

Disruptive Encounters. Concepts of Care and Contamination Out of Control. An Introduction

Solvejg Nitzke
Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany
Solvejg.Nitzke@rub.de

Svenja-Engelmann-Kewitz
TU Dresden, Germany
Svenja.Engelmann-Kewitz@tu-dresden.de

Kirsten Jüdt
TU Dresden, Germany
Kirsten.Jüdt@tu-dresden.de

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2024.15.2.5618>



*For living things, species identities are a place
to begin, but they are not enough: ways of
being are emergent effects of encounters*
Anna Tsing

Curiosity and Protest, or: Encountering Disruptions

Encounters are often hailed as a solution to the alienation of humans from nature. Through encounters with (preferably “wild”) nature, it seems, alienation is easily healed: national parks and wilderness reserves all over the world advertise encounters with nature as a cure to the urban life far removed from nature and offer *Auszeiten* from cramped city dwellings (time off and/or away in mountain and sea-side resorts, yoga retreats and survival exercises just long enough to fit in a professional’s holiday) in which one can decelerate and re-encounter mainly oneself. The problem with this simplified concept of healing encounters is that neither “nature” nor “wilderness” can exist in the present as anything but *other* to the lived reality of only a limited number of people. That is, human interaction with global ecosystems is so pervasive, that any “outside” of the alienated every-day world is necessarily a fiction. However well-intended, these types of encounters are in effect stabilizing instruments of the very culture they seem to criticize. They work as supposed moments of relief in which “we” get to witness our own (human) and our (nonhuman) environment’s instant restoration—observable, for example, in the ubiquitous hashtag #NatureIsHealing during the first phase of the Covid 19-pandemic in 2020. The promise behind this type of healing encounter is that of a quick fix that

allows the *status quo* to continue with only minor adjustments. It helps to brush over violent scenes such as Nastassja Martin's encounter with a bear (*Croire aux fauves*, 2019) or Val Plumwood's encounter with a crocodile (*Being Prey*, 1996) as well as stories of hostile alien "nature" such as the environments in Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) and the "contact scenes" of colonial destructions which "alienated" aboriginal peoples all over the world from "country" (see, for example, the collection *Heartsick for Country* ed. by Morgan, Mia, and Kwaymullina). Infectious encounters of human and nonhuman bodies with viruses, parasites and even anthropogenic technologies from within (Alaimo) remain out of reach, too.

Undeniably, being able to ignore, deny or even just gloss over disruptive encounters is a privilege of the few. It requires material as well as epistemological, legal, social, political and imaginary boundaries, which not only hold up distinctions between nature and culture, but single out specific desired humans and non-humans, suitable to suggest stability in a thoroughly precarious world. But the supposedly protective walls and fences that politicians of all stripes keep calling for all over the world fail to compartmentalize both material and imaginary terrain. Rather than keeping various others out, they provoke both curiosity and protest. Literary and cultural history teaches us that both, curiosity and protest, can emerge at either side of any boundary. The desire to know what is beyond the walls of secret gardens or gated communities arises from within as much as from the outside, even more, desire might blur the distinction between inside and outside altogether. The same is true for protest. What feels like security for some might feel like imprisonment for others, and walls can be erected as well as torn down in gestures of protest. Meanwhile, plants, animals, fungi, toxins and air permeate and subvert any kind of wall or border without either of these all-too-human approaches. A vine or a butterfly might seem curious but, not unlike water, it will find ways not because of any discernible desire but because it can or needs to.

The walls and boundaries we evoke, however, are more than metaphorical, they are onto-epistemological boundaries that matter insofar as they produce order and thus generate the possibility for the kind of encounters in which we are interested. That is, we seek to study how disruptive encounters always already undermine or interrupt a structure or norm and hence are, by definition, only possible when humans are involved to establish such a norm. Rather than arguing for relativism, our imaginary walled garden is supposed to point out the simultaneity of the impossibility and productive necessity of (imagined) boundaries, distinctions and oppositions. Therefore, while we are interested in ways to view the entanglements of concepts such as nature and culture, familiar and foreign, self and other, as literary and cultural scholars we are also interested in the power of these categories as imperatives of how to engage with texts and other living beings. In this special themed section, we assemble explorations and conceptualizations of disruptive encounters—whether gentle or violent, fictional or factual—which challenge the cause-and-effect logic of quick-fix remedies as well as relativism and denial of difference and opposition. Building on Anna Tsing's concept of the transformative effect of

“unpredictable encounters” (Tsing 20), we are interested in disruptive encounters that challenge and transform dominant (alienated) human-nonhuman relationships.

The disruptive quality of meetings between those who are not supposed or not used to meet or to being required to form relationships is categorically different from the more “touristy healing” encounters mentioned in the beginning. Whereas the latter suppose that either humans heal a more-than-human environment (e.g. by “cleaning up a beach”) or are being healed by encountering them (think of examples such as “forest bathing”) and thus engender utilitarian relationships in which one serves the other, disruptive encounters are onto-epistemological events. They at once produce and reveal the relationships that constitute the agents of this relationship. *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, the title of Karen Barad’s seminal materialist book, puts such an encounter front and center to conceptualize the confluence of knowing and being in “agential realism”:

There is an important sense in which practices of knowing cannot fully be claimed as human practices, not simply because we use nonhuman elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part. Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. [...] *Onto-epistem-ology* – the study of practices of knowing in being-is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that we need to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (Barad 185; emphasis in original)

Disruptive encounters and agential realism meet in this simultaneity of knowing and being, the meeting of word and world as well as the ability to acknowledge intra-actions while maintaining the ability to notice difference. This is important because Barad’s theory has often been mistaken for an invitation to relativism but is everything but. Rather, it connects with Anna Tsing’s call to notice the fundamental precarity that connects “life in the ruins of capitalism” and Donna Haraway’s call for “Staying with the trouble.” It is no coincidence that these (sub-)titles are so evocative as to become synonymous with the respective theorist’s work. Already in their just quoted (sub-)titles, Barad, Tsing and Haraway invoke contact scenes (Koch and Nitzke), that is, stages for scenes of disruptive encounters to play out. These scenes bring together doings and environments and allow for the observation of associations and destructions, i.e. the becoming and unbecoming of relationships and thus enable us as researchers, viewers, readers and participants, to notice and intervene in these processes and intra-actions. In other words, disruptive encounters are much more than the counterpart to (supposed) healing encounters. In fact, they are revelations of precarity. Disruptive encounters spontaneously unveil the supposed stability of orders as phantasms covering up a messy, precarious and deeply intertwined web of relationships encompassing live and dead matterings. Throwing out the promise of healing and restoration might seem dire at first glance, but it holds the possibility of life beyond the intact and idealized. With both curiosity and protest in mind, then, we read through and with examples of disruptive encounters that encourage and enable us to resist the temptation to control or fix things but instead invite us to become part of their messy reality.

Concept and Contributions

Our concept of disruptive encounters builds on but is not limited to three major sites of disruptive encounters which we believe engender practices of care, contamination and surrendering control over (nonhuman) environments:

1. Science-Art-Worldings: Donna Haraway understands them as models for multispecies thinking which produce a “critical zone” (Haraway) in which humans and nonhumans are co-present. Such worldings are sites where arts and sciences “are part of the emergence of narratives about the ways in which we live in the world” (Davis 65). This includes projects such as Hanna Tuulikki’s [deer dancer 2019](#) which connects human, animal and elemental movements in an artistic performance and re-readings of supposedly destroyed landscapes such as Cal Flynn’s *Islands of Abandonment* (2021). Closely connected to the constantly self-referential and searching ways in which Anna Tsing practices the “arts of noticing” (Tsing 17) as a method of narrative-scientific inquiry and a way of recognizing her own involvement in what she is noticing by speaking of “arts” and evoking the not-yet division between art and science in the Greek concept of *techné*.

2. Forced Nurture: Tsing’s empowering concept of “contamination” (Tsing 27) as well as Haraway’s concept of “sympoiesis” (Haraway 58) offer perspectives on encounters from within that turn frightening and often marginalized relationships into productive (if messy) collaborations. In order to avoid romanticizing the unwanted and often disorderly contact within bodies and environments, one can value and evaluate toxicity, parasitism and symbioses under the umbrella of involuntary care or forced nature. Science fictional encounters such the (marine) alien encounters in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* (2014) or the fungal contaminations in Aliya Whiteley’s *The Beauty* (2018) speak of a becoming-with that is neither entirely unwanted or violent, nor fully welcomed. Rather, it is the effect of a disruptive encounter that calls for a relationship by demonstrating that separated existence is no longer an option—in fact, it might never have been possible in the first place. Many forms of care, as this form of encounter suggests, are simultaneously chosen and imposed on both the care-giver and care-receiver.

3. Gentle Collisions: Resisting the logic of dominance that so often overshadows encounters, *gentle* encounters re-imagine and practice human-nonhuman contact as “matters of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa) where environmental caretaking is an ethical, socio-political practice of both human and more than human agency that creates, affirms, and makes visible relations. While alienation translates humans and nonhumans into resources (Tsing 133), resistance to this form of “disentanglement” comes from Indigenous and marginalized voices. Where e.g., Robin Wall Kimmerer talks of “gift economies” in which “cultures of gratitude” rather than private property relations shape encounters (Kimmerer 187), [female hunters in Norway](#) attempt to express what Tim Ingold frames as an appreciation of the “animal kind” (see Ingold 71) through hunting practices. Counterintuitive at first, both harvesting and killing thus become sites of gentle encounters.

The contributions in this special themed section show how disruptive encounters combine and re-combine these sites as parts of complex constellations which require careful observation and participation in order to take on the responsibility of evaluating their impact and sustainability. Considering the hype around the subversion of boundaries, it is important to stress that “we” as humans, especially as those who not only govern, interpret, direct and conduct power but are also the ones who design and shape asymmetrical power relations, are never only observers but also responsible parties with accountability for our impacts. This is especially important where disregarding difference hurts humans and nonhumans with less or no access to the forms of power (and) capital that still shape so much of the planet.

In their contribution on “disruptive knowledge structures between ecology and economy,” Alina Stefan and Sieglinde Grimm look at the Arctic as a contact scene which plays out disruptive encounters between ecological, economic, scientific and Indigenous interests and ways of communicating. Their reading of Wolf Harlander’s eco-thriller *Schmelzpunkt* (2022) follows the set-up of the Arctic as the stage for a thought experiment in which these different interests collide and thus allow for enacting a more connected concept of subjectivity that protests the reductive ideology that has exploited the region not least as an example for warnings of the effects of global warming. The literary text, here, allows for a more nuanced view that disrupts common themes in order to look at “the Arctic” as a web of manifold relationships in the context of the concept of the Commons.

Karl Rosenbæk Reetz’s contribution proposes the concept of “Coastal World Literature” to capture the vibrancy of disruptive encounters in the littoral zones of the planet. Focusing on the so-called “migrant-crisis” following the political fall-out from the Arab Spring, Rosenbæk uses this concept to confront literary realizations of opposing perspectives meeting at the beaches and along the shores of Northern Europe. Two Danish novels, Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise* (2021), and Peter Højrup’s *Til stranden* (2017; *To the Beach*) realize the “thrill” of the encounter with strangers who they do not expect or want to meet in their beach-side “paradise,” while Khaled Mattawa’s poem *Mare Nostrum* and Peter Clement-Woetmann’s poetry collection *Bag bakkerne, kysten* (2017; *Behind the Dunes, the Coast*) enact the “horror” of possible encounters that might mean deportation and punishment for their protagonists. The disruptive character of these “uneven encounters on the shores” reveals not only the injustice of Europe’s exclusionary politics but also their intimate entanglement with the shape and form of the (artificial) landscapes that only allow “healing encounters” for some but are life-threatening for others.

Looking at feral Icelandic horses in Benedikt Erlingsson’s film *Hross í oss* (2013), Judith Meurer-Bongardt questions how literary and media scholars can (and maybe should) read human-animal relationships care-fully or full of care (“fürsorglich”) in what she has conceptualized as “ambivalent entanglements” between humans and horses. This is a challenge to prevalent ideas of scientific and scholarly stances that, while not necessarily objective, call for a (at least partially) detached positionality.

Through the film, Meurer-Bongardt shows how a reading that itself produces disruptive encounters where otherwise romanticization might run rampant, produces and surfaces knowledge that is otherwise inaccessible.

Leaving the Arctic, the shores of Northern Europe and its Islands behind, Taylin Nelson encounters “The Sounds of Cetacean Revolution through Histories.” By reading current collisions with rogue whales in the Mediterranean Sea as part of a history of rebelling cetaceans, she rejects the notion of whales acting out of order and replaces it with a “cultural history of whale resistance” thus taking seriously the idea of historicizing animals as subjects of their own volition and actors capable of rejecting human dominance. It turns out that whether or not cetacean “intentions” can be proven, the disruptive encounter of human noise pollution and the “roguish animal revolution” challenges the practice of silencing whales in favor of cruise ships and opens the possibility to grant them, if not suffrage, then at least a voice in what happens in “Mare Nostrum.”

Anne Peiter’s exploration of the continuities between the representation of animal-human-relationship in German publications about Rwanda looks at the racist origins and genocidal consequences of a colonial blending of human and animal form. German and Belgian colonial rule left behind a racist societal order in which ethnic groups were pitted against each other in a way that was used to legitimize a long-overlooked (at least in Europe and, especially, in Germany) civil-war and genocide that left hundreds of thousands of Tutsi dead. Peiter analyses the representation of Tutsi and their cattle as a core practice of racist identification and marker of difference that, while it first marked the Tutsi as superior (from the colonizer’s perspective), spelled their demise once the colonialists left. Holding on to this association of humans and livestock in their reporting on the Tutsi genocide German press prevented a reckoning with their own involvement or a political debate about responsibility, a situation that is only slowly being remedied today.

Instead of confronting the multitudes of wrongdoing in the political past of their nation and its ongoing impacts, Germans frequently turn to the forest as their favored *Umwelt* for recovery, restoration and recharging. Helga Braunbeck interferes here and deconstructs the forest as a site of respite and, instead, shows how this contested space becomes the site for disruptive encounters in immensely popular works by Felix Salten (*Bambi*), Horst Stern (*The Last Hunt*) and Peter Wohlleben (*The Hidden Life of Trees*). Complicating reductive myths, the analysis shows how disruptive encounters between humans and deer (hunting) as well as between deer and trees (grazing) question not only the right way to engage in the protection of forest ecosystems but also the forms in which these encounters are presented. With careful consideration of the different poetic and imaginary potentials of popular narratives in media ranging from literary fiction to popular forestry, the question who is taking care of whom becomes the ground for a radical ecological rethinking.

While Peter Wohlleben’s famous tree anthropomorphizing clashes with *Bambi* in the previous article, Alisa Kronberger moves to a thoroughly arbo-centric question by looking at three films that were shown as part of the exhibit *Cambio* in 2020.

Thinking through more-than-human conceptualizations of care, Kronberger shows that concepts of responsibility, response-ability and accountability form a precarious web of meaning which not only leads to the film's outright rejection of the notion of "humans as forest protectors" but also gives way for disruptive encounters as exploratory spaces for both plants and (human and more-than-human) artists to grow.

Giulia Baquè moves a step further in the direction of technology by inquiring the effects of "nonhuman care." By looking at Artificial Intelligences and robotic humanoids which are charged with caretaking in Kawakami Hiromi's *Don't get carried away by big birds* (2016) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), she shifts the tables and puts human beings in the place of "nature." But especially in "encounters of care" the opposition does not hold up. "Refusing both technophobia and technophilia", Baquè is able to show how technological agents of care already take their place in the pantheon of nonhuman agencies which with we have failed to reckon adequately.

Finally, Elisa Mazzocato leaves the realm of the living and asks about the "Weird Ghosts of the Anthropocene." Closing the special themed section, Mazzocato explores how spectral encounters in New Weird Fiction challenge not only the banishment of ghosts into the realm of the supernatural and, hence, the disqualification of believers as "supersticious," but also how their very weirdness and *Unheimlichkeit* lends itself as a conceptual metaphor for ecological relationships in the present. The New Weird responds to the aesthetic challenges of the Anthropocene and simultaneously offers a reality so weird and uncanny that it might just be disruptive enough to help us encounter the reality of our own present.

Works Cited

- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Davis, Heather. "Art in the Anthropocene." *Posthuman Glossary*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 63-65.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge, 2011.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.
- Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Morgan, Sally, Tjalaminu Mia, and Blaze Kwaymullina. *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation*. Read How You Want/Accessible, 2008.