

**About Staying with the Trouble: conference with Donna Haraway**

29 March 2017, Brussels. Organised by the GECO — Groupe d'études constructivistes.

The issue I would like to address here with you, Donna Haraway, with the GECO and with the audience, is one that is exciting *and* disturbing. It left me perplexed at first, then convinced me. It was brought home to me by your book. It concerns the Chthonic ones. You've said a lot about the Chthonic this morning. They are the peoples and critters that practice "the arts of living on a damaged planet" (p. 67). They are involved in sympoietic thinking and action. They yearn for resurgence and recuperation and craft the "earth powers of resurgence" (p. 73) in times of planetary devastation. They are, very concretely, the pigeon blog, the crochet reef, the video game, the Mesa alliance, and so many others. You tell their stories which are, you insist, "the ordinary stories of the ongoing" (p. 76) and you cast your lot with them, and this you say with other feminists, for they are "worlds worth fighting for" (p. 98)<sup>1</sup>.

If that is the scene, which is the Chthulucene of course, if one is infected by the call and the yearning for recuperation, then one might close the book and say: Well, here we go, we need to become sympoietic i.e. we need to learn to become-with, to live and die well, to make for flourishing worlds *with other species and critters*. It's tough but it's exciting. It's a way out. The game is not over. But what caught my attention and left me perplexed at first, is this growing sense that we, the Chthonic ones-to-be, the yearners and crafters and tale-tellers of resurgence and recuperation, that we will need to become opportunistic. Wow! The word's out in the open. The word punctuates the book. Opportunistic... Isn't that the enemy's quality? Perhaps. Perhaps not. For if you think of it, opportunism makes a lot of sense when looked at from the point of view of those who are struggling and crafting the powers of resurgence:

We Chthonic ones-to-be need to learn to seize any opportunity, to make all kinds of unexpected alliances, to explore every single possible entanglement and connexion *for* these worlds we're fighting for... **Worlds which otherwise do not stand a chance.**

To put it in the words of a Black Panthers affiliated activist of the late 1960s when installing a community center, medical services and counter-history classes in East Harlem, New York:

We are a life force. We don't want to go to jail. We don't want to die. I will talk to *anyone* whose interest is in helping the people. I even went down to the College of Criminal Justice and talked to the cops themselves. [...] You [the community] are going to keep us from getting killed. Don't take it lightly. [...] Anyone here who has contacts, begin to use them, I don't care what level you are, I don't care what your commitments are – begin to use them.<sup>2</sup>

In learning about struggles and powers of recuperation, I've come across many such appeal to efficiency, to unpredictability and to the need for unlikely alliances. The struggler I've just quoted isn't the only one who's on the look-out, ready to trespass into enemy's land, ready to take *any* help, in order to make the impossible possible. Many say they aren't struggling for the *principle* of it but they are struggling in order to win. Win against the odds. In other words, and the quote shows it well, the world worth fight-

ing for *and* the strengthening of the collective fighting for it are the only measure. Opportunism, then, is: to fit, to plug in, to hook up actions to circumstances while holding the goals dear. In fact, this is the initial meaning of the word: opportunism as a craft of circumstance and consequence. It is only very recently, during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that it came to mean selfishness and *disregard* of the consequences...

Well, hear me pontificate! Initial meaning, etymology... When all I've done is check a dictionary online;) When all I say, I've actually learned from feminists and ecofeminists. They taught that we must hold the goals dear while being tricky, clever and unpredictable. They taught me to care for the powers of the collective. For instance, in a "love letter" written to fellow blockaders of a nuclear plant in California, in the early 1980s, affinity groups make this statement: "We are trying to develop a community and resistance that confronts the system forcing the Diablo [nuclear plant] on us. Our success should be measured by whether or not we are stronger when the action is over."<sup>3</sup> If measure there is, that's the one. Or as a Greenham woman puts it to a journalist complimenting her on the beauty of the women's actions led against a nuclear base: "[Excuse-me Sir] We're here for survival, not the niceties of things!"<sup>4</sup>.

What I'm trying to say, is this: opportunism could well be, is already, a precious quality for those struggling and crafting barely possible worlds. Of course, it is messy. For opportunism is set against principled action i.e. action guided by rules such as "I do not talk to cops" or "I only accept help of likeminded people". Opportunism is also set against complacency. Indeed, when facing adversity, we might cry out indignantly: "But we're in the right! How can they do this to us?" Hello there, Planet Earth? "They" can do whatever they want. Reality, realism, is on their side. We the Chthonic ones-to-be are working against the odds. Claiming rightness, righteousness or virtue won't change a thing. This is not to say that principled action and indignation make no sense but I do mean to say that they hardly ever make sense in the Chthulucene. For what exactly is the situation right now? What *are* we facing today?

*Staying with the trouble* puts it well:

A geophysical [and] geopolitical storm of unprecedented proportions is changing practices of living and dying across [the globe]. The coalitions of peoples and critters facing this storm are critical to the possibilities of earth powers of resurgence. (p. 73)

The Chthonic ones are facing the storm by reclaiming, by surviving and by mourning the irreversible losses. They involve all kinds of peoples, critters, in coalition and kin-making. Amongst them, humans are no longer humans i.e. alone and in charge of the world but they become *gumans* i.e. *of the earth*<sup>5</sup>. And like any other people *of the earth*, especially in times of danger, *gumans* are opportunistic. They practise the craft of circumstance and consequence. They know the art of composing while keeping up their goals i.e. while holding dear their lives, their kins' lives, their niches and ways of living and dying together *well*. This is to say that we are revisiting Darwin. Living and dying is no longer driven by the survival of one super-mega-fittest but, in a feminist Darwinian sense, it is driven by the capacity to entangle, to connect, to infect, to digest and to win over. Opportunism becomes a biotic, sensual quality.

Perhaps as sensual molecular curiosity and definitely as insatiable hunger, irresistible attraction toward enfolding each other is the vital motor of living and dying on earth. (p. 58)

So attraction is the motor and it can be likened to unquenchable hunger or to sensual molecular curiosity.

Attraction toward enfolding. This is key. So often forgotten in politics. Sensual curiosity, tentacular love of the world, feeling beauty in the flesh. Without it, we cannot reclaim. Without it, opportunism remains human-only and hollow. One must hold dear in both sensual and brainy ways. As the Chthonic ones do. Donna, you tell of the ethologist Allisson Jolly who “fell into love and knowledge with the lemurs” (p. 81) i.e. she fell in love with them, the tentacular world they stood for, and she fought for that particular world. You tell of the Wertheim sisters and their emphasis on play — play is core you say (p. 78)— how the playful and aesthetic dimensions of mathematics are *implicated* in our attachment to the coral reefs. “Coral reef worlds are achingly beautiful. [You add:] I cannot imagine it is only human people who know this beauty in their flesh.” (p. 73) We are not alone. There’s enfolding, curiosity, ingenuity in this world.

Perhaps that is the hardest task ahead i.e. to learn how to reach out to material worldings in curiosity and play; to become capable of knowing beauty in the flesh with humour and with rage. I close the book and think: “Shut Up and Train [girl]!”<sup>6</sup> (p. 116) We must stop yearning for some universal principled good and start yearning for *this* or *that* specific worlding<sup>7</sup>. We must stop wallowing in our own virtue, repeating our endless critique of the enemy and must start exploring the worlds and ways *we* care for<sup>8</sup>. For these are barely possible worlds. They need all of our tale-tellers’ crafts, all of our strategical lovers’ powers. This craft, these powers, must be trained. The art of composing must be trained. For they necessarily lead us onto slippery roads. They are dangerous practices, without guarantee. “Shut Up and Train!” really is my favourite slogan of yours, Donna. It’s your slogan. It’s the slogan of the Chthonic. It’s the slogan of the opportunistic sensual tentacular enfolding ones.

To conclude, I would like to return the gift which is by no means as important as yours, but let’s just say it’s a figure and I would like to play;) In October 1984, a woman stays at Greenham in order to help sabotage NATO operations. She writes in her diary:

That night, after supper, we talked about the New Age, the Atlantis age, the second coming of Eve and the sixth sense. We hear that 15 years ago an underground lake flooded and that [some] base had to close. So we go to the wires [gate] and call out to the lakes, the rivers and the Oceans that we love and that are dying already, [we call out for them] to help us. We don’t see any tidal waves but it is obvious that the police are having to think about it too.<sup>9</sup>

*That* is infection: the police are having to think. And the New Age, Atlantis? *That* is entanglement, slippery roads, dangerous practices. These women are reaching out in love, in rage, and they take any help they can get. They grow strong and stronger as they call out the lakes, rivers and oceans they love. Stories *are* powerful. So is the Earth. How to bring them, stories, Earth, into the game is a crucial question. This, then, Donna, is a slippery, beautiful and dodgy string figure, of women calling out lakes in 1984 as they are facing a nuclear base. Let’s play...

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For all quotes of the book, pages without any other reference, see Donna Haraway, 2016, *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press. This paper has greatly benefitted from the GECO, their input and trust.

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- <sup>1</sup> Anna Ting's expression. Same for "the arts of living on a damaged planet".
- <sup>2</sup> Felipe Luciano, "Speech by Felipe Luciano (1969)" in: Darrel Enck-Wanzer, ed., *The Young Lords: A Reader*, New York University Press, 2010, pp. 208-212.
- <sup>3</sup> Graduate Theological Union Archives (Berkeley). Starhawk Collection. Box 16 Political Activism, Folder file 15 "Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant Protests 1981": "A love letter to our fellow blockaders" written by the affinity groups "Handbook Collective", "Love and Rage Affinity Group" and "Narcoleptic A.G."
- <sup>4</sup> Graduate Theological Union Archives (Berkeley). Starhawk Collection. Box 3, Folder file 13 "Woman-Earth Institute 1989 (or Woman Earth Peace Institute)": photocopy of *The Nation*, December 12 1987, readers' responses to the article by Sale K (1987) "Ecofeminism - A New Perspective", *The Nation*, Sept. 26, pp. 302- 305.
- <sup>5</sup> See page 16 and footnotes.
- <sup>6</sup> See also: "The Symchtonic don't dither but compose and decompose which are both dangerous and promising practices" (p. 102)
- <sup>7</sup> I'm paraphrasing here: "Starting from this caring, not from some delusional caring in general, landed me in innovative pigeon lofts, where it turned out, Despret, attuned to practices of commemorations, had already begun to roost." (p. 133)
- <sup>8</sup> I'm paraphrasing here: "Big Pharma, Big Agribusiness, and Big Science provide drama and villains aplenty, but also plenty of reason to damp down the certainty of villainy and explore the complexities of cyborg worldings." (p. 115)
- <sup>9</sup> Women's archives of Wales (Cardiff). DWLE - Women for life on earth records, 1981-2002. Box 6: Correspondence, draft articles, and news-cuttings relating to activities at Greenham Common peace camp 1982-1984. Document 40: 15 pages account of unnamed woman under title "Greenham Women's Peace Camp", pages 8-9.