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Thneeds Reseeds: Figures of Biocultural Hope in the Anthropocene

Thneeds Reseeds, a sculptural artwork by Deanna Pindell, is a biotactical intervention aimed at exposing and derailing dominant regimes for managing sylvan life (da Costa and Philip 2008, xviii). Imagining a way to reseed the clear-cut forested landscapes near her home on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, Deanna began collecting friends' multicolored wool sweaters—old and funky things that were no longer fashionable to wear. Refashioning the form of these commodities, products of the excess of late capitalism, she shrank the donated sweaters in her drier. Using a time-tested process called “felting,” she made fuzzy softball-sized sculptures, brightly colored habitats for forest plants and animals. Deanna created small openings so that forest mice, voles, and salamanders might live inside the Thneeds. She also hoped that these wool balls would become moth-eaten, that they would become food for the insect community.

The name for these sculptures was taken from *The Lorax*, a classic childhood tale by Dr. Seuss about environmental destruction. “A thneed’s a fine something that all people need,” proclaims the Old Onceler, a haunting specter of dead capital who is the nemesis of the Lorax: “It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a glove, it’s a hat. But it has other uses, yes, far beyond that!” Speaking for nature, the Lorax persistently tries to interrupt the Old Onceler’s plans to get mighty rich by knitting these multi-purposed sweaters: “I’m the Lorax, who speaks for the trees, which you seem to be chopping as fast as you please. But I’m also in charge of the brown barbaloots, who played in the shade in their barbaloot suits, and happily lived, eating truffula fruits” (Seuss 1971, 17–18).

Bruno Latour has rearticulated the refrain of the Lorax. Calling on scholars of science and society to give democratic rights to non-humans, Latour has suggested that we construct “speech prosthetics”: “millions of subtle mechanisms capable of adding new voices to the chorus” (2004, 64, 69). The Lorax attempted to speak for a multitude of creatures living among the truffula trees. But, ultimately, this tragic figure failed to save this forest from being clear-cut. Perhaps initiatives to build new speech prosthetics, to bring the voices of other species into play, also always generate constitutive outsiders who are unrepresented in realms of human discourse (Dumit 2008, xii; Kirksey 2012, 48).

Rather than simply repeat failed truth-telling strategies, or construct speech prosthetics for particular species, Deanna Pindell has worked to create livable futures in the aftermath of ecological disaster. Multispecies ethnographers have recently taken an “ontological turn,” departing from a foundational distinction between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans that is at the base of Euro-American epistemology (Candeia 2010; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Tracing the vector of a parallel turn, Deanna and other artists operating in biological and ecological domains have begun to explore novel modes of care for beings in multispecies worlds (Gablik 1991; Bureaud 2002, 39; Zurr 2004, 402; da Costa and Philip 2008).

When she first moved to the Olympic Peninsula of Washington, Deanna found that struggles by environmental advocates to save particular patches of forest were taking place alongside struggles by loggers who were trying desperately to keep their jobs, to heat their homes. As activists lost steam, timber companies cut the forest and then moved on—leaving devastated ecosystems and unemployed people in their wake.

“Every time I passed a clear-cut forest,” Deanna told me, “I felt a sense of loss, a sense of mourning.”

Seeing that the oppositional politics of activists were failing, Deanna began reworking the ideas of metamorphosis, remediation, and sanctuary. Rather than dwell on tragedy, she began to add a sense of comedy into the mix. Seeding these abandoned lands with multicolored wool balls, she began enlisting multiple species to enliven these devastated spaces. Overcoming incapacitating feelings of mourning, Deanna played with the tale of the Lorax to invent a novel technology of interspecies care and cultivation.

Deanna initially created her Thneeds Reseeds with one particular species in mind: silvery bryum (*Bryum argenteum*), one of the most resilient mosses in the world. This plant is found in all sorts of seemingly hostile environments—from the tarmacs of New York City airports to the tiled roofs of Quito. Deanna hoped that giving it a moist substrate would enable it to become a “first responder” in clear-cut forests. The spores of silvery bryum are abundant in aerial plankton, the cloud of spores, pollen, and insects that circulates the globe at altitudes up to 4,500 meters (see Raffles 2010, 10; Kimmerer 2003, 92).

Moss spores are raining down in the air all around us, looking for a suitable place to germinate—a solid substrate with enough light and water. Deanna designed the Thneeds to trap rain, to hold on to moisture that would otherwise evaporate in a landscape where the forest canopy had been removed. A book by bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History*, initially gave Deanna the idea of using silvery bryum to help the forest regenerate. At an abandoned iron mine, Kimmerer found that tree seeds grew and survived best on huge mounds of tailings when living in partnership with moss (2003, 50).

Deanna sent 21 Thneeds to the Multispecies Salon, an art exhibit that blurred the distinction between ecoart and bioart (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Kirksey, Schuetz, and Shapiro 2011). Her installation was framed by instructions and a tragic joke: “Thneeds Reseeds. To restore your clear-cut forest: 1) Break the mosses into fragments; 2) Mix the moss with buttermilk; 3) Place Thneeds in clear-cut; 4) Keep the Thneeds moist with buttermilk until tree seedlings can take hold. Enough Thneeds for one square meter of forest.” If Deanna’s scale of intervention, one square meter, is a tragic joke, she hopes her piece will help inspire other people to develop their own ideas about enlivening abandoned spaces.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) bioculture is generating emergent forms of diversity that are enabling certain species to flourish in the Anthropocene, the era when the agency of humans has been scaled up to embrace and endanger the planet. Novel microbiopolitical interventions—local cycles of materials on a microscale, outside of dominant institutionalized practices and global commodity chains—are allowing for cross-species tactical coordination (cf. da Costa and Philip 2008, xi; Paxson 2008, 40; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 560; Berrigan, 2012). A multitude of bioartists and ecoartists are generating living figures of biocultural hope.

Certain notions of “hope” are vacuous. Jacques Derrida, for example, attempted to evacuate all content from his dreams as he faced the immense “abyssal desert” of future possibility. Derrida cultivated an empty notion of hope, devoid of any objects of desire (1994, 28; cf. Jameson 1999, 62). Trying to literally expect the unexpected, Derrida was waiting for mysterious possibilities that were utterly unfigurable, beyond our imaginative horizons (Derrida 1999, 253; cf. Crapanzano 2004, 103–4, 146; Kirksey 2012).

Rather than harbor empty dreams devoid of all figures, Deanna Pindell has worked to congeal her imaginings of post-industrial futures in actual material objects. The Thneeds Reeseeds are intended to be agential things in the world, tools for enlisting multiple species in the healing of damaged ecosystems or even generating new kinds of flourishing (cf. Haraway 2007). These sculptures prefigure coming changes and contain a radical openness to possible multispecies becomings. Deanna has knit particular species into the fabric of one imagined future for Pacific Northwest forests. Her project also offers an opening for a multitude of other life forms, and creative human agents, to explore new ways of being-with-others in the world (Hardt and Negri 2004; Despret 2004, 122; Kirksey, Schuetze, and Shapiro 2011).

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