

## Cthulhu plays no role for me

Sophie Lewis May 8, 2017



Still from Fabrizio Terranova's *'Donna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival'* (2016)

Donna Haraway's most famous piece of writing declared itself "faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism."<sup>1</sup> But in the 1980s, there were many feminists, socialists, and materialists who couldn't see how this self-described "political myth" was faithful to them at all. Was comrade Haraway recommending – beyond even critically embracing technology, as the Bolsheviks had – *incorporating it into the human body*? In fact, the Cyborg Manifesto (as it soon came to be known) expressed a dream of a politics neither of repudiation nor exodus but rather – as she put it – faithful irony (i.e. blasphemy) vis-à-vis heteropatriarchal racial technocapitalism. She encourages something like a killing embrace of the brutal either/ors and deadly dyads imposed by that "matrix" of power onto would-be

human subjects. She invites recognition of one's individual (uneven) imbrication with colonialism and the military-industrial complex – the better to fuel one's loving rage and fervor to dismantle those evils. As a trained biologist and primatologist Haraway is able to deliver her blasphemy in a formally blasphemous blend of scientific and poetic tongues.

Haraway's multiple "cyborg" articulation of the self as a kind of proletarian drag proved to have intense resonance across the world. It is, in its own words, "oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence."<sup>2</sup> If the success that greeted the Manifesto surprised its author, the suspicion and shock did not. A significant legacy of the anti-nuclear and anti-military organizing throughout the long 1970s – the feud in which, in fact, Haraway was intervening – consisted of a false antithesis between a convinced technophobic leftism and practically all other approaches to the matter of "techne." Of course, at the time, myriad Marxist writings on the co-imbrication of capitalist technologies with natural entities existed, which reflect on the possibility of salvaging them for emancipatory ends – including the account of "nature as an accumulation strategy" developed by the eco-Marxists Cindi Katz and Neil Smith. But few such interventions were coming (ostensibly) from within eco-feminism: the camp of peace-activists and Earth-defenders. Haraway, the self-described "Sputnik Catholic,"<sup>3</sup> *did* belong, in part, to that camp. Nevertheless, her sisters in grassroots feminism proved reluctant to take on board her message. The cyborg's popularity surged primarily elsewhere: notably in art and "urbanism." David Harvey hailed her as an indispensable figure for the practice and study of spatiality: "she has evolved a wonderful way of talking that acknowledges that, if everything is related to everything else in the world, then we must create sentences to reflect that fact."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, while the Cyborg Manifesto was originally meant to be a straightforward contribution to the erstwhile left publication *Socialist Review*, what emerged was gobsmackingly "postmodern." As Haraway boldly declares: "The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ... they have been 'techno-digested'".<sup>5</sup> Re-phrasing Bruno Latour's famous

dictum “we have never been modern,” she advanced that “we have never been human.”<sup>6</sup> Years later, she clarified this problematic in more conversational terms: “Thinking of machines as an ‘it,’ over and against which our organic and internal cells have to conduct some kind of heroic struggle, is a very hard framework to avoid.”<sup>7</sup> Even as it bewildered and offended elements of the left – who declined to see why one might want to avoid that kind of framework – the Cyborg Manifesto offered nourishment to many others. The new analytic weapons it proffered invited mutant, contaminated subjects to build a new world on the ruins of the present-day home, factory, or lab. “Cyborg,” for some of us, is a luminous translation of the marxist idea that *we make history but not under conditions of our choosing*. It is a timely suggestion that political science address the fact that we are full of bubbling bacteria, inorganic prostheses, and toxic economic mythologies. It is hardly an overstatement to say that the now-ubiquitous field of “science and technology studies” was born with this weird, psychedelic text.

Yet, for all its polemical anti-humanist pizzazz, cyborgicity was grounded solidly in social reproduction theory of the kind pioneered by Marxist feminists Nancy Hartsock, Ruth Cowan, and Barbara Ehrenreich. What separates the Manifesto from their meticulous dissections of labor divisions and market transformations is, rather, its seemingly miraculous syncretism. Black, Indigenous and Chicana feminisms (e.g. bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldua), lesbian and “deconstructive” feminisms (e.g. Monique Wittig), and queer, anticolonial afrofuturisms (e.g. Octavia Butler) were all treated as though they were *always already* inextricably linked to conversations in biology about genes, computer-chips, symbiogenesis, and cybernetic matrices (in particular the critiques of science of Sandra Harding, Richard Lewontin, Hilary Rose, Zoe Sofoulis, Stephen Jay Gould et al.). The Manifesto is, in some ways, a retelling, rather than reinvention, of emancipatory thought’s fundamental “eco vs. techno” dialectic. At the time of its publication, in the mid-1980s, contradictions in this arena were coming to a head within feminism over the “new reproductive technologies.” The essay combines economic analysis – of the centrality of “homework” to the tech “revolution” – with a deconstruction of the figure of the “human” in many ways reminiscent of Frantz Fanon’s. Like Fanon, Haraway centers the queer and

racialized character of the animal “proletarian.” Applying her cyberfeminist primatologist’s eye, she also insists “we are all chimeras;”<sup>8</sup> historically situated implosions of animal and technology, virtuality and physicality.

If we have never been human, then what have we been? What are cyborgs? Part of the answer, to many readers’ surprise, is – simply – “women.” In calling up this “invisible,” “leaky”<sup>9</sup> virtual monster, she calls on a mass constituency to recognize and re-imagine itself: “women and other present-tense, illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life.”<sup>10</sup> In the same way that Wages for Housework was a weaponization of wages *against* housework, however, the invocation of women was intended to “abolish gender.” Haraway held forth “a picture of possible unity ... the self [that] feminists [of all genders] must code”<sup>11</sup> so as to foment a state of being “responsible”<sup>12</sup> to the social relations of science and technology in all their contingency. Politics, she suggested, “means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories.”<sup>13</sup> Reconstructing the boundaries of daily life would inevitably yield a new human-ish subject, “in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts.”<sup>14</sup> The machine and the monster, she explained, are both “us.”<sup>15</sup>

By the time I encountered the Cyborg Manifesto in the early 2000s, it was a cult text. Haraway penned her chimeric essay – part binary-imploding “fabulation” of liberatory subjectivity, part avant-garde account of the political economy of post-Fordist societies’ production of people – in California in 1984.<sup>16</sup> Somehow, to me, Harawayian words felt like coming home. Her writing was witchy; baroque, yet pellucid. But I soon learned that many cultural gatekeepers in my British environment – notably those wedded to George Orwell’s patronizing and spartan rules for avoiding pretentiousness English – simply couldn’t stand it. Such people insisted that, “objectively,” these mad, dense sentences of hers just weren’t clear. Their displays of non-plussed intolerance in the face of Haraway’s rococo prose seemed – and still seem – suspiciously disproportionate. Might they simply represent the cost of being a “FemaleMan” (as she put it in her 1997 book title) treading cheerfully and irreverently on Marxological ground?

I think so, but I am anything but impartial. After all, Haraway began as my hero. My comrades teased me relentlessly for citing her in every single one of my articles and reaching for her in every conversation. Admittedly, my interest was mainly in the older stuff, like

*Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup> (1997), where Haraway criticizes the “obsession with the gene as a form of reification similar to that of commodity fetishism.”<sup>17</sup> But by the time I discovered her writings on the cyborg, she was talking about dogs (a political choice, she claims, but not one whose implications were ever clear). At that point she overwhelmingly had, in Alyssa Battistoni’s words, “more to say about kin-making and agility competitions” than political coalitions and oppositional strategies.<sup>18</sup> Still, it was often fascinating stuff, posing questions like: what kind of world do nonhuman beings want and how can we know? I sat tight. I had, after all, felt firsthand her ability to make Marx readable, relevant and – yes – cyborg for polymorphously perverse teenaged girls like me. It is thanks to her I came to anticapitalist thought and struggle in the first place. Were it not for Haraway, I might never have dared – or desired – to read Marx at all.

Here was a trained biologist who analyzed the swarming web of earthly life at the cellular level and pursued a revolutionary’s desire for liberation in the same breath. She projected an infectious, subversive sense of confidence that biological realities – from computers to embryos to brains – militate for, rather than against, a comradely and just existence. Her thought laughs generously at humanism and posthumanism in equal measure, revealing playful and at the same time utterly serious modes of organizing, or lines of flight, within the deadly matrices of technology-mediated violence she insists our own bodies co-compose. Her unbounded, psychedelic, militant-particularist materialism doesn’t so much explode the reproduction/production distinction as make it look ridiculous, embarrassing. She seems to be grimacing in the face of such categories, following Medusa – a practice of reflecting back and splintering chauvinist epistemes which she calls “diffraction.”

The figure of the cyborg turns the marginality of “queer” on its head, taking for

granted that proletarian monsters under fire from transphobia and antiblackness are powerful recombinant operatives, central to class struggle. Rather than *adding* axes of oppression to her militant Marxian heuristic, she composted them. Her mission? To implement forms of organizing capable of uniting “witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists long enough to disarm the state.” She articulates a materialism that makes palpable how we are *all* touched by the cyborg virus in the “feminizing” landscape of neoliberal work. Though a story about common ground, it is not a sexy story. As Battistoni remarks in her own portrait of Haraway: “The Manifesto’s popularity has no doubt been fueled in part by the vision of a bionic babe implied by the word itself – a Furiosa or the Terminator – but little could have been further from her meaning.”<sup>19</sup> Battistoni’s essay reminds its readers how, when asked to give an example of what exactly cyborgicity is in an interview, Haraway talked about “how like a leaf I am,” describing the “intricacy, interest, pleasure and intensity” of this sense of imagined kinship. How many people in 1989 (or since) pictured the neoproletariat as... *leafy*? – yet it is: an intimate mass network of synthesizers, imperfectly communicating, individually mutating, and crackling with static.

At the same time, the image was less a question of acknowledging overlapping DNA, as Battistoni says, than “thinking about the immense amount of labor and practice that had gone into producing the knowledge that she was like a leaf in so many ways. Thinking about how incredible it was to be able to know such a thing.”<sup>20</sup> Cyborgs are collective brains.

Some folks pick up the figure of the cyborg and use it in a celebrational mode, and miss the argument that the cyborg issues specifically from the militarized, indeed a permanently war-state based, industrial capitalism of World War 2 and the post World War 2 Cold War. They miss that the cyborg is born as the cyborg enemy... Now, from that particularly unpromising position, what possible kinds of cracks in the system of domination could one imagine beyond a kind of sublimity, a kind of wallowing in the sublime of domination which, of course, many folks do...<sup>21</sup>

As Haraway’s concern makes clear, far from representing an aestheticized

apocalyptic ideal for the Anthropocene, the cyborg is a multiply colonized test-subject, situated squarely in the Capitalocene. “She” is a laborer who traffics in informational, capital, and gender codes. Think of a hormone-deprived prisoner; or a manufacturer of low-grade circuit-boards and computer-chips on night-shift; or a pregnant housewife-cum-call-center-contractor; or a forcibly sterilized migrant hijacking radio-waves, evading searchlights.

Or for instance me. Ever since she first hacked my teenaged frontal lobes, I have made sense of myself as cyborg and stalwartly defended what I recognized in my marrow to be the funny, the wild, the profound, the radically illuminating genius of Haraway. I’ve argued against all of the standard charges laid against her: self-indulgence, stylistic obscurantism, “postmodern” triviality, etymological shamanism.<sup>22</sup> And, since Haraway opened the door to radical thought for me, what follows has been painful to write. It is a lamentation: not that her critics were right before, but that, substantively, her latest monograph, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, jumps the shark and heralds a change.

Since the 1980s, a steady succession of figures have cropped up in Haraway’s thought, characters who are comparable to the cyborg but far less popular, and far less politically generative: the “modest witness”; the coyote; the trickster; FemaleMan; the Surrogate, the “companion species”; Oncomouse™; and since 2014, “string figures” and “chthonic ones.” Already in 2003 (in the *Companion Species Manifesto*) she declared in disgruntled tones that: “I have come to see cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in retrospect, I wonder now whether the coining of those more overtly “organic” successors must be understood in the context of Haraway’s frustration with the persistent revolutionary humanism of cyborgicity. Perhaps I am sensing a double frustration in Haraway: not only with the common misunderstanding of the cyborg as a kind of android, but also with the very *non*-misunderstanding of her cyborg (outlined above). Perhaps this cyborg, which Haraway called the illegitimate offspring of militarism, capitalism, and state socialism, also represents a somewhat illegitimate (even partially regretted) daughter of a reluctant intellect.

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*,<sup>24</sup> Haraway has made a decisive turn towards a primitivism-tinged, misanthropic populationism. Though she started off championing the cyborgs of class struggle against the goddesses of technophobia (her immortal closing line: “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”), my suspicion is that, now, she’s gone over to the goddesses.

Despite enduring decades of denigration from some left quarters as a “po-mo” thinker, Haraway’s remarks about Marxism’s limitations in the past have not remotely amounted to anti-Marxism. The Cyborg Manifesto cared deeply about human people in all their proliferating ingloriousness and it desperately wanted post-gender communism for *us* – the species that reads and writes manifestos. It didn’t link laboring with healthfulness, morality, or being deserving. But in the essays constituting *Staying with the Trouble* she has, in fact, developed a new affinity for just that. Now, she wants a decline in human beings more than she wants to smash capitalism. In fact, it isn’t clear if she even still wants the latter. Although the lines are drawn coyly, they are unmistakable. Her cursory but emphatic and repeated antinatalist instructions – that is, enjoinders against making babies – seriously risk rehabilitating the very eugenic anti-humanism her early work on “Teddy Bear Patriarchy” (for example) inveighed against so brilliantly. Population reduction, as she now fantasizes it, is declared by fiat to be nondiscriminatory, friendly, collective, and non-coercive.

One would be justified in expecting to get some elaboration on how the removal of 8 billion heads from the total headcount over the next century or so could be non-coercive – indeed, non-genocidal. But there is really only a fable, based around a micro-community in the United States, proclaiming that this is possible.<sup>25</sup> The utopia of 2-3 billion human beings is supposed to arise from a choice, simply, to *not make babies*. As a program, this represents a provocative break with materialism. It is also a provocation it is impossible to ignore or overlook, since it is effectively all that ties together what would otherwise be an unconvincing but inoffensive collection of vague, repetitive chapters on various eco-techno-animalian assemblages such as carrier-pigeons and pills that stop urinary leakage in mammals.



The trend already seemed apparent in her last book *When Species Meet*,<sup>26</sup> but it has now been consolidated in *Staying with the Trouble*, where the feminist-scientific emphasis on epistemic partiality (pioneered since the 1980s by Haraway alongside figures like Sandra Harding) has turned into a commitment to pluralism, and where she actively shuns the pursuit of systems theorising – for, as she says in a recent biopic, such theorising only ends up “dazzling” us.<sup>27</sup> Haraway’s former (profoundly system-oriented) Marxian technofeminism has given way, then, to something called multispecies feminism: a tendency pioneered also by Anna Tsing characterized by a barely disavowed willingness to see whole cities and cultures wiped from the planet for the sake of a form of thriving among “companion species” involving relatively few of *us*.



To be underwhelmed by *Staying with the Trouble* might be explained in part by its re-printing of several known essays with very little truly new material; plus it having taken a long time to come out. But it is also because the revolutionary spark in Haraway’s “more-than-humanism” has apparently been lost along the way and supplanted by an apolitical notion of trans-species *Gemeinschaft*. One intriguing consequence of the place humanity now occupies in her ends-means argument is that nonhuman *as well* as human animals receive less methodological care. Even as Haraway’s delightful critiques of Derrida and Deleuze’s inability to *really respond* to actual animals (a cat, a wolf...) ring fresh in my ears, it strikes me that these “chthonic ones” (the latest case studies) are oddly distant and inanimate sketches of butterflies, spiders, pigs, ants, sheep, and racing pigeons. They are all “critters” by whom Haraway says (frequently) she is entranced, riveted, passionately gripped. Yet I don’t see it. It was hard to care about the pigeons in *Staying with the Trouble* – even harder than caring about the dog(s)<sup>28</sup> in *When Species Meet* back in 2007, who were at least mixed up in a brilliant passage or two about the biocapitalist labor-power (or not) of those with “paws, not hands” (“we need a Biocapital volume

1!”).<sup>29</sup>

The failure to respond to earthly companions, of course, is the very thing Haraway always sets out to consequentialize. “Thou shalt not make killable,”<sup>30</sup> she wrote in that last book. Speaking as a trained lab-biologist, she saw with unique clarity how there is no rationalizing away or escaping the killing we perpetrate, the suffering we inflict (albeit not with equal complicity, and not under conditions of our choosing). Rather than cultivate guilt, we must, she said, *stay* with our responsibility for it. We must promote response-ability by “sharing suffering”<sup>31</sup> every time, even if and when we decide to kill. Because this articulation of the bloody fusion between politics and ethics has always struck me as extraordinarily fruitful and revelatory in an everyday as well as world-historic sense, I never allowed my worry that Haraway might prefer animals to humans to deter my deep gratitude (reverence, even) for her gifts. Until now.

Witness this diffident wish where Haraway is reflecting on the world “over a couple hundred years from now” and writes in a hopeful mode: “maybe the human people of this planet can again be numbered 2 or 3 billion or so”.<sup>32</sup>

In one faux-innocent speculative sentence, Haraway here disappears billions from her own 11 billion+ projection of this century’s likely peak *homo sapiens* headcount.<sup>33</sup> Elusive as its explicit appearances turn out to be, in the final analysis, the numerical goal of population reduction undergirds and drives this book – not just its pivotal chapter (chapter 4 – “Making Kin”).<sup>34</sup> As she repeatedly drums home, *don’t make babies* – as much as *make kin* – becomes the take-home injunction for the reader of Donna Haraway. The vision of trans-species Gemeinschaft that emerges is not so much post- as *anti*-human.

It is a vision that emerges shyly and – yes – *guiltily* rather than responsibly. In the Introduction, she calls “make kin not babies” a “plea” and dives right into a tendentious process of marshalling unwilling allies to her cause before she has even stated what it is. Indeed, what is most striking throughout is this guilt – Haraway’s apparent discomfort with what she has to say, indeed, her near-inability to say it – and this, in a way, is what says it all.

For excellent reasons, the feminists I know have resisted the languages and policies of population control because they demonstrably often have the interests of bipolitical states more in view than the well-being of women and their people, old and young. Resulting scandals in population control practices are not hard to find. But in my experience, feminists ... have not been willing to address the Great Acceleration of human numbers, fearing that to do so would be to slide once again into the muck of racism, classism, nationalism, modernism, and imperialism.<sup>35</sup>

The claim that any number of humans is expendable for the sake of the kin-community is advanced via a series of disavowals and but's followed by oddly timid pieces of commonsense. *I know what you're going to say...* she repeatedly parries: "But"... :

But that fear is not good enough. ... a 9 billion increase of human beings over 150 years, to a level of 11 billion by 2100 if we are lucky, is not just a number; and it cannot be explained away by blaming Capitalism or any other word starting with a capital letter.<sup>36</sup>

For Haraway now, it seems that what is bad is "scandals in population control practices," not population control *per se*, even if historically the two can hardly be called distinct. While that last catty sentence sticks in the craw,<sup>37</sup> it is barely the worst of what's here. If 9,000,000,000 is indeed not "just a number" (it certainly seems that way to me) Haraway declines to tell us *what else* exactly it is. Leaving the implication open, she introduces – as though it were already legitimated – the word "urgency" as a synonym for projected population increased, without nailing down what the emergency consists of. Of course, what Haraway analyses as "avoidance," based in "fear" (of sliding into the muck of "racism, classism, nationalism, modernism, and imperialism...") could also be given the benefit of the doubt and interpreted as a decision; a conscious rejection.

With "make kin, not babies," Haraway is far from the first to appreciate the seeming paradox and important truth: that making larger families might result in a smaller total population. That is, family enlargement can be a qualitative rather than quantitative matter. There is a class struggle already underway around the

biological dimensions of the making of a good life – a struggle waged (among others) by abortion activists, single mothers, and commercial gestational surrogates threatening strike action. But rather than work through the preconditions and likely strategies for achieving (non-)reproductive justice politically, Haraway proceeds on the vague and simplistic presumption that the “kinnovations” of queer “oddkin”<sup>38</sup> are necessarily better and less violent than biogenetic forms of family.) At the same time, the queer biological efflorescence she valorizes is *already here* – she says – everywhere. We have to actively generalize it anyway. This feels like a flat ontology; less a matter of “trouble” (or struggle) than infinite regression. The basis for preferring “oddkin” over non-odd-kin goes basically unjustified. Why “kinnovate”<sup>39</sup> if traditional families are already queer? How does kinnovating break down the structural apparatuses of slow violence?

The blurring of descriptive and prescriptive elements is a poor replacement for dialectic immanence. Should a reader pause to ask, skeptically, *what is politically “better” about tentacularity, exactly?* they may not find a substantive answer. Not-making-babies is never much related to the objective of building counterpower. And if all of us “share flesh” already, what is the political purpose of fostering *more* flesh-sharing? Even if universal flourishing is easier to imagine when fewer humans are in the picture, desiring fewer humans is a terrible starting-point for any politics that hopes to include, let alone center, those of us for whom making babies has often represented a real form of resistance.<sup>40</sup>

This ethnocentric antimaternal impulse is an especially disappointing about-face for Haraway. The Cyborg Manifesto vindicated a non-innocent, anticolonial maternity (regeneration) symbolized by mutant or surrogate pregnancy; it names as cyborg, for instance, “the indigenous woman Malinche, mother of the mestizo ‘bastard’ race of the new world.”<sup>41</sup> The cyborg, Haraway memorably declared back then, “is outside salvation history. ... it has no truck with ... unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness...”<sup>42</sup> Compare this with the first pages of *Staying with the Trouble*, which replicate this prophetic tone, and even elements of its content:

Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. [They] have no truck with sky-gazing Homo... no truck with ideologues. ... Chthonic ones are not safe. ... They make and unmake; are made and unmade.<sup>43</sup>

To those in the know, this is instantly recognizable music. But it falls flat. To her readers hungry for mobilization and organization, as such, the bulk of *Staying with the Trouble* is likely to feel like a bit of a warming-over of previous themes and tendencies: cyborgicity wrung clean of systemic analysis and socialism, repackaged as a vague and omnipresent animist tentacularity.

While waxing forth about “symchthonic” potency, Haraway will usually mention the work both of making *and* unmaking, tying *and* cutting, and so on. But in practice she nowadays under-emphasizes the potentially antagonistic-sounding acts of *cutting* and *unmaking* almost to the point of silence, even as she cuts humanity down to size. Her earlier call for new grapplings with the form labor takes as social domination (straddling species lines – *Biocapital Volume I*) also seems forgotten. The core impetuses now appear to be downright pro-work, erasing her own gendered and others’ companionate labor. What is left is a wholesome anti-laziness wedded to the injunction to be always doing: respond, act, cultivate, invent, discover, bind, work, be ever more capable and alert (“Shut Up and Train!” was the slogan of *When Species Meet*).

In the end, it seems that nobody at all except Haraway herself and Cayenne (her ageing but “sporty” dog) is proactive enough. Even if her criticisms of noxious narratives, despondent or naive, hit their mark, it seems nowadays that Haraway’s biggest problem is having fallen out of love herself with the human masses. The year right now is 2017, yet she suggests pessimistically that for future historians, “the period between about 2000 and 2050 on earth should be called the Great Dithering.” This “Great Dithering,” she says,

was a time of ineffective and widespread anxiety about environmental destruction  
mistakable evidence of accelerating mass extinctions, violent climate change, social  
disintegration, widening wars, ongoing human population increase due to the large  
numbers of already-born youngsters (even though birth rates most places had fallen

below replacement rate), and vast migrations of human and nonhuman refugees without refuges.<sup>44</sup>

Just like that, she conveys her rather brutal certainty that humans, overall, are “dithering” *and will be for another 33 years.*



Even those of us who have not read any HP Lovecraft are likely to have some familiarity with the death-cult god for which that prolific 1920s pulp science-fiction writer became famous. The weird, faux-arcane sound of the word “Cthulhu” has a widespread ability to conjure images of apocalypse, and perhaps piles of skulls. A cursory scan of scholarship on Lovecraftian literature suggests a stable consensus that the Cthulhu Mythos was (and remains) the vehicle of a genocidal fever-dream and obsessional racism. While serious fans and Lovecraft nerds still energetically debate His “real” meaning, the media life of Cthulhu proceeds largely outside of their (or the author’s) control. With this in mind, there is a wonderful review of *Staying with the Trouble* at the group blog Savage Minds, authored by the Dread Destroyer (Cthulhu) himself:

Sure my methods are “controversial” but [Haraway] and I have the same goal in mind: confronting our shared ecological crisis by addressing the problem of accelerating human population growth. Whereas she seeks to carve out the possibility that feminism can navigate the racist and eugenicist histories of limiting human reproduction, I advocate for a strategy of direction action, i.e. human sacrifice.

Haraway mistakenly believes she has inoculated herself against my minions by adding a superfluous “h” to Cthulhu. ... I am skeptical that she did not mean to summon me by speaking my name.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed.

She, however, protests: “Cthulhu plays no role for me.”<sup>46</sup> An unintentionally comic apophasis. And she instructs us repeatedly to “note the different spelling” as we approach her “Chthulucene”: Cthulhu/Chtulhu.

Cthulhu (note spelling), luxuriating in the science fiction of H.P. Lovecraft, plays no role for me, although it/he did play a role for Gustave Hormiga, the scientist who named my spider demon familiar.... I take the liberty of rescuing my spider from Lovecraft for other stories.<sup>47</sup>

In actuality, it is the *spider* – not the sublime misanthropic domination of Cthulhu – and the indigenous cosmologies – not Lovecraft – who have been marginalized in this book. Haraway’s forced insistence that something she has just named “plays no role” is an almost monumentally ridiculous moment from a self-proclaimed “material-semiotic” thinker. How many readers would spot the difference without being told to in the footnotes? How many would imagine it to be remotely significant? She ropes the Dread Destroyer (negatively) into her concept herself, so how can Cthulhu be quite so “irrelevant” to Chthulucene chthonic ones as all that? In the documentary film *Donna Haraway: Storytelling For Earthly Survival* (2017) by Fabrizio Terranova, Haraway tries to suggest that the Chthulucene is “a kind of joke” because “it too threatens to become too big” of a concept, like the Anthropocene concept she is critiquing. In my view, though, it is a joke that misses badly; a lapse in judgment that is almost slightly shocking. After all, it is Haraway herself who is constantly saying in this book (quoting Marilyn Strathern) that “it matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts.” To paint with a homonym of HP Lovecraft’s mass-murdering titan represents a choice.

Predictably, Haraway makes several gestures declaring her cognizance of systemic colonialism, capitalist austerity, white-supremacy, and their manifestations in the form of reproductive stratification. She notes (correctly) that many people she holds dear “hear neo-imperialism, neoliberalism, misogyny, and racism in the ‘Not Babies’ part of ‘Make Kin Not Babies’” – she even comments “who can blame them?” in parentheses (footnote, p.208). Nevertheless, in a breathtaking evasion of these issues, the reduction of human population imagined by Haraway takes place

in the context of a racially unmarked (i.e. white) community situated at Gauley Mountain in West Virginia. Here, the parable tells, thanks to chains of events set in motion by compostists, “human numbers ... were declining within a deliberate pattern of heightened environmental justice” by the year 2220. Gauley Mountain is the current real-life home of the white “eco-sexual activists” Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens; and they are, presumably, the template “compostists” in question. I do not wish to cast aspersions on Sprinkle and Stephens’ projects, but the fact remains that they are affluent cosmopolitans who have settled in the Appalachian “hillbilly” context.<sup>48</sup> Despite this apparent incongruity, in Haraway’s vision of the future:

That pattern [of heightened environmental justice] emphasized a preference for the poor among humans, a preference for biodiverse natural-social ecosystems, and a preference for the most vulnerable among other critters and their habitats. The wealthiest and highest-consuming human populations reduced new births the most ... but human births everywhere were deliberately below replacement rates.<sup>49</sup>

Undaunted, Haraway repeats that if I am appalled by her grasping the nettle of “the” population question (or, as she puts it, the issue of the Great Acceleration of human numbers), then I might be suffering from “beliefs and commitments ... too deep to allow rethinking and refeeling,” comparable to the “Christian climate-change deniers who avoid the urgency ... because it touches too closely on the marrow of one’s faith”.<sup>50</sup> How deep, precisely, should our commitment to antiracism be?

There is no such orthodoxy, no such denial, when it comes to proletarian (especially black and brown people’s) fertility rates. These have long been conceptualized as a threat and a problem including within feminism. On the contrary, critical demographers still have to fight hard to bring gross structural inequalities – in *mortality* rates rather than fertility – into the frame at all. If Haraway were really “rescuing” and recuperating images of degeneracy (what James Kneale calls Lovecraft’s core topoi of racial “contamination” and “infection”<sup>51</sup>) for the purposes of antiracism, wresting them away from fascist mythmaking, she would need to



carefully center an analysis of the centrality of border-policing and population discourse to white supremacy. She does not do this. She expresses an appetite for a “wormy pile” of “chop[ped] and shred[ded] human as Homo”,<sup>52</sup> a banquet of “Humanity as humus”,<sup>53</sup> but without tackling the border regimes that fatally control and limit this supposedly joyful “diverse” commingling. “Living-with and dying-with each other potently in the Chthulucene can be a fierce reply to the dictates of Anthropos and Capital,”<sup>54</sup> she blithely remarks. If it can, it isn’t really clear how, or for whom, this is true. As Kneale says of Lovecraft, there are “textual thresholds” here that “do not simply express racist fears; they *produce* the narratives that dramatize fears of contact and change”.<sup>55</sup> In short, Haraway is trafficking irresponsibly in racist narratives.

In contrast, the cyborg stood for a politics of “pollution.”<sup>56</sup> And insofar, I remain for reading Haraway against Haraway. For all her chastisement of “bitter cynicism”,<sup>57</sup> and for all her talk of mud and piss and worms, the chanting goddess who has displaced the earlier cyborg, at least in the pages of *Staying with the Trouble*, is too much of a clean-living misanthrope – and above all, too much of a pessimist – to be a comrade.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, her neglected (if not disavowed) framework of cyborgicity becomes a more and more potent heuristic for thinking class composition and embodying its struggles every day. Cyborgs for Earthly Survival! was the slogan Haraway submitted to *Socialist Review*. That spirit still lives in the interstices of *Staying with the Trouble*. Part of our task is indeed “not to forget the stink in the air from the burning of the witches, not to forget the murders of human and nonhuman beings in the Great Catastrophes named the Plantationocene, Anthropocene, Capitalocene”.<sup>59</sup> Part of it is, indeed, to “move through memory to re-presenting;” to grow capable of response; to become kin; and to “stay with” trouble. But the main thing is to make an altogether bigger kind of trouble.

Tentacular, spidery aesthetics are all well and good, but they do not escalate anything. These vague “chthonic” signifiers of well-meaning are a flimsy challenge to their namesake, the Great Old One, Cthulhu – that vivid necro-patriarchal savior-figure who is a caricature, arguably, of imperial capital. It is as though these new Harawayian companions – the chthonic ones – are making precisely the error

she bewailed over the cyborg: “wallowing in the sublime of [His] domination.” I have been relieved to see that, in the interviews in Fabrizio Terranova’s recent and beautiful film *Donna Haraway*, Haraway contradicts some of the elements of *Staying with the Trouble* laid out in this essay. “It is really important to be in revolt,” she emphasizes there: “We *do* have to practice war: we *do* have to be for some worlds and against others.” Sadly, however, that is not what comes across on the written page. So, forget the Cthulucene. Despite all its talk of numerically decimated humankind, this theoretic turn is not remotely destructive *enough*. Ultimately, this Cthulhu guy’s got nothing on cyborg revolution when it comes to abolishing present realities. What if the cyborgs made a comeback? They knew who their enemies were. Overpopulation did not number among them. There is so much on earth, after all, that we really do have to destroy.

1. Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway: The Cyborg Manifesto and the Companion Species Manifesto*. ed. Cary Wolfe. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2016), p.5. ↩
2. *ibid*, p.9. ↩
3. *Ibid*, p.283. ↩
4. Donna Haraway and David Harvey, ‘Nature, politics, and possibilities: a debate and discussion with David Harvey and Donna Haraway’ (*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1996): 507-527) p.508. ↩
5. *Manifestly Haraway* p.32. ↩
6. Donna Haraway and Nicholas Gane, “When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done? An Interview with Donna Haraway” (*Theory, Culture, Society* 2006, 23(7–8): 135–58). ↩
7. Haraway and Harvey (1996) p.514. ↩

8. *Manifestly Haraway* p.7. ↩
9. Ibid p.13, p.11. ↩
10. Ibid p.59. ↩
11. Ibid. p.30. ↩
12. Ibid. 57. ↩
13. Ibid. 68. ↩
14. Ibid p.67. ↩
15. Ibid p.65. ↩
16. Her assignment had been to map the contours of socialist feminism in the era of neoliberalism and the web. The East Coast *SR* editorial collective hated what she turned in, but the West Coast collective overruled them and published it (and thank goodness they did). ↩
17. Battistoni, personal correspondence 2017 ↩
18. Alyssa Battistoni, 'Monstrous, Duplicated, Potent' (*n+1* magazine 2017), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-28/reviews/monstrous-duplicated-potent>. ↩
19. Battistoni (2017). ↩
20. Ibid. ↩
21. Haraway and Harvey (1996) p.514. ↩
22. Often I thought I could sometimes detect the whiff of misogyny on them anyway – the structure of thought that recoils subconsciously and willfully hears only babbling narcissism because it dimly registers a threat or feels indignant at not being the intended interlocutor. ↩
23. *Manifestly Haraway* p.103. ↩

24. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press 2016). ↩
25. The Camille Stories', as Haraway explains in *Staying with the Trouble*, are the upshot of a group science-fiction exercise in which Haraway participated with Vinciane Despret and Fabrizio Terranova at a summer workshop organised by Isabelle Stengers in France. ↩
26. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2007). ↩
27. *Donna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival* (2017) dir. Fabrizio Terranova. 90 min. <http://earthlysurvival.org>. ↩
28. I know I was not alone in feeling crestfallen at the time and hoping fervently that *When Species Meet* did not signify a truly lasting reorientation in Haraway's thought, away from building postcapitalism and towards thinking (mainly/only) about her dog Cayenne. ↩
29. *When Species Meet* p.56, p.46. ↩
30. Ibid. p.80. ↩
31. Ibid. p.69. ↩
32. *Staying With the Trouble* p.103. ↩
33. It is often the case that successful feminist struggle results in fewer human births and I have no problem saying that fewer human births will almost certainly be a planet-cooling (thus, 'good') effect of the former goal. Common sense dictates that it would probably be easier to enjoy finite planetary resources in real communist abundance if there were 3 billion of us instead of 7 or 11 billion (I dispute, however, that this is really fully knowable). It's still a far cry from that observation to a politics that takes population reduction as its end, even if it stringently avoids the language of "overcrowding" or even "overpopulation," as Haraway does. ↩

34. Actually, the majority of Chapter 4 seems only to appear – as though spooked – in its own vast and apologetic footnotes. “For our people to revisit what has been owned by the Right and by development professionals as the ‘population explosion’ can feel like going over to the dark side,” she repeats in one of these, “But denial will not serve us.” She knows, she says, that “reemphasizing the burden of growing human numbers, especially as a global demographic abstraction, can be so dangerous.” And naturally “coercion is wrong at every imaginable level in this matter, and it tends to backfire in any case, even if one can stomach coercive law or custom (I cannot).” Still, “What if nations that are worried about low birth rates (Denmark, Germany, Japan, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, white America, more) acknowledged that fear of immigrants is a big problem and that racial purity projects and fantasies drive resurgent pronatalism?” (p.209). “Thanks to Michelle Murphy [author of *Seizing the Means of Reproduction*] for ... the resistance to my arguments, no matter how well intended. I still think they are necessary” (p.210). And so on and so on. ↩
35. *Staying With the Trouble* p.6. ↩
36. Ibid. p.6-7. ↩
37. I guess you could say Haraway scored a point off me there, given how much she enjoys and approves of “indigestion” (p.58). But not all instances of heartburn provokes the “thought” that Haraway, quoting Arendt, grandly declares she wants to promote. ↩
38. *Staying with the Trouble* p.221. ↩
39. This entrepreneurial concept is glossed p.208-209. (Haraway would doubtless claim it is a joke, just like the ‘Chthulucene’ concept, a joke because it reproduces the problems of the concept it is supposed to détourne or supplant). ↩
40. “Make kin not babies” happens to be a motto I have – personally – been more than willing to render operative in a life lived, very much like Haraway’s, “queerly” but as a white Anglo-European whose biogenetic self-reproduction

has only ever been structurally encouraged. I am, truth be told, ashamed to see it deployed in this way against the principles of reproductive justice. ↩

41. *Manifestly Haraway* p.56. ↩

42. *Ibid* p.8. ↩

43. *Staying with the Trouble* p.2. ↩

44. *Ibid.* p.145. ↩

45. Matt Thompson, 'Staying with the Trouble—Making Kin in the Chthulucene: Review' (Savage Minds 2016) <http://savageminds.org/2016/11/18/staying-with-the-trouble-making-kin-in-the-chthulucene-review/>. ↩

46. *Staying with the Trouble* p.173. ↩

47. *Ibid.* ↩

48. As with 'kinnovation', the language in which Haraway now couches her interventions would sometimes not seem out of place in Silicon Valley. Transhuman mutations and butterfly-beards notwithstanding, the question arises: is the "Communities of Compost" an image of genuinely transformative process, or a kind of polyamorous start-up? "The Communities of Compost worked and played hard" (p.138)... ↩

49. *Staying with the Trouble* p.159. ↩

50. *Staying with the Trouble* p.6, p.208. ↩

51. James Kneale, 'From beyond: HP Lovecraft and the place of horror.' (*cultural geographies* 2006, 13(1):106-126). ↩

52. *Staying with the Trouble* p.32. ↩

53. *Ibid.* 160. ↩

54. *ibid* p.2. ↩

55. Kneale (2006) p.120. ↩

56. *Manifestly Haraway* p.57. ↩

57. *ibid* p.3. ↩

58. I note that the word “goddess” appears in *Staying With the Trouble* no less than fourteen times, quite a lot for someone who once said – and still says – she’d rather stand with the unnatural and the queer. ↩

59. *Staying with the Trouble* p.166. ↩

**Sophie Lewis** is a writer, translator, utopian and critical geographer who has completed a PhD on gestational surrogacy (entitled *Cyborg Labour*) at the University of Manchester, England. Her academic writing is in (or forthcoming in) *Antipode*, *Feminism & Psychology*, *Signs*, *Frontiers* and the anthology *Intimate Economies* (Palgrave 2016). Her non-academic writing appears at *Blind Field*, *Salvage*, *Jacobin*, *The New Inquiry* and *Mute*. She helped turn Bini Adamczak's *Communism for Children* into English, as well as Patu/Antje Schrupp's *Brief History of Feminism*, for MIT Press. She is writing a book entitled *Full Surrogacy Now*."

Follow

---

Menu

- [About](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [Archives](#)

- [Essays](#)
  - [Dossiers](#)
- 



[Back to Top ▲](#)