



# A Tentative Tangling of Tendrils

Making Oddkin with Kurt Vonnegut  
and Donna Haraway

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**Abstract** This article carries out a diffractive reading of Kurt Vonnegut through the writings of Donna Haraway. Vonnegut and Haraway never read each other, yet this essay argues that they are kindred spirits, or *oddkin*. Both authors challenge the distinction between theory and fiction in their practice. The approach of Vonnegut's work from the perspective of Haraway's is through the polysemic notion of SF and her diagnosis of the "trouble." The reading has two parts. First, it focuses on Vonnegut's diagnosis of the trouble, leading deep into the military-industrial-entertainment complex with its machines, engineers, cyborgs, monsters, and wars. Second, in line with Haraway's notion of SF, it analyses Vonnegut's creation of new worldings centered on an understanding of life as sympoietic. In Vonnegut's fiction, the deeply relational nature of life is expressed in a range of speculative settings, both terrestrial and extraterrestrial. To stay with the trouble means developing other social arrangements based on new sensibilities and forms of perception. Vonnegut and Haraway share a common vision centered on a relational and monstrous understanding of life that leads, in turn, to an ethics of care that bridges the barriers and enables associations of humans and nonhumans.

**Keywords** Donna Haraway, Kurt Vonnegut, science fiction, sympoiesis, worlding

## Making Oddkin

The following is an exercise in "making oddkin," or "creating unexpected collaborations and combinations."<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway admits she has never read Kurt Vonnegut (pers. comm., March 21, 2021), and we can safely assume that Vonnegut never read Haraway. However, these two authors, born twenty-two years and seventeen hundred kilometers apart, are kindred spirits whose writing shows profound synergies. Ostensibly,

1. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

Haraway is a theorist, and Vonnegut mostly a fiction writer, yet their work unsettles this distinction in practice. Both authors approach storytelling with serious philosophical and political intent, as a matter of earthly survival. They are concerned with the ethics of technoscience, with monsters, new social arrangements, and alternative modes of being on Earth. Haraway's thinking is steeped in science fiction and storytelling practices, as a recourse for new *worldings*. Fiction and fact are intertwined in the discourses that construct nature and the objects of technoscientific intervention. Myth is an important aspect of this process of production: the narratives we tell about science, nature, and ourselves. For Haraway, the task is to examine "the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, science fiction is not just a genre but a form of organization of the imaginary that opens up new ways of thinking and perceiving, apprehending other life-forms, and imagining other ways of being in the world—other worldings.<sup>3</sup>

Haraway's project is "to find a concept for telling a history of science that does not itself depend on the dualism between active and passive, culture and nature, human and animal, social and natural."<sup>4</sup> In this project, SF is a polysemic term that stands for "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far."<sup>5</sup> SF is a strategy for overcoming dualisms, a source of alternative paths to understanding and inhabiting complexity. It is a device for disassembling the material-semiotic nodes that generate modern boundaries between nature and artifice by recognizing the constitutive metaphoricity involved in the construction of objects of knowledge.

As the articulation of matter and thought, of heterogeneous knowledges and practices, SF is about matters of fact and also matters of affect, the fostering of care and concern. As such, speculative fabulation is a "practice of worlding" that articulates fiction and life and opens up a space for dreaming alternative futures—but not in the sense of projecting utopias or dystopias.<sup>6</sup> SF aims to address the issue at the heart of what Haraway calls the "trouble," our present "disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times."<sup>7</sup> It is not a time for either hope or despair. SF weaves together the imagining of different futures (a traditional task of science fiction) and a feminist, situated ethics of response-ability toward the world and others, humans and nonhumans, in an awareness of the mesh of relations that sustains us. Haraway considers the work of Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler as exemplary cases of SF in this sense.<sup>8</sup>

Much of Vonnegut's writing borrows science fiction tropes to produce philosophical fables that are SF in Haraway's sense: speculative fabulations, practices of worlding

2. Haraway, *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, 82.

3. Mengozzi and Wacquez, "On the Uses of Science Fiction."

4. Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 8.

5. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

6. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 213.

7. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

8. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 117–25.

and making kin. Through various devices (metafiction, irony, fragmentariness, unreliable narrators, and constant authorial intrusion), Vonnegut destabilizes the fictional character of the work. The opening epigraphs of two of his most famous novels exemplify this. *Sirens of Titans* begins: “All persons, places, and events in this book are real. Certain speeches and thoughts are necessarily constructions by the author. No names have been changed to protect the innocent, since God Almighty protects the innocent as a matter of Heavenly routine.”<sup>9</sup> *Cat’s Cradle* starts with a fictional quote from the holy book of “Bokononism,” a made-up religion to which we will return soon: “Nothing in this book is true.”<sup>10</sup>

In this article, we read Vonnegut’s major SF novels by weaving in and out of Haraway’s reflections to see how Vonnegut’s fiction “worlds” some of Haraway’s arguments. We focus on some of Vonnegut’s most well-known novels: *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *Galápagos* (1985). We begin by characterizing the “trouble” in the work of Vonnegut, which leads into the military-industrial-entertainment complex (from now on, the Complex), whose main business is war. In turn, war reveals an attitude to life characterized by *resourcing* and based on a technocratic organization of knowledge. In the second part, we explore fictional forms of life in Vonnegut’s fiction that enact alternative dispositions toward the world and others. These fictional worldings put emphasis on the relational nature of life as a sympoietic phenomenon. The monstrous in Vonnegut’s fiction offers glimpses of possible becomings of life and the human in ways that challenge the logic of the Complex. Vonnegut is skeptical of utopias; the utopian spirit in his novels is expressed at intimate and personal magnitudes, in the context of heterogeneous groups comprising human and non-human members—that is, not at the level of all-encompassing, totalizing sociopolitical structures in which science and technology are centrally managed (i.e., technocracy). These visions of community also highlight the need for an ethics of care based on interpersonal bonds. For both Vonnegut and Haraway, to go deeper into the trouble means to pursue the monstrous: other forms of life, other social arrangements, and other modes of relation, affection, and perception. We finish with Haraway’s reflections on the sympoietic nature of life and death, as seen through Vonnegut’s creations.

### **String Theory: Following the Thread of the Complex**

A string figure is created by “dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before, of relaying connections that matter.”<sup>11</sup> String figures allow us to put together collective stories as “patterns that connect” places, people, beings, forces, natures, and cultures.<sup>12</sup> As Tim Ingold argues, “threads” and “traces” are types of lines that take us back to

9. Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*, 6.

10. Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*.

11. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

12. Bateson, *Mind and Nature*.

the “oldest of subjects” at the origin of the most primordial human practices: “walking, weaving, observing, singing, storytelling, drawing and writing. All take place along lines of one kind or another.”<sup>13</sup> Threading and telling stories are ways of establishing connections and building togetherness. More than the sum of discrete individualities, string figures enact a meshwork of intertwined stories in which creatures are interdependent and capable of being mutually affected and transformed. The game’s partners become agents in (and through) the relation, in a dynamic that is irreducibly both semiotic and material.

*Cat’s Cradle* is one such string game and also the name of Vonnegut’s fourth novel, published in 1963. The game is about creating a nest-like pattern by looping a string around the fingers, back and forth. “Cat’s cradle can be played on your own hands, but it’s more interesting to play it with someone else. It’s a figure for building relationality that isn’t agonistic.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, string figures embody key aspects of SF and of staying with the trouble. The trouble at the heart of Vonnegut’s work is the demise of relations, a crisis of relatedness that leads to planetary devastation and the impoverishment of human and nonhuman life.

War is, for Vonnegut, the stark and most visible face of it. Vonnegut was a first-hand witness of the devastations of war. In 1945, while a prisoner of the German army in Dresden, he lived through the bombing of the city by British and American forces. The destruction of Dresden was an apocalyptic experience, the end of a world. The event became the centerpiece of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In Vonnegut’s novels, the Complex is the culprit of the trouble, a tentacular articulation of technologies, scientific knowledge, politics, economic interests, and wars. Vonnegut gives the Complex various names: Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company (*Cat’s Cradle*), the National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Board—with a little help from supercomputer EPICAC XIV—(*Player Piano*), Magnum Opus (*The Sirens of Titan*), the Martian Army (also *Sirens*), and the RAMJAC Corporation (*Jailbird*).

After the war, in the late 1940s, Vonnegut went back into the Complex, which provided him with material for some early works. Vonnegut worked as a publicist at General Electric’s research lab in Schenectady, New York, where his brother (the physicist Bernard Vonnegut) was also employed. For Vonnegut, there was no way to avoid science fiction, for “the General Electric Company was science fiction.”<sup>15</sup> Among other projects, Bernard was involved in the development of experimental geoenvironmental technology. He was one of the brains behind Project Cirrus, a joint venture of GE with the US Army and Navy, whose aim was to weaken hurricanes by pumping silver iodide into them (cloud seeding).<sup>16</sup> Bernard was disappointed that the technology he helped develop was used for military ends instead of helping save human lives, for example, by deviating

13. Ingold, *Life of Lines*, 53.

14. Haraway, *How Like a Leaf*, 156.

15. Standish, “Playboy Interview: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,” 68.

16. Strand, *Brothers Vonnegut*, 61.

hurricanes and putting out forest fires. During his stay at the GE research lab, Vonnegut became acquainted with the culture of technoscience, how scientists and engineers worked, and the way they saw the world and their place in it.

Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), was the product of his experiences in the GE lab.<sup>17</sup> Charles Proteus Steinmetz, an engineer at GE, is the inspiration behind one of the main characters, Dr. Paul Proteus. The novel is set in a future automated society that has survived a war against a nameless enemy. Society has been divided into three. At the top there is a class of engineers, managers, and civil servants. Below, the bulk of the workers, who live in relative comfort but are enslaved. An entire district of the fictional city of Ilium is taken up by machinery. EPICAC XIV is the latest in a powerful line of computers developed to fight the war. At some point in the novel, an illustrious foreign leader becomes fascinated with the machine, only to realize it is a false god. Vonnegut was struck by the first computers, which worked on punched cards, called "piano rolls" in honor of their source technology, player pianos. *Player Piano* portrays a hierarchical alliance between science, technology, and state power, with a rigidly stratified society organized and catered by a technocratic class, impeccably organized with the help of machines. The ultimate dream of technocratic control is the machines taking over and ushering in a wholly automated world. As an engineer laments in the novel: "If only it weren't for the people, the goddamned people . . . always getting tangled up in the machinery. If it weren't for them, earth would be an engineer's paradise."<sup>18</sup> In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's most renowned antihero, the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, offers us a succinct fable that highlights the dehumanizing effects of the Complex. In 1932, Trout wrote a novel called *The Gutless Wonder* that predicts the invention of napalm, "burning jellied gasoline," as a weapon: "It was dropped on them from airplanes. Robots did the dropping. They had no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground."<sup>19</sup>

The military robots are symbolic of the dehumanizing effects of war, but also of the permeable barrier between human and inhuman. Rather than an essential or substantial "nature," "humanness" is a relational property that can be suppressed in the right circumstances. The protagonist of Trout's novel is a robot that appears to be human in all respects. It looks human, it can talk and dance and "go out with girls." The only problem is that the robot has halitosis. Once he is cured of that, the machine is "welcomed to the human race." In *The Sirens of Titan*, a similar transformation takes place when Salo, a Tralfamadorian robot stranded in Titan, becomes almost human as a result of witnessing the entirety of human history, and of having his heart broken by someone (Rumfoord)

17. Charles Shields writes that, after Vonnegut submitted the first draft, he asked his editor to refrain from promoting the book "as a satire of one of the world's largest corporations," or Bernard's career "might suffer through guilt by association" (*So It Goes*, 121).

18. Vonnegut, *Player Piano*, 332

19. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 168.

whom Salo considered a friend: “‘The machine is no longer a machine’ said Salo. ‘The machine’s contacts are corroded, his bearings fouled, his circuits shorted, and his gears stripped. His mind buzzes and pops like the mind of an Earthling—fizzes and overheats with thoughts of love, honor, dignity, rights, accomplishment, integrity, independence.’”<sup>20</sup> Salo’s mission was to deliver a message to Earth. It turns out that the whole of history has been somehow engineered so that Salo can obtain a replacement part for his ship. That has been the whole purpose of humanity’s existence all along.

Human nature is a choice for which humans are responsible. The question of responsibility, particularly in the context of technoscience, is a central preoccupation of both Vonnegut and Haraway, as we shall see in what follows. In Vonnegut’s fiction, the focus is on the “everyday man,” the individuals who are often both victims and instruments of the Complex. *Galápagos* opens with an epigraph from Anne Frank’s *Diaries*. The quote is ostensibly a profession of faith and particularly poignant given its source: “In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart.” Robert Tally Jr. characterizes Vonnegut as a “misanthropic humanist,” an ambiguous position between hope and fatalism about human nature.<sup>21</sup> However, following Haraway, we could better describe Vonnegut as a “compostist” who appropriates the conventions of the science fiction genre to give us a defamiliarized view of humanity from a cosmic perspective. In this sense, the key science in Vonnegut’s fiction is anthropology, as it is for Ursula Le Guin.<sup>22</sup> Vonnegut places the reader in the position of a Martian anthropologist who studies different kinds of humans in a state halfway between horror and compassion. Vonnegut’s training as an anthropologist gave him the tools and a vantage point from which to consider the work of scientists, engineers, and corporate workers and was a key element in developing his planetary citizenship.<sup>23</sup>

In *Cat’s Cradle*, the logical outcome of the machinations of the Complex is the destruction of the world as an unintended consequence of technology. John or Jonah, the narrator, is writing a book called *The Day the World Ended*, “an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.” One such important American is Dr. Frank Hoenikker, Nobel Prize laureate and “father” of the atom bomb.<sup>24</sup> Hoenikker was at home in his pajamas, playing *Cat’s Cradle*, when the bomb was dropped. The string Hoenikker is playing with was previously used to bind a manuscript that a man in prison had sent him: a novel called 2000 A.D., “about how mad scientists made a terrific bomb that wiped out the whole world.”<sup>25</sup> In a dizzying *mise en abyme*, this last fictional work is placed within Jonah’s

20. Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*, 210.

21. Tally, *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel*.

22. Le Guin’s parents were the renowned anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and the writer Theodora Kroeber. As she acknowledges, anthropology was the basis for her fictional worlds (Le Guin, *Wave in the Mind*).

23. Griffin, *Science Is Magic That Works*; Jarvis, *Lucky Mud*.

24. Hoenikker is based on Dr. Irving Langmuir, a physicist awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1932, and one of the top scientists at GE (Plimpton, “Kurt Vonnegut Jr.,” 223–24).

25. Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 7.

(“nonfictional”) account, which in turn only exists within yet another book about the end of the world—the novel *Cat’s Cradle* itself.

Ironically, at the end of *Cat’s Cradle* the world ends not with a flaming bang but with a fizzle. In lieu of a thermonuclear holocaust, all of the world’s water is frozen when coming into contact with “ice-nine,” another of Hoenikker’s doomsday inventions. Ice-nine is a substance that sets off the crystallization of liquids—a “seed of doom” that ends up turning the world’s waterways solid, killing all life on Earth except for a handful of survivors on the island of San Lorenzo.<sup>26</sup>

Vonnegut dramatizes key aspects of the patriarchal nature of the Complex as exposed in war, from male figurations of sex and death (“father” of the bomb) to cyborg resourcing and mind control. In a similar fashion, the narrator of *Hocus Pocus*, Eugene Debs Hartke, realizes at a late point in his life that he has fucked as many people as he has killed in the Vietnam War.

In *Galápagos*, the Peruvian pilot Guillermo Reyes refers to his war machines in sexual terms: “The launching of a missile . . . was virtually identical with the role of male animals in the reproductive process.”<sup>27</sup> Reyes is a cyborg capable of surviving at the edge of the Earth’s atmosphere because of his suit and helmet. As he fires his “tremendous self-propelled weapon” underneath the airplane, Reyes thinks of it as “mating” with its target.<sup>28</sup> Reyes is a hyperbolic incarnation of the Complex as a sexually violent male. Sex = Death. The sexual metaphors also have the effect of naturalizing war as an extension of certain (male) biological urges. Evolution is to blame, since it has led to misadaptation, for example, by increasing the size of the human brain: “Can it be doubted that three-kilogram brains were once nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race?”<sup>29</sup>

The convergence of sex and death in the fantasies of the Complex is one facet of its pervasive attitude toward life on Earth. Capitalism and patriarchy appropriate the life sciences with the aim of maintaining “domination in the form of escalating logics and technologies of command-control systems fundamental to patriarchy.”<sup>30</sup> The cyborg children of the Complex are the iconic product of this logic, based on the interpellation of humans and nonhumans as resources—that is, nature as raw material to be “appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted, or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism.”<sup>31</sup>

26. Ice-nine is based on an idea of Langmuir’s. Langmuir was H. G. Wells’s host during a visit to Schenectady. Vonnegut says: “Langmuir thought he might entertain Wells with an idea for a science-fiction story—about a form of ice that was stable at room temperature. Wells was uninterested, or at least never used the idea. And then Wells died, and then, finally, Langmuir died. I thought to myself: ‘Finders, keepers—the idea is mine’” (Plimpton, “Kurt Vonnegut Jr.,” 224).

27. Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 206.

28. Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 204–5.

29. Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 9.

30. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 68.

31. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 198.

Vonnegut's fictional scientists and engineers working at the heart of the Complex are characterized as absent-minded, disconnected, and morally oblivious to the deadly applications of their research. Hoenikker's game of Cat's Cradle betrays a childish narcissism that stands as a dark corollary of the unimaginable horror unleashed by the bomb. At certain points in the novel, Hoenikker inquires: "What is sin?" "What is God? What is love?"<sup>32</sup> The Complex acts as a colonization device, making humans operational by depriving them of relationships and empathy. The capitalist-colonialist machine produces a lack of affectivity and relation that often resembles childish innocence or narcissism. Dehumanization, as a necessary condition for resourcing, also embraces the agents of the Complex. Like Hannah Arendt's murderous bureaucrats, Vonnegut's engineers act in an irreflective manner, without questioning—a new type of criminal that is terrifyingly "normal." The opposite of evil is not good, but thought.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, Haraway takes up Virginia Woolf's call: "Think we must."<sup>34</sup>

Humans are not the exclusive targets of resourcing.<sup>35</sup> Animals are, too. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim is twice placed in the position of a nonhuman animal. Prior to the bombing of Dresden, the Germans take Billy as a POW and lock him in the slaughterhouse of the title, "a one-story cement-block cube with sliding doors in front and back. It had been built as a shelter for pigs about to be butchered. Now it was going to serve as a home away from home for one hundred American prisoners of war."<sup>36</sup> After Billy is abducted by aliens from Tralfamadore and whisked to their home planet, he is put on display in a zoo, a simulated habitat containing all the necessary furnishings of standard suburban living: "There was a picture of one cowboy pasted to the television tube. So it goes."<sup>37</sup> The attitude of the Tralfamadorians is a sarcastic mirror of how humans strive to "reconstruct" the habitats of pets and nonhuman animals in captivity. These locations (slaughterhouse and zoo) stand respectively as figurations of the two dominant modes of consumption of nonhuman animals in modern Western culture: as industrial resource and as entertainment. In this manner, Billy comes to occupy the material-semiotic place of nonhuman animals, to suffer in his own flesh the Complex's established modes of resourcing. In the colonialist mindset, resourcing means that dehumanization and objectification are the prime modes of unmaking relations.

32. Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 13.

33. Caswell, "Hannah Arendt's World."

34. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 36.

35. The technosolutionist, managerial approach embraces not just humans and societies but the Earth itself, in what Frédéric Neyrat calls "geo-constructivism," a synthetic fantasy of total managerial control (*Unconstructable Earth*). Such fantasies are also present in Anthropocenic, posthumanist approaches to life in a multi-scalar, complex, and fast-paced world—what Stephanie Wakefield, David Chandler, and Kevin Grove call "resilience" discourses ("Asymmetrical Anthropocene").

36. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 152.

37. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 112.



### Alien Encounters and Sympoietic Bonds

We are never alone, relations are everything. Vonnegut's fiction travels across space and time in search of monstrous encounters. These journeys are not of conquest or discovery but are about relationships—relations with other humans and with the alien and the monstrous, as well as encounters with oneself that spark subjective transformations as characters forge their place in strange new networks of relationships. What Vonnegut's engineers and scientists lack is, precisely, relatedness, care, and responsibility, in Haraway's terms. As David Robinson argues, Vonnegut's technocrats "do not tend to see their actions in relational terms; they do not acknowledge the complex relations and connectedness between various aspects of the biosphere."<sup>38</sup>

Relatedness and connection are at the heart of Vonnegut's narrative strategies themselves. Many of his novels proceed by mapping out a web of connections. *Cat's Cradle* is composed of a series of testimonies from various relatives and acquaintances of Dr. Frank Hoenikker. Each story casts a different perspective on Hoenikker, weaving a composite pattern, a "karass" of which Jonah and Hoenikker are part. A *karass* is an arrangement of humans and nonhumans that are associated through bonds of fate. It can be defined as a divinely ordained "team" that "ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries. It is as free-form as an amoeba."<sup>39</sup> A *karass* is a "tentative tangling of tendrils" formed by "sinookas," the threads of life that bind humans together, and with the world.<sup>40</sup> Jonah's *karass* encompasses Dr. Hoenikker, Dr. Asa Breed, and Hoenikker's children (the giant Angelica and tiny Newton), among many others. A *karass* also coalesces around certain nonhuman entities. A "wampeter" is the "pivot" of a *karass*: "Anything can be a *wampeter*: a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a book, a melody, the Holy Grail. Whatever it is, the members of its *karass* revolve about it in the majestic chaos of a spiral nebula."<sup>41</sup> A *karass* entangles humans and nonhumans: ants, turtles, stones, planes. Even ice-nine is a *wampeter* in Jonah's *karass*. The living and the dead come together in a *karass*, which can extend indefinitely into time and space. For example, as a recipient of the Nobel Prize, there are sinookas that weave Hoenikker and Alfred Nobel together, as creators of destructive technologies (dynamite, in the case of Nobel).

The question of responsibility is an important aspect of the *karass*: responsibility for crimes of the past, for the faults of our ancestors, for our wounded earth. People are thrown into and do not choose their *karass*. A *karass* plunges us into the heart of the trouble; it is what Haraway classes as a historically situated relational worlding.<sup>42</sup> The *karass* is an apt figuration for knowledge as a situated, collective, and relational

38. Robinson, "Vonnegut and Apocalypse," 44.

39. Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 2.

40. Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 4.

41. Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 37.

42. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 50.

phenomenon. SF is concerned with fostering new forms of interspecies responsibility and planetary care, forging alliances among and within communities and with other “critters” and forces. The central question is: “How do we designate radical otherness at the heart of ethical relating?”<sup>43</sup> At the center of SF lies the question of alternative modes of living, in communities of humans and nonhumans: the question of making oddkin, of becoming-with.<sup>44</sup>

A karass is a doctrinal item of Bokononism, a religion invented by Lionel Boyd Johnson, whose last name is pronounced “Bokonon” in the local dialect. Johnson and Earl McCabe are two sailors who are stranded on the island of San Lorenzo, where they decide to reorganize society from scratch. Bokononism rests on the following principle: “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.” Yet any denier of the truths of Bokononism is sent to a horrible death: impalement by the Hook, a very serious thing. Stories are lies of great import. By this and other devices, Vonnegut places his “fictions” in an undecidable space. Often Vonnegut composts different diegetic levels (author, narrator, character) and genres, ranging from autofiction to stories within stories. As Romina Rauber argues, Vonnegut’s metafictional techniques seek to problematize and interpenetrate the “orders of the imaginary and the real” by disrupting the reader’s expectations and subverting the fictional pact.<sup>45</sup> The imbrication and juxtapositions of different narrative planes (e.g., *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Timequake*) “[generate] the effect of ontological parity, the rupture of unity, linearity, and temporal and spatial hierarchy, and the blurring of the limits between the real and the unreal.”<sup>46</sup> Rauber points out that this effect “is not important in its mimetic implications, but rather for the relationship established between two people, author and reader.”<sup>47</sup> For Vonnegut, ethical engagement is the essence of storytelling: engagement not only with the reader but with the world. The “cruel paradox of Bokononist thought” is that of Vonnegut’s fiction: “the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it.”<sup>48</sup> Vonnegut’s “trickster” methods align well with Haraway’s own emphasis on trickster ontology as figured by coyote myths in the Native American tradition. Nature itself is a trickster, full of surprises.

Storytelling is a search for relatedness in which Vonnegut draws the reader as part of a karass. In turn, a karass demands nonhuman forms of perception, an alternative way of perceiving space, time, and causation. A karass is a phenomenon beyond the grasp of a single human lifespan. It follows that new modes of relation require corresponding modes of affection and perception, which, in turn, open up different ethical perspectives about *who* to care about. The result is an explosive expansion of our circle

43. Haraway, “Otherworldly Conversations,” 89.

44. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

45. Rauber, “Kurt Vonnegut,” 127.

46. Rauber, “Kurt Vonnegut,” 134.

47. Rauber, “Kurt Vonnegut,” 139.

48. Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 203.

of ethical concern. Some of Vonnegut's characters and narrators display omniscient gifts. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the Tralfamadorians grasp time as a continuous series of moments existing simultaneously rather than as a linear progression from the past to the future. In this alien mode of awareness, all events are taking place at once. This perspective dissolves traditional notions of causality, free will, and individual agency, weaving together the universe and all living things. In *Sirens*, Winston Niles Rumfoord achieves transtemporal consciousness after accidentally driving his spaceship into a "chronosynclastic infundibula," a funnel-shaped time warp. Rumfoord manifests a God's-eye view of history, revealing future events to some of the characters. Leon Trout is the disembodied narrator of *Galápagos*, none other than the son of Kilgore Trout. As an omniscient ghost, one million years in the future, Leon reconstructs the unlikely causal web that intertwines the characters together, leading to the emergence of an animalistic posthuman species.

The pattern that emerges puts into relief an awareness of the relations that constitute us. Often these relations arise from alien encounters. In *Sirens*, we are introduced to the "harmoniums," a species that thrives deep in the caves of the planet Mercury. Clinging to phosphorescent rock walls, the translucent creatures live peaceful lives, free from familiar human affectations. They nourish themselves from the vibrations of the planet, literally "eating" the song of Mercury. Their color changes as light emanates from the walls:

There is no way in which one creature can harm another, and no motive for one's harming another.

Hunger, envy, ambition, fear, indignation, religion, and sexual lust are irrelevant and unknown.

The creatures have only one sense: touch.

They have weak powers of telepathy. The messages they are capable of transmitting and receiving are almost as monotonous as the song of Mercury. They have only two possible messages. The first is an automatic response to the second, and the second is an automatic response to the first.

The first is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am."

The second is, "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are."<sup>49</sup>

Boaz, a stranded recruit from the Army of Mars, undergoes a spiritual transformation as he interacts with the creatures, and he finally decides to stay with them: "I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I'm doing good, and them I'm doing good for know I'm doing it, and they love me . . . as best they can. I found me a home."<sup>50</sup>

On his part, Chrono, the son of Malachi Constant and Beatrice Rumfoord, becomes enamored of the majestic bluebirds of Titan and decides to join them. He lives by their

49. Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*, 132.

50. Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*, 151.

necks, sits on their eggs, shares their food, and speaks their language. As Malachi Constant says, in his last epiphany: “[I now] realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.”<sup>51</sup>

Vonnegut’s politics center on the notion of community and were strongly influenced by the anthropologist Robert Redfield, one of his professors at the University of Chicago. According to Redfield, the basic unit of the folk society is an extended circle of relatives that support and care for one another. It is a social form that emphasizes interpersonal relationships, family, local community, and place. On the other hand, the liberal notion of the individual self tends to consider human beings as separate and autonomous entities who associate following the principles of rational self-interest. However, Vonnegut is not a reactionary, in that he acknowledges that a return to the past is neither desirable nor realistic. Philip D. Bunn also argues, rightly, that Vonnegut’s assessment of modern technology hinges on its alienating, depersonalizing function and the resulting capacity to hinder communal interactions. Vonnegut’s portrayal of war aims to *personalize* the conflict. “Rather than viewing military campaigns in terms of objectives, targets, and missions, Vonnegut forces those who read his works to think in terms of lives lost and people harmed. . . . Inhuman depersonalization is a consequence of modern total war generally.”<sup>52</sup>

In a community, a person’s horizon of ethical concern encompasses all its members, to a greater or lesser extent. Yet Vonnegut (and also Haraway) commends us to widen the focus to encompass the whole Earth and all its creatures, human and nonhuman, and, at the same time, to acknowledge our situatedness and the situatedness of knowledge. In turn, situatedness means relatedness: “knowing and thinking are inconceivable without a multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we think with.”<sup>53</sup>

### Here Be Monsters

Vonnegut’s aliens and mutants are monsters in Haraway’s sense.<sup>54</sup> Monsters speak of the powers of diversity and of our sympoietic bonds, how we become with other people and beings. Monsters, from cyborgs, companion species, or compost in the Chthulucene, are liminal beings, mixtures, challenges to the established orders of knowledge and nature. Monsters traverse Haraway’s work, where they become a principle of mixture: compost, humus, paths that mix the living and the dead, different stories in pursuit of planetary regeneration.

For both Vonnegut and Haraway, the monstrous is at the heart of ethics and politics. The question of the monster is that of the other, and of relations to others, human and otherwise. For Margret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick, Haraway proposes a radical

51. Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan*, 220.

52. Bunn, “Communities,” 509.

53. Puig de la Bellacasa, “Thinking with Care,” 198.

54. Haraway, “Promises of Monsters.”

“poststructuralist politics of alterity that would take seriously the ethical encounter with the nonhuman other.”<sup>55</sup> Making kin means building ties, fostering other kinds of kinship. It means becoming monstrous, relating to monsters, in monstrous times.

The monster is a figuration of multiplicities. Monsters are resistant to dominant hierarchies and taxonomies. They are against dualism and its corresponding structures of domination and alienation, and also of paternalistic and colonialist protection. Monsters are inappropriable, they allow us to rethink notions of nature (both “virgin” nature and nature as object of mastery), and to find forms of resistance in contamination and impurity. Monsters are about encounters, interdependence, and relationships. Even relationships that change, that alter, mix, and multiply. Haraway borrows the concept from Trinh Minh-ha, a Vietnamese-American filmmaker and feminist theorist. The inappropriate others are “those who cannot adopt the mask of either ‘self’ or ‘other’ offered by previously dominant, modern Western narratives of identity and politics. . . . To be inappropriate is not to fit in the taxon, to be dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed by difference.”<sup>56</sup>

Two monsters, which form a single sympoietic monster, are the protagonists of *Slapstick, or, Lonesome No More!* This novel draws a link between monsters and novel social arrangements based on extended networks of relationships. The story follows the life of the twins Wilbur and Eliza Swain, who were born monsters with six fingers, six toes, and two extra nipples. Wilbur explains that he and his sister were “neanderthals” with “mongoloid” features. Despite what appears to be some sort of de-evolution, when they are together Wilbur and Eliza combine to form a creature with genius-level intelligence. Eventually, Wilbur becomes the last president of the United States, shortly before civilization collapses. Wilbur wins the elections with the slogan “Lonesome no more!” Once in power, he establishes a “utopian scheme for creating artificial extended families in America by issuing everyone a new middle name. All persons with the same middle name would be relatives.”<sup>57</sup> The extended families also include nonhuman members, such as animals. Wilbur’s scheme results from his longing for relatedness, the product of the social ostracism he has suffered his whole life. There is a link between Wilbur’s and Eliza’s monstrous condition and the establishment of a “monstrous” social order. For Vonnegut, the monstrous comes to embody a new hope. One way to approach the significance of the monstrous is through the notion of “hopeful monsters.” In *Galápagos*, Leon Trout reminisces about one of his father’s novels, *The Era of Hopeful Monsters*, set in a planet where “humanoids” have laid waste to forests and lakes, rendering all water non-potable. A new type of mutant emerges, monstrous, with wings and antlers or without brains. A few of these “were really quite promising, and they intermarried and had

55. Grebowicz and Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg*, 88.

56. Haraway, “Promises of Monsters,” 299.

57. Vonnegutt, *Slapstick*, 119.

young like themselves.”<sup>58</sup> The term “hopeful monsters” was originally coined by the German geneticist Richard Goldschmidt (1878–1958), a “heretic” scientist who engaged in heated controversies with the neo-Darwinian orthodoxy of his time.<sup>59</sup> According to Goldschmidt, mutant individuals can express phenotypic traits of “future” species. Hopeful monsters are “homeotic mutants” that reveal the “evolutionary potential of genetic alterations in developmental processes.”<sup>60</sup>

However, there is another way to think about monsters. From a symbiogenetic perspective, evolutionary changes do not arise at the individual or genetic level but in *between* species or organisms.<sup>61</sup> For Lynn Margulis, big changes in evolution are not because of mutations but imply an intimate relation, a complex integration of different forms of life. For example, the apparition of the eukaryotic cell, the typical cells of animals, fungi, and plants, is a result of numerous endosymbiotic processes and integrations of prokaryotic cells (such as bacteria). Monsters are symbiogenetic phenomena, born from mixtures and networks. Haraway takes up Margulis’s notion of symbiogenesis and mixes it with that of autopoiesis from Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela.<sup>62</sup> For Haraway, genesis is not as crucial as poiesis. And there is no *auto-*; becoming is always becoming-with. Monsters, then, can be seen as *sympoietic* phenomena.

Humans are a good example of a *sympoietic* monster, a hybrid resulting from a symbiotic pact with millions of microorganisms, not to mention plants, fungi, other animals, and machines. Our life is indissociable from other life-forms that are essential for nutrition, breathing, thinking, and inhabiting. Without going any further, dogs have been, and are, a crucial part of “our” natural-cultural coevolution and cohabitation.<sup>63</sup>

In *Galápagos*, after the *Bahía of Darwin* runs aground on the island of Santa Rosalía, a hopeful monster is born, the common ancestor of a future posthuman species. Akiko is born covered in fur. One million years later, humanity will evolve into furry, seal-like creatures with flippers instead of limbs and streamlined skulls with small brains. Akiko’s genetic mutation is an accident of war and technological “progress.” Her grandmother was a survivor of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan toward the end of World War II. Various characters in the novel are also afflicted with congenital conditions such as heart disease, Huntington’s chorea, retinitis pigmentosa, and short-sightedness. Throughout the narrative, the manifestation of these genetic predispositions can have decisive consequences. For example, James Wait’s heart attack compels the bus of survivors to take a detour to a hospital, saving the lives of the future leftovers of humanity.

58. Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 86.

59. Dietrich, “Richard Goldschmidt’s ‘Heresies.’”

60. Dietrich, “Richard Goldschmidt’s ‘Heresies,’” 72. The term has also been adopted in queer studies (e.g., McCormack, “Hopeful Monsters”) and science fiction studies (e.g., Hollinger, “Women in Science Fiction”) as a metaphor for the power of difference to challenge the dominant taxonomies of power.

61. Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*.

62. Maturana and Varela, *De Máquinas y seres vivos*.

63. Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*.

The cradle of humanity's succeeding species is staged as a perfect reversal of the patriarchal-colonial logic. As Matthew Gannon notes, the extinction of humanity comes about from the destruction of the feminine.<sup>64</sup> The mothers of posthumanity are six "Kanka-bono" girls, the last remnants of a native tribe from the Ecuadorian rainforest driven to extinction by "the encroachments of civilization."<sup>65</sup> Marooned on the island, a high school biology teacher (Mary Hepburn) performs genetic experiments on the six girls, inseminating them with the semen of the last male left, the captain of the doomed *Bahía de Darwin*, Adolf von Kleist. Captain von Kleist is portrayed as an affable but drunken incompetent who unwittingly saves humanity by setting the ship on the wrong course. Technological hubris also figures prominently in the shape of Mandarax, a handheld computer created by Zenji Hiroguchi, a Japanese genius who is shot before making it into the ship, and whose most valuable contribution to posthumanity is fathering Akiko. Mandarax is a translation device that regularly brings up quotes from poetry and literature to fit the occasion. At the end, Captain von Kleist casts Mandarax into the water in a fit of rage. Hopelessly attached to the machine, Mary Hepburn dives after it and is devoured by a white shark.<sup>66</sup>

For Vonnegut, symposiosis is not just about the monstrous but also about granting agency to diverse forms of life and affects. Love is not only human. In *Slapstick*, Wilbur cannot distinguish the love for people from the love for dogs, echoing Haraway's sentiment about our companion species (e.g., Cayenne). Doggy love as another mode of worlding.

### Final Entanglings

String figures at some point become tentacles, a tentacular thought, which does not refer to an octopus, as one would assume, but mostly to a spider. *Pimoid cthulhu* is one of the myriad creatures that populate Haraway's work: "Tentacularity is symchthonic, wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings, passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying."<sup>67</sup> We live in a monstrous era, and there lies the hope also. The Chthulucene is "an elsewhere and elsewhere that was, still is, and might yet be."<sup>68</sup>

In this context, a central challenge of SF is to transcend the colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist imaginary that molds dominant visions of the future. Naturecultures are

64. Gannon, "A Second Noah's Ark."

65. Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, 125.

66. This event brings to mind the reflections of the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood. While traveling in Northern Australia, Plumwood once suffered a terrifying attack by a crocodile. Reflecting on the experience, Plumwood was struck by the fact that humans easily forget that they are food. "For a modern human being from the first, or over-privileged world, the humbling experience of becoming food for another animal is now utterly foreign, almost unthinkable" ("Meeting the Predator," 13).

67. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.

68. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

not inhabited exclusively by humans but are a co-construction among humans and nonhumans, the dead and the living. In the effort to stay with the trouble in the midst of a world in ruins, full of refugees without refuge, it is crucial to bring down barriers, to embrace the monstrous and mixed, to bring together lives and deaths, bugs and humans, stones and lichens. The question is what stories emerge once we acknowledge our deep *becoming-with* other forms of existence.

Haraway and Vonnegut show us that there are other possible worlds beyond the capitalist-patriarchal dreams of space colonization. They both show the ways in which the Complex breaks relations, separating ethics and affects from scientific practices, in its quest to normalize and “manage” a diverse, resilient world. They both show how scientists and engineers can become the “Eichmanns” of the Technocene if they don’t develop critical thinking and practices of response-ability. Vonnegut and Haraway stay with the trouble and gesture toward the small, the ineffable, the tentacular: toward that which links feeling and thinking.

What fictions guide possible futures? Much of science fiction dreams of space conquest, from *Star Trek* to Space X, that relegates the Earth to the background and shrugs off environmental collapse as of secondary importance. The “space cyborg” of Clynes and Kline is a perfect figuration of the myth of bounded individuality, a body that forfeits its habitat and its entanglement with others.<sup>69</sup> The evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis has remarked on the farcical nature of certain science fiction narratives, set in space futures that dispense with plants and nonhuman organisms. These kinds of stories feed the exit fantasies of interplanetary escape, as the continuation of colonialist cartographies and imaginaries. For Margulis and Haraway, life is always entwined with other lives, and also deaths, in “an incredibly complex interdependence of matter and energy among millions of species beyond (and within) our skin.”<sup>70</sup> We are *holobionts*, a network of beings, a symbiogenetic assemblage of vital forms. In “The Camille Stories,” Haraway reminds us that other fictions are possible and that a story is “a keeper of memories in the flesh of worlds that may become habitable again.”<sup>71</sup> We think that Vonnegut does this as well. With a straight yet magical prose, he takes us on a journey through other possible worlds, beyond utopias and dystopias, to show us other configurations, other imaginaries, other ways of making kin.

Faced with the death of our worlds due to the breakdown of vital ties, what other worlds can we build beyond the fantasy of conquest as an extension of terrestrial colonialism and extractivism? How, and with whom? Where and when? How to nurture affects with the monstrous, the liminal, and the different? How to recognize ourselves in others? What other forms of kinship can we establish? To build worlds we need alliances, and those alliances are also stories. Haraway, evoking Anna Tsing, proposes to

69. Clynes and Kline, “Cyborgs and Space.”

70. Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, 140.

71. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 134.



find “the arts of living on a damaged planet.”<sup>72</sup> We need to go beyond despair and hope, find the “patches of livability” where the crisis becomes a springboard to other worlds.<sup>73</sup> The question is to find other stories to inhabit, in order to find a space of coexistence for collaborative survival.<sup>74</sup> This same search also animates Vonnegut’s work. Human lives are short and absurd, and humor becomes a way of making kin. “Earthlings are never alone,” says Haraway. To which Vonnegut responds, “Lonesome no more!” Faced with the trouble, a crisis that is both looming and already here, we find in Haraway and Vonnegut two alliances for earthly survival.

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72. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 85.

73. Tsing, “Is There a Progressive Politics after Progress?”

74. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

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