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The Alchemy of Bodies and Technologies

***Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World* by KATH WESTON**

Duke University Press, 2017 \$24.95

Reviewed by **KELLY SHEPHERD**

In *Animate Planet's* Introduction, anthropologist Kath Weston defines "animacies," the "new animisms of the twenty-first century," by distinguishing them from earlier conceptions of animism. She suggests that they are "less concerned with whether trees and rocks and cows are sentient"; these "new animisms" begin instead from the conviction that trees, rocks, and cows are all inseparable, in the deepest possible sense of the word: they are connected at the most intimate physiological levels. "Synthetic hormones flow into cows into milk and back into humans," for example, "accomplishing life-altering work along the way" (Weston 4). Plants pick up chemicals from water and pass them on to the mammals who feed on them, who then pass the chemicals along to humans—who are responsible for the presence of the chemicals in the water in the first place. "Animacies" define human beings as products of the environments that we ourselves have changed and shaped.

This is a far cry from the cultural Darwinist notion of animism first introduced by Sir Edward Tylor in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, and closer to the thinking of contemporary scholars like Graham Harvey. Harvey suggests that

animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship to others. Animism is lived out in

various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons" (Harvey, xi).

In the hundred-plus years between Tylor and Harvey, animism has fallen in and out of fashion, and has been debated and discarded, defined and redefined; picked up and put down more often than an undergrad's smart phone. Harvey and other recent thinkers have revived animism as a useful critical category.

In *Animate Planet* Weston amplifies Harvey's claim that "life is always lived in relationship to others" (Harvey xi) and focuses on the most intimate physical aspects of these relationships. From the perspective of religious studies, animism implies spiritual interconnectedness; Weston focuses instead on the sensory and the embodied. She writes about

people trying to make visceral and political sense of the damaged ecologies that late capitalism has bequeathed them, in the shadow of the promise and the peril that high technology represents. (Weston 11)

She writes about dissolving boundaries, and new kinds of interdependencies and entanglements.

This book is divided into five thematic narratives, described as "analytic stories," and "stories to wake up by" (11), although they are more like case studies or critical essays than stories. "FOOD: Biosecurity and Surveillance in the Food Chain" is about the use of monitoring technology in factory farming, and how these technologically mediated distances between people and their food are marketed to the public. "ENERGY: The

Unwanted Intimacy of Radiation Exposure in Japan” explores social and media relationships in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor disaster of 2011, using critical terms such as “technostruggle” and “slow violence”—new ways to talk about new forms of bio-intimacy. “CLIMATE CHANGE: Climate Change, Slippery on the Skin” looks at the relationship of embodied empiricism with massive-scale climatology, and adds some much-needed nuance to the oversimplification of superstition vs. science in popular climate debates. “WATER: The Greatest Show on Parched Earth” focuses on the construction of the Grand Venice, an expensive and extravagantly wasteful water-themed business complex in one of the most water-depleted regions of India. This section is reminiscent of Rita Wong’s writing about water, and might be considered a useful companion piece to some of Wong’s works. Weston’s final section, “KNOWING WHAT WE KNOW, WHY ARE WE STUCK: Political Ecologies of the Precarious” describes the automobile as the ultimate symbol of human intimacy with technology—including the toxic fumes (the “new car smell”) sold to consumers as a marker of luxury and prestige.

This cursory overview of the book does not even begin to describe the bodily intimacies and empiricisms—the fascinating and disturbing “sensory fabric of capitalism’s affective relations” (194)—detailed here. Weston takes some very complex concepts and intersections, and makes them accessible in a fast-paced and highly quotable book.

A reader looking for a book specifically about animism (along the lines as Harvey’s excellent *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, for example) might find *Animate Planet* disappointing. It very quickly departs from any discussion of that particular body of theoretical writing. Instead Weston attempts to describe “a range of ecological intimacies through which people have co-constituted a world in which their finest technological achievements are implicated in habitat destruction” (10)—definitely a departure, but perhaps also a new breath of life, for a very old anthropological notion.

Kath Weston is a professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia. She has published widely on political ecology, gender and sexuality, poverty, and environmental issues.

Works Cited

Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

KELLY SHEPHERD teaches English & Communications at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, in Edmonton. His poetry book *Shift* (Thistledown Press, 2016) was longlisted for the Edmonton Public Library People’s Choice Award.