Rachel Carson Center

Perspectives

Why Do We Value Diversity?

Biocultural Diversity in a Global Context

Edited by
GARY MARTIN
DIANA MINCYTE
URSULA MÜNSTER

2012 / 9

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S. Eben Kirksey

Thneeds Reseeds: Figures of Biocultural Hope in the Anthropocene

Thneeds Reseeds, a sculptural artwork by Deanna Pindell, is a biotactical intervention aimed at exposing and derailing dominant regimes for managing sylvan life (da Costa and Philip 2008, xviii). Imagining a way to reseed the clear-cut forested landscapes near her home on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, Deanna began collecting friends' multicolored wool sweaters—old and funky things that were no longer fashionable to wear. Refashioning the form of these commodities, products of the excess of late capitalism, she shrank the donated sweaters in her drier. Using a time-tested process called "felting," she made fuzzy softball-sized sculptures, brightly colored habitats for forest plants and animals. Deanna created small openings so that forest mice, voles, and salamanders might live inside the Thneeds. She also hoped that these wool balls would become moth-eaten, that they would become food for the insect community.

The name for these sculptures was taken from *The Lorax*, a classic childhood tale by Dr. Seuss about environmental destruction. "A thneed's a fine something that all people need," proclaims the Old Onceler, a haunting specter of dead capital who is the nemesis of the Lorax: "It's a shirt. It's a sock. It's a glove, it's a hat. But it has other uses, yes, far beyond that!" Speaking for nature, the Lorax persistently tries to interrupt the Old Onceler's plans to get mighty rich by knitting these multi-purposed sweaters: "I'm the Lorax, who speaks for the trees, which you seem to be chopping as fast as you please. But I'm also in charge of the brown barbaloots, who played in the shade in their barbaloot suits, and happily lived, eating truffula fruits" (Seuss 1971, 17–18).

Bruno Latour has rearticulated the refrain of the Lorax. Calling on scholars of science and society to give democratic rights to non-humans, Latour has suggested that we construct "speech prosthetics": "millions of subtle mechanisms capable of adding new voices to the chorus" (2004, 64, 69). The Lorax attempted to speak for a multitude of creatures living among the truffula trees. But, ultimately, this tragic figure failed to save this forest from being clear-cut. Perhaps initiatives to build new speech prosthetics, to bring the voices of other species into play, also always generate constitutive outsiders who are unrepresented in realms of human discourse (Dumit 2008, xii; Kirksey 2012, 48).

Rather than simply repeat failed truth-telling strategies, or construct speech prosthetics for particular species, Deanna Pindell has worked to create livable futures in the aftermath of ecological disaster. Multispecies ethnographers have recently taken an "ontological turn," departing from a foundational distinction between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans that is at the base of Euro-American epistemology (Candea 2010; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Tracing the vector of a parallel turn, Deanna and other artists operating in biological and ecological domains have begun to explore novel modes of care for beings in multispecies worlds (Gablik 1991; Bureaud 2002, 39; Zurr 2004, 402; da Costa and Philip 2008).

When she first moved to the Olympic Peninsula of Washington, Deanna found that struggles by environmental advocates to save particular patches of forest were taking place alongside struggles by loggers who were trying desperately to keep their jobs, to heat their homes. As activists lost steam, timber companies cut the forest and then moved on—leaving devastated ecosystems and unemployed people in their wake.

"Every time I passed a clear-cut forest," Deanna told me, "I felt a sense of loss, a sense of mourning."

Seeing that the oppositional politics of activists were failing, Deanna began reworking the ideas of metamorphosis, remediation, and sanctuary. Rather than dwell on tragedy, she began to add a sense of comedy into the mix. Seeding these abandoned lands with multicolored wool balls, she began enlisting multiple species to enliven these devastated spaces. Overcoming incapacitating feelings of mourning, Deanna played with the tale of the Lorax to invent a novel technology of interspecies care and cultivation.

Deanna initially created her Thneeds Reseeds with one particular species in mind: silvery bryum (*Bryum argenteum*), one of the most resilient mosses in the world. This plant is found in all sorts of seemingly hostile environments—from the tarmacs of New York City airports to the tiled roofs of Quito. Deanna hoped that giving it a moist substrate would enable it to become a "first responder" in clear-cut forests. The spores of silvery bryum are abundant in aerial plankton, the cloud of spores, pollen, and insects that circulates the globe at altitudes up to 4,500 meters (see Raffles 2010, 10; Kimmerer 2003, 92).

Moss spores are raining down in the air all around us, looking for a suitable place to germinate—a solid substrate with enough light and water. Deanna designed the Thneeds to trap rain, to hold on to moisture that would otherwise evaporate in a landscape where the forest canopy had been removed. A book by bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History,* initially gave Deanna the idea of using silvery bryum to help the forest regenerate. At an abandoned iron mine, Kimmerer found that tree seeds grew and survived best on huge mounds of tailings when living in partnership with moss (2003, 50).

Deanna sent 21 Thneeds to the Multispecies Salon, an art exhibit that blurred the distinction between ecoart and bioart (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Kirksey, Schuetze, and Shapiro 2011). Her installation was framed by instructions and a tragic joke: "Thneeds Reseeds. To restore your clear-cut forest: 1) Break the mosses into fragments; 2) Mix the moss with buttermilk; 3) Place Thneeds in clear-cut; 4) Keep the Thneeds moist with buttermilk until tree seedlings can take hold. Enough Thneeds for one square meter of forest." If Deanna's scale of intervention, one square meter, is a tragic joke, she hopes her piece will help inspire other people to develop their own ideas about enlivening abandoned spaces.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) bioculture is generating emergent forms of diversity that are enabling certain species to flourish in the Anthropocene, the era when the agency of humans has been scaled up to embrace and endanger the planet. Novel microbiopolitical interventions—local cycles of materials on a microscale, outside of dominant institutionalized practices and global commodity chains—are allowing for cross-species tactical coordination (cf. da Costa and Philip 2008, xi; Paxson 2008, 40; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 560; Berrigan, 2012). A multitude of bioartists and ecoartists are generating living figures of biocultural hope.

Certain notions of "hope" are vacuous. Jacques Derrida, for example, attempted to evacuate all content from his dreams as he faced the immense "abyssal desert" of future possibility. Derrida cultivated an empty notion of hope, devoid of any objects of desire (1994, 28; cf. Jameson 1999, 62). Trying to literally expect the unexpected, Derrida was waiting for mysterious possibilities that were utterly unfigurable, beyond our imaginative horizons (Derrida 1999, 253; cf. Crapanzano 2004, 103–4, 146; Kirksey 2012).

Rather than harbor empty dreams devoid of all figures, Deanna Pindell has worked to congeal her imaginings of post-industrial futures in actual material objects. The Thneeds Reeseeds are intended to be agential things in the world, tools for enlisting multiple species in the healing of damaged ecosystems or even generating new kinds of flourishing (cf. Haraway 2007). These sculptures prefigure coming changes and contain a radical openness to possible multispecies becomings. Deanna has knit particular species into the fabric of one imagined future for Pacific Northwest forests. Her project also offers an opening for a multitude of other life forms, and creative human agents, to explore new ways of being-with-others in the world (Hardt and Negri 2004; Despret 2004, 122; Kirksey, Schuetze, and Shapiro 2011).

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Anna Tsing

Contaminated Diversity in "Slow Disturbance": Potential Collaborators for a Liveable Earth

Our time is the "anthropocene," the age of human disturbance. The anthropocene is an era of mass extinction; we must not forget that. Yet the anthropocene is also an era of emergence. What has emerged? I use the term "contaminated diversity" to refer to cultural and biological ways of life that have developed in relation to the last few hundred years of widespread human disturbance. Contaminated diversity is collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems. It emerges as the detritus of environmental destruction, imperial conquest, profit making, racism, and authoritarian rule—as well as creative becoming. It is not always pretty. But it is who we are and what we have as available working partners for a liveable earth.

"Slow disturbance" refers to anthropogenic ecosystems in which many other species can live. Slow disturbance landscapes are those that nurture interspecies collaborations. They are not untouched by the presence of humans, the ultimate weedy invader. Still, their biodiversity is comparatively high. I use the adjective "slow" in conversation with slow foods and slow cities; slowness is a dream to encourage, rather than a trait to objectify. In my current collaborative research on the world connected by matsutake mushrooms (a slow disturbance fungus much valued in Japan and foraged around the northern hemisphere), I have explored landscapes of interspecies collaboration involving humans and pine forests (see Satsuka and Hathaway, this volume). Matsutake landscapes are disturbed forests; they are also sites of multispecies life.

How might we work toward an earth of slow disturbance? Instead of merely cataloguing diversity, we need to tell the histories in which diversity emerges—that is, acknowledge its lively and, thus, contaminated forms. Diversity is created in collaborative synergies; it is always becoming. Both indigenous people and migrants can participate in making slow disturbance patches. One useful direction in which to move "biocultural diversity" is to open it up to the contaminated diversity and slow disturbance regimes of people in many circumstances.

Biocultural diversity has usually been used as a term to recognize traditional ecological practices. Tradition is just one example, I argue, of the contaminated diversity that allows slow disturbance. There is a kinship here with other contaminated forms. But let me begin with a classic case.

Among Meratus Dayaks of the rainforests of Kalimantan, with whom I conducted fieldwork, biodiversity is nurtured through livelihood practices (Tsing 1994, 2005). It is not just that Meratus are blessed with a diverse environment, they encourage biodiversity through landscape management. First, Meratus diversify cultivated plants, developing many varieties for each crop. Second, they diversify landscape through long-rotation fire farming, creating patches of successional forest within old forest. Patches encourage biodiversity. Third, they encourage other species through semi-domestication, bringing plants and animals into their disturbance ecologies without the rigors of domestication. For example, they clean and prepare forest trees for migrating bees. They spread the seeds of wild fruits and encourage useful plants.

The diversity that thrives is that which adapts to Meratus disturbance practices. Things are confused when conservationists identify this suite of species as the "untouched" rainforest; they should not banish the people from the story. The gift of the term biocultural diversity is to make that evident. Yet it is not necessary to deny history (in search for tradition) to hold that gift. The plants and animals are part of a human disturbance regime; they have a contaminated history. While Meratus have had a long time to develop this set of practices, it would also be a mistake to imagine them holding a blueprint of timeless wisdom. Meratus were refugees from the Islamicization of South Kalimantan, itself a defensive reaction to European invasions starting five hundred years ago. They developed an alternative to capitalist modernity by working to stay out of its way. It is not that they never heard of colonialism or national development; they have tried, in their own way, to survive on the periphery of such formations. Their cultural integrity is as contaminated as their biological landscape, and this puts them into cosmopolitan kinship with the rest of us.

This kinship can lead us into sharply contrasting examples of contaminated diversity and slow disturbance. Bettina Stoetzer's recent dissertation (2011) explores contaminated diversity in the city of Berlin. The rubble of collapsing buildings after World War II created "rubble ecologies" in the heart of the city; new weeds sprung up from the ruins of war. These weeds lead her into the metaphorical rubble ecologies of im-

migrant gardens and barbeque areas, as well as refugee camps in the forest. Contaminated cultural diversity becomes tied to contaminated biological diversity in these practices. Some of the time, slow disturbance is possible.

Between these two examples are the disturbed pine forests that produce matsutake mushrooms. One of my fieldwork sites is the ruins of industrial forests in Oregon. The big timber trees are gone. Small, crowded, diseased pines grow slowly on this pumice soil. This is surely contaminated diversity. Those who know it best are the pickers who come every autumn for matsutake. Most of the pickers are also survivors—of war. White veterans of the US-Indochina War share the woods, begrudgingly, with Southeast Asian refugees of the same war and the civil wars that followed. Other pickers were displaced by the end of industrial logging, by the decline in standard employment, and by the possibility of crossing borders to seek new lives. Many languages are spoken, including Hmong, Mien, Lao, Khmer, Cham, Akha, Mayan, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, Japanese, Korean, and English. This small area of ruined forest must be one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse areas of the world—during matsutake season. But this is all contaminated diversity. The refugees reconstitute themselves as cultural groups in memory of war. Cultural identity here *is* the memory of war. So too, ecology here is the memory of logging. Contaminated diversity is everywhere; for better or worse, it is what we have. In accepting these limitations, this matsutake picking constitutes slow disturbance, allowing forest life to continue.

If we are looking for collaborative partners for a liveable earth, we must consider contaminated diversity and slow disturbance. This means telling histories of the cultural and biological synergies through which diversity continues to emerge, even in ruins.

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enous rights are now being raised in China, in part due to a set of connections between international conservationists and Chinese scholar-activists. His second project examines the global commodity chain of the matsutake mushroom, where he is investigating how its commercialization in China is influencing ethnic hierarchies. Overall, his theoretical concerns are motivated by an interest in fostering new forms of environmentalism rooted in social justice, and new forms of indigeneity that are less restricted by the weight of Western expectations.

Karen Hébert is an assistant professor jointly appointed in the Yale Department of Anthropology and School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. She received a PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Michigan in 2008. Her research examines the development and implications of changing forms of natural resource production and consumption, with a focus on the subarctic North. She has conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork on a commercial salmon industry in southwest Alaska.

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Shiho Satsuka is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her research concerns the politics of knowledge production, discourses of nature and science, and cultural practices of capitalism. She is interested in how diverse understandings of nature are produced, circulated, and transformed in trans-local interactions. She is currently completing a book about Japanese nature tourism in Canada. She is also conducting research on the role of scientists in the emerging global scientific and commercial network of matsutake, a highly valued wild mushroom. This research is also a part of "Matsutake Worlds," a multi-sited, collaborative ethnographic project.

Spencer Schaffner is assistant professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he teaches in the Center for Writing Studies. Spencer has published about rhetoric and the environment in such journals as *Ethos, American Literary History,* and the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues.* He is also the author of *Binocular Vision: the Politics of Representation in Birdwatching Field Guides* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011). Currently, Spencer is working on a project about media representations of environmental management decisions following the BP Gulf oil spill of 2010.

Kevin St. Martin is an associate professor of geography at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. His research concerns the development and institutionalization of economic and environmental discourse. His current work examines the case of the regulation and remapping of the marine environment and its relationship to the sustainability of community economies and local environments. His work has been published in *Antipode, Environment and Planning A, The Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, as well as other journals and edited volumes. Author preprints of his articles can be found at http://geography.rutgers.edu.

Anna Tsing's current collaborative research studies emergent forms of cultural and biological diversity through the science and commerce of matsutake mushrooms. A professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she is the author of *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-way Place* and *Friction: an Ethnography of Global Connection.* Her most recent co-edited collection (with Carol Gluck) is *Words in Motion: Towards a Global Lexicon.*

RCC Perspectives

RCC Perspectives is an interdisciplinary series of papers and essays in environmental history, environmental studies, and related fields. The papers have their roots in the scholarly activities of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society and in current debates in society. They combine thought pieces and fresh empirical research, and they are designed both to further international dialogue and to inspire new perspectives on the complex relationship between nature and culture.

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The concept of biocultural diversity was introduced by ethnobiologists to argue that the variation within ecological systems is inextricably linked to cultural and linguistic differences. It has generated much interesting research and has influenced the politics of conservation. However, it is not without its critics. In this volume of *RCC Perspectives*, scholars from a wide range of fields reflect on the definition, impact, and possible vulnerabilities of the concept. Understandings of biocultural diversity have had and will have a significant impact on resource use and conservation, and on the transformation of landscapes. While the concept may help preserve what we value, we must ensure that it does not lead to forms of cultural or ecological imperialism.

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