
Book Review

Whitney A. Bauman (ed.), *Meaningful Flesh: Reflections on Religion and Nature for a Queer Planet* (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2018), 149 pp., \$19.00 (pbk), ISBN: 9781947447325.

Eager to immerse myself in an honest and critical study of religion and nature, I recognized the cover art of *Meaningful Flesh* as the work of Ernst Haeckel, having just finished *The Invention of Nature* (2015) by Andrea Wulf. Not only was Haeckel a brilliant and devoted artist of the burgeoning field of natural sciences, but he is also credited with influencing Aryan and Italian fascist philosophy due to his speculative leaps into the racism of Eurocentrism. I note the ambivalence in the spirit of queering the study of religion and nature. So also my heart was sinking with what Renee Lertzman (2015) calls *Environmental Melancholia* while the jellyfish on the cover rise, because their numbers are rising, thanks to their unique capacity to endure warming and acidification. I unequivocally recommend with the greatest enthusiasm that one feels the sting, opens the book, and moves forward. Expect an unease of the soul while being inspired.

In Daniel T. Spencer's pithy introduction, he narrates his journey as 'a deeply closeted' science student who ultimately studied the interconnections between ecology, theology, and environmental ethics. Providing the reader with a genealogy of the spaces and times that influenced *Gay and Gaia* (Spencer 1996), we are set up beautifully for the exacting, inventive, and intriguing tentacles of queer thought that lie ahead. It strikes me that we are shifting from the jellyfish tentacles of the cover to octopus tentacles: the former float and the latter move independently, while nevertheless carrying the goal-oriented octopus forward. These chapters are erudite and playful as well as pedagogically instructive for a reader with some grounding in critical thought. This is a collection to be studied.

Carol White's explication of religious naturalism is precise and her anti-transcendence stance is helpful to consider in these times where authors often work toward constructions of immanent transcendence. Her alacrity in moving through five of Baldwin's major texts, tracking metaphors (from bastardy to freaks) and ethical commitments, brings the reader closer to Baldwin; it is a crucial moment to recall his genius. Perhaps no voice from the twentieth century more critically appraised white supremacy than Baldwin's. Let me note that I was co-chair with Carol of the Feminist Theory and Religious Reflection group, and thus my estimation that this chapter and her award-winning work *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* (2016) deserve the widest readership possible is informed by friendship.

Jacob J. Erickson's chapter, 'Irreverent Theology: On the Queer Ecology of Creation', performs an unapologetic and irredeemable return to Martin Luther's discussion of nature as masks of divinity. He does this after introducing the reader to

the queerness of nature via Isabella Rossellini, and more deeply Karen Barad's feminist philosophy of science, thus bringing Barad's 'post-humanist performativity' to the study of Luther's incarnational theology. Perhaps the most clearly theological chapter, he points toward the possibility of experiencing abrupt climate crisis as an opportunity to be fully in love with and enmeshed with the divine performance.

Jay Emerson Johnson's 'Liberating Compassion: A Queerly Theological Anthropology of Enchanting Animals' practices the inductive arts, beginning with his reflections on the grief engendered by the death of his dog. He moves from these reflections to describe and explore 'master/pup' relationships, a relationship between a human master and a human pup in which the human pup performs like a puppy, in play 'that is usually not sexual in the more common genital connotations of that word, though the relationship is certainly physically affectionate' (p. 85). The work is intimate, comprehensive in its survey, and focused in its delivery of significant questions regarding our animal selves in relations of living, dying, and thinking.

Whitney A. Bauman's chapter provides operational definitions of globalization and climate change in order to position a reader among transdisciplinary intellectual frames for considering 'Queer Values in a Queer Climate'. This is a helpful platform from which to consider the material elements of something as abstract as a 'versatile planetary ethic'. He carries the reader through the 'queer time of non-locality in quantum physics' to queer space, in which bodies in space are better understood as liquids, so that we can 'think ourselves back into our animality and embeddedness' in order to instill a planetary ethic in which the 'strange stranger' is not our neighbor, but rather a self with ten times more non-human cells in our biome than we have human cells in our body (pp. 113, 117).

The collection concludes with Timothy Morton's 'Queer Green Sex Toys', a masterpiece in its ability to carry a reader into deep consideration of a frog's frogness, after which he delivers the reader from Aristotle to Hume, Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida to consider the metaphysics of presence that current natural sciences and queer theories sometimes perform and sometimes undress.

The place of our queer planet is organized by the agri-logistics that are entwined with Black Lives Matter, the Water Guardians at Standing Rock, the international Indigenous People's Movement, and Earth's rights activism. I have noted previously with regard to New Materialist philosophies that the debt to Indigenous understandings of place, earth, time, and our relations with non-human animals is little noted, and the same is true in this collection. Perhaps, as Baldwin (1992) suggests, the problem remains that *nobody knows the names*. When Indigenous studies scholars, such as those gathered in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (Driskill et al. 2011) are sought out as founding cultural voices that are necessary for New World scholarship, then we will start thinking with the first names that have long contemplated spirited animality and non-binary gender possibilities.

The collection is evocative, historical, and contextual; and each chapter provides an excellent bibliography. The audience is at least twofold: (1) a religious studies or theological researcher who wants *tour de force* introductions to the fields addressed in the chapters, whereby experts frame, synthesize, and construct matters of interpretation, ethics, and action for a queer planet, and; 2) summative, provocative reading for graduate students or highly advanced undergraduates who have some handle on the language and landmarks of critical theorizations of race, religion, sexuality, and ethics. Modeling the art of academic reflection, these essays produce an intelligent

ecology in which serious students can reinforce their grasp of the interrelationships of religion and nature, and find inspiration from the rigor and precision of the chapters for the work ahead of naming and valuing meaningful flesh on a queer planet.

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