

Facing the planetary: Entangled humanism and the politics of swarming

by William E. Connolly, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017, 240 pp., \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-7325-4

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BOOK REVIEW

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Entanglements are everywhere today. As the realities of climate change begin to shape critical theory, “entanglement” has become shorthand to describe the reliance of humans upon the natural world. Wherever it occurs, this insistence demands that we confront our hubristic anthropocentrism and comprehend, as William E. Connolly states in *Facing the Planetary*, the “impressive entanglements between regions, humans, animals, bacteria, chemicals, and things” (118).

Connolly’s book offers a welcome move away from the depoliticized stance that emerges from many other accounts of planetary entanglements. In seeing an entangled world of organic and inorganic actants, the proponents of vital materialism, for instance, remove any sense of human accountability for climate breakdown, whether it be individual, national, continental, or corporate. *Facing the Planetary*, by comparison, develops a response to climate change based on “the politics of swarming”. Drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, Wangari Maathai, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Arundhati Roy, amongst others, this ambitious political vision calls for “militant citizen alliances across regions” (9), able to pressurize “states, corporations, international organizations, churches, universities, and investment groups to radically reconstitute the extractive cultures upon which they are currently based” (58). For Connolly, a “pluralist assemblage” of “multiple minorities” (9) that transcends “class, nation, faith, gender, state, order, region, party, racialized constituency, or age group” (34) would be able to ignite transnational, non-violent protests and general strikes.

While Connolly’s approach is that of a political theorist, as opposed to an investigative journalist, there are some striking similarities between *Facing the Planetary* and Naomi Klein’s (2015) *This Changes Everything*. Both Connolly and Klein tackle the convergence of a neoliberal world order and the deepening ecological crisis, and, in recognizing the global magnitude of the extractive industries, both invest in a transnational, grassroots approach to resistance. Connolly’s evocation of a cross-regional “politics of swarming” is comparable to that of the “Blockadia” movements outlined by Klein, which have seen activists take on the oil and gas industries in the UK, Canada, Nigeria, Greece, and China: both, for instance, rely on the mobilizing potential of social media to connect isolated, localized fights against extractivism.


The significant divergence between Connolly and Klein, however, marks one of the limitations of *Facing the Planetary* and the deployment of a language of “entanglements” more generally. Klein’s anti-capitalism informs her commitment to a Green New Deal. Connolly, on the other hand, maintains that focusing on capitalism risks the pitfall of “sociocentrism” that fails to acknowledge the “bumpy history of climate, ocean currents, glacier flows, bacterial crossings, and species evolution” (32) that preceded the capitalist era. This stance complements Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work, but recent analysis from Andreas Malm, Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, and others shows that any transformative environmental politics under capitalism will require an anti-capitalist, social movement that puts humans front and centre.

The “entangled humanism” of *Facing the Planetary* is also largely reliant on a critical canon drawn from Euro American political theory, philosophy, and biology, including Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Lyn Margulis’s evolutionary theories. But the work of prominent Indigenous scholars, such as Nick Estes, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Kyle Whyte, makes a forceful claim

for the significance of Indigenous perspectives that have *always* valued kinship relations between human and other-than-human life. In this light, Connolly's commitment to drawing "the humanities and the earth sciences into closer proximity" (157), along with the mobilization of minorities, needs to be matched with the "decolonization" of those very disciplines and a commitment to widening inclusion. Such initiatives, in turn, require us to develop a climate justice that is firmly rooted in addressing the intertwined histories of land appropriation, indigenous and colonial oppression, and capitalist expansion.

Reference

Klein, Naomi. 2015. *This Changes Everything*. London: Penguin.

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