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Kate Judith, *Exploring Interstitiality with Mangroves: Semiotic Materialism and the Environmental Humanities* (London, New York: Routledge, 2023), 212 pp.

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Mangroves take root and build land in precarious, contaminated in-between places in the tropics and subtropics where few other plants can survive. This makes them fascinating partners with whom to think about human/nonhuman relationships and the possible futures of life on Earth in the so-called Anthropocene. Like virtually every other ecosystem, mangrove forests around the world have been severely degraded by colonial schemes of land “improvement” and capitalist money-making ventures. But mangrove ranges in some regions are actually expanding as the planet heats up.¹ For instance, mangroves have recently been taking advantage of warmer winters to spread from southern Florida to salt marshes on tidal creeks near where I live, in the northeastern corner of the state. And as sea levels rise and tropical cyclones grow more and more destructive, mangrove forests’ qualities as “living walls” (Judith 180) standing between coastal settlements and ocean waves have endeared them to societies that formerly tried to eradicate them. In addition to the basic fact that they thrive in intensely hot, salty, and oxygen-poor intertidal zones, mangroves’ “superpowers” (Montague) include sequestering carbon, purifying polluted water, building up threatened shorelines, shielding coastal communities from much of the violence of tsunamis and storm surges, and providing habitat for oysters, fish, birds, tigers, and countless other organisms. Even as mangroves spread to some new areas on their own, people throughout the tropics are working hard to restore them in places where shrimp farms and other extractivist projects have left mangrove forests in tatters.

Given that so many environmental headlines these days are so awful, it is not surprising that many commentators have succumbed to the temptation to treat the evolving story of human/mangrove entanglements as a rare case of biocultural harmony. (For example, a 2021 children’s book, part of a sustainability-oriented series sponsored by UNESCO, is called *The Children Who Saved the Mangroves*—past tense, problem solved.) To her credit, Kate Judith resists the kinds of reductive happy-

¹ In other places, such as the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia, mangrove forests have been shrinking due to droughts, severe storm surges, and other climate-crisis-related factors.

ending framings of human/nonhuman interactions that, while seeming to promote less anthropocentric ways of being with other organisms, shrewdly reinforce human exceptionalism by positioning humans as eco-saviors and pegging a given ecosystem's value to the usefulness of the "services" it provides to us. The Australian mangroves with whom Judith explores interstitiality (betweenness) and questions of meaning, narrativity, difference, relationality, and ethics across species boundaries have not been saved in any conclusive sense, nor are they saving the people of Sydney. These humble, trash-strewn urban survivors grow not just in foul-smelling mud but in the shadow of a genocidal colonial project that has treated both mangrove forests and the Indigenous people who have depended on and cared for them for tens of thousands of years as noxious impediments to total White mastery of Australia's life-worlds, obstacles to boundless economic growth.

Some people, such as volunteers who go by the delightful name of "Mudcrabs," are responding to this legacy of destruction by caring for Sydney's mangroves. Other people continue to root them up and poison them. But even if the degraded mangrove forests of the urban rivers Judith focuses on, the Cooks and the Georges, were somehow to make a full recovery to pre-colonial conditions, human relationships with them would never be simple, or simply benign. A mangrove forest, like any ecosystem, is a site not just of symbiosis and rebirth but of fierce predation, sickness, decomposition, and "troubled co-becomings" (Judith 9) of species that are intimately *entangled*, yes, but far from coexisting in ecological harmony. Judith wisely devotes the middle section of the book to "monstrous relations," focusing especially on a troublesome knot of relationships that emerges between a human (herself), a wallaby, an *Aedes vigilax* mosquito, and a disease (Ross River virus) carried by the mosquito. Improvements to the health of mangrove forests, the book suggests, do not automatically translate to idyllic conditions for people. Nor, while Judith makes a strong and innovative case for regarding mangroves, oysters, and other nonhuman beings as meaningful and meaning-making entities, does "mangrove storying" (66) align neatly with human modes of communication. Under the best of circumstances, as in a mangrove estuary in Northern Australia known to the Karrabing people as Tjipel, human/ mangrove entanglement is a matter of constant negotiation, re-storying, care, and attempts to understand the other that will never result in perfect mutual intelligibility.² But at least, Judith argues, attending closely to such phenomena as mangrove agency and "oyster semiotics" (56) can weaken the hold of anthropocentrism on human minds in ways that could be beneficial for humans as well as mangroves, not to mention basically all other Earthlings.

It should be noted that readers who come to Judith's book expecting concrete recommendations for improving human/mangrove relationships are apt to be frustrated by the deep dive Judith takes in her first and second sections into the complexities and uncertainties of interstitiality, guided through the murky waters of semiotic materialist theory by such challenging predecessors as Karen Barad, Gilles

² See 89-90, 193. Judith's account of Tjipel is based on the work of anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli.

Deleuze, Donna Haraway, Brian Massumi, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand, advanced scholars in the environmental humanities will likely find her theoretical engagements sound, even-handed, clearly articulated, impressively wide-ranging, and refreshingly well-grounded in the particularities of mangrove roots and river mud in a particular place. (Readers interested in more hands-on matters, such as the ethics of mangrove restoration and what people can learn from mangroves about infrastructure design, should skip ahead to Judith's excellent third section, which brings some theories of Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres to bear on the contrast between the rigid walls and dams favored by settler colonialism and the "massive but permeable barrier[s]" formed by mangroves [180].) A gifted environmental writer as well as eco-theorist, Judith complements and tests her theoretical explorations with vivid, scientifically informed passages describing such things as the filter-feeding of oysters.

One of my few quibbles with the book is that I would have enjoyed more of these passages interspersed through the denser theoretical chapters, along with a few pages toward the end on how Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous would-be allies of mangroves are storying and living with Sydney's mangrove forests in new ways. Judith calls for "[n]arrative tools that foster attunement" between species, and shows how scholars such as Haraway and Deborah Bird Rose have employed these tools; I hope that in the future, the ratio in Judith's work between a) shaping her own narrative tools in response to personal experience and b) evaluating other thinkers' ways of "keeping meanings open, [...] storying porous boundaries," and so on (126) will tilt more in the direction of the former. Judith's narrative passages show that she is eminently qualified to do this kind of work. (Ecocritics who concentrate on literature will find it productive to put her narratives and theories in dialogue with fictional representations of human/mangrove naturecultures, such as Amitav Ghosh's powerful 2005 novel *The Hungry Tide*.) All in all, her book opens up many promising lines of inquiry for mangrove studies in the environmental humanities, and I expect Earth-oriented critics, environmental philosophers and historians, anthropologists, and others to take up questions Judith has raised here as human cultures become more and more entangled with mangrove forests in an overheating, drowning world.

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