

REVIEW

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis, MN and London, UK: Minneapolis University Press, 2017)

And

Unreal Objects: Digital Materialities, Technoscientific Projects and Political Realities (Digital Barricades) by Kate O’Riordan (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2017)

Kim De Wolff

University of North Texas
kim.dewolff@unt.edu

How should we respond to the entwined trajectories of seemingly inevitable technological progress and a planet careening toward ecological collapse? We resist. And we focus on the arts of living. Or so argue two new books that share feminist materialist commitments to the entangled becomings of matter and meaning, humans and more-than-human worlds. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, the editorial team assembles a powerful transdisciplinary collection that addresses the lively

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and deathly multispecies landscapes of the anthropocene. Here, “bodies tumbled into bodies”, the flourishing and perishing of beings as/and ecologies challenge modernist assumptions of individuality and progress. In *Unreal Objects*, Kate O’Riordan also takes on progress, turning to the grand technoscientific projects so often positioned as utopian solutions to the problems of contemporary life. Here, bodies tumble into technologies as she ambitiously works to destabilize the assumed, yet always mediated, existence of biotechnical objects. As all of the authors grapple with the emerging materialities of the now and the near future, both texts demonstrate commitments to decentering the human but, crucially, with feminist attention to situated narratives and meanings. As Tsing et al. write, “Material worlds and the stories we tell about them are bound up with each other” (M10). This statement would be equally at home in O’Riordan’s introduction since the influence of Donna Haraway’s material-semiotics and Karen Barad’s feminist new materialism reverberates throughout both texts. As such, neither book outlines a radically new theoretical perspective; they instead share the strength in what they bring together, reinvigorating powerful feminist approaches in the current moment of technological and ecological concern.

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet gathers the work of twenty prominent humanities and science scholars and writers into a guidebook for earthly survival that demonstrates the “arts of living”: entangled histories, thick description and situated narratives. The collection is organized around two points of departure, each with a respective introduction and table of contents: indeterminate *Ghosts* leading us through landscapes haunted by modern progress; and multispecies *Monsters* unsettling individuality while inspiring forms of collective care. With compelling questions and sweeping synthesis, the twin introductions are provocation-manifesto hybrids: calls to look, listen and imagine differently. Co-written by the four editors, these opening pieces draw on concrete examples from the volume to establish a shared language of entanglements, world making, and storytelling of comingled feminist materialist traditions, rather than turning to lengthy theoretical

exposition. Tsing's presence, though, does ring particularly clear as the imperative to develop the "art of noticing" life in the ruins echoes from her 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

As a collection, these essays push far beyond the individual contributions of the unanimously stellar cast of contributors (including the inimitable Ursula K. Le Guin, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway), to follow interwoven threads not only across species and geographies but through the very makings of scale. Or, as Barad writes of spacetime mattering, "the dynamic reconfiguring of the field of relationalities...where *scale is iteratively re-made in intra-action*" (G111). Most directly in conversation with the anthropocene as concept and epoch, *Ghosts* takes us from the unexpected secret lives of lichen in a New England cemetery (Pringle) to the more expectedly haunted landscape of Chernobyl fallout where surprise lies in a radiation monitor and surreptitious photographer's sense-ability to feel and even taste decaying atoms (Brown). *Monsters*, in contrast, takes a more indirect approach to the anthropocene, tacking between species and spatial interdependencies to show "the enfolding of bodies within bodies in evolution and in every ecological niche" (M2). It is in this conversation between what appear as macro-level entanglements (Freccero's humans and wolves and Lien's fishy connections) and the micro-level ones (McFall-Ngai and Gilbert's microbial worlds) that challenges to modern paradigms of autonomy and ecology emerge. Yet perhaps the most telling demonstration overall is how readily monsters infiltrate ghostly landscapes and vice versa. That many chapters could fit equally well on either side (particularly Parker's grassland of invasive species that render indigenous wildflowers ghosts and Rose's shimmering symbiosis of flowers and flying foxes) is testament to the entangled existence of beings and landscapes where relationships exceed even the most careful organizational structures.

As an artifact, the paperback version of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* embodies ontological commitments to entanglements-against-progress narratives in its own material form. With double covers, acknowledgments and tables of contents, the haphazard placement of a

barcode sticker provides the only clue as to which way is up. Regardless of your point of entry, the second half of the text will be upside down. The ambiguous beginning combined with the flipping required to read the book in its entirety is more suggestive of endless looping of a Möbius strip than simply having two sides, a sentiment that is foreshadowed by the John Cage image and accompanying caption that opens *Ghosts* with “elements that can be layered into infinite compositions.” This innovative organization, however, is somewhat diminished in eBook form where, rather ironically, the coded templates of digital readers become more limiting than physical paper and the book is remediated in linear fashion, beginning with *Ghosts* and ending with twin codas (that mischievously meet at the central inversion point of the paper version).

Where *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* explores modes of collaboration and experiments with written forms, in *Unreal Objects* Kate O’Riordan offers conceptual precision as a tool for disarming narratives of inevitability. In order to challenge progress stories and all their attendant injustices, we cannot take the objects of Big Technoscience at face value. But with the material turn, O’Riordan contends, too many scholars are guilty of doing just that: insisting that technoscientific objects are already given and, in doing so, enabling domination by reducing human agency to mere response. Here enters the concept of unreal objects, tasked with bringing these seemingly inevitable objects “back to the life of things, processes, materials and meaning making” (p. 14), back, that is, into the realm of feminist materialities where media-objects make worlds. An unreal object, then, is anything given or treated as real but that derives this very status from its unacknowledged entanglements with the contingencies (the “unreal”) of apparatus, mediation and storytelling. After carefully situating “unreal objects” within (feminist) and against (object-oriented) materialist theoretical constellations in the introduction, the four chapters that follow put the concept to work, ambitiously tackling the topics of the human genome, biosensors, smart grids, artificial meat and de-extinction respectively. Given the current proliferation of many excellent monographs dedicated to these topics in depth, *Unreal Objects’*

potential lies in demonstrating the analytic prowess of its namesake concept as it travels. This is arguably most successful in “The Shadow of Genomics” which demonstrates the unreality of *the* human genome as it only emerges as an object through its digital mediations with and as code, a process that simultaneously renders life a commodifiable form in the service of biocapitalism (p. 27). The concept also works well in “Smart Grids: Energy Futures, Carbon Capture and Geoengineering”, revealing how smart grids currently only exist as green promises on a large scale, but it is less powerfully applied to biosensors like the Fitbit, which already appear more obviously as both media and as objects. The area where *Unreal Objects* truly excels is in explicitly carving space for feminist critique within what has become an expansive materialist literature. This work is not at all contained in the introduction and conclusion but appears throughout the text, including where it pokes holes in the “inflated ego” of totalizing digital media theory (p. 16), and in a memorably pointed feminist takedown of Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* as a “god trick” (p. 44). O’Riordan points to the importance of “collective political thinking” in academia and beyond, asking “which speculations get to count as real futures?” (p. 142).

Considered together, *Unreal Objects* and *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* map critical pathways of resistance and collaboration through some of the most pressing (and trendy) contemporary territory where the fleshy and digital meet. In *Unreal Objects*, where the mediated is always the contingent, the same contradictory forces that make objects unreal allow for a seemingly inevitable world to be made otherwise. But despite its inclusion as part of a series called “Digital Barricades,” which explores possibilities for “revolt and liberation,” the promise of resistance sometimes feels tacked on to the end of chapters and falls short of inspiring action beyond theoretical disruption. Though such openings are arguably preconditions for living differently, there is more work to be done establishing what such practices might look like, particularly outside academic contexts. Tsing et al. are more successful in getting on with the arts of living, acknowledging but refusing to get bogged down by

arguments about terminology or origin points for the anthropocene (as in Moore's 2016 *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*). Still, it is notably the scholars based in the natural sciences who most lucidly articulate new practices, calling for ecologists to build bridges with microbiologists (McFall-Ngai, M65) that can then be manifested in multispecies approaches to conversation (Funch, M151).

Admittedly, I was initially hesitant to undertake a joint review of what on the surface appeared as such markedly different texts: a massively multi-authored, edited collection about strategies for multispecies survival, and a highly theoretical-sounding single-authored book about digital objects: one sharing almost equal space with scientists, the other taking aim at scientific projects. But it is in such unexpected crossings of emerging life forms and emerging technologies that generative conversations themselves emerge where we might consider the anthropocene-as-geological-fact an unreal object, or talk about a human genome that is not only highly mediated (O'Riordan) but arguably also mostly not human (Gilbert M76). At the same time, this reading together left me wishing that O'Riordan had done more with her own writing practice, which has a somewhat frustrating tendency to bury the most fascinating details instead of leading with compelling stories. Conversely, Tsing et al. seem only to gesture toward power and capitalism, whereas O'Riordan is far more explicit about whose interests narratives of progress serve. Because *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* provides an exemplary model for interdisciplinary work that moves beyond simple juxtaposition to collaboration truly deserving of the label transdisciplinary, I cannot help but think of how the promises of "symbiotic scholarship" (M8) might be limited not only by the time it takes to develop an art but also by the demands of the neoliberal university.

We need new institutional structures. New metaphors. New stories. Old stories told anew. We need more (feminist) humanists who focus on the non-human and more scientists who ask big philosophical questions about what it all means. No single text or pair of texts can solve our nested crises, but *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* and *Unreal*

Objects can and do offer creative optimism for confronting terrors without succumbing to despair. Together, these authors open up spaces for meaningful change, “disrupting the narrative of the inevitable world given to us in which we can only react” (O’Riordan 2017, p. 3), pushing with cautious hope toward new forms of observation, resistance and action in perilous times. In the exquisite prose of Deborah Bird Rose, “We are...called into gratitude for the fact that in the midst of terrible destruction, life finds ways to flourish, and that the shimmer of life does indeed include us all” (G61).

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Bio

Kim De Wolff is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Texas.