly sym-crittery – Haraway activates for its imaginative instauration, I'd like to suggest, functions as an efficient tool of problematization. It posits an active and activating problem as Bergson might have said. Bergson considered the construction of good problems as a fundamental task, a task enabling us to resist surrendering to ready-made problems „as they are posited in language“<sup>5</sup>. If philosophy stops at the repetition of ready-made problems, he insisted it condemns itself “in advance to receive a ready-made solution or, at best, simply to choose between the two or three only possible solutions, which are co-eternal to this positing of the problem. One might just as well say that all truth is already virtually known, that its model is patented in the administrative offices of the state, and that philosophy is a jig-saw puzzle ... But the truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of finding the problem and consequently of positing it (...) But stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, a situation, no matter how difficult and unbearable it might be, is not a problem yet, just as little as a question can claim the status of problem for itself – in both cases we remain completely dependent on reality as it is given to us. In order to transform this passive force of questioning into an active, empowering force that enables us to interfere with or impact on the reality at stake, it is required that we construct a problem thereby composing newly disposed spaces or environments for thought, imagination and action. Following the same kind of intuition, it seems to me, Haraway's proposition of the *Chthulucene* is therefore much more than a freely invented exotic-sounding neologism. Rather, its introduction is constrained by a concrete situation that calls for the invention of tools (conceptual, material and other) which can function as occasions for new forms of earthly, chthonic, tentacularly growing empowerment. Haraway reminds us, that “human exceptionalism, as well as the utilitarian individualism of classical political economics, have become unthinkable in the best sciences” across the disciplines. “Seriously unthinkable”, she insists, “not available to think with.”<sup>7</sup> If, however, we take this non-availability to think with, or at least to think well with, seriously, notions like the Anthropocene, or the Capitalocene, need additions. The Chthulucene is such an addition in the form of a hybrid conceptual-mythical proposition – which sets its very own rhythm and melody. Its wager is that turning the attention ‘downwards’,

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<sup>5</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind. An Introduction into Metaphysics*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 30.

'backwards' and 'sideways' tentacularly towards the earth and its mythological as well as biological critters, towards practices, historical and contemporary that do not normally figure in the 'too big (hi)stories' might open a new space for imagination and not least, narration – not escapist, but, on the contrary, earth-bound, realist, if you like – rendering us capable of sensing improbable possibilities within the present. Haraway thus appeals to us, asks us to confide in the capacity of thought and concepts; their capacity of interrupting our accustomed habits, to make us hesitate with respect to our predefined visions about the world. Instead they can develop the power of bringing reality into motion by creating occasions for new articulations – worldings – to come into existence. This is one strategy by which Haraway pursues the job of making “the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge.”<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Incantation

We lack refuge, Haraway (together with Anna Tsing) insists on this. Refuge on all levels and for humans as well as more-than human beings: physical refuge in the sense of ecological niches, of course, as a requirement for the survival of any species, but also imaginative refuge allowing us to inhabit places that might justly be referred to as *home*. Replenishing Refuge, as the expression literally cries out, requires re-activations, elements, stories able to re-plenish, to create refuge again. Central in this context are without a doubt historical practices of re-membering, com-memorating as active practices of reprise, revival, retake, recuperation, reclaim as Haraway underlines. How we inherit and narrate the past, to put it differently matters existentially for what we will be able to transmit. We need to learn, Haraway appeals to us, to *change the story*: „The stories of both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene teeter, she writes, constantly on the brink of becoming much Too Big.”<sup>9</sup> ‘Big enough stories’, a notion coined by Donna’s colleague James Clifford in contrast must be “big enough to matter, but not too big, ...able to account for a lot, but not everything”. In their partiality, they are necessarily “without guarantees of political virtue.”<sup>10</sup> Big enough stories are without determinism, teleology, and plan. Haraway, it seems to me, here shares an exigency with thinkers like Siegfried Kracauer who, in the aftermath of the two world-wars prominently called for a historical practice that “focus[es] on the “genuine” hidden in the interstices between dogmatized beliefs of the world, thus [...] giving names to the hitherto unnamed”<sup>11</sup>. Telling these stories can at least do one thing, render us sensitive to what Kracauer also referred to as a “Utopia

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford, *Returns*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History. Last Things before the Last*, p. 67.

of the in-between - a terra incognita in the hollows between the lands we know.”<sup>12</sup> Not Utopias with a BIG U then, but tentative experimentations in grasping, in producing an appetite for people, practices, thoughts that appeared but did not last or only in distorted ways, but that deserve being considered as worthy legacies to become heirs to. History-writing then consists in re-attaching ourselves differently to the past, of dramatizing, intensifying and thereby “establishing tradition of lost causes” – remember the slide in Donna’s presentation this morning: “We are the witches you did not burn!”

“We need to change the story!” Haraway repeatedly insists, and she added, yesterday at École de Recherche Graphique, “more than ever even, in Trumplandia”. However, this is not an innocent appeal, Trumplandia itself being most enthusiastic about changing stories as it likes. In other words: Promoting the fabulative production of versions of history might in face of the threats of our current political and ecological condition quickly be mistaken for a justification of the invention of ‘alternative’ facts – and denial for that matter. *Staying with the trouble*, it seems to me, also means bearing this kind of tension – or contradiction – without all too quickly abandoning what is of importance to us.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 217.