

REVIEW

Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou, *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*, (Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2021), ISBN: 9781503615045. <http://doi.org/10.21627/2020fa> and www.feralatlas.org

As I land in the *Feral Atlas* web page, my computer monitor seems different. The edges are being played with and I begin to notice them more. The usual throngs of information, separated neatly into frames, are disrupted by drifting bits that migrate lightly across the screen, arriving through the margins and then moving out again. Boxes of information become porous borders that cannot contain data. My attention is escorted along these peripheries: blueberry moves out passing over rabbit who moves in, dry clay floats above fire that touches frog and fungi spore. Some items repeat while more and more arrive from the outskirts. As the screen fills with data encountering each other, I am drawn into the weird potentials they propose.

Data (etymologically from ‘something given’) on the screen have agency; set loose within their algorithmic ambles, they demonstrate possible cosmologies of an unessentialised identity reminiscent of Yuk Hui’s *Cosmotechnics*,¹ which keep technology speculative and culturally variable. Foregrounded in this emerging world of compounding input is the experience of encounter. As data interact, I notice them through their unlikely and suggestive chimeric potentials, which have me somewhat implicated and discomforted by the ways that I imagine monstrous compositions. Roaming further, and tripping into digital piles upon piles, I begin to find clearer and more categorically separate clarifications, accounts, descriptions, and offerings from these entanglements in the web book that I am in: *Feral Atlas*. But it is the initial encounter that sets the tone for how to be with the information that this web book houses. There is a trust, perhaps even an ask, from the authors for the visitor. We are trusted as arriving as already intelligent and able users who can orient and navigate through our curiosity, and in this asked to activate our critical wayfinding abilities so that we can engage with complexity.

1 Y. Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

The ‘encounter’ seems to be a technique for communication that the authors of this project are utilising. Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou published *Feral Atlas*² as a digital project through Stanford University Press, resulting in a choral experience that rings through odd yet fierce relations. Clicking into the snail I begin to browse its underneath, a sprawling network of the Rosy Wolf Snail’s entanglement with the rest of the world. The clickthrough takes me to an illustration with ‘This is Indian Land’ written loudly at the top, mountains in the backdrop and neat rows of houses with same-size gardens blocked out front. This is where the snail is located. Some more information reveals its context: it is a carnivorous creature introduced into settler gardens. ‘TAKE’: that is the title for the landing page. I click through to a poetic collage (filmic, sonic, textual, illustrated) of long-distance material transfers, and the ways that these transfers have mediated infrastructure-based changes through autocatalytic sprawl. The mutations here are unintended interspecies and anthropogenic disturbances of the more-than-just-human world that flourish, demonstrating the authors’ main point for this node of information about how intentional and unintentional introductions to local ecologies have become feral today.

‘TAKE’ also generates a ‘tipper’ (a radical change that shifts ecologies past tipping points), which is filled with an array of items such as the rosy wolf snail, genjer, comb jellies, lantana, coronavirus, rats, late potato blight, kudzu (twice), sudden death oak, cats, African swine fever, chestnut disease, cane toad, Dutch elm disease, European common reed, pestilence, rabbits, cattle and grass, emerald ash borer, bd chytrid fungus, American bullfrog, mitten crabs and Argentine ants.

Set apart by another click we find the field report. Each of the items in the tipper ‘TAKE’ also have their own field report, which seems to act as a placeholder for the importance of close observation. The one that I am now exploring is titled *Snails that Eat Snails* by Michael G. Hadfield, and it is filled with references to the ways that the introduction of the Rosy Wolf Snail into that landscape has resulted in what the authors call ‘feral qualities’, an out-of-control and compounding runaway admixture of human and non-human histories. The particular point where the entity has tipped out control, however, is a site that *Feral Atlas* renders as a traceable relationship between the specific entity and large-scale human infrastructure.

Navigating this website is somewhat akin to listening. There are multiple overlaps with parts sounding together, interlinking quiet suggestions with explosive noises. Such listening asks visitors to hear beyond bits of singularity, and orient themselves instead through what the authors call ‘performative’ aspects of data. As data are curated on screen, they play and behave in dramatised ways through their proximities. Together, they story the content through their detail. This enables a non-linear complexity to resist the rush to form flat-line narratives. The staying place within complex relations that the data spark up are demonstrative communications of the website’s calls to ‘tell terrible stories as well as possible’.

2 A. L. Tsing, J. Deger, A. K. Saxena, and F. Zhou, *Feral Atlas : The More-than-Human Anthropocene* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

Terrible stories, the authors argue, are of the 'Anthropocene'. These stories probe beyond the present moment to trace deeper relations and get at the initial disturbances caused by anthropocentric infrastructural activity. Through Angela Y Davis,³ we might understand these terrible stories as radical ones, because they grasp at the root of their emergence. With the official term 'Anthropocene' being rejected by the International Union of Geological Sciences in 2024 due to the ways that the timeframe proposed for the term (a relatively short series/epoch) oversimplifies the complex relations therein, *Feral Atlas* demonstrates how the 'Anthropocene' can be understood beyond such problematic points of measurement. *Feral Atlas* proposes observations from multiple perspectives that engage rhizomatic root causes to make sense of and tackle 'patchy' environmental damage that cannot and should not be separated from human and nonhuman realities. Within this are the potentials for noticing and engaging radically with systemic change that needs transforming in order to do such work.

As a map for analysis, the authors have outlined historical axioms that contribute to the 'Anthropocene', and which render visible various infrastructural make-up that contribute to the mutant complexes in question. These axioms are useful for taking into account the atmospheres and ongoing legacies of historical socio-ecological events within which our current environment suffocates. They provide thinking lines for considering ethical socio-economic responses that are politically astute and deftly analytical. As a pedagogical tool, *Feral Atlas* demonstrates a variety of learning environments that draw together the ontological and epistemic differentials of material and cultural relations.

The analytic departure points for educational settings in *Feral Atlas* generate a deliberative environment that stays within troubling relations. One of the potentials of this is to put into action in Isabelle Stengers and S. Muecke's *Slow Science*.⁴ Stengers asserts that science needs to slow down so that it can find thicker questions to ask about the constant coming together of living communities, while working through a responsibility that it has for social interdependencies. Including a broader awareness of the *value* that facts hold, Stengers proposes, is a sort of rigour that is mirrored both within and outside of the lab, and is a rigour that asks about 'the often messy web of hard questions that matter in any given situation'.⁵

Locating these hard questions can be more daunting (and rewarding) than finding answers to simple ones. *Feral Atlas* does not rush toward fast answers; quantity produced through speed and efficiency, funding pressures and short-term focus do not necessarily lead toward quality research and sustainable livelihoods. Instead, what *Feral Atlas* proposes is the value in finding the right questions, through an investigation of plural reflections and contemplations that lead to ethical considerations. This rethinking from/at/with the edges and peripheries of what is known leaves space for something unexpected to emerge. Careful inquiry here interrogates certainty

3 A. Y. Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics* (New York, Vintage, 2011).

4 I. Stengers and S. Muecke, *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science*, (Cambridge, Polity, 2018).

5 Stengers and Muecke, *Another Science*, 102.

through broader contextual understandings, and in *Feral Atlas* this can help to notice what unexpected ecological impact arrives as a surprise, eschewing dominant socio-ecological narratives and undoing self-fashioned narratives about (certain) human control over the natural world. A cacophony of what has been silenced and ignored can now be heard, giving noise to the doldrums of the everyday. What ‘noises’ in this is the rendering visible of power differentials, acting across the pasts, presents and futures which continuously rupture environmental stability. Within this noise, plurivocal frequencies scale and collide across matter, location, politics of relation, historicity and temporality.

Feral Atlas reminds us that, within the project of the Anthropocene, physical substance cannot be separated out from discourse. As the authors state, ‘questions of colonialism, violence, class, race, and gender, for example, are not just add-ons to landscape analysis; they constitute patches that matter’⁶. The project makes it clear that it is within the messiness of matter that matters of importance reveal entangled states of being, wherein through-lines for deep questions can be shaped. Physicist Karen Barad⁷ speaks of matter as phenomena that sense, communicate and yearn, and how, through their materiality, these are always-already entangled with more than just themselves. This entanglement of matter and meaning is present in *Feral Atlas* in the ways that knowledge production, along with the active participation of the visitor to the site, coalesce meaning-making with the material activities presented. *Feral Atlas* contributes greatly to thinking about how the nature of being and existence is crucial for comprehending knowledge production, and thus demonstrates the importance of ontology within the sciences.

Film clips, maps, reports, poetry, essays, algorithms, testimonials and illustrations all generate a resonant non-linear communication for feral qualities, shaped by varied agencies. This communication offers something of a refreshingly uneven picture to the somewhat reductive yet neatly packaged linear storytelling of climate, with associated tactics of locating a hero that journeys on highly emotive arches and dips along a singular line of attention, all of which reduce the presence of data. *Feral Atlas* offers a form of science communication that, while keeping close to data, is shaped through the validity of different forms of knowing.

Instead of flattening all relationships within the feral phenomena presented and drawing a single story out of it all, *Feral Atlas* manages to locate a sort of restlessness in the form of questions that rise up through the dissonance of connections, highlighting relationships in connectivity, even through the request for visitors to engage. Temporally speaking, there is a dissonant rhythm present in which natural cycles clash with human progress. Questions that rise through the rupturing of teleological anthropogenic progress redefine syncretic understandings. The questions that begin to find shape through a *Feral Atlas* analysis of the world can, in some ways, begin to address why ruptures occur, why rupturing is necessary, what the lines of progress

6 *Treat the Anthropocene as Patchy Here*, www.feralatlas.supdigital.org/index?text=feral-atlas-and-the-more-than-human-anthropocene&type=essay&cd=true%2C%20consult%C3%A9.

7 K. M. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press 2007).

are and how they are unsustainable. But the project does not simply problematise matters; *Feral Atlas* provides grounds for ethical considerations that arise through a concern for the consequences of acting without relational lucidity.

These questions help one to comprehend the enormity of awareness that is needed for communicating issues around climate crisis, which Amitav Ghosh has argued is a 'crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination'.⁸ The imagination that spurred the Anthropocene on is one that failed to comprehend, or refused to acknowledge, relational entanglements of differing agencies and temporal values beyond that of the figuration of the human cast out of the form of Man⁹ so central to it. Upholding such farciality is unsustainable. *Feral Atlas* manages to demonstrate how questions from beyond the imaginary of 'Man' are needed to comprehend ruptures at greater and more complexly intimate scales.

Bringing visitors into a lively encounter with data puts to work contemporary science communication methods for generating a dialogical space with varying issues at stake. This approach departs from the deficit, often top-down, educational approach to non-scientists by expert scientific cohorts. Such modes have, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith¹⁰ has pointed out, caused much distrust of science in the past, mostly due to the denial of different knowledge systems and related ways of communing with the natural world. An understanding of distrust needs to be taken into account when seeking ways to build trust. For science scepticism to be addressed in a world that needs scientific evidence to curb the rise of right-wing politics and capital control over resources, *Feral Atlas* boldly and creatively demonstrates not only how possible it is to collect various 'investigators' together (including nature scientists, indigenous elders, historians, writers and artists) that provide differing perspectives, but *why* this is necessary for the survival of planetary life as we live it today.

While a more feverish unboundedness would be required to really achieve the goal of undoing the Anthropocene, or reverting to relational technologies for survival with the natural world, *Feral Atlas* orients the viewer to new ways of being by attuning itself to the discomfiting sites where relational imaginaries need to expand. The congealing of ethical considerations that become apparent here trace questions that, like the data they consider, are agential and never quite settled, yet are incredibly generative for the project of becoming-together.

Meghan Judge

Origins Centre Association, School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of Witwatersrand

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3588-2133>

8 A. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.

9 S. Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument.' *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3, 3, 2003, 257–337.

10 L.T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: Zed Books, 1999).