



Afterword

Crossing Time, Space, and Species

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As many academics debate who is the “anthro” of the anthropocene, often doing so from seemingly disembodied vantage points, this important collection of essays demonstrates that toxic embodiment is a crucial lens for rethinking the human, not as an abstract force acting on the world, but as fleshy beings who are inseparable from their transcorporeal entanglements within the world. While the public concern for toxins seems overshadowed by the understandably urgent concerns about climate change, this collection makes a potent argument for attending to how environments, human bodies, and nonhuman bodies are being transformed by anthropogenic substances. The temporalities of these transformations, which are inseparable from ongoing histories of colonialism and capitalism, scramble conventional understandings of time, agency, and ontological categorization. Sasha Litvintseva, for example, grapples with the temporality of asbestos, noting the “unfolding of the deferred yet certain effects of asbestos on the toxic body and the unpayable debt owed to it by industrial progress.” Whether “the toxic body” or “industrial progress” can even be thought as such is questionable, yet it is safe to say that the sort of debt she provocatively imagines, will not, in the end, have been paid.

Feminist science studies and other new materialist feminisms offer robust theories for grappling with these strange matters. Many of the essays included here expand on these theories, most notably, perhaps with trans, decolonial, and indigenous philosophies and histories. Some narratives are as captivating as they are incisive. The riveting tale within Hugo Reinert’s “The Midwife and the Poet: Bioaccumulation and Retroactive Shock,” is, for example, crafted to produce an experience of retroactive shock within the reader. Reinert writes, “to grasp the poisoned mother in her full implication meant being shifted, shockingly, into a world that you already shared with her but which, until that point, only she could experience: a damaged world, suffused by invisible poisons, shaped by forces that were remote, powerful, and unaccountable.” Toxic

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bodies catalyze narratives that decline disassociation, sequestering, and invulnerability. Instead, these stories inhabit the ethical, political, and theoretical quandaries of the Anthropocene by finding themselves, retroactively perhaps, within sites of enunciation that interlace the scientific, historical, personal, and political. Miriam Tola, for example, puts forth a conception of the “cosmpolitical commons” that “foregrounds, and politicizes, attachments across time, species, and elements,” as she analyzes “eco-memories” as assemblages. Such narratives are propelled by the challenge of reckoning with what it means to live, think, and act as toxic bodies, which often entails fracturing the Western capitalist ideology of the individual self. Nina Lykke’s “Anthropocene necropolitics,” for instance, shifts from an individual “‘I,’ waging ‘war’ on cancer to a ‘we,’ based on a planetwide kinship of vulnerable bodies.”

Much of the scientific, scholarly, and activist thinking about toxic bodies has thus far operated within the parameters of the human, divided into the (more privileged) environmental health and (less privileged) environmental justice movements. Even as environmental health and environmental justice, along with climate justice, indigenous sovereignty, and queer ecology movements, have hardly gained a solid footing, concerns for multispecies justice need not be shunted off to the side, to await attention later—since toxins interconnect bodies and ecologies through their strange agencies, offering the possibility for ethical relations that need not be sequential. Wibke Straube argues that trans bodies and ticks—who are both “unloved others”—can be “responded to and approached through reciprocity and relationality.” And Michael Marder sees toxins as enacting a deindividualizing cross-species leveling, as toxic substances “hit ‘me’ as though I were a lump of flesh not at all distinct from the flesh of a rodent, a cockroach, microbes, or a dandelion.” Thinking with indistinct flesh, or in my terms, thinking as the very stuff of the world, can radiate curiosity and concern in multiple directions, as we consider how every species must inhabit the ever more precarious crossroads of body, place, and (toxic) substances. Indeed, we are hit with ever more grotesque accounts of animal life extinguished by toxins: “An orca that was found dead last year is now considered one of the most polluted whales ever found.”¹ This orca, Lulu, a member of one of the last Orca pods near the United Kingdom, calls us to think across toxic bodies of many species, tracing the entanglements that underscore the necessity for ethico-political praxis that exceeds the untenable figure of the (Western) human.

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1. Deamer, “Dead Orca Contained Highest Levels of Toxins Ever Recorded in a Whale.”

Reference

Deamer, Kacey. "Dead Orca Contained Highest Levels of Toxins Ever Recorded in a Whale." *Live Science*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.livescience.com/59024-dead-orca-is-considered-most-polluted-whale.html>.