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Interview

Feminist cyborg scholar Donna Haraway: 'The disorder of our era isn't necessary'

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Cyborg Manifesto author and philosopher who explores the nature of reality discusses the science wars and climate activism

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The history of philosophy is also a story about real estate.

Driving into Santa Cruz to visit Donna Haraway, I can't help feeling that I was born too late. The metal sculpture of a donkey standing on Haraway's front porch, the dogs that scramble to her front door barking when we ring the bell, and the big black rooster strutting in the coop out back – the entire setting evokes an era of freedom and creativity that postwar wealth made possible in northern California.

Here was a counterculture whose language and sensibility the tech industry sometimes adopts, but whose practitioners it has mostly priced out. Haraway, who came to the University of Santa

Cruz in 1980 to take up the first tenured professorship in feminist theory in the US, still conveys the sense of a wide-open world.

Haraway was part of an influential cohort of feminist scholars who trained as scientists before turning to the philosophy of science in order to investigate how beliefs about gender shaped the production of knowledge about nature. Her most famous text remains The Cyborg Manifesto, published in 1985. It began with an assignment on feminist strategy for the Socialist Review after the election of Ronald Reagan and grew into an oracular meditation on how cybernetics and digitization had changed what it meant to be male or female - or, really, any kind of person. It gained such a cult following that Hari Kunzru, profiling her for Wired magazine years later, wrote: "To boho twentysomethings, her name has the kind of cachet usually reserved for techno acts or new phenethylamines."

The cyborg vision of gender as changing and changeable was radically new. Her map of how information technology linked people around the world into new chains of affiliation, exploitation and solidarity feels prescient at a time when an Instagram influencer in Berlin can line the pockets of Silicon Valley executives by using a phone assembled in China that contains cobalt mined in Congo to access a platform moderated by Filipinas.

Haraway's other most influential text may be an essay that appeared a few years later, on what she called "situated knowledges". The idea, developed in conversation with feminist philosophers and activists such as Nancy Hartsock, concerns how truth is made. Concrete practices of particular people *make* truth, Haraway argued. The scientists in a laboratory don't simply observe or conduct experiments on a cell, for instance, but co-create what a cell *is* by seeing, measuring, naming and manipulating it. Ideas like these have a long history in American pragmatism. But they became politically explosive during the so-called science wars of the 1990s - a series of public debates among "scientific realists" and "postmodernists" with echoes in controversies about bias and objectivity in academia today.

'My attention is centered on the extermination and extinction crises happening at a worldwide level, on human and non-human displacement and homelessness. That's where my energies are.' Photograph: Courtesy Icarus Films

Haraway's more recent work has turned to human-animal relations and the climate crisis. She is a capacious *yes, and* thinker, the kind of leftist feminist who believes that the best thinking is done collectively. She is constantly citing other people, including graduate students, and giving credit to them. A recent documentary about her life and work by the Italian film-maker Fabrizio

Terranova, Storytelling for Earthly Survival, captures this sense of commitment, as well as her extraordinary intellectual agility and inventiveness.

At her home in Santa Cruz, we talked about her memories of the science wars and how they speak to our current "post-truth" moment, her views on contemporary climate activism and the Green New Deal, and why play is essential for politics.

We are often told we are living in a time of "post-truth". Some critics have blamed philosophers like yourself for creating the environment of "relativism" in which "post-truth" flourishes. How do you respond to that?

Our view was *never* that truth is just a question of which perspective you see it from.

[The philosopher] Bruno [Latour] and I were at a conference together in Brazil once. (Which reminds me: if people want to criticize us, it ought to be for the amount of jet fuel involved in making and spreading these ideas! Not for leading the way to post-truth.)

Anyhow. We were at this conference. It was a bunch of primate field biologists, plus me and Bruno. And Stephen Glickman, a really cool biologist, took us apart privately. He said: "Now, I don't want to embarrass you. But do you believe in reality?"

We were both kind of shocked by the question. First, we were shocked that it was a question of *belief*, which is a Protestant question. A confessional question. The idea that reality is a question of belief is a barely secularized legacy of the religious wars. In fact, reality is a matter of worlding and inhabiting. It is a matter of testing the holdingness of things. Do things *hold* or not?

Take evolution. The notion that you would or would not "believe" in evolution already gives away the game. If you say, "Of course I believe in evolution," you have lost, because you have entered the semiotics of representationalism - and post-truth, frankly. You have entered an arena where these are all just matters of internal conviction and have nothing to do with the world. You have left the domain of worlding.

'Reality is a matter of worlding and inhabiting. It is a matter of testing the holdingness of things. Do things hold or not?' Photograph: James Tensuan/The Guardian

The science warriors who attacked us during the science wars were determined to paint us as social constructionists - that all truth is purely socially constructed. And I think we walked into that. We invited those misreadings in a range of ways. We could have been more careful about listening and engaging more slowly. It was all too easy to read us in the way the science warriors

did. Then the rightwing took the science wars and ran with it, which eventually helped nourish the whole fake-news discourse.

Your PhD is in biology. How do your scientist colleagues feel about your approach to science?

To this day I know only one or two scientists who like talking this way. And there are good reasons why scientists remain very wary of this kind of language. I belong to the Defend Science movement and in most public circumstances I will speak softly about my own ontological and epistemological commitments. I will use representational language. I will defend less-than-strong objectivity because I think we have to, situationally.

Is that bad faith? Not exactly. It's related to [what the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called] "strategic essentialism". There is a strategic use to speaking the same idiom as the people that you are sharing the room with. You craft a good-enough idiom so you can work on something together. I go with what we can make happen in the room together. And then we go further tomorrow.

In the struggles around climate change, for example, you have to join with your allies to block the cynical, well-funded, exterminationist machine that is rampant on the Earth. I think my colleagues and I are doing that. We have not shut up, or given up on the apparatus that we developed. But one can foreground and background what is most salient depending on the historical conjuncture.

What do you find most salient at the moment?

What is at the center of my attention are land and water sovereignty struggles, such as those over the Dakota Access pipeline, over coal mining on the Black Mesa plateau, over extractionism everywhere. My attention is centered on the extermination and extinction crises happening at a worldwide level, on human and non-human displacement and homelessness. That's where my energies are. My feminism is in these other places and corridors.

What kind of political tactics do you see as being most important – for young climate activists, the Green New Deal, etc?

The degree to which people in these occupations *play* is a crucial part of how they generate a new political imagination, which in turn points to the kind of work that needs to be done. They open up the imagination of something that is not what [the ethnographer] Deborah Bird Rose calls "double death" - extermination, extraction, genocide.

Now, we are facing a world with all three of those things. We are facing the production of systemic homelessness. The way that flowers aren't blooming at the right time, and so insects can't feed their babies and can't travel because the timing is all screwed up, is a kind of forced homelessness. It's a kind of forced migration, in time and space.

This is also happening in the human world in spades. In regions like the Middle East and Central America, we are seeing forced displacement, some of which is climate migration. The drought in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America [Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador] is driving people off their land.

So it's not a humanist question. It's a multi-kind and multi-species question.

What's so important about play?

Play captures a lot of what goes on in the world. There is a kind of raw opportunism in biology and chemistry, where things work stochastically to form emergent systematicities. It's not a matter of direct functionality. We need to develop practices for thinking about those forms of activity that are not caught by functionality, those which propose the possible-but-not-yet, or that which is not-yet but still open.

It seems to me that our politics these days require us to give each other the heart to do just that. To figure out how, with each other, we can open up possibilities for what can still be. And we can't do that in a negative mood. We can't do that if we do nothing but critique. We need critique; we absolutely need it. But it's not going to open up the sense of what might yet be. It's not going to open up the sense of that which is not yet possible but profoundly needed.

The established disorder of our present era is not necessary. It exists. But it's not necessary.

A longer version of this conversation will appear in a forthcoming issue of Logic, a magazine about technology. To learn more, or subscribe, visit logicmag.io.

The documentary Donna Haraway: Story Telling For Earthly Survival is now available to stream on Amazon, iTunes, and Vimeo, as well as on DVD via Icarus Films.

Regenerating the future without reproducing it:

Donna Haraway's nature-cultural, multi-species kinship

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Fabrizio Terranova's film *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* draws its inspiration mostly from Donna Haraway's last work – her book *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Anthropocene*, published in 2016.[1] In what follows, I will try to unravel some conceptual knots, central to Donna Haraway's work, which may enable us to follow particularly those threads that lead to the understanding of her contribution to imagining different ways of creating communities or "kinship", with implications also for contemporary ecological thought. I will also point at the way we may understand the formal structure and some motifs of the film in dialogue with some of Haraway's most recognizable forms of thinking, which draw our attention to the "troubles" with which we should, as Haraway says, "stay" in order to think them through together.

Situating Haraway

Haraway's 1991 book, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, has been widely translated worldwide in the past decades, in 1999 also into Slovenian.[2] It includes also the nowadays already classic "Cyborg Manifesto". In a conversation with Cary Wolfe, included in the book *Manifestly Haraway*,[3] Haraway recounts how she wrote "A Cyborg Manifesto" as a brand new faculty member at the University of Santa Cruz in California (where she is now Emeritus Professor of History of Consciousness), while slowly getting acquainted with the structuralist and poststructuralist theory spreading in the anglophone humanities at that time.[4] Haraway emphasises that her thinking was also influenced by her previous experiences as lecturer at the University of Hawaii and at Joan Hopkins University, where she got a chance to glimpse into the way the military industrial complex was (still is?) embedded into the technoscientific practices of research and higher education,[5] while being also marked by all the historical and political baggage of her cold-war surrounding, as well as the personal relationships and friendships she built at the time, which would remain lifetime commitments.[6] Her invitation to move away from reproductive lifestyles in the biological, patriarchal family and live other kinds of lives – you have probably heard of it: "Make kin, not babies"[7] – was one she took herself, building nonheteronormative, non-reproductive forms of living together, which she also mentions in the film. These facts are not simply anecdotal biographic notes, they are important for understanding her work. For Donna Haraway, knowledge is in fact always "situated" – nobody thinks, knows and writes from nowhere or everywhere, everybody thinks, knows or writes from a very particular place, a particular social and political context, historical situation, *naturecultural* environment, to use one of her signature terms. Let us start

[1] Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016.

[2] Donna Haraway, *Opice, kiborgi in ženske, reinvencija narave*, translated by Valerija Vendramin and Tina Potrato, Študentska založba, Ljubljana 1999 [1991].

[3] *Cf.* Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe, "Companions in conversation", in: Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2016, pp. 199–289.

[4] *Op cit.,* p. 209.

[5] *Op cit.,* p. 203.

[6] *Op cit.,* p. 205.

[7] *V.* Donna J. Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationcene, Chthulucene: Making Kin", *Environmental Humanities*, n. 6, 2015, pp. 159–165.

our short walk following some of threads of Haraway's thinking with a quote taken from the Introduction she wrote to a collection of her essays, published in 2003. She begins it thusly:

> I learned to read and write inside worlds at war. I was born near the end of World War II, grew up in the Cold War, attended graduate school during the Viet Nam War, and I am preparing this *Reader* for publication during my country's invasion of Iraq. And that's the short list. These wars are personal. They make me who I am; they throw me into inherited obligations, whether I like it or not. These worlds at war are the belly of the monster from which I have tried to write into a more vivid reality a kin group of feminist figures. My hope is that these marked figures might guide us to a more liveable place, one that in the spirit of science fiction I have called "elsewhere."[8]

This quote underlines the lived situatedness of thinking in Haraway's work, while also offering a few conceptual knots to untie. Some of these can be found already in the title of her Introduction: "A Kinship of Feminist Figurations". Here, we encounter two concepts that will accompany us in our exploration: "kinship" and "figuration".

Kinship beyond reproduction

In a recent lecture she held at Yale, Haraway got a provocative question: if her work and life have been in many ways devoted to decentring the model of the patriarchal reproductive family based upon biological/genetic/blood ties, how come that to name a different form of "multispecies togetherness" she chose a word that usually refers precisely to genetic, reproductive ties, i.e. "kinship"? Given Haraway's attention to linguistic figuration, how come she did not choose a different term, e.g. solidarity, community, care?[9] Haraway has always tried to articulate the possibility of a different, non-exploitative, non-repressive form of living together and relating to each other from within the "belly of the monster" (as she writes), from a situation that is never "innocent", never ethically unambiguous, always complex and "troubled".[10] As she says, she tried to find a word that would name a relationality that is not necessarily the result of personal choice, that does not depend upon whom we agree and whom we disagree with, whom we like and whom we dislike, but is rather bound with the larger environment, the place we are thrown into and the particular historical, socio-political baggage that accompanies us. She was looking for a figure that would include ties that demand care, questions that demand our ability to respond, to be responsive and responsible (as she puts it, our "response-ability"), regardless of whether we want to answer those particular questions or not.[11] As she says in the quote rendered above about the broader, global political midst she was thrown into: "These wars are personal. They make me who I am; they throw me into inherited obligations, whether I like it or not."[12] This entails the privilege and the curse of being situated in political communities enmeshed in contemporary invasive economic and military operations; communities, heirs to heavy pasts and presents of brutal colonisation, depredation of natural resources and the wiping out of indigenous human and non-human populations. By living, we unwillingly forge ties with a multitude of human and non-human beings whose lives bear the consequences of our actions, our travels, our consumptions; just as we enmesh ourselves into human and non-human communities of direct

[8] Donna J. Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004, p. 2.
[9] Donna J. Haraway: "Making Oddkin: Story Telling for Earthly Survival", a talk at the University of Yale, published online on 26 October 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-iEnSztKu8, (5/6/2019).
[10] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, p. 2.
[11] Haraway, "Making Oddkin".
[12] *Ibid.*

care, affection and responsibility. We weave these ties like players of the game of "the cat's cradle", playing string figures with the multitude of beings who are our co-players.[13] This game provides Donna Haraway with her preferred figure for thinking common thinking and common living:[14] we receive a string figure from our co-player and we must continue making new string figures, otherwise the game – the thinking, the living – comes to an end. Such weaving of thoughts is demonstrated by Haraway also in the film, most explicitly when she reads a passage from a book by philosopher and chemist Isabell Stengers, written in French, which Haraway simultaneously translates into English; this is a quote from Haraway's own work which Stengers had previously translated from English into French... the passage is thusly of course thoroughly transformed, yet without becoming something completely different.

In her last book, Donna Haraway asks: "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with."[15] We need other stories. "Autopoiesis" is a term coined by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in 1972 to explain the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells; since then, it came to be used in the social sciences and environmental humanities to explain the self-organisation of complex ecological, social and other systems. Contrary to such an understanding of living and social systems, Haraway claims that barely anything or anyone develops itself and on its own; instead, most of everything that is develops, changes and becomes with others and other things.[16] If we were to ascribe Donna Haraway's thought a particular ontology, it would undoubtedly be a relational ontology of mutual becoming, co-becoming or *becoming with*, an ontology of "s*ympoiesis*",[17] in Haraway's words. Relation designates both the bonds that tie people to each other more generally and a person of kin, a relative. "Kinship" can thus be understood as Donna Haraway's concept for grasping the ontological relationality of beings of different species, and of other natural phenomena, as well as machines and other artefacts: kinship is what summons us to response-ability beyond our wishes, desires or will. At the same time, "kinship" is also a concept pointing from the troubled, knotted present ("the belly of the monster") to the possibilities for creating different kinds of connections: "Make kin, not babies".[18] In her notion of "multispecies kinship", ethically tied to the notion of "multispecies justice",[19] "kinship" is equally a figure for thinking a different kind of future, different, less destructive, less suffering, less oppressive forms of living and dying together, for thinking an "elsewhere" and an "*elsewhen*".[20] These are terms Haraway borrows from science fiction; and as she points out in the film, science fiction is, for her, a form of thinking, and not simply material necessitating of philosophical reflection. The last chapter of her last book, "The Camille Stories" is a story that recounts different generations of a character called Camille, who live in a society where symbiosis with creatures of other species at the molecular level is

[13] This game entails making string figures with a knotted string; our co-player will intervene into the string figure we've made to make a new one, and take over the string in its new figuration; this is then an invitation for the other player to do the same, and so the game goes on.
[14] *Cf.* Donna J. Haraway, "SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far", *Ada, A Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology,* n. 3, 2003, doi:10.7264/N3KH0K81.
[15] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 33.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene", p. 162.
[19] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 3.
[20] Haraway, *op. cit.,* p. 31.

a common and desirable practice; a society where all children have at least three parents and each adult at most one child, together with two others – a society thus progressively diminishing its population to an ecologically more sustainable level.[21] The last sequence of the film before the final credits – the latter take the form of a camera-driven journey through an imaginary, digitally animated coral reef – offers us a visualisation of this story, or rather, an exercise in restraining visualisation. Up to this point, the film has been populated by visually stunning intrusions of images, from book covers to oceanic creatures; now it humbly withdraws into the dark undergrowth. Puncturing the rustling of the night, in the barely visible contours of the weeds, we hear Haraway's voice, reading "The Camille Stories". Any visually more explicit figuration would probably have significantly limited the viewer's imagination of this future society. Haraway thus concludes her most recent book and the cinematic portrait of her thought with the narrative figuration of an "elsewhere" and an "elsewhen", of a place and time favouring intra-species kinship, a different (non)reproductive regime, a different form of sociality. Let us now turn to the central role figuration plays in Donna Haraway's thought.

A group of kin feminist figures

What also in Haraway's work more broadly helps us bridge the thinking of this "elsewhere" and "elsewhen", is thus also a kind of kinship: "a group of kin feminist figures".[22] Some of these figures arise from science fiction, others from techno-scientific practice, yet others from everyday multispecies living-together. The cyborg is such a figure, an entity between an organism and a machine, between the natural and the artificial, which took form in the "Cyborg Manifesto".[23] Then there are "companion species", for instance dogs, whose co-becoming with humans drove Haraway's second manifesto, "The Companion Species Manifesto".[24] In Haraway's last book, the "kin feminist figures" that aid her thinking of kinship are most prominently (though not only), "the tentacular ones": chthonic, earthly creatures, "critters"[25], that is (particularly) small animals that are not humans; otherwise, when referring to humans, this term is commonly deployed in a derogatory manner. The sensing, tentacled beings, feeling their way through the environment with tentacles, antennae and multiple legs, but also fingers. Donna Haraway's hands and fingers occupy a prominent place in the film as well: when she thinks and talks, they move as if they were sensing thought and touching speech, all the time in the foreground; and every once in a while some other tentacled creature, an octopus or a jellyfish, bursts into the shot to sense the scene. With its singular aesthetic, the film thus relentlessly undermines the construction of a sovereign authorial self, otherwise supported by the conventions of portrait documentaries. The intrusions of tentacled and other critters into the scene of the film are neither an ornamentation, nor an interruption: they are engaged in the co-creation of the image of a form of thinking that is never its own, never self-same, but instead unruly, multiplying into a myriad of non-identical iterations (taken up also by the film's formal structure, for instance, by including, in the same scene but at several depths, numerous images of Haraway, busy with different activities, coexisting at once). The film thus paints the portrait of a form of

[21] *Cf.* Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, pp. 134–168.
[22] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, p. 2.
[23] *V.* Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", in: Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, pp. 149–182.
[24] *V.* Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, 2003.
[25] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 43.

thinking always enmeshed with different others, with "companions in thought",[26] as Haraway calls them in her last book. These beings help her articulate her notion of "tentacular thinking"; as she tells us, "tentacle" comes from the Latin verb *tentare* – to try, to feel.[27] Tentacular thinking therefore names a sensing, a feeling, a tasting, a smelling, an emphatic sensitivity for the environment we find ourselves in, a decisive departure from the all-encompassing, distanced overview of everything from nowhere. This latter way of understanding knowledge is typical of heavenly (Olympic or monotheistic) gods, of the modern European subject in search for certainty, of the techno-sciences at a particular point in history when their self-understanding included the attainment of such knowledge as their aim and programme. Haraway dealt with such illusions and "god tricks",[28] as she calls them, already in her essay "Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective," also one of the chapters in her book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. Departing from her critical take on "standpoint epistemology" in the work of, for instance, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock and Gloria Anzaldúa,[29] Haraway proposes the notion of "situated knowledges" to replace the paradigm of the disembodied total view from nowhere. Situated knowledges are, following Haraway, an "embodied, therefore accountable, objectivity".[30] Her aim is not to reject science and objectivity in favour of an endless regress into perspectivism; as she claims, "progress" in knowledge is not a swear-word, but the very aim of the scientific method of falsification and verification; only by way of misunderstanding can unquestionable certainty be attributed to concrete scientific findings. In fact, if these could actually be unquestionable, the notion of "progress" in knowledge would lose all meaning.[31] Haraway therefore proposes a more situated, but less biased understanding of knowledge, that is, a more objective knowledge,[32] a better description of the world, a more precise picture produced by acknowledging the situatedness of all speech, of every act of viewing, of all sensing, feeling and trying. It is to the latter that she turns in her last work, moving ever closer to the earthly, the tentative, the situated ferment of the chthonic ones.

In the aforementioned Introduction, Haraway notes that when writing "A Cyborg Manifesto" and "The Companion Species Manifesto" she was actually trying to articulate a common position – a socialist, anti-war feminism; she concludes that when social circumstances do not significantly change, the same story might have to be told over and over again.[33] The above-mentioned figures of Haraway's thinking – the cyborg, companion species, the tentacular ones, and others – are woven with the same thread, like different figures of the "cat's cradle" game: like "string figures" or SF, which according to Haraway stands for, simultaneously, science fiction, science facts, speculative facts, speculative feminism and their epistemological, ethical, political entwinement.[34] The thread with which these figures are woven is one that traverses the inherited dualisms of Western thought, showing how these ways of thinking – like the very idea of the bounded autonomous individual, or of disembodied knowledge from nowhere – are but fictions. And these fictions

[26] Haraway, *op. cit*., p. 62.
[27] *Op. cit*., p. 31.
[28] Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in: Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, p. 191.
[29] *Op. cit.,* p. 191.
[30] *Op. cit*., p. 194.
[31] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, p. 4.
[32] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", p. 196.
[33] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, p. 5.
[34] *Cf.* Haraway, "SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far".

may no longer be useful for thinking the present and the future,[35] they could even be noxious, for they might implicitly ideologically legitimate relations of exploitation and domination. European colonialism has been, for instance, ideologically legitimised with a system of values founded upon the division between what is human and what is non-human, what is brute/natural and what civilized; sexual oppression has always been naturalised by referring to the alleged higher and more significant subjection of women to nature, which would supposedly make them unfit for public, political, intellectual life, i.e. for forms and realms of life considered men's calling; the absolute ontological division between the human and the non-human which is at the human's disposal, inherited also from monotheisms, is the ideological baggage which, despite modern science, still grounds the unlimited expropriation of anything humans designate as non-human. The fact that these fictions often lead to injustices, of course, does not imply they are always useless; it does not imply that we can no longer talk about humans, nature or culture. Haraway, for instance, distanced herself from the theoretical trend of posthumanism[36] – a trend significantly inspired also by her own work and currently in vogue in several disciplines, which rejects any humanist notions as irremediably indebted to human exceptionalism and the instrumentalization of everything that is non-human – and designates herself as a "humanist, despite myself".[37] The notions of nature, culture and the human can still prove useful in the realms of ethics, politics, science or the humanities, but we have to remain alert to the relations of power entwined in the processes of differentiating and defining that enabled the creation of such notions. Given the historical harm ideologically legitimised also through certain kinds of conceptual differentiation, the task today is for Haraway no longer the categorisation of beings, but the cultivation of thinking "in the muddle".[38] In its phonetic kinship with "mud", the living environment of many chthonic, earthly, tentacular "critters", the "muddle" is one more figure for thinking the muddy, confused, troubled environment we are thrown into today, the complex situations which demand our response-ability, our ability to make other kinds of string figures, figures of thought, and to patiently unravel old ones, as opposed to an easy, omniscient cut that would purport to resolve the problem and end the questioning once and for all.[39]

Intermezzo: kinship as an ethics of thinking together

At this point, I should mention, in passing, the relations that this kind of effort to think in the muddle and from the muddle creates with other thinkers. In her work, Haraway manages to successfully avoid the almost imperative academic practice of referencing, denouncing, contesting, and arguing; instead, she tells stories that always emphasise the non-autonomous genesis of her own thinking, the way a friend of hers, whether human or of another species, introduced to her one of her current thoughts. She does not always find herself in agreement with all of them – as is made clear also in the film, for instance when she wittily contests Bruno Latour's rejection of Marxism and his ignorance of feminism. Yet, she always summons those she might have intellectual or political disagreements with as friends, who stimulated some of her thoughts, and not as enemies or competitors, whose thinking must be demolished, denounced, publicly shamed. The circle of her intellectual friends includes established scientists and philosophers, but also many of her current and former students and colleagues, her

[35] *Cf.* Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 30.
[36] *Cf.* Haraway, *Op. cit.*, p. 11, 13, 32.
[37] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, p. 4.
[38] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 174.
[39] *Cf. Op. cit*., p. 42.

extended family or kinship, including her long-time canine companion Cayenne Pepper, as well as a multitude of non-human friends, the multispecies crawling of pigeons, spiders, octopuses, primates, dogs, cyborgs, laboratory mice, lichen, bacteria, etc., companions in exploration, thinking and narration. This is also the way Haraway is portrayed in the film: the clever deployment of double expositions, the green screen, animation, and montage enables the intrusion of the nearing and the distant environment, of the close and the distant kin. Perhaps only such a friendly openness to the thinking of different others, and to the thinking of the other and the different, can enable such a fertile, yet non-reproductive proliferation of kinship, the fostering of non-blood related, non-identical kin, as the one prompted by her work. Throughout the years, the latter has inspired a very diverse bundle of theoretical orientations, which in very different, in some respects even opposite ways, tie together the thinking of technology, nature, feminism and capitalism: from the technophilic cyberfeminism, the posthumanist vitalism of new materialisms, to the queer-feminist and anti-capitalist ecology, signature of the recent xenofeminism. This fecund diversity of deviating, non-filial offspring could be characterised also with Haraway's notion of *oddkin* – a weird offspring, the opposite of the "godkin", the children of God, which faithfully turn their heads towards the white dead Gods and Fathers of the Western tradition.[40] *Oddkin* thus designates a queer, unfaithful, non-filial offspring, woven into the meshes of a common, collective thinking, engaged in knitting and passing on the string figures we may together create, and/or unravel. What all of us – regardless of our particular political affiliation or theoretical interests, regardless of which kind of feminism we abide by, what kind of importance we ascribe to (anti)capitalism or ecology, what we think of the inherited dualisms of Western thought – what all of us might learn from Donna Haraway's work, is her ethics of openness to the untameable, the obstinate thinking of the *oddkin,* an ethics which enables kinship in thought, a non-filial bond that avoids the reproduction of the authoritative same, a bond that fosters creative deviation. Dangerous, as Haraway says, is orthodoxy – the conviction that we, or a (usually dead, white, male and bearded) Authority we might abide by, have all the answers.[41] For this kind of conviction obstructs any kind of listening, hinders collective thinking and thus prevents our common "staying with the trouble", our capacity to invent new, different stories together.

Storytelling, surviving, living

For it does matter what kinds of stories we tell. As Haraway says, from the midst of the contemporary muddled knot of economic, racial, sexual, inter-species relations of inequality we did not necessarily choose, we need to invent new stories: "we must think", as she quotes Virginia Woolf from the essay *Three guineas*,[42] and adds: "but it matters, what kinds of thoughts we think thoughts with, [...] it matters, what kinds of stories we tell stories with."[43] How, then, are we to think the progressive threat that humans pose to one another, to the livelihood of a multitude of species on Earth, including our own?

[40] *Cf. Op. cit.,* p. 2.
[41] *Cf.* Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" in: Haraway, *Simians Cyborgs and Women*, p. 191.
[42] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 130.
[43] *Op. cit.,* p. 35.

Currently, the most popular story is the Anthropocene. The term was coined in 1980 by ecologist Eugene Stormer to denote the effects of the human species upon the environment, allegedly so massive as to merit the name of a new geological era; the concept gained worldwide fame in 2000 when taken up by the Dutch chemist and Nobel laureate, Paul Crutzen.[44] The story of the Anthropocene might be useful for conversing with the authorities and those who are ready to listen to it.[45] And yet, as Haraway says, this story remains all too pious; it resembles too much a tragic acceptance of guilt and repentance for human *hybris* – the insolence of having grown estranged from Mother Nature through our allegedly unnatural life-styles encroaching upon the environment.[46] Haraway notes that ascribing such a massive transformation of the environment uniquely to the Human with the Tool might be overblown, and myopic – after all, every being transforms its environment in a myriad of ways and the human is not the only being that uses tools. In her book *Staying with the Trouble,* Haraway thus accepts another story as a more accurate description of the climate and geological changes our planet is undergoing: the *Capitalocene*.[47] For the recent transformation of the environment at the hands of man cannot be understood without taking into account the decisive role played by European colonisation and the trans-Atlantic slave-trade, which marked the beginning of the modern massive exploitation of natural resources, of deforestation to make room for plantations, the dispossession of the populations of colonised lands and the simultaneous transportation of non-autochthonous species, including pathogenic viruses, bacteria and parasites across the continents into new environments. The current transformation of the environment cannot be understood without accounting for the industrial revolution, and without taking into account the interests of corporations and states which, in the name of economic growth and the preservation of non-sustainable lifestyles, asymmetrically conceded to some and not to others, continue to plunder natural resources.[48] However, as Haraway tells us in the film, while she considers Marx's analysis of Capital and its implications for thinking the human depredation of the environment, "a damn good story", she is also well aware that this puts us at risk of creating new Master narratives or enforcing existing ones, of either spreading the illusion of one ultimate solution, or plunging into passive despair. This is why, according to Haraway, the Capitalocene ought to be understood as a "big enough story", which can explain many things, but not everything;[49] as a thread that needs to be suitably interwoven with others in the game of string figures we play in order to think the contemporary trouble we have put ourselves into. In *Staying With the Trouble*, Haraway thus proposes one more story, one more thread to be included in this string figures game, a story that may help us avoid blissful ignorance, desperation and salvationist narratives: *the Chthulucene*. Instead of being kindred to the human-threatening other-worldly monsters of H. D. Lovecraft's weird fiction, the Chthulucene comes from the Greek word *chthonic*, the earthly, the grounded, and stands for the present, but also the future time of co-existence and co-becoming in a troubled situation which could perhaps, as Haraway hopes, still be turned into better, more companionate forms of living and dying together on a damaged planet. The Chthulucene is thus the current and also the future time of forging new ties in a multispecies community, of making kin and forging bonds beyond reproduction, of inventing better ways of living and dying together in troubled, muddled times.[50] Despite the multiplying predictions that forecast the imminent end of human life and the extinction of

[44] *Cf. Op. cit*., p. 45.
[45] *Cf. Op. cit.,* p. 48.
[46] *Cf. Op. cit.,* p. 47.
[47] *Cf. Ibid.*
[48] *Cf. Op. cit.,* p. 48.
[49] *Cf. Op. cit.,* p. 50.
[50] *Cf. Op cit.,* p. 55.

most animal and plant species as we know them, Haraway insists on the urgency of thinking through these troubled times: urgency, not emergency, as she says, staying clear of alarmist Big Stories.[51] "Staying with the trouble" entails not giving in to the apparent insolubility of the trouble, as it also entails avoiding cutting this knot with omniscient arrogance.

Haraway never had patience for the Big stories of Modernity, though she always remained, and still is, committed to at least some of them, i.e. feminism and Marxism, stories that ought to be, according to Haraway, adequately interwoven with other stories, not given up. So has Haraway no patience also for the Big environmental stories – be they eschatological or apocalyptic, secular or sacred. Neither a technological miracle, nor some kind of "providence" will save us; and yet, despite the bleak forecasts of environmental scientists, Haraway insists upon the necessity of avoiding defeatism or self-enamoured cynicism.[52] The past must not become an alibi for enclosing the future; the damage done – to the planet, the environment, ourselves; to the victims of colonisation and racism, to the victims of sexual violence and abuse – can never be undone, never forgotten. It cannot be adequately repaid, we can never return to the blessed state before the crime was committed, before the mistakes were made. Yet, this must not be an excuse for simply keeping repeating the crimes and mistakes of the past. Neither human technology nor Capital nor all the crimes and mistakes of the past can entirely determine the future. This is why it still matters what concrete people, human and non-human, do in concrete situations. For what we do impacts the ways other, human and non-human people, live, it marks those with whom we are enmeshed in troubled knots of responsibility, in meshes of co-becoming, of sympoiesis, of kinship beyond our will, of responsibilities and duties outside our choice. This is why, regardless of the future forecasted for us, regardless of the irreparable damage done in the past, the present of the Chthulucene is ours to think; as Haraway says in her last book: "This Chthulucene is neither sacred nor secular; this earthly worlding is thoroughly terran, muddled, and mortal - and at stake now."[53]

It matters what kinds of thoughts we think thoughts with; it matters what kinds of stories we tell; it matters how we live with each other, with other human and non-human people, with organisms and machines and inorganic nature and... be it in the next 100, 1000 or a million years – or merely, as Haraway might say, in this thick, chaotic, troubled present.

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[51] *Cf. Op. cit.*, p. 56.
[52] *Cf. Op. cit.,* p. 56.
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