Entangled and Empowered

Agency in Multispecies Communities

Edited by
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Introduction

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Why Entanglement? Why Empowerment?

"Today," says Merlin Sheldrake in his book about fungi, *Entangled Life,* "the idea that all things are interconnected has been so well-used that it has collapsed into a cliché" (72). It may seem as if the last thing that the world needs is another book about entanglement. We know we are entangled. If anything, some people would say, what we need to concentrate on is how to turn away from that entanglement, either—depending on the speaker's motivation—to learn how to transcend the limitations of nature, or to learn how to ensure that the rest of life can function without us. Either way, it means snipping free the human part of the web.

Entangled and Empowered aims to show not just entanglement, but the joy and power that come from that entanglement. Living in a multispecies community does not have to be a chore for a human, whether that human is a person of color, queer, female, or incarcerated. Transcendence is not the only "solution" to problems we experience. Likewise, humans do not have to simply imperil other species, but can work in harmony with them, surrender to them, care for them, and have spiritual relationships with them. Entanglement is impossible to escape, but that is one of its wonders. The interdisciplinary, international authors and pieces in this collection aim to show how acknowledgment of the often-grim realities of our living world—climate change, extinction, pandemics, racism, and others—are part of the web, not the whole of it. Humans and other species continue to live in that web, create art, eat, and make worlds in common. The subtitle of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's influential book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, is on full display here. *Entangled and Empowered* works to illuminate some of these possibilities. Humans, animals, plants, landscapes, and bacteria are saying: We are still here, and we are alive.

Entanglement with other beings is everywhere in our multispecies world; we are forever enmeshed with what Henry Beston called "other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth" (23). We cannot eat without the participation of our gut flora, which in turn are so deeply entangled with us that whole colonies and

ecosystems flourish within our intestines. What we call "natural products" and "ecosystem services" originate, ultimately, in the bodies of other beings, whether the beef cattle we reduce to hamburgers, the trees we cut down for timber, or the fungi that link those trees to each other and support their mutual flourishing and even networks of communication (Simard 5). When we spill oil on the oceans, "[t]he tens of thousands of different compounds that make up [that] oil can only be biodegraded by communities of microorganisms acting in concert" (American Society for Microbiology 1). And we do not and cannot exist separately from nature, whatever some humans who believe in a technological solution to all problems might think. Even the technology that might someday create mass space travel, faster-than-light communication, or cryogenic immortality, to name three common science fiction conceits, is still sourced within and from other species. In the case of fossil fuels, those species are extinct, but in their very existence and their very mortality, they spell the rise and ultimately the mortality of much of our own technology. We are still breathing, eating beings as well as thinking or inventing ones, and we cannot disentangle ourselves from the other species that midwife and bury us.

Mourning over this particular kind of entanglement, of course, is well-established in environmental criticism. Humans being unable to withdraw from connection with the world has been seen as our inability to withdraw from abusing the world. But the ethnographer M. Kat Anderson sees this attitude of constant grief over the loss of nature's purity as simply another side of the desire to get as much from other beings as we can.

> [H]umans either conquer nature and destroy its integrity, or they visit it as an outsider, idealizing its beauty and leaving it largely alone. These seemingly contradictory attitudes—to idealize nature or commodify it—are really two sides of the same coin, what the restoration ecologist William Jordan terms the 'coin of alienation'…Both positions treat nature as an abstraction—separate from humans and not understood, not real (109-110).

We do not grasp nature, feel its sharp edges and its rounded ones, if we exploit it from a distance, and neither do we if we hang it on the walls of our imaginations as a pristine painting. Humans are part of those sharp and rough edges, enrolled in the mud and the dirt, not extraterrestrials here only to place a tragic imposition on other animals' innocence. "If anything," notes the nature writer Craig Childs, "it is we who are innocent, and not the animals. Naïveté comes with believing that the world is built of words and numerals" (39), including words about inevitable tragedy and numerals meant to drive viewers' shock and engagement with 24/7 news media, as though those were the only realities of entanglement.

Human separation from nature thus might be a technology-fueled fantasy of escape, or it might be the idea that humans are not *part* of nature, not in the same way that cows and trees and bacteria and fungi are. That we cannot go further away, that other beings have to put up with having our species in their space, is a cause of dark predictions for the future. Documenting the pressure on wild tigers in the Sundarbans tidal delta from people who need to eat, cut firewood, and graze their livestock, nature writer Sy Montgomery notes that, "Even if the slaughter of tiger[s] stopped, humans might simply crowd tigers off the planet" ("Introduction"). Such pessimism is, of course, largely justified. Predictions about the exact impact of climate change on human productivity, among other things, may still be uncertain, but the endangerment of plants and animals due to climate change is not. Elizabeth Kolbert notes that climate change is a driver of the "sixth extinction," or mass die-off of the planet's species thanks to humanity's asteroid-like impact on the Earth (166-170); while it does not act by itself, climate change will do a lot of damage, and it is anthropogenically generated. A few species, like ravens, might be spreading into human-created environments such as cities (Heinrich 241), but others are losing their homes, their habitats, their breeding grounds, their food, and their migratory pathways. Consider the case of the red knot, a small shorebird that migrates from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Circle (Cramer 4). Along the way, the birds make numerous stops to consume the eggs of horseshoe crabs, an important food source, and one that is more and more endangered by human overuse of the crabs, especially for purposes such as bait (Cramer 85). The loss of horseshoe crab eggs spirals knots and crabs alike down into a frenzy of loss, which humans both cause and are affected by. As Deborah Cramer states, horseshoe crabs' blue blood is the source of a unique compound called LAL, which is necessary to detect fragments of toxic bacteria in medical instruments and prevent patient deaths from conditions like meningitis (92-93). Yet horseshoe crabs continue to be used as bait, and although they can be collected from the sea, bled, and then released back into the ocean, hospitals kill far more than necessary and even refuse to release the numbers of how many crabs are used (Cramer 110). We are not even intelligent enough, the line of thinking could run, to avert the increase of future, preventable deaths of our own species in hospitals. We will run right over the cliff, blind to everything except immediate profit or gain, and take the other beings we are connected to with us. What a pity that they cannot stand independently of us, so that we might doom ourselves, but leave them alone to increase and live.

However, they cannot stand independently of us, and neither can we of them. Our entanglement is as inescapable as it is permanent. Timothy Morton, in his book *The Ecological Thought,* refers to the binding of living beings together as "the mesh." Morton, in fact, claims that there is no ecology without both humans *and* other life-forms: "[The ecological view] is a vast, sprawling mesh

of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings…In an age of ecology without Nature, we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people" ("Introduction"). While Morton means for the metaphor to give the reader a sense of connection, the way he describes the mesh is also as a net that binds and tangles. Blinding ourselves to those tangles because of the profit motive is more inexcusable than blinding ourselves to them because of our own mourning, but the end result is the same: spinning effort into nothingness. We cannot preserve a world without us, perfectly pure and pristine. Even Alan Weisman's thought experiment in *The World Without Us* notes that if all human beings disappeared forever, plastic would still persist in the environment for thousands of years or even longer (117). Trees and water in places like New York City would regenerate, but they would still be affected by the traces of humans' presence long after we had departed (23). And since we cannot simply vanish quietly from our other nations' lives, how much better is it to face the mesh, to accept the entanglement, and attempt to make it as pleasant and protective for other beings as possible? How much better to acknowledge the agency we have instead of ignoring the harm we do or flinching back from the idea of making any impact?

Donna Haraway, an important theorist for several authors in this collection, sees this as a matter of not just coexistence but of acknowledgment of kinship and community: "We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love" (*Companion* 2). Love and agency are empowering things. Being bound is an empowering thing, if viewed in the correct light. Since we cannot change the fact of our entanglement with other beings, changing our attitude seems like a much more productive goal. Looking with clear, critical eyes at the multispecies communities around us can also protect us from what Rebecca Solnit calls "naïve cynicism," which "use[s] bad data and worse analysis to pronounce with great certainty on future inevitabilities, present impossibilities, and past failures…It bleeds the sense of possibility and maybe the sense of responsibility out of people" (53). The sense of "knowing" that the environment will collapse and there is nothing we can do to stop it presents humans with the temptation to do nothing because the problems that threaten our communities, like climate change and the sixth extinction, are so overwhelming. Rather than focusing on praising ourselves for being cynical enough, involved enough, mournful enough, or detached enough, we should look for ways to act. Let us get to work with other beings; we are all going to need it.

Among many other effects, this means learning to live with uncertainty, to accept that we do not know exactly what effects climate change will have on

humans or other beings, that we do not know how fast certain extinctions will happen, and that we cannot be certain exactly what action would be most effective in making us champions of multispecies communities. Too much desire for clarity can lead us down the same road that naïve cynicism does, to "a relentless pursuit of certainty and clarity in a world that generally offers neither, a desire to shove nuances and complexities into clear-cut binaries" (Solnit 53). Instead, we should strive to live in worlds of open possibilities and accept and absorb different patterns of agency, relationship, and entanglement. This book, as I hope to show you when I describe the chapters, offers one clutch of patterns, from artistic collaborations with human gut flora to the changing relationships some Indigenous people in Belize have with the cacao tree. No single work can embody the endlessly extended mesh that binds us to this world, but they can enable us to open our eyes to some of the directions it extends. Jane Bennett argues in her book *Vibrant Matter* about the amalgamations that humans make with not only animals and plants but also matter like stones and rubbish, usually considered non-living, that we must

> [a]dmit that humans have crawled or secreted themselves into every corner of the environment; admit that the environment is actually inside human bodies and minds, and then proceed politically, technologically, scientifically, in everyday life, with careful forbearance, as you might with unruly relatives to whom you are inextricably bound…Seek instead to engage more civically, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate (115).

Such careful, thoughtful engagement is at the heart of Bennett's work, and at the heart, too, of this collection and the authors who explore the limits, abilities, frustrations, and joys of entangled empowerment.

The authors in this collection do not flinch from acknowledging the despair-causing realities of our entangled worlds breaking. It is important to do so. The editors of the collection *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* note in their introduction that much harm to other beings and landscapes (and humans themselves) is done in the name of worshipping the golden calf of Progress: "*We are willing to turn things into rubble, destroy atmospheres, sell out companion species in exchange for dreamworlds of progress*" (Tsing et al. "Introduction", emphasis in original). But a steady diet of despair will only weaken any ability to find joy or wonder in the world, and ultimately our ability to care about the rubble, atmospheres, or companion species. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* looks to both past and future, using metaphors of ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene to explore what humans have cost the world, and warns about the danger of desiring too much progress. This collection, I hope, will

take a look at the present and the ways that both humans and other beings continue to create and act.

Robin Wall Kimmerer sees empathy with other beings as a choice between joy and despair, and comes down on the side of the former:

> We could take the path of fear and despair. We could document every scary scene of ecological destruction and never run out of material…
>
> What could such a vision create other than woe and tears?...But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift (326-327).

I and many of the authors in this collection, too, choose joy over despair. The vast majority of humans, environmental humanities writers included, are still choosing to breathe and eat and stand on this wounded world. We still create theory and art, including pieces about woe and tears. If we were so completely despairing that we had no hope, our voices would be silent. And if we believed that there was no point in continuing on into the future, that it was a feast of ashes and nothing else, then we would not be trying so hard to persuade other people to pay attention to what is beloved and lost, but, being lost, still existing.

The Structure of This Book

Entangled and Empowered is divided into three sections, consisting of two, four, and three chapters. Chapters in the individual sections share themes, topics, or ways of approaching the general idea of agency in multispecies communities. While there are enough commonalities between chapters that they could be arranged several different ways, I hope that this division will allow audiences to see how authors were often working toward the common goal of, as Kimmerer says, putting our hands in the earth. But I also hope that readers will feel free to pair or group chapters across the section boundaries to look at their ideas and texts from new eyes, emergent possibilities.

Part One: View(ing)s of Entanglement: Multispecies Communities in Art

While several of the chapters in this collection, as in many other environmental humanities texts, concentrate on written works, this first section looks at entangled empowerment in visual art. Stepping out of what might be seen as the more common or popular stomping ground of U.S. TV or Hollywood films,

they explore the process of co-creating different human relationships with the ecosystem, as well as different relationships with specific kinds of beings, microbes and the serpent, often assumed to be caught in a relentlessly adversarial relationship with *Homo sapiens*.

Chapter One, Rory O'Dea's "Symbiotic Cultures: The Microbial Ecologies of Contemporary Art," engages bacteria as partners in the work of several artists such as Anicka Yi and TJ Shin. O'Dea argues that the gut microbiome and other microbial cells create an ecosystem inside humans, and we should be responsive and attentive to the one within as well as the one without. Such a visualization violates the philosophical concept of autonomy that O'Dea sees as integral to the modern Western conception of the self; O'Dea states that while autonomy "maintains the separation of the self-contained perceiving subject from the enclosed object of aesthetic contemplation," viewing humans as partners with microbes in the work of living, dying, and art permits "us to move far beyond anthropocentric notions of individual agency toward a more symbiotic model of co-creation." O'Dea's chapter uses posthumanist and new materialist theory to challenge the notion of humans as the only artists making worlds, and even of humans as entirely human, given that we have so many microbial cells, opening up thrilling new vistas of what is possible with proper attention to microbes.

In "Making Peace With the Ground: Extraction and Ecofeminism in the Paintings of Hannah Yata," Kayla Kruse West tackles the notion of hierarchy between humans and other beings. Traditional Western thought has, of course, placed humans at the top of this hierarchy, below only God and the angels in the context of the Great Chain of Being. But Hannah Yata's paintings portray a world in which humans are subservient to other beings, such as fish, snakes, and flowers, and find freedom in this surrender. West's argument portrays the paintings as situated in fields of extraction, or humans' greedy consumption of Earth and its children as simply resources and materials. Yata's human figures—shown mostly faceless, making way for other beings without asserting the dominance of the human gaze or language—are at peace, no longer extracting, having moved beyond the need for consumption into a reversal of the "usual" hierarchy. Ecofeminism, and the work of Macarena Gómez-Barris and Kathryn Yusoff that considers extraction and the Anthropocene from a critical lens, show the empowerment of other-than-human organisms at the expense of humans, and how we might come to welcome such a new, thoughtful, unexpected perspective.

Part Two: Consider Her/Their Ways: (Eco)Feminist Empowerments

In this section, all four chapters intersect with feminist (and ecofeminist) and sometimes queer readings of texts. How women and queer people of all

genders and sexualities relate to other beings is a vexed question, given that in many cases they have been pushed into comparisons with those beings that deny their humanity. Therefore, these readings attempt to give them back their power and a way to relate to the natural world that is not clouded by patriarchy and heterosexism—or at least, less clouded by it. This includes relationships with the divine, the animal, the plant, and the landscape.

Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K. Suresh's "Entangled Empowerment: The Divine Dynamics of the Snake Woman in India" approaches the fraught relationship between women and snakes from the point-of-view of Indian culture, snake worship, and cinema that depicts the *nagin*, or snake woman, who can shapeshift back and forth between her various forms. Despite the fact that these films often show the nagin as a seductress using feminine wiles to get her way, Raj and Suresh argue that she has more freedom and power than she has been given credit for. This power comes from the worship of the *nagas*, legendary divine snake beings, and snakes themselves in some corners of Hinduism, including contexts where women and lower-caste *dalit* people are able to become the conduits of serpentine power. Such combinations of culture and film in "[t]he naga narratives epitomize the entangled relationships between myth, femininity, empowerment, and cultural symbolism," according to Raj and Suresh, that set serpents and human women free to intertwine in more than stereotypical, patriarchally-defined ways. An ancient antagonism becomes stronger and more embracing when looked at through a different lens.

"Cannibalism as Deconstructing the Human/Nonhuman Dichotomy?: A Reading of the Scandalous Novella "Life Ceremony" by Japanese Writer Murata Sayaka" presents Keitaro Morita's reading of a novella in which "life ceremonies" have taken the place of funerals; these involve cannibalizing the body of the deceased and then finding a partner for "insemination" in the hopes that children might be born to reverse human population decline. Morita points out the ways in which the protagonist of the novella, Maho, crosses the line that separates "edible" from "inedible" and blends into water and landscape, a process called "melting." The novella's language and presentation question the existence of boundaries separating not only humans from other animals, but also from plants and objects like water that are usually considered inanimate. As Morita argues, "the cannibalistic practice at a life ceremony makes the story *queer* in the broad definition by deconstructing the conventional framework." There is certainly nothing conventional about "Life Ceremony," or about Morita's reading, which examines the way that cannibalism can be not just a human-on-human crime or sin, but a way of relating to the broader universe, and of escaping what seem at first to be the inevitably heterosexual implications of the "insemination" part of a life ceremony.

Kumar Sawan's "Women as State Machinery: A Posthuman Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" presents an innovative reading of Atwood's Handmaids—fertile women who, in state-sanctioned rapes by "potent" men, are supposed to create the next generation—as half-cyborgs. Rather like Morita's chapter, this view looks for hope in what seems to be a bleak and heterosexist arrangement (and indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale* is usually categorized as dystopian fiction). Sawan uses the cyborg idea popularized by Donna Haraway to argue that the Handmaids have the means of feminist resistance in their hands. Because they are denied access to complete knowledge, most especially reading and writing, their potential remains "halved," and they cannot change the patriarchal world as it stands. But because the end of that world might mean a return to individual consciousness instead of collective, cyborg consciousness, perhaps Gilead, Atwood's imagined future, offers a potential for human relationship to other beings and transformation that cannot exist outside it, but might exist beyond it, with its destruction, if the Handmaids can retain the desire for cyborgdom. This potential remains fragile, itself half-unborn, but is still more hope than most perspectives on the Handmaids can offer.

"Entangled Vitality and Female Resilience in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and *Prodigal Summer*" by Chak-kwan Ng closes this section, presenting Kingsolver's characters as slowly discovering that they, too, are entangled with the broader world, despite the crushing pressure of failed marriages and attempts at pushing them into stereotypical female gender roles. Kingsolver's training as a biologist informs her novels, and Ng's argument that they "highlight the vitality of multispecies entanglement." Ng uses Haraway's concept of "sympoiesis" and Karen Barad's idea of "intra-actions" to show how the women in Kingsolver's novels and the butterflies, coyotes, sheep, and other species they interact with form each other's worlds. In each case, the characters reach an ecofeminist conclusion, leaving behind the idea of complete solitude, detachment, or autonomy from others also criticized by O'Dea. Surpassing individualism like this also enables the characters to surpass the idea of connections between women and nature as automatically lowering or disempowering, and emerge into a new world where they honor those entanglements.

Part Three: Beyond the Human: Entanglements Beyond Borders

This final section groups chapters that take a position on entanglements that reach beyond the expected borders: of the prison, of the human species, of entanglement theory itself. The authors emphasize continually that there is no way to simply set up walls between people and nature, or between humans and other species, and expect them to work. Interconnections grow beneath and

beyond the walls like vines, and bring them crashing down, whether or not society at large, the narrative, or a community ever acknowledges them as such.

Sarah Snyder co-writes "A Carceral State: Incarceration's Reach in Ecosystems Within and Beyond the Prison" with Will Anderson, an incarcerated scholar. Together, they investigate the trees, ducks, and humans of MCF-Faribault, the largest state prison in Minnesota, and their interbraided lives. As they point out by detailing the way the "conquered" ecosystem at Faribault fights back and provokes care and compassion from both prison wardens and inmates, incarceration impacts but cannot define other-than-human beings; it is entirely a human social construct. The entanglements with other beings, then, offer a way for humans to reimagine and perhaps resist the carceral state, passing beyond the walls that the prison sets up physically and mentally.

Mayank Kejriwal then moves beyond the borders of popular fiction with "Multispecies Communities in J. K. Rowling's Potterworld: A Critical Appraisal." Examining the *Harry Potter* series from a multispecies point-of-view, Kejriwal argues, reveals how unusually broad its perspective is, incorporating "mundane" animals, intelligent but non-human species like goblins and house-elves who are often mistreated by the magical humans they live among, "fantastic beasts" such as dragons, and other characters who are viewed with loathing and fear by wizards and witches, including half-giants. At the heart of Kejriwal's chapter is Hagrid, the half-giant character who is deeply mistreated by the wizarding society he longs to be a part of, but continues to respond with kindness and optimism. Hagrid, Kejriwal offers, occupies a unique place as a keystone character in a multispecies reading of *Harry Potter* and unites the diverse themes of social justice and human interactions with beyond-human beings. While the *Harry Potter* series is not unique in fantasy fiction in including nonhumans as a central part of its narrative, it is unusual in including so many major characters and perspectives on the multispecies community it takes place in, even if many of its human characters prefer to retain ignorance of this, as Kejriwal points out.

The last chapter in this section, and the book, is Erik Stanley's "Cacao, the *Cheil*, and the Erosion of Spiritual Agency: Protestantism and Capitalism's Impact on Maya Environmental Relations." Stanley is an anthropologist who has spent years living among and interviewing members of the Mopan Maya community of San Jose in Belize about their relationship with the cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao*), and how it has changed over time as the residents' religious beliefs and conceptions of the supernatural have changed. Stanley argues that Anna Tsing's description of multispecies assemblages as strictly material neglects the spiritual aspect, and demonstrates how Spanish conquest, Catholicism, and the mid-twentieth-century proselytizing by Protestant missionaries in the Maya communities affected their relationship with both cacao trees and the

"spirit owners" of the wild cacao, the *Cheil*. While the change over time from regarding the cacao as the property of sacred spirits to thinking of it as a globalized commodity might seem to hearken a return to despair, Stanley's portrait of change gestures at the ability to change other aspects of our multispecies relationships, and keep some alive, as some of his interview partners in the Maya community keep the images and the stories of the *Cheil*.

All three sections, and all the authors, with their different theoretical perspectives, topics, fields, and interests, offer a glimpse of hope: that we do live entangled, and that we can live empowered. Donna Haraway's statement in *Staying With The Trouble,* that "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (12), might be stating yet another truth that *Entangled and Empowered* strives toward. While worlds and stories matter, we cannot be too late.

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