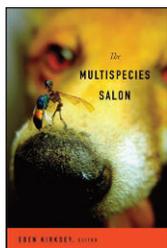


Review



The Multispecies Salon. Edited by Eben Kirksey. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 306 pp. ISBN: 9780822356103.

As an emerging scholar in the interdisciplinary fields of communication and culture studies, I took up Eben Kirksey's edited collection *The Multispecies Salon* with great anticipation. I approached the text with several questions. One question in particular imagines how the text might connect to fields of media archaeology and environmental studies. What kind of creative theoretical and methodological possibilities could *The Multispecies Salon*, a collection of writing from anthropologists, artists, and biological scientists, generate with eco-media scholars such as Jussi Parikka (*A Geology of Media*, 2015), John Durham Peters (*Marvellous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, 2015), and Sean Cubitt (*Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*, 2016)? In what ways can their disciplinary distinctions blend?

While reading *The Multispecies Salon*, I found that unlike current trends in eco-media theory, which explore the paradigmatic limits and possibilities of the contested “age of the anthropocene,” the anthology is less concerned with technologies of mediation and geological time, and instead draws out the possible futures of dynamic human and non-human entanglements. The anthology moves past questions of representation, invoking Donna Haraway's claim that animals are not just “good to think” or “good to eat” they are also “good to live with” (p. 3). However, caring to live with animal companions of different kinds demands us to ask, what are the conditions on which we are able to “choose” with whom we cohabitate? The anthology signals an ontological turn that moves away from foundational distinctions of the human in European thought, and encourages the reader to conceive of humans as multispecies beings.

Rather than simply celebrate multispecies mingling, the contributors of the anthology explore three interconnected questions through creative, critical, and artistic practices:

“[w]hich beings flourish, and which fail, when natural and cultural worlds intermingle and collide? What happens when bodies of organisms, and even entire ecosystems, are enlisted in the dreams of bio-capitalism? In the aftermath of disasters—in blasted landscapes that have been transformed by multiple catastrophes—what are the possibilities for bio-cultural hope?” (p. 1)

In addressing these questions, one of the anthology's objectives is to illuminate how diverse organisms are entangled in political, economic, and cultural systems. However, in pointing to the “multispecies alliances” (p. 160), as conceived by Linda Noel et al., the anthology signals a rejection of apocalyptic thinking on these questions, and instead points to specific possibilities in the wreckage of ongoing disasters.

Divided into three sections, the collection consists of seven chapters written by emerging and established scholars, artists invoking arts-based research practices and methodologies, and biological scientists with a taste for understanding the hierarchies of power. The sections are: 1) Blasted Landscapes, 2) Edible Companions, and 3) Life and Biotechnology. The articles and artistic exhibitions in each of these three sections engage in a specific multispecies method, which, as described in the anthology's introduction, is loosely organized around two conceptual nodes: "poaching" and "para-ethnography" (para-site). Drawing on Michael de Certeau's idea of poaching, *The Multispecies Salon* unapologetically engages in intellectual trespass; contributors push or poke pieces of their research toward that of another. Conducting research in this way is seen as an offering—a gift—not an act of encroachment. Para-ethnography, on the other hand, is a way to conceive of the experimental and collaborative hinge on which this particular multispecies project takes shape. Using different and unfamiliar tactics and methods, scholars, artists, and scientists open an auxiliary ethnographic field site, a *para-site*, through which to ask their research questions. Coupling with Michael Serres' concept of the parasite, which does not stop "eating or drinking or yelling ... filling up space with its swarming din" (p. 15), *The Multispecies Salon* critically moves through research questions armed with an unrelenting hope for future embodied relationships and a collaborative spirit.

Section 1, "Blasted Landscapes," centres on the significance of place in weaving together multispecies relationships that have the possibility of being both a gift and a poison. The section attempts to trace what might be considered modest hope contra misplaced utopia when it comes to nurturing multispecies relationships. The reader is encouraged to think about hope as a process, as living, and already in our midst. Multispecies artists explore the "contours of hope in a social landscape that is structured by inequality" (p. 53), and in so doing, reject calls for hollowed hope in the face of environmental disaster, gentrification, and bio-capital displacement without a critical analysis that engages the question: hope for whom? For instance, Anna Tsing, in her research on matsutake mushroom economies, disturbance histories, and global commodity chains, asks us to be vigilant in our differentiations between forms of disturbance that are harmful to all life (such as the Fukushima disaster in 2011, when a nuclear reactor in Japan failed following an earthquake) and those that offer multispecies opportunities. The section attempts to make visible journeys of bodies and beings across time and space using new material forms to express these interactions.

Articles and artistic performances in Section 2, "Edible Companions," disturb seemingly settled relationships by creating experiences of embodied indigestion. Heather Paxton advances the term "microbiopolitics" (p. 115) to suggest that modern life has become antiseptic—both in an antibiotic sense and in a spiritual sense. Unconventional "recipes" are shared as a way to embark on this process of indigestion and resist microbiopolitical tendencies. Ingestion of these recipes and their accompanying narratives enables us to question dominant relationships to parasites and toxins, bitter and bland tastes, and viruses and bacteria. For instance, performance artist Caitlin Berrigan uses her Hepatitis C contaminated blood as a means to stage a multispecies encounter with dandelions, and also to reveal the subtleties of microbiopolitical power;

dressed in the rhetoric of safety, Berrigan's artistic performance gave rise to anxieties about the containment of bodies, fluids, and infections, even if these fears have little to do with actual danger.

Finally, Section 3, "Life and Biotechnology," explores the specialization of power in biological domains. More distinctly, contributors to this section evoke a language of ethics to their respective sites of analysis. The section aims to dismantle dominant multispecies spectacles that narrativize life in the age of biotechnology. With an understanding that laboratories tend to conceal potential human and animal relationships, bioartists in this section work to cultivate relationships with these creatures based on responsibility, attention, and care. They experiment with new ethical interactions to illustrate how we might better live together with others in common worlds. For example, Karen Barad suggests that in exploring the conceptual and relational qualities of "brittlestar" (an underwater organism whose existence has captured the attention of scientists and big industry), we must attend to ethico-onto-epistemological questions that have to do with responsibility and accountability for the entanglements we help enact, and the commitments we are willing to take on. If our intentions are to forge relationships with other species that are not predicated on appropriation by the interests of bio-capital desires, these questions become crucial. Confronting another set of historical and ongoing oppressions, Donna Haraway's contribution suggests that the work of bioartist Patricia Piccinini engages settler colonialism as a multispecies responsibility. Interested in unexpected consequences, Piccinini's sculptures hold us accountable to the "technocultures" we have created. Employing indigenous theories of time, we have a familial, generational duty to technoculture failures, as well as to their accomplishments.

The Multispecies Salon develops a conversation around the possibilities for multispecies thinking and, as the text argues, we can harness these multispecies relationships to inform epistemological projects that work through nature/culture/social crisis. The nuanced arguments in each article forge exciting pathways toward a modest hope that, however encouraging, would seem to require greater political organizing to generate social change. However, the anthology's willingness to push, poach, and creatively practice its critical politics surrounding disaster landscapes, pathogens, and ethics makes the multispecies methodology so resonant for our tumultuous environmental, political, and social times that often lack hope.

References

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