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American Quarterly, Volume 70, Number 4, December 2018, pp. 875-888
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0070>



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Writing Against the Human in the Humanities

Kyla Tompkins

The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century. By Kyla Schuller. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 296 pp. \$94.95 (cloth). \$25.95 (paper). \$15.32 (e-book).

Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture. By Britt Rusert. New York: New York University Press, 2017. 320 pp. \$99.00 (cloth). \$32.00 (paper). \$17.60 (e-book).

Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. By Donna Haraway. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 312 pp. \$99.95 (cloth). \$26.95 (paper). \$14.55 (e-book).

Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology. By Angela Willey. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 216 pp. \$89.95 (cloth). \$23.95 (paper). \$13.49 (e-book).

Amid the wailing and chest beating about the decline of humanities enrollments, I have sometimes wondered: What do we do about the centrality of the human to the humanities? What, I want to know, does the apparent decline of humanistic education, of a guaranteed undergraduate consumer base, and the retrenchment of such modes of aesthetic criticism as formalism, the new formalism, the lauding of close reading as analysis in fields like (English) literature, have to do with our moment of ecological collapse? Will the looming possibility that capitalism, with all its concomitant racial inequities, its slaughter of indigenous life, its implication in the production of both slavery and slavery's afterlives, has created unstoppable conditions for the end of human life as we know it change humanities methodologies, ever?

I realize that it's not the job of literature to save the world. Yet if we take seriously the idea that the ideology of human exceptionalism has wrought its own form of material, economic, racial, ecological, and animal injustice over the last half millennium or so, and if, further, we take seriously the interventions

that scholars in the environmental humanities, Black studies, Native studies, queer theory, and in the multiple new materialisms and posthumanisms, and in particular, from feminist science and technology studies (never mind the critiques of the putatively universal but usually depressingly and unsurprisingly specific human subject of modern and Enlightenment thought developed in postcolonial theory over the last five decades), have brought to the question of the human in all its racialized and gendered violences, what does the reentrenchment of and mourning for abstraction, formalization, and disciplinarity at this moment in time have to do with, well, this moment in time?

What does the idea and project of producing human exceptionalism, in short, have to do with the human in the humanities? I ask this question sincerely, but not without a pointed and simmering sense of ire, as an interdisciplinarian deeply committed to the methodologies and strategies of minoritarian knowledge, which I learned as I migrated away from the (sometimes) seemingly apolitical aesthetic investments of (some) English departments, and into the archives and critical frames in which I found the objects and questions that moved me most.

The four books under review do not quite ask these same questions, and in fact each is fascinatingly different from the others, but they all also circle around the challenges of the human at the heart of the arts, humanities, and science, and they all engage literature as one form of evidence among others. They do so via interdisciplinary methods borrowed from recent theoretical waves that engage science and the nonhuman world—variously, other nonhuman species, matter, antiracist appropriations of and engagements with humanist and scientific discourse, or philosophical, aesthetic, and political work produced by those barely human peoples whose claim to human subjectivity flickers in the historical archive without ever alighting on the right to be humans. That this important interdisciplinary work emerges in conversation with science and technology studies is not surprising; whether in the name of Black studies and queer theory, speculative realism, affect theory, new materialism, animal studies, or the environmental humanities, the turn to thinking with the sciences, and with the question of matter, underlies much critical interdisciplinary work today.

Contextualizing this shift over the last two decades or so (even if we were to ignore the long-standing critique of humanism from antislavery, indigenous, and postcolonial thought) demands locating these books within what we might term a changing sense (and changing stakes) of the real that has emerged from several pressing political, aesthetic, and ecological phenomena: first, the seemingly total evacuation of even the veneer of rational debate from the public

sphere following September 11, which forced a reconsideration of affect and feeling as broadly social, which is to say, as shared and mediated phenomena with laden political consequences; second, a sense that we have passed an ecological turning point from which there will be no return, in which the enormity of natural forces unleashed by global warming is increasingly experienced as a total systemic shift in the material world (and which we might argue has been metonymized in conversations about “vital matter”); third, a turn to neuroscientific understandings of human sociality, which has forced a reconsideration of the insoluble relation between the social-cultural-linguistic and the biological; and fourth, an enervated and oversaturated media present that has also shifted the terms within which we theorize immateriality itself, as an issue related to the productive value (or lack thereof) of labor (with particular attention to all the gendered implications of those terms). Finally, as outlined by the revolutionary Black Lives Matter movement and various indigenous movements including Standing Rock, Idle No More, and Mobilização Nacional Indígena, the ongoing violence of racial capitalism and settler colonialism demands a reevaluation of the intertwining of cultures of land, species, ecology, and nonwhite and non-Western epistemologies. Written by four white female scholars, the four books discussed in this review circle all these issues, seeking to provide analytic tools that are determinedly, promiscuously, and rigorously interdisciplinary not only as a way to account for the ongoing political real but because the work of thinking against human exceptionalism *demands* it.

Environmental and ecological crisis emerges as the central crisis most clearly in Donna Haraway’s 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, when she says, discussing her title, “*Chthulucene* is a simple word. It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthon* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.”

Of all the scholars whose books are under review, Haraway is the most senior, now an emeritus professor at University of California, Santa Cruz. A founding figure in feminist science studies, you can tell this is the case from her writing and thinking, which is looser, more speculative, more willing to take risks with the genre of criticism itself than the three other scholars I review here (understandably so in that they are publishing their first books). This is not a criticism! I will spoil the ending of this review by saying right away that these are four smart books, each accomplished in their own way, each offering a central contribution to feminist science and technology studies (STS). Noting the relaxed looseness in Haraway’s methodology and writing is not an oblique way of saying it is not rigorous thinking—as always her work is capa-

cious, sharp, inventive, and informed—but more a way of thinking with how far Haraway is able to migrate her ideas into new modes of writing that seek to keep up and, in her terms, “stay with” the current planetary crisis.

What does it mean to “stay with the trouble”? In the second chapter, really the key methodological intervention in the book, Haraway takes up the challenge of not only imagining but writing through and with the end of the era of human and planetary history called the Holocene, and the emergence of the so-called Anthropocene, a term much under debate. Coming out at least tentatively for the term *capitalocene* across the book—because, as she argues, even the name Anthropocene only serves to ironically recenter man—Haraway demands a thinking-through of the methodological implications of imagining life after human exceptionalism and of thinking with this moment of ecological peril. “It matters what thoughts think thoughts,” she writes. “It matters what knowledges make knowledges.”

Against the imperative to either rely on some technological savior or to give up on planetary life (what she witheringly refers to as an “affect of sublime despair”), Haraway proposes that imagining life beyond and with the urgency of the current ecological moment is both much harder and what is needed: “This book argues and tries to perform that, eschewing futurism, staying with the trouble is both more serious and more lively. Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in expected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all.” In Haraway’s thinking, the human is one species on a planet in crisis that must now learn to make family, to assemble even, in formations that exceed species-limits.

In the mode of “becoming-with,” Haraway plays with the initials SF to signify the multiple modalities—each drawn from speculatively interdisciplinary conversations—with which she explores making thicker connections between and with the material and nonhuman world: SF here can stand in for science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures. The latter term is borrowed from Navajo practice (although in fact, string games are found in many cultures globally) and is meant to signal the play of a children’s game, cat’s cradle, as it passes back and forth between players, reshaping and reforming itself, a looped network that makes and reshapes a limited form into something creative, gestural, and temporary. The actors “speculatively strung together” in the book include pigeons and people, squid and bacteria, orchids and bees, lemurs and anthropologists, ants and acacia seeds.

Of ongoing issue in Haraway's work have been the challenges from indigenous, postcolonial, global South, and critical race theory to open up her analysis to the differential effects of science (both in history and in the present) and ecological change (in the present and in the future) across racial and economic divides, both in the US and transnationally. In *Staying with the Trouble*, it is clear that Haraway has internalized those critiques and works hard to answer them in her work: in many ways this book, by hosting and considering multiple communities and locations, by complicating its own investments in what might be seen as a nonsecular and animistic relation to the nonhuman world, by entering into conversation with postcolonial, indigenous, and global South scholars and activists, does shift into a more racially complex analysis than many of her other books.

Yet on another level, while the problem and challenge of race is marked, considered, and noted and in this way seems both foundational and unaddressed in this book, from within the question of creating ethical relations across difference, of making kin with nonhuman others, there does seem to be a sense in which the work of "making kin" with other species appears almost as a postracial dream. Given the challenges to animal studies from critical race theory and particularly given the considered and careful question of reproduction as it is worked through in the fourth chapter—in which she urges a reduction in human population based in better access to women's health, and asks the crucial question: "What is decolonial feminist reproductive freedom in a dangerously troubled world?"—it remains to be seen whether "making kin" across difference, whether across species or across nations, can be parsed as an ethical practice alongside the resonances with postracialism that it seems to invoke. Can difference be transcended or even worked within so easily? I think Haraway would answer that it cannot and will not. This is a challenge and a problem that Haraway herself marks mostly in a set of fascinating footnotes at the end of chapter 4, during which she discusses the problem of overpopulation. I wish that the ethical challenges taken up in those footnotes—the troubles with racial and hemispheric difference that lie between us and staying with the ecological trouble that threatens all of us, albeit unequally—could emerge from the subconversation and enter into the book itself. Instead, those challenges remain both critical and mostly unanswered, offering the field a fecund place, an invitation even, that future work will build on.

The question of race as it relates both to the history of biopolitics and, specifically, to the question of the materially affective life of gendered normativity is at the center of Kyla Schuller's superb study of nineteenth-century

sentimentalism, science, and social hygiene, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. The importance of this book to nineteenth-century studies cannot be understated: it fundamentally rewrites the history of sentimentalism, an affective and cultural formation that dominated norms of comportment and embodiment across the period. Sentimentalism also dominated critical conversations in nineteenth-century literature and cultural history for well over two decades, first as a feminist term to describe and recuperate the seemingly apolitical but in fact covertly feminist and overtly abolitionist modes within which white and Black women wrote about the arenas of marriage, motherhood, home, and domesticity; later, as taken up by such critics as Lauren Berlant, sentimentality emerged as a technology through which to understand how what seemed to be private feeling was located as a structured affective sociality that underlies, then and now, the sense of belonging to a larger formation, such as nation, state, or the public intimacy of communion.

In *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, Schuller redeploys sentimentalism, connecting it to the biopolitical regimes that shape the culture's very understanding of matter itself. In Schuller's reformulation, sentimentalism is recast as one disciplinary technology through which energetic and affective capacity, understood as a measure through which hierarchies of racial order were justified and normalized. Under this regime, the human body is understood as vital, responsive, stimuable—in Schuller's term, as *impressible*, that is to say, as a "neurobiological substrate . . . in dynamic exchange with the surrounding bodies, objects and forces that press on it." Taking up and historicizing current discussions of neuroplasticity in the context of Lamarckian and Darwinian science, Schuller takes up five case studies to demonstrate that sentimentalism, in its conversation with nineteenth-century science, sought to order social difference at the level of population by delineating the levels at which variously racialized groups could be shaped by—impressed on—their environments.

Impressibility means, quite literally, the ability of a body to improve itself or be improved, according to its capacity to respond to external, shaping conditions. Within the racial logic of impressibility, white people adapted and improved themselves more readily than other races, justifying their historical and temporal location as civilizationally advanced. Taking up social and scientific deployments of impressibility as a kind of somatic dynamism that was used to distribute social power, Schuller's book thus functions as a prehistory of our contemporary understanding of affect, and, crucially, her thesis works to complicate the idea that in the nineteenth-century, race was universally understood as biologically determined (sometimes referred to as

“essentialism”) rather than socially constructed. It is in this rethinking of the history of social constructionism, however, that Schuller’s book takes up its most pointed political critique.

As she shows, even in contemporary new materialist critique, ideas of matter’s vibrant materiality are themselves, despite protestations otherwise, inheritors of a social constructionist discourse in which human impressibility shapes human sociality. As Schuller’s theory of sentimental biopower shows us, however, “Race did not name a fixed, interior quality of individualized matter and did not function primarily to limit the perceived potential of some bodies. Rather it helped produce hierarchies of somatic capacity, the biological phenomenon of the population, and the corresponding central goal of power to measure and manage the uneven distribution of vital potential throughout national territory, including overseas colonies.” Within the most limited forms of this paradigm, bodies are located within animacy hierarchies organized by race, in which whiteness survives as the evolutionary and hereditary accumulation of proper impression, while nonwhite subjects fail to evolve, remaining available for energy extraction but not civilizational belonging.

Across five chapters, which admittedly contain some rhetorically chewy, if theoretically dazzling, sections, Schuller traces impressibility discourse as it was adapted and reworked by a wide variety of players: scientists, nineteenth-century Black feminists, white lesbian feminist gynecologists, and, in the early twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois. Of particular interest (and written with the most wry humor) is the critique of white feminism that emerges in the third chapter, in which Schuller establishes that the category of woman itself is a biopolitical and regulatory norm—an “advanced state . . . only achieved by the civilized”—that sits at the heart of much feminist discourse, in turn foreclosing access to “real” womanhood to nonwhite and gender-nonconforming peoples: Schuller’s particular contribution is to link these discourses to the production of modern white lesbian feminism, as expressed early on by two lesbian gynecologists whose research centered on the impressibility of the vagina. While there is a wink and a nod to the sly sexuality of that “research,” what Schuller impressively does is link current political tensions between transfeminism and the so-called Radical and Liberal models of feminism to feminism’s nineteenth-century forebears. Schuller’s close readerly attention to the discursive productivity of female erotic energy and sexuality also emerges in the chapter on Frances Harper’s recuperation of sentimental biopower to advance a “biopolitics of touch” in which a frank political sensuality recuperates impressibility for the racial uplift project; this is an argument for reading Harper’s work as a biopolitical eros of Black bourgeois nineteenth-century

female subjectivity deeply in line with Audre Lorde's later readings of the uses of the erotic.

Closely aligned with Schuller's work, in that it reads science as a project engaged in political meaning-making, Britt Rusert similarly takes up what she terms "fugitive science" as it evolves and is reworked by African American practitioners of science and medicine, by activists and political theorists. Central to her project is a respect for knowledge systems that might otherwise be called "pseudoscience," or in the parlance of the history of science, "popular" science: phrenology, ethnology, mesmerism, conjuring, and mid-nineteenth-century astrology among them. Rusert's investment in "minor sciences," or in another sense, her archival engagement with a broad set of Atlantic conversations that specifically circulated around racial science, in the era before the professionalization of science as we know it, frames the dramatic contribution that this book makes to the history of science, African American history, African American studies, and American studies. That contribution is methodological, in the sense that an expansive sense of what science is, what it can be, and how it might be read opens up new archives for all these fields.

A concerted taking up of the "minor" archive, then, Rusert's book neatly brings African American critical theory—in particular, the concept of fugitivity—to bear on science and empiricism: "Fugitive science makes good on the active experimentalism of experience . . . it reanimates the Latin sense of experiment, *experior*: to test and try. . . it carries in the multitude of experience, continually poses problems (for the state and the state of slavery), and transforms the passivity of knowledge production into the activity of invention. Fugitive sciences are ongoing experiments in freedom, radical empiricisms."

The central contribution of *Fugitive Science*, however, is the book's archival reach, which is simultaneously creative and thorough, and, I believe, will be field changing for nineteenth-century American studies. Engaging nineteenth-century African American archives on their own terms, which is to say, as they sprawled and proliferated across multiple print forms from fiction, diaries, and journals to visual media and performance and finally to both scientific writing and science pedagogy, *Fugitive Science* examines "science" as a contested terrain, as a terrain of praxis and innovation, that brings antebellum natural science into deeper conversation with critical race theory and performance studies. By examining Benjamin Banneker's rebuke to Thomas Jefferson's racial theories, and then turning to David Walker's *Appeal* in the first chapter, Rusert demonstrates how Banneker was claimed by African Americans as the progenitor of a critical and antiracist Black science tradition. The second chapter shows how Black artists and political figures used a "calculated visibility"

in performance and visual representation to counter the claims of polygenist ethnology, while the third and fourth chapters take up Black abolitionist figures’—in particular Martin Delany’s—use of science to either produce or imagine black movements across the Americas and the Atlantic, thus using science alongside fugitive movement to demand freedom. The final chapter excavates the pedagogical work of Sarah Mapps Douglass, an African American educator, science teacher, and activist.

This, then, is an inventive archive that picks up on recent conversations in critical race theory that emphasize creative and speculative approaches—what I would call a disciplined interdisciplinarity—to the archival remains of minoritarian and particularly Black life before the twentieth century. I will say that the speculative and theoretical brilliance of the introduction—it really should be required reading in the practice of producing and thinking from within a minoritarian archive—is not always pulled through the density of the archival matter in the following chapters. While the introduction is dazzlingly argued as archival methodology, that methodology is then executed over the next five chapters in such a way that seems to keep Rusert from allowing herself to theorize more freely from within the material itself: is *every* Black engagement with science in the nineteenth century a liberatory project in the same way? Do fugitive science and critical empiricism change over the course of a century?

This is a minor objection, however, because for the most part Rusert’s readings of her material are also thoroughly convincing: the third chapter, which especially shines, puts Delany’s unfinished and seemingly imperfect novel *Blake* into conversation with Delany’s own astronomical research. This gorgeous chapter will join the canon of literary and historical criticism that surrounds the novel, including Robert Levine’s critical and archival work, reaching through Paul Gilroy’s reclamation of Delany as an Atlantic intellectual and more recently to consideration of Delany’s novel with the geographic reorientation of American literary criticism itself, as seen in Martha Schoolman’s work. Rusert’s superb chapter on Delany locates the serialized novel in its print context, in the storied *Anglo-African Magazine*, in which science was prominently featured and discussed. Her reading of *Blake* argues that it works to teach astronomy, among other sciences, as a body of knowledge—the titular fugitive science—that can be put to the use of Black liberation: in this reading *Blake* himself, crossing state and national lines with dizzying speed, reads less like bad or imperfect writing, which is how it is often taught, than as the embodiment of a vibrant, meteoric, and astrological materiality, in which blackness is understood as a vital force much like the physical potency of the universe itself. This effective blurring of the line between the factual and the fantastic is the epistemology

that *Fugitive Science* seeks to uncover, a radical empiricism—a “willful unrealism” that opens up onto the political potential of the antihumanist critique inherent to blackness itself. I return here to Haraway’s SF—Delany’s *Blake* is proto-science fiction, as described even by the *grand maître* of contemporary science fiction today, Samuel Delany.

Angela Willey’s book would seem to stand here as the most traditional of STS books of the four under review in that she is the only author who engages ethnographically with laboratory life and therefore with science research as cultural process. This is a richly interdisciplinary book, however, that demonstrates a facility and ease with multiple approaches in feminist science studies, from the historical and discursive study of science as a cultural formation in the first chapter, which examines the archive of sexology to link the production of monogamy as a normative model that itself produces whiteness as a civilizational ideal over and above primitive sexualities, to the second chapter that takes the reader on a respectful but also bizarre ethnographic journey through autism research on voles. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters largely engage feminist and queer theory, with a slight detour into lesbian comic strips.

I take Willey’s main point to be this: that the focus on sex as the defining quality of sexuality and relationality itself has limited what sociality can and could be for heterosexuals and queers alike and that this is as true for monogamy as a normative model for relationality as it is for nonmonogamy, normative sexuality’s putative other. Studying “monogamy’s nature” as “an artifact of colonial science . . . implicated in processes of racial formation and nation building,” Willey shows how monogamy is naturalized within lab methodology, even when it includes a capacious understanding of “coupleness” as a model of attachment that does not necessarily include consistent erotic object choice (especially on the part of males) (of course). In a particularly fascinating if somewhat rhetorically dry chapter about the use of voles in autism studies, Willey skewers the reliance on sex acts that defines laboratory definitions of monogamy and thus obscures the other models of relating that take place between animals within the lab itself. Willey’s main point is outlined in the introduction and first chapter: sex itself, and monogamy in particular, is a product of the co-imbrication of nature and culture, those two entities so often held as binaristic opposites. Instead, she focuses on what Haraway has termed the “naturecultural.”

I will admit that the second chapter was hard for me to read, as someone who does not engage either often (ever) or happily (at all) with laboratory life. And it must be said that as a trained ethnographer, Willey is very careful to treat her informants with respect for their work and their investment

in the research and meaning-making systems that they engage with. Beyond and below the narrative of animal-based research into vole sexual habits, you can detect Willey's wry sense of humor about the laboratory logics that lead to such cultural formulations as: if autism is defined as failure to attach and if long-term monogamy is the apogee of human attachment and if voles are monogamous creatures . . . then therefore voles must have something to teach us about the causes of autism. Willey deftly explains the norms and protocols of animal research for such hopelessly uninformed people as myself, fascinatingly opening up the logics by which animals become eligible for "translational research." These would not be, then, the kin-making practices that Haraway imagines, and in fact there seems to be a somewhat underexplored subtheme in this chapter that might use the contemporary scene of autism research, as a disease paramount in the contemporary Western imagination, as a bridge between disability studies, queer studies, and animal studies as well. In fact, Willey has already pursued new, and exciting, work in this arena.

Willey's ethnographic observations in the lab lead to what is really a quite fascinating insight: that while the scientists are concerned with timing and watching sexual contact between voles, using odd temporal formulas to calculate when a mate has been chosen, they miss other important moments in vole sociality. To wit: in the lab, voles have eighteen hours to pair-bond after intercourse, after which the male is tempted by the introduction of a "stranger" female vole in an adjoining cage. If he spends more than one third of his time with the "partner" vole with whom he has mated, he is seen to be "monogamous." You cannot make this stuff up! What is really quite lovely is that Willey's attention to the male voles' movements inside the adjoining cages where the females are being held yields another observation: that instead of a male vole rushing back and forth between two constrained female voles to choose a mate, what close attention to their movements reveals is how voles actually try to help each other escape from their restraints. After a somewhat dry chapter narrating lab life, it is a startlingly touching and moving insight, and undergirds Willey's really substantive contribution to queer theory and sexuality studies, which is that the idea of monogamy and nonmonogamy as sexual practices—as sex itself—has been obscuring something of value: the expansive social worlds that might emerge if both monogamy and its others were critiqued. In short: what if *collectivity* is what rests on the other side of the couple form?

This is developed in the third chapter, on sexology, which critiques the obverse theoretical pose of the second chapter: that while monogamy might not be a natural expression of civilized sexuality, neither can nonmonogamy

or polyamory necessarily be understood as inherently “natural” or “liberated” positions either. By the fourth and fifth chapters, however, something much more speculative and seductive begins to take place, as, perhaps having made her argument in more dense and methodologically careful historiographic and ethnographic chapters, Willey can now play a little bit more with her sources, turning from her work in reading the “biological” and strictly scientific in terms of its suppressed relation to the cultural, to the speculative and imaginative work of art and political theory. Exploring what she terms a “dyke ethics” of antimonogamy, she engages with two canonical texts of lesbian cultural feminism: the famous *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic series written by Alison Bechdel in the 1990s and Audre Lorde’s canonical essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.”

If what might seem like a more thin evidentiary archive grounds these last two chapters, in fact they could and should be mined as a bibliography of second-wave lesbian theorizing about sexuality, a useful exercise given the ongoing epistemic and ontological erasure of lesbian presence and history under the guise of the seemingly gender-neutral but actually masculinist mode that dominates queer theory today. In the fourth chapter Willey proposes that Bechdel’s comic strip enacts not simply a critique of both monogamy *and* nonmonogamy, but much more generatively and radically, the comic strip offers representation of an expansive dyke sociality of which the couple is just form. The fourth chapter is fun to read, especially if you know the comics at all, but it does beg for a bit more self-reflection on the use of an archive of comics as the grounds from which to theorize a “destabilizing, antimonogamy sensibility”—this is especially true when you pay attention to how often Willey describes the text as “funny” or as “humor.” Leaving aside the resonances of the classical humoral medicine with earlier biological explanations of the body, the comedy of the “comic” strip seems significant as part of its generic construction, and one wonders what an engagement with that frame might do to Willey’s analysis. Perhaps we can find the resonances of comedy in Willey’s salient point that the series never quite made up its mind about monogamy, all the while depicting a rich form of dyke sociality that created family and kinship networks across multiple nonbiological, multigenerational, and non- and postsexual lines.

Similarly, the final chapter reads Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” as a theorizing of what Ashon Crawley has elsewhere called otherwise possibilities—the wish to not accept what is as all of what is possible. In Willey’s terms, Lorde’s writing is a speculative theorization of a joy yet to come, whose answers might be found, as she writes in the epilogue, in a dream of “dyke science.” Calling

this vein of theorizing in and through the body “biopossibility,” this chapter engages the turn to (new) materialism in feminist science studies by resituating Lorde’s text in the context of current theorizations of the “vital” sensory body. In this vein, Lorde’s understanding of joy and of the erotic as a realm that exceeds the sexual is a critique of a narrow understanding of sexuality as the truth of the self in the Foucauldian sense, and here Willey builds off Sharon Holland’s important reading of Lorde in *The Erotic Life of Racism* in which Holland points to Lorde’s essay as a black lesbian feminist critique of the emerging scene of sexuality studies itself. In Willey’s reading, then, the erotic is another word for what the post-Spinozan scene might call capacity, “an account of embodied capacities in ways that acknowledge present forms (like sexuality) while challenging their prediscursive facticity.”

I will say that I was not fully convinced by Willey’s engagement with matter and the molecular: while she shines at discourse analysis, the complexities of current theoretical engagements with matter are not really done justice here. But that’s OK: that work is not really the point of Willey’s project. Rather, she is interested in speculating about biopossibility as a nature–culture formation, located in the body but not reducible to biology. Put into conversation with her earlier engagement with lab science, this point undergirds another important aspect of Willey’s argument: that science is to be respected, albeit not uncritically, as a central and important but also mediating epistemology in the world, but it is not to be confused with nature (or in the terms of the new materialists, *matter*) itself. This confusion, she argues, is a central failure of new materialist thinking. It is a subtle and important critique.

Let me return to my somewhat unfair and not even mildly digressive opening question—what are we to do with the “human” in the “humanities”? I ask this question from the scene of humanistic and disciplinary caterwauling about declining enrollments, from beneath the thundering waterfall of online thoughtpiece after online thoughtpiece about the decline of the humanities, at a moment in which the increasingly nonwhite population of the United States, in which the student populations of our colleges and universities are often met with, on the part of disciplines like English, a Jeremiad-like narrative of self-pity about how (often but not only) minority and immigrant students are seemingly pushed to the more conservative disciplines like science and economics.

None of these books explicitly takes up these questions, and none of them expresses my own impatience with the boundaries of disciplinarity: these authors are both otherwise concerned and too politic for that. Yet each of them engages interdisciplinary archives and interdisciplinary methods as inheritors

of a long line of critics of humanism, as scholars whose work seeks to build bridges between science, discourse, and textual analysis, precisely because the problematic centering of *The Human* in disciplinary study—the human as avatar of the transcendently aesthetic; the unmarked Human as the universal benchmark against whom and in whose name unspeakable violences against the planet, against enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples, against queers, against the very matter of the soil, the air, the water, and, most murderously, other species, have been propagated—has led us to this very moment, this deadly terrible violent moment, this Trouble.

One really must wonder: how far into the muck will we have to go before we finally give up on the Human? As Haraway argues, the muck, as in the muddle, as in the trouble, is the only way through. Drawing from and testifying to the many decades of posthumanist critique developed in Black, indigenous, feminist, queer, environmental, and ecological thought, in each of these books we find creative and vital reinterpretations of interdisciplinary methodology in the name of grounding a more expansive future, for more species of being (not only Human/ist) than one archive or methodology could possibly allow.