

Introduction

Trouble is an interesting word. It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning “to stir up,” “to make cloudy,” “to disturb.” We—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy—with vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy, with unnecessary killing of ongoingness but also with necessary resurgence. The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.¹

Chthulucene is a simple word.² It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthôn* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth. *Kainos* means now, a time of beginnings, a time for on-going, for freshness. Nothing in *kainos* must mean conventional pasts, presents, or futures. There is nothing in times of beginnings that insists on wiping out what has come before, or, indeed, wiping out what comes after. *Kainos* can be full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturing what might still be. I hear *kainos* in the sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities.

Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. Chthonic ones romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo. Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences. Chthonic ones are not safe; they have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade. They are who are. No wonder the world's great monotheisms in both religious and secular guises have tried again and again to exterminate the chthonic ones. The scandals of times called the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene are the latest and most dangerous of these exterminating forces. Living-with and dying-with each other potentially in the *Chthulucene* can be a fierce reply to the dictates of both *Anthropos* and *Capital*.

Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than that one? What shape is this kinship, where and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what? What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance? An ubiquitous figure in this book is SF: science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far. This reiterated list whirls and loops throughout the coming pages, in words

and in visual pictures, braiding me and my readers into beings and patterns at stake. Science fact and speculative fabulation need each other, and both need speculative feminism. I think of SF and string figures in a triple sense of figuring. First, promiscuously plucking out fibers in cluttered and dense events and practices, I try to follow the threads where they lead in order to track them and find their tangles and patterns crucial for staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times. In that sense, SF is a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark, in a dangerous true tale of adventure, where who lives and who dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice. Second, the string figure is not the tracking, but rather the actual thing, the pattern and assembly that solicits response, the thing that is not oneself but with which one must go on. Third, string figuring is passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them. SF is practice and process; it is becoming-with each other in surprising relays; it is a figure for ongoingness in the Chthulucene.

The book and the idea of “staying with the trouble” are especially impatient with two responses that I hear all too frequently to the horrors of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The first is easy to describe and, I think, dismiss, namely, a comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious: technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children, or what amounts to the same thing, God will come to the rescue of his disobedient but ever hopeful children. In the face of such touching silliness about technofixes (or techno-apocalypses), sometimes it is hard to remember that it remains important to embrace situated technical projects and their people. They are not the enemy; they can do many important things for staying with the trouble and for making generative oddkin.

The second response, harder to dismiss, is probably even more destructive: namely, a position that the game is over, it's too late, there's no sense trying to make anything any better, or at least no sense having any active trust in each other in working and playing for a resurgent world. Some scientists I know express this kind of bitter cynicism, even as they actually work very hard to make a positive difference for both people and other critters. Some people who describe themselves as critical cultural theorists or political progressives express these ideas too. I think the odd coupling of actually working and playing for multispecies flourishing with tenacious energy and skill, while expressing an explicit “game over” attitude that can and does discourage others, including students,

is facilitated by various kinds of futurisms. One kind seems to imagine that only if things work do they matter—or, worse, only if what I and my fellow experts do works to fix things does anything matter. More generously, sometimes scientists and others who think, read, study, agitate, and care know too much, and it is too heavy. Or, at least we think we know enough to reach the conclusion that life on earth that includes human people in any tolerable way really is over, that the apocalypse really is nigh.

That attitude makes a great deal of sense in the midst of the earth's sixth great extinction event and in the midst of engulfing wars, extractions, and immiserations of billions of people and other critters for something called "profit" or "power"—or, for that matter, called "God." A game-over attitude imposes itself in the gale-force winds of feeling, not just knowing, that human numbers are almost certain to reach more than 11 billion people by 2100. This figure represents a 9-billion-person increase over 150 years from 1950 to 2100, with vastly unequal consequences for the poor and the rich—not to mention vastly unequal burdens imposed on the earth by the rich compared to the poor—and even worse consequences for nonhumans almost everywhere. There are many other examples of dire realities; the Great Accelerations of the post-World War II era gouge their marks in earth's rocks, waters, airs, and critters. There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference.

This book argues and tries to perform that, eschewing futurism, staying with the trouble is both more serious and more lively. Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and worldly. Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, and so we succumb to despair or to hope, and neither is a sensible attitude. Neither despair nor hope is tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to material semiotics, to mortal earthlings in thick copresence. Neither hope nor despair knows how to teach us to "play string figures with companion species," the title of the first chapter of this book.

~~Three long chapters open *Staying with the Trouble*. Each chapter tracks stories and figures for making kin in the Chthulucene in order to cut~~

Notes

Introduction

- ¹ *Critters* is an American everyday idiom for varmints of all sorts. Scientists talk of their “critters” all the time; and so do ordinary people all over the U.S., but perhaps especially in the South. The taint of “creatures” and “creation” does not stick to “critters”; if you see such a semiotic barnacle, scrape it off. In this book, “critters” refers promiscuously to microbes, plants, animals, humans and nonhumans, and sometimes even to machines.
- ² Less simple was deciding how to spell Chthulucene so that it led to diverse and bumptious chthonic dividuals and powers and not to Chthulhu, Cthulhu, or any other singleton monster or deity. A fastidious Greek speller might insist on the “h” between the last “l” and “u”; but both for English pronunciation and for avoiding the grasp of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu, I dropped that “h.” This is a metaplasm.

Chapter 1: Playing String Figures with Companion Species

- ¹ In languages attuned to partial translation, in U.S. English string figures are called cat’s cradle; in French, *jeux de ficelle*; in Navajo, *na’atl’o’*. See Haraway, “SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far.”
- ² For a mathematical joke-exposition of Terrapolis, see Haraway, *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures*.
- ³ From Proto-Germanic and Old English, *guman* later became *human*, but both come soiled with the earth and its critters, rich in humus, *humaine*, earthly beings as