

A Review of Tsing, Swanson, Gan, and Bubandt's (2017) Edited Volume: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet

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Article abstract

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A REVIEW OF TSING, SWANSON, GAN, AND BUBANDT'S (2017) EDITED VOLUME: *ARTS OF LIVING ON A DAMAGED PLANET*

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Abstract: This is a review of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, an edited volume from Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. The text showcases historical abuses of the earth *and* offers a myriad of opportunities to creatively inquire about our current relationship and interactions with other matter, creating a sense of urgency within the precarity of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: arts-based research; climate change; review; Anthropocene; interdisciplinary

Living in the Anthropocene, or “the Chthulucene” (Haraway, 2017, p. 33), *and* engaging with all that this epoch means for citizens of the earth is harrowing work. Published in 2017, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, an edited volume from Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, offers 18 unique chapters¹ that investigate relationships with and understandings of other matter—be it the ghosts of the Tijuana Estuary Visitor Center described by Stern in Chapter One or the lessons of ant colonies offered by Gordon in Chapter Seven. These chapters support contemplation of “how [the Anthropocene] will be lived” (Pratt, 2017, p. 170).

Tsing et al. include diverse disciplinary scholars and topics. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* exemplifies and showcases the necessity of collaboration between artists, scientists, humanists, and other matter. For instance, Pringle (2017), a professor of botany and bacteriology, highlights how lichen can teach us about aging and time, and challenge our traditional human timelines, encouraging us as readers to think about the perseverance of other matter (p. 157-167). Carla Freccero (2017) enters the conversation differently, yet still in community with the other authors, offering a posthuman theorization of wolves through their work as a literary critic (p. 91–105). Freccero offers that the wolf, storied into the werewolf, offers readers the opportunity to think about the human and wolf’s “interdependence and complication” (p. 102). As depicted by these chapters, and other chapters together, the editors have included multiple perspectives and expertise to help us think through our current ecological context in creative ways. Creativity and collaboration are necessary in the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016).

The editors have taken aesthetic care in designing this book, making the artistic choice to divide the thematic engagements of the 18 contributions into ghosts and monsters. Much like the world feeling upside down—amidst intense heat waves, flooding, and other climate crises (IPCC, 2014)—the ghost and monsters are juxtaposed, upside down, but totally bound in this book. The reader literally flips the text over in order to read each portion (i.e., ghost or monster). This troubles a linear reading, much like the text troubles humanist discourses. Moreover, there are transitional segments of text linking the two parts, ghosts and monsters, as “figures hiding in plain sight” (Tsing et al., 2017, n.p.). The division, coupled with the transitional segments, allows the reader to choose where they will begin reading—will they begin with ghosts, or will they begin with monsters? Moreover, this design stymies a hierarchical reading of ghosts versus monsters, instead allowing the reader to take on ghosts *and* monsters. This is accomplished by avoiding language that puts the thematic characters in opposition and by creatively flipping the portions, thereby avoiding leading with one character over the other.

The words “ghosts” and “monsters” conjure spooky connotations, and yet this text inspires hope and possibility to (re)think our relationalities in order to live ethically and effectively. Ghosts represent the history of human harm; monsters represent new possibilities that go beyond normative conceptions of the individual actress to engage readers with the idea that we are part of a messy web. For instance, Brown’s (2017) Marxist analysis (p. 48–49) recognizes the political and social implications of spelunking in Chernobyl, the ghost of the USSR’s nuclear power program and evidence of modern abuses against citizens of the earth. The ghost, in this case photographs of the remnants of a nuclear power plant, offers the reader the opportunity to reflect on the history of the USSR. Brown writes that the partisan spelunker, Kupny, freely chooses to investigate and photograph Chernobyl so as to “visualize...his lost world of socialism with all its possibilities and promise” (p. 49). Put another way, Brown uses the theme of the ghost in order to speak to the hopefulness that nuclear energy gave constituents of the USSR, such as Kupny. In this way the ghost, the forgotten memory of a world that operated outside of capitalism, is a reminder and counter-story. Similarly, Gilbert (2017) contributes to the theme of monsters, “the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene” (Swanson et al., 2017, p. 2), centering bacteria in the discussion of unknown possibilities (p. 73–89). Gilbert uses DNA in humans to discuss how bacteria are symbionts, that bring “approximately 8 million more genes” to humans (p. 76). The bacteria and genes have the potential to give humans different properties (p. 77). Gilbert challenges the notion that humans are not already monsters, able to shape shift with the help of bacteria. Thus, these ghosts and monsters help readers think anew in the age of the Anthropocene.

Readers across many fields and contexts, including arts-based research, anthropology, education, climate science, philosophy, ecology, and environmental activism could all benefit from the diverse exemplars, as the 18 chapters offer a multitude of ways to consider how the Anthropocene has been, is being, and could be lived. Each author offers great intellectual generosity, citing the complexity of our entanglements in the Anthropocene, mostly through the mode of writing, but also including photography, such as John Law capturing Lien’s (2017) discussion of black plastic “prayer flags” used to imitate kelp forests (p. 115). This can also be seen with the illustrations that appear throughout the text, and diagrams. For example, McFall-Ngai (2017) includes Jensen’s adapted Whittaker Diagram that showcases our relationships (p. 55).

Sometimes, it is not always apparent how these examples fit within the themes of ghosts and monsters. The editors do seek to make explicit links to show these themes across the text, which appears written for an academic audience. The scholarship is intellectually invigorating, and this is not surprising, given that these scholars, such as Barad, Haraway, and Tsing, are leaders in their fields. I am curious to see how these

conversations could be enriched. Including scholars, artists, and activists outside of North America, Europe, and Australia, such as Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim of Chad, Juan Carlos Jintiach of Ecuador, and Joan Carling of the Philippines, would offer new windows and perspectives of how to live in the Anthropocene.

This edited volume challenges the reader to think about humans' historical mistreatment of other matter, while purporting that humans can and should live more ethically in order to impede the most disastrous potential outcomes of climate change. This text will engage anyone searching for new ways to relate and think about the ethics of living alongside and with other matter. Given our current and future ecological crises, this volume offers space for both creative reflection, action, and imagination—all of which are imperative for hopeful work in the Anthropocene.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Chapters include work from: Karen Barad, U of California, Santa Cruz; Kate Brown, U of Maryland, Baltimore; Carla Freccero, U of California, Santa Cruz; Peter Funch, Aarhus U; Scott F. Gilbert, Swarthmore College; Deborah M. Gordon, Stanford U; Donna J. Haraway, U of California, Santa Cruz; Andreas Hejnol, U of Bergen, Norway; Ursula K. Le Guin; Marianne Elisabeth Lien, U of Oslo; Andrew Mathews, U of California, Santa Cruz; Margaret McFall-Ngai, U of Hawaii, Manoa; Ingrid M. Parker, U of California, Santa Cruz; Mary Louise Pratt, NYU; Anne Pringle, U of Wisconsin, Madison; Deborah Bird Rose, U of New South Wales, Sydney; Dorion Sagan; Lesley Stern, U of California, San Diego; Jens-Christian Svenning, Aarhus U.