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Citation: Hamilton, J.M. 2017. The Trouble with Babies. *Cultural Studies Review*, 23:1, 185-188. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v23i1.5505>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://csrj.epress.lib.uts.edu.au>

BOOK REVIEW

The Trouble with Babies

Donna Haraway. 2016

Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene

Durham: Duke University Press

ISBN 9780822362241. RRP: \$26.95 USD (pb)

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v23i1.5505>

Article History: Received 20/02/2017; Revised 21/02/2017; Accepted 21/02/2017; Published 15/05/2017

Although Donna Haraway's new book, *Staying with the Trouble*, is marketed as a monograph, it is really a collection of essays that many of us will have encountered in other contexts. 'Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others', for instance, first appeared in *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway* (2013) and has been in my Ecocriticism course reader ever since.¹ Likewise, I cite 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin' from *Environmental Humanities* in one of my recent journal articles.² Neither article has been rewritten for this book. Other sections are familiar to me as keynote lectures I have heard in the flesh or listened to online. I begin my review in this somewhat narcissistic way to illustrate my bias—I am very engaged with Haraway's work—and also to foreshadow my reservations about the success of this volume with specific regard to the central provocation announced in its title, namely the question of 'making kin'.

At the level of its individual chapters, Haraway's book is a pleasure to read because of the playful complexity she is famous for. While her affection for science-fiction tropes is

1 Donna Haraway, 'Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others', epilogue in Margret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, pp. 137–46.

2 Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

evident across her *oeuvre*, *Staying with the Trouble* is the closest she has ever come to a sci-fi genre piece. As a totality of examples from the reparative arts of The Crochet Coral Reef project, to her dog Cayenne's fraught medical imbrication with Big Pharma via the horses that are factory farmed for the high-oestrogen urine they produce—both of which could be found just as easily in the feminist futurism of Margaret Atwood—Haraway's book is best navigated with an openness to the speculative quality of her writing and its reimagining of the world.

Take, for instance, this sentence: 'The critters of all of my writing inhabit an n -dimensional niche space called Terrapolis'. (10) If this were not written in the first person, we could mistake it for a sentence from an Ursula K. Le Guin novel (who is, of course, one of Haraway's key interlocutors). Instead, it is a simultaneously approachable ('critters') and esoteric (' n -dimensional') way of expressing the idea that we are all situated on a multidimensional and political planet. The reason we recognise Haraway's writing as a product of feminist environmental humanities, or science and technology studies, or posthuman process philosophy, and not some creative parallel universe is because of her relentless real-world orientation. Haraway's primary method is ethnography: her stories are highly reflective retellings of earthly conflicts. Moreover, every strange noun we encounter when reading her registers a conceptual thickness that has developed across the course of her academic career. The term 'critters', for instance, which surfaced in *When Species Meet* (2008) as her charming gloss on more-than-human creatures or characters, has now proliferated across the environmental humanities as an affectionate way of referring to living organisms without defaulting to the familiar human-animal binarism and its tacit anthropocentrism.³ Reading her for the first time can still be perplexing but, once you get a handle on the referent the world starts to alter before your eyes. In *Staying with the Trouble* her prose continues to vibrate in that particularly Harawayan way.

Although the play on word and world is sustained throughout the book, it is in 'The Camille Stories: Children of Compost' that commitment to genre takes over. From beginning to end this essay presents an entirely speculative fictional philosophy regarding a different kind of social order. This is where she offloads the logic of her new slogan: 'Make Kin, not Babies!' Like most strong manifesto statements (SCUM comes to mind), this one generates feelings of ambivalence whereas the earlier 'Cyborgs for Earthly Survival!' seems less contentious. What feminist raised on Haraway's Cyborg manifesto wouldn't sign up to work with technology in order to construct a viable political response to the militaristic, technophilic hegemon that rules the world? But, the idea of just saying no to babies stops me in my maternal tracks and gives me pause. What is this hypothetical world with no babies?

I first encountered this new turn in Haraway's thinking in an online podcast of a lecture she delivered at the University of Alberta in 2014. Let me set the scene. I may have been breastfeeding at the time. I was certainly on maternity leave, though what that means to a sessional academic who received no allowance from either of the two universities at which I then taught, is debatable. Grateful for the 3-months minimum-wage equivalent granted me by Australian law, I spent a lot of my baby-time reading up on how other female academics managed their career after having children, though that wasn't why I tuned in to Haraway on this particular day. In the lecture Haraway spins humour out of the distinction between the reproductive body and the enquiring mind. In an aside to her real-time audience, she jokes about how her early research career in biological sciences was a product of US attempts

3 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008.

to supersede Russia during the Cold War: she explains that ‘that’s why my uterus remained quiescent, but my brain got a lot of cold war money’. Cue laughter. ‘That’s why I understand what the Anthropocene is and what its sciences are.’ Now I am some distance from this moment, I can take the joke for what it is: Haraway ironically acknowledging her personal debt to a militarised form of scientific funding despite her career-long commitment to its critique. At the time, however, her yukking it up with the crowd who had come to hear her lecture seemed yet another iteration of academic culture’s aversion to women with children. While her quiescent uterus was at the lecture podium, mine was still bleeding from the labour and my breasts were sore from feeding the little one. I took her aside *very* personally. Then, less than twenty minutes later in lecture time, Haraway began to talk about her conceptual baby: Camille.

Unsurprisingly, since I still had my hands full with an actual baby, I was initially resistant to the concept of Camille and the idea that we should make kin but not biological offspring. I find I am still resistant to this idea but now also for intellectual reasons. Is it possible I wonder, to have an ecological politics of population control such as Haraway proposes, that does not slide into a form of paternalistic colonialism or eugenics? Is population alone the origin of the ecological crisis or is this crisis a result of the volumes of food and pharmaceuticals delivered to us by fossil fuels? I, for one, would be dead without modern drugs and, likely enough, my no-longer baby too. Is this new manifesto something feminists should rise to (our own children notwithstanding) or is this an example of a non-reproductive woman chiding others, in particular economically disadvantaged women of non-Western nations, for their reproductive fertility without so much as acknowledging the fossil fuelled-intensive basis of her own privilege? Of course this may be my hormones speaking.

Haraway has not marched blindly and blithely into debates about population control that often attract patriarchal and moralising positions. In the introduction to *Staying with the Trouble*, she outlines her political approach to the question of human reproduction. ‘The great acceleration in human numbers,’ she argues, needs to be approached in ‘antiracist, anticolonial, anticapitalist, proqueer feminist’ terms. (6) This assertion flags for me the incommensurability between her two primary political projects: her on-going allegiance to feminism, with its commitment to a woman’s right to control her fertility (including having babies if she wants them), and her parallel investment in a multispecies future in which human offspring have no more value than the offspring of any other critter.

In the chapter where Camille’s story is fully explored, Haraway recounts the creative work she undertook with Fabrizio Terranova and Vinciane Despret at a writing workshop in Cerisy, France. All three were asked to generate the speculative equivalent of a Tamagotchi toy: they had to design a baby and construct a world in which this baby and her offspring could live through five successive generations. (134) Camille, Haraway’s imagined offspring, is no ordinary baby but a baby born into a different social contract from the one my child was born into (though not that different, as it turns out). To begin, Camille has three parents and a totem animal. Each of the Cerisy babies is charged with the task of surviving and bringing another species with her. In Camille’s case, her species is the Monarch Butterfly with whom she bonds as a pair of ‘symbionts’. As it unfolds, the story of Camille weaves a critique of both Western, heterosexual humanist reproduction and the anthropocentrism on which it is founded. Beginning with a different kind of birth, the social structure of future generations shifts in concert with a new model of living. This is not normative repro-futurism as Lee Edelman has diagnosed it, but a feminist speculative challenge to current straight and nuclear modes of making family and babies. Even with a son and husband, this is a slogan I can get

behind without having to move from the Earlwood share house (www.earlwoodfarm.com) in which our child is being raised in a human-animal menagerie that supplies him with a multispecies *oikos* of kith and kin.

On reflection, I think my reservations about the collection of essays stem from the fact that the Camille stories and the Against Babies manifesto it supports appears at the end of the book rather than providing its overarching rationale. Although the idea of ‘staying with the trouble’ unifies the project to some extent, it is not as interesting as Haraway’s propositional challenge to current models of human reproduction. In its most generalisable sense, ‘the trouble’ is the simple fact that living in the world often undermines our political commitments to that world. There is no exit strategy from this position of impurity, we just have to work with and through it however guilty it makes us feel. This has been Haraway’s creed for years and she is the first to acknowledge its debt to the Catholicism of her childhood. But the diffusiveness of ‘trouble’, like the diffusiveness of guilt, is sometimes hard to reckon with for both writer and reader: ‘Why tell stories like my pigeon tales, when there are only more and more openings and no bottom lines? Because there are quite definite response-abilities that are strengthened in such stories’. (29) It would be easier to get behind this affirmation if it weren’t repeated nearly verbatim a hundred pages later: ‘Why tell stories when there are only more and more openings and no bottom lines? Because there are quite definite response-abilities that are strengthened in such stories’. (115) The real provocation of this work—and not just for mothers—is contained in the eco-mantra ‘Make Kin, not Babies!’ I just hope the t-shirt bearing this slogan comes in toddler size.

About the author

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