This is not an easy read and the complexity of the book’s arguments leaves you with a sense of not having comprehended everything. Johnston wants us to take the proposition of other-than-human-agencies, including material agency, seriously, but even if we accept the challenge, it takes an effort. She asks us not to automatically reject affective responses that do not easily fit within our epistemology. This is not necessarily a problem. Books that take on complicated theoretical issues should be challenging. However, when a multitude of perspectives are woven together, the general picture that is pursued is at risk of becoming somewhat blurred. And if the author not only wants to introduce new ideas, but also strives to recapitulate a long research history, cover all grounds, and challenge the reader’s academic modes by introducing a multitude of diverse examples, the cocktail is really mixed. I shall only address a few of the problems the book discusses.

Johnston presents the book as ‘a collection of accounts, or interpretations, of ruptures through which other-than-human agencies emerge and resonate’ (p. 2). The diverse examples support two comprehensive arguments: ‘The first proposes that ambiguous objects and intermediary subjectivities – those that have a reputation for being inchoate and difficult – are exactly where other-than-human agency may be most clearly comprehended.’ The other postulation is that this comprehension ‘requires both a conscious cultivation of perception and a scholarly opening to plural epistemologies’ (p. 2).

The issues highlighted in Stag and Stone clearly resonate with certain trends in comparative religion, anthropology, and archaeology. Materiality has been a buzzword for the past fifteen years, and a host of contributions are now dealing with the issue of non-human or other-than-human persons, transspecies subjectivity, and thus non-human agency. Johnston taps into the recent research history of these and other disciplines and offers a clear view of what is going on. She is well read, has a keen ability to reflect critically, and a lot is included in the packed pages. In a way, therefore, it is fortunate that the author has refrained from her ‘natural’ inclination to discuss the philosophical and ontological foundations of the debates she wants to raise, and that the many strains of cognitive science have been largely untouched. Or perhaps it is not. In my view the demand for what she calls ‘plural epistemologies’ needs clear demarcations to avoid more problems than solutions, while Johnston supports an approach that ‘refuses any impermeable borders to be fixed between these different “realms” of existence’ (p. 204).
Johnston joins forces with anthropologist Eduardo Kohn whom she quotes: “[…] encounters with other kinds of beings force us to recognize the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs”, and it is not difficult to agree (p. 20). The work of scholars within the New Animist paradigm is appealing and convincing, and working in a field where these problems are pertinent, the new perspectives are in fact easy to accept. However, when Johnston talks of ‘ontological sources other than human’ and phenomena ‘not readily perceived by the five senses or dominant scientific methods’, the project is in danger of becoming rather theological and the ‘closing down’ Johnston warns against, may be precisely what is needed (p. 23).

Being open to new ways, new perspectives, and new understandings based on very different human – or animal – perceptions of reality should be a scientific virtue, but not if it means that religious or spiritual ontologies and beliefs sneak into the scientific toolbox. It was quite a battle to separate comparative religion from a theological bias, and it would be a shame, in fact a disaster, to introduce a strange new bedfellow. Johnston rightfully promotes the principle of epistemological plurality, but the question remains where to set the boundary. The intersection where comparative religion (the academic study of religion) meets religion (something thought, said, and done by religious persons), for instance, should not constitute common ground. The methodological and theoretical ‘multivocality’ should definitely not be limitless.

After an entertaining flow of examples and many excursions into the literature, toward the end of the book, Johnston summarizes the meaning of ‘ecology’ in a social context, where the word denotes ‘the relationship between peoples, communities, and their environment.’ Hence, she writes: ‘An environment that acknowledges other-than-human agencies – even if they cannot be entirely perceived, conceptualized or known – is an ecology of other-than-human agency’ (p. 236). Sometimes these agencies, according to Johnston, come into view through our awareness of ‘the materiality of things’, but at other times they are expressed ‘via stories, imaginings, hunches, and creative play, among other modes’ which is why ‘other-than-human agencies demand plural epistemologies’ (p. 236).

I wonder if this simply means that we should take the world views of the people we study (dead or alive) seriously, and that we should acknowledge that their imagined realities (all realities are imagined, I suppose), including notions of other-than-human agencies, are as valid as our own, albeit different, and that such subjective realities remain part and parcel of the objects under scrutiny. Or does Johnston’s proposed methodology transcend what is normally considered academic? With regard to the use of ancient Neolithic monuments and other structures, she refers to theories regarding ‘sensory training brought about by internal monument space’ and suggests that the landscape may have formed individuals and groups in the same way, and she argues that it is our ‘response-ability’ (i.e., our ability to respond) to ‘enable opportunities for these agencies and “worlds” to come (back) into sight: an embodied sight’ (p. 237).

If this simply means reconstructing how people of a remote past may have thought and felt by using your own emotions and you own imaginations, it falls within what I was taught as a young student and what I try to pass on today. However, Johnston continues: ‘Any such ambition necessarily requires entertaining, with play and reverence, uncomfortable ideas-experiences including perceptions of the “spiritual”. Indeed, if nothing else, the “material agency” turn in humanities disciplines invites us to think the spiritual anew’ (p. 237). Given that ‘the spiritual’ is a fuzzy, indefinite and therefore highly problematic concept, it is
wise to reconsider what it means, but perhaps it would be even better if it was avoided altogether, simply because it is an inherently emic concept. I certainly welcome Johnston’s advice to reconsider our sources in the light of plural epistemologies, but entering non-academic domains (including language domains) is a step in the wrong direction.

Stag and Stone will be a mouthful for upper-level undergraduates, but postgraduates and professionals within art history, various branches of cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology, animal studies and history of religions will be challenged with new thoughts, creative confusion and many good ideas. The array of examples are illustrative and admirably well-selected from many different areas in time and space. The text is well-composed and Johnston writes in a capturing language, even if her reflexivity sometimes goes too far. Typos are few and insignificant although Icelandic author Halldór Laxness may be a bit dissatisfied with being transformed into Harold in one place.

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