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The Risks of Eco-Theodicy

Emily Theus, Guest Contributor

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This Research Reflection is part of an ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

In the face of environmental crises, feminist science and technology studies scholar Donna Haraway provides a lesson in “entanglement,” an ecologically-oriented theory of existence emphasizing the relationality and interdependence between humans and non-humans. Two claims drive Haraway’s lesson, one descriptive and the other prescriptive. Entanglement is more scientifically accurate than worldviews that divide reality into subject and object, or culture and nature. But entanglement is also a model for right action, a political and ethical antidote to ecocide.

Haraway offers entanglement as a roadmap for building more livable relationships with humans and nonhumans alike. But is this union of description and prescription too convenient? As a theologian, I approach this question through theodicy—a technique for relating suffering to a more fundamental reality to render it meaningful. That “more fundamental reality” might be God, but it also might be history, progress, or even entanglement. Theodicies conflate “what is” with “what is necessary,” potentially justifying all manner of violence, loss, and suffering. By claiming that recognizing the truth of entanglement establishes an ethical mandate, Haraway risks creating a “theodicy of entanglement.”

In *Staying with the Trouble* (Duke University Press, 2016), a collection of writings on multispecies environmental and reproductive justice, Haraway diagnoses the ways anthropocentrism, nature/culture binaries, and bounded individualism conceal entanglement. In her telling, ecological breakdown dispels this concealment, prompting a recognition that “we humans” aren’t exempt from the entanglements that bind all life and matter. “Various and dangerously configured relationality is just what is,” Haraway writes. Accepting the truth of this relationality is the prerequisite for the ethical work of “staying with the trouble”—of remaining present with both the horrors of ecocide and the enduring possibilities for planetary flourishing.

In the final chapter of the book, Haraway turns to storytelling to help us imagine what life might look like if we let the recognition that everything is entangled shape our actions. Her exhortative parable, “The Camille Stories,” follows the Children of Compost, small communities organized around a commitment to “make kin, not babies.” Each child born to these communities is a genetically-modified symbiont, or “sym,” whose DNA is entangled with that of an endangered “companion species.” These syms literally embody the entanglements Haraway believes are necessary for flourishing despite ecological devastation. After five generations, their practices reduce the global human population to a “stable” three billion—a win in Haraway’s book, though many former “companion species” have gone extinct and live on only in their syms.

Though fictional, “The Camille Stories” encapsulates how Haraway’s vision of entangled living negotiates the realities of violence and loss. The Children of Compost face challenges that include “complex difficulties with hierarchical caste formations and sometimes violent clashes between children born as symbionts and those born as more conventional human individuals.” But these “complex difficulties” remain blurry. We don’t hear whether these caste hierarchies form along familiar axes of race, gender, and class. Nor are we told how these clashes resolve—or if they do resolve. Instead, as critical theorist Dixa Ramírez-D’Oleo notes, Haraway leaves us with the impression that “unequally meted out violence is unavoidable in the attempts to curtail the growth of the global human population.”

For all her talk of “staying with the trouble,” Haraway struggles to keep crucial details of that trouble from fading into the radiant backdrop of entanglement. We see this when she skims over the specifics of violence and suffering in “The Camille Stories,” and in her broader suggestion that the descriptive vision of entanglement is available thanks to ecological breakdown itself. Haraway never grapples with the moral difficulty of this claim, too preoccupied with prescribing immanent possibilities for multispecies alliances.

Enamored with the amorphous wonders of entanglement, Haraway gives us little purchase on the distinction between the contingent realities of unequally distributed suffering and the tragic limitations of entangled life. She conflates “what is” with “what is necessary,” the precise problem of theodicy.

Amidst the difficult realities of planetary destruction, Haraway offers entanglement as the promise of something at once truer to the facts of existence and more ethical. And she is not alone in finding a link between the descriptive and the prescriptive in entanglement. But the problem of theodicy clarifies the risk of attempting to derive “what we should do” directly from the bare facts of ecological relations. Doing so may prevent us from being genuinely troubled by the suffering that surrounds us, blunting our capacity to discern between what is and what must be.

The descriptive claim that “everything is and always has been entangled” is not inherently ethical. Indeed, as Haraway’s example shows, unifying the descriptive and the prescriptive risks creating a theodicy of entanglement that prevents us from being genuinely troubled by the unnecessary suffering that surrounds us.

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Bio: Emily Theus earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Yale University, where she also served as a Strategic Communications Fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center. Sitting at the intersection of theology and the environmental humanities, her current book project demonstrates that many

highly influential attempts to grapple with ecological crisis rely on a category of revelation that echoes, and sometimes even owes direct debts to, Christian ideas of revelation.