

Three Stories from the Chthulucene

ALEX PRONG

“Three Stories from the Chthulucene” attempts to work through some of the theoretical framework outlined in Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.¹ The term “Chthulucene” derives from H. P. Lovecraft’s science-fictional tentacled being, the Cthulhu. Haraway theorizes the Chthulucene as an alternative to dominant notions of our time as the Anthropocene. Rather than seeing humans as separate from the environment and acting *on* it, Chthulucene theorists see humans as part of an intricate web of relations between human and more-than-human life, where humans act *through* the environment. The methodology used in this article is research-creation, specifically creation *as* research. This article begins with three autofictional vignettes that aim to play with research questions such as: How might Haraway’s concept of “tentacular thinking” impact the way narrative is structured? Is there an accessible way to write Haraway’s theories so that they are approachable but still “writerly”? How can writer and reader together (re)imagine utopias, in particular queer utopias, so that they are still situated strongly in the present? A supplementary essay follows these three vignettes and attempts to tease out some of these findings within a more typically academic format.

Keywords: Research creation, Donna Haraway, Chthulucene, creative writing, creation as research, horizontal research, autobibliography, genre queer

#1

On a Tuesday in August it was too hot to be anywhere but by the water. Usually, when it was this hot, Jana and I would lie out in it and remind each other that it’s only going to get hotter until we are swallowed by the sun (any day now), which to us seemed like a much-needed respite from student loan payments and anti-maskers. On that Tuesday we decided to take a break from the cynicism and take a ferry to Toronto Island.

¹ See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

When I was a kid, taking the ferry was the only time I felt alive on the four-hour journey to Kingston to visit my aunt. The wind would whip my little-kid face and I would feel amphibious, a thing of the water and the land. If I glimpsed a frog somewhere along our journey, I would think, "I'm just like you." The water was green but white where the boat disrupted it and it formed peaks. I didn't understand science—still don't—so the fact of that big boat with all our cars on it floating felt just as surreal as the ships floating through space in the science fiction books I would read until I felt nauseated in the car. This time, there were no cars on our ferry. Just us and our roller skates and a whole bunch of people with bikes. I couldn't feel the wind on my face because of the mask. We arrived at the wrong end of the island on purpose so we could skate to Hanlan's Point.

I can see the water from where I hide in the brush. There are people, so many people. There are some flies here, so I am full, but hot, so hot. I snag another with my tongue. My saliva coats it, seeps into its crevices, those wings suddenly no longer twitching. At that moment we become one thing, frog and fly. I bring it into my mouth and it melts. With significant effort, I swallow. I look again at the beach, at the lake. The water is a green-blue blur in the distance. I will make it.

We'd skated fast and hard the five kilometres to the other end of the island, passing day-drunk quadricycle riders and kids on lunch break at summer camp. It was thirty-three degrees, and I could see the heat in the air. My knee pads were soaked through. We sat on a rock near the public bathrooms to take off our skates; I peeled off a sock that had become a second skin. We walked through the brush that blocked the view of the clothing optional beach from the decent outside world and came out into Hanlan's Point. Utopia.

The sun burnt our bare feet but we were among queers so we didn't care. There was so much skin, casual genitals, sunburns around areolas, pot smoke and BBQ. We found a spot and began to undress. With considerable effort I freed myself of my sports bra. Jana took off her shorts and underwear and put on swim trunks; I removed all my clothing even though I hadn't necessarily planned on it, but I was hot, so hot.

We ran to the water, past the initial rocky shore that cut our feet and into the cool lake just past. I submerged and felt held by the water. My feet sank into soft sand. Jana and I held each other, naked and almost naked, among our naked and almost naked peers. In her arms, I looked around and felt the surreal notion that we were in a fishbowl. There were groups and other couples all around us, similarly embracing, and people were cruising at the shore, looking to hook up. In the distance I could make out the Toronto skyline, and behind us, just past the buoys that delineated our space, there was a small yacht blasting The Chainsmokers. Jana and I watched them for a bit and

decided the occupants of the yacht were straight. We couldn't hear what they were saying, but we could tell from the way the people in swim trunks spoke to the people in bikinis that they didn't belong in our queer space. But they loomed just on the perimeter. Every so often we would hear a scream from their boat.

The sand burns between my webbed toes. I can't say it's never been this hot before, but it feels worse, unnaturally hot. I was supposed to be built for this environment. I don't know. The humans loom large above and around me. I freeze, trying not to get in the way of them. One steps over me, and I look up and see the human's phallus, and even that is larger than I am. I begin to think this must be what it is like to be a fly. When my ancestors evolved to jump, they never could have predicted this. I think: *this one's for you Triadobatrachus massinoti*. And then I do what I was born to do. I jump.

"Aw, Jana look! A frog!" I held out my hand for him.

"Lil' guy's probably trying to get to the water."

He didn't seem to want to get on. "This must be a scary place to be a frog."

"It's a scary place to be a human," Jana said, spearing a piece of tofu with her fork.

Finally, he jumped onto my hand. I lifted him. Up close, I could better see his eyes—huge globe-like pupils, surrounded by a thin perimeter of speckled gold. His little chest was breathing fast. I stood up tall and walked him to the water, breasts and full bush on display, frog in hand, a slow march to the spot where land and water touch.

#2

Again we were on the beach eating tofu. We were naked. Maybe it was the same world; for sure it was the same island. On a towel nearby, two other naked people were lying down and kissing in the sun while Kim Petras played softly from their speakers. The sun shone on them and their still-wet skin reflected the light.

I began to write in my journal:

I never would have thought that this would be my utopia. I hate the heat; I get heatstroke easily. Seasonal Affective Disorder gets to me in the summer. Something about the notion that it's supposed to be fun keeps me from having any. I didn't always know that about myself, though. When I was a teenager, I knew that people my age were supposed to love the beach. So I would force my beach-hating kin to bring me.

I would lie in the sun, letting the beach happen to me.

I didn't hate it, but it wasn't my favourite thing. Except getting to tell the girls at school that I went to the beach was euphoric.

I know myself better now. I'm on a different beach with different kin. I've accepted the fact that maybe there's no perfect place for me.

Which leads me to the question:

What if all we have is this beach?

A group of two men and a woman in their clothes approached the people beside us, who sat up and stopped embracing. They looked frightened.

"You disgust me, faggots," said one of the men.

Jana and I looked at each other and quickly began to dig around in our bag for our clothes, but we couldn't find them.

One of the naked people said, "Dude, just leave us alone."

In a much higher voice, the woman repeated, "Dude, just leave us alone." The three of them now stood surrounding the two people, who were also searching for clothes that seemed to be missing.

"I thought you didn't need clothes here," said the first man, laughing. He kicked up sand all over the two people.

They tried to spit out the sand that got in their mouths.

"Oh, now the faggots are spiting at us?" the woman said.

"You don't spit at our woman," said the second man, who had been quiet up until then. He stepped toward the people and took a swing at them, his fist colliding with one of their eyes.

I watched as the fight broke out. Purple bruises began to flower where the men hit the people. Shouts carried across the beach, shrieks so loud even the seagulls seemed to freeze.

I wanted to shout, "You don't belong here," at the attackers but my mouth wouldn't open. I felt Jana's hand on my arm, gripping and pulling me to get up, but I was rooted in the sand, even as it burnt me between my toes.

Suddenly, there was a thud louder than any sound a human could make. And then another. The fighting stopped. Everyone on the beach looked up as a huge creature stood, unfolding from the brush. It had green skin and globe-like eyes that stuck out the sides of its head. Its massive chest pumped in and out, in and out. Far away, someone must've screamed. And then, like it was no effort at all, the creature whipped its sticky tongue down and back into its mouth three times. The creature, cheeks enlarged with its prey, blinked its rippled lattice eyelids once and swallowed. And then it did the most terrifying thing yet: it jumped.

I was engulfed in a wall of sand. When I shook most of it off and managed to see, I realized I was next to the creature's massive webbed toe. I looked up at the beast. It was at least fifty meters tall. But it wasn't just sitting. The creature seemed to be bending its face down close to the sand. Its elbows were bent. In fact, it seemed like the creature was making itself as flat as possible.

"I think," Jana croaked, "it wants you to get on."

I looked at her, disbelieving. And then I looked back at the creature. Its skin was damp but sticky and covered in warts that I could climb like a rock-climbing wall. So I did. I made it to the frog's shoulder and rode onward. We hopped a few times and it felt like flying. We made it to the spot where the land met the water. The CN Tower loomed behind us on the other side of the lake, a reminder of the aquarium below it.

#3

From yet another perspective, the sun shines on the beach even though the people are gone. It is the surface of an alien planet, the plain, dry cold of winter. There is no more water meeting sand, only snow covering ice covering hard compact ground.

The waves have become entirely white. The air is grey. Here and there driftwood peeks out from underneath the blanket of snow like limbs. Sleeping, sleeping.

Remember the first time you saw this beach? When, at the end of a long journey, you saw bodies being only bodies, masks removed after a long season of wearing masks. To be so exposed to each other breeds a certain queer kinship. Don't spend too long remembering, though. This is the time of the thick now. Pay attention to the frozen tundra around you in the present, the way the snowflakes eclipse sand like so many particles of a different order.

To walk through the beach now is like walking through icy quicksand. Heavy step after heavy step, you push through the troubled landscape. No seagulls fly overhead; they've travelled to more hospitable climates. But not you. You do not fly. For better or for worse, this is your beach.

Sweat through layers upon layers of clothing as you walk laboriously. Lose your way and then find it and then lose it again. And then find it. As you walk out onto the frozen lake, feel the heartbeat of the tentacular creatures beneath the ice through your boots. Look down and see a light show unlike anything you've ever seen before. These are the things of the deep communicating: red-red-blue; long, bright orange; green-pink; embarrassed, pale purple. Look down and see life. Turn around and face your beach. Look up, and see a snow-covered sign that says: Hanlan's Point.

Supplementary Essay: Fondling the Truth with Tentacles

“Three Stories from the Chthulucene” attempts to explore some of the theoretical framework outlined in Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. The methodology used is research creation, specifically creation as research.² Haraway describes the temptation amidst what can often feel like the end of times—i.e., widespread extinction, global warming, intense income inequality, overpopulation, overwhelming profit-over-humanity attitudes from those in power—for intellectuals who acknowledge these troubles to then either succumb to abstract futurism or sublime indifference.³ Haraway’s book presents an alternative, hence “Staying with the Trouble.”

The term *Chthulucene* is derived from Lovecraft’s science fiction—the Cthulhu is a tentacled being that is “of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute.”⁴ Lovecraft sometimes also refers to Cthulhu as great old ones; they are earthly knowledge from the past that does not become obsolete, but rather sharper and more vital as time passes.⁵ Haraway theorizes the Chthulucene: an alternative to dominant notions of our time as the Anthropocene (“the human epoch,” or the period of time in which humans have altered the environment enough to constitute a distinct geological era) in which rather than see humans as separate from the environment and acting on it, humans are part of an intricate web of relations between human and more-than-human life and so humans act *through* the environment.⁶ The term “more-than-human” refers to the kin with whom we share the planet: plants, animals, maybe Cthulhu, the biotic “other” often previously dubbed “nonhuman.”⁷

For Haraway, the implicit knowledge of the deep past referenced by the Cthulhu is needed to envision an ethical future. Haraway’s Chthulucene is a period of time in which the *tentacular thinking* implied by the concept of the Cthulhu is employed to revise the way humans relate to the world and each other.⁸ Tentacular thinking

² On research creation see Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, analysis and ‘family resemblances,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 1 (2012): 5–26.

³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

⁴ Haraway, 2.

⁵ Haraway, 2.

⁶ Haraway, 1–8.

⁷ Fikile Nxumalo and Marleen Tepeyolotl Villanueva, “Listening to Water: Situated dialogues between Black, Indigenous and Black-Indigenous feminisms,” *Transdisciplinary Feminist Research*, ed. Carol Taylor, Jasmine Ulmer, and Christina Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2020), 59.

⁸ Haraway, 32.

references the Cthulhu's tentacled visage to suggest how humans might begin to envision a world where the hierarchy between humans and the rest of the living world is flattened, and the messy, complex web of relations between these beings is highlighted. Tentacular thinking is a dissolution of neat classification, which invokes the search for connections where they may have been hidden in anthropocentric pasts and presents. Tentacular thinking creeps fluidly over, under, and between boundaries, across disciplines, species, and borders.

My stories present three ways of seeing the same utopia, which is a real place that already exists (Hanlan's Point on Toronto Island), in an attempt to work towards "pedagogical imaginaries" in which the reader and writer both participate in "... imagining different kinds of futures—futures marked by resistance, hope and more relational ways of living with human and more-than-human life."⁹ In the first story, I challenge the individuality of the narrative "I" and the anthropocentrism of our oft human-centered stories through the shifting of perspective between the human and frog narrators.

In the second story, I trouble the reality structure by introducing a Gojira-like frog creature that draws upon science-fictional tropes of our saviour coming in the form of a technological solution. In this I hope to equally demonstrate the absurdity of this type of thinking (though, notably, there is pleasure to be derived from the absurd) and destabilize delineations between non-fiction and fiction. Tentacular writing crosses boundaries and in fact could be described as genre-queer. As Haraway says, "Science fact and speculative fabulation need each other, and both need speculative feminism" (and speculative queer theory).¹⁰

In the third and final story, I write what "staying with the trouble" actually looks like for me in the present. I too sometimes feel the hopelessness of searching for alternatives within the dominant system of cishetero-capitalism. In the literalized microcosm of queer utopia I am making Hanlan's out to be in this work, there is trouble. The gay-bashing incident that takes place in the second vignette is based on real events that took place in the summer of 2020. In story three, I wonder what we can do when we realize the truth, which is that we do not have utopia. We have all we ever will have, which is heterotopia—a place where both dystopia and utopia exist together, in "trouble" in the traditional sense of the word, which means "to make cloudy" or "stir up."¹¹ In this story, I am beginning the lifelong process of staying with my utopia even when it has frozen over and I am (seemingly) alone. I am stirring up the sand—itsself a geologic reference to the deep past—and seeing what life can still be found there, seeing what I will walk with into the future.

⁹ Nxumalo and Villanueva, "Listening to Water," 59-60.

¹⁰ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3.

¹¹ Haraway, 1.

I have written future-oriented stories that take place in the past and present. This is a situated queer temporality, not just abstract futurism; there is an animating force to queerness that looks to the way things could be if the dominant narrative were disrupted. This is what José Esteban Muñoz calls a “forward-dawning futurity” or “queer doing.”¹² Muñoz’s queer doing and Haraway’s Chthulucene compliment each other: both concepts aim to disrupt the dominant narrative and see the present as the site for change. Muñoz also rejects notions of utopia that prescribe a certain end, instead imagining queer futurity as an opening or horizon which will always also involve staying with the trouble.¹³ In employing tentacular thinking, we are in a sense trying to shoehorn the future into the present. This is why I chose to write three stories rather than one; I want to demonstrate the malleability of the future and even the present narrative if only some pedagogical imagination is employed.

The research problems at the center of my research-creation project are: How might Haraway’s “tentacular thinking” impact the way narrative is structured? Is there an accessible way to write Haraway’s theories so that they are approachable but still “writerly”? And how can writer and reader together (re)imagine queer utopias so that they are still situated strongly in the present (staying with the trouble, rather than escaping and leaving behind the world that does not serve us)? I approach these questions through the method of theory-practice that sees theory and practice as “non-hierarchical asymmetries of difference” in which my three stories are only three of a “multiplicity of articulations” of the theory-practice of Haraway.¹⁴ There are surely as many ways to interpret Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* as there are grains of sand at Hanlan’s Point. I hope my three stories are generative of further tentacular thinking, of more stories and more stories after that.

Creation as research is a method that recognizes that there is always creation and practice in theory and theory in creation and practice. A useful metaphor for this type of research is that of the Moebius strip, where theory and practice are “rendered bankrupt at binary oppositions, but not through unity, though a situated complexity.”¹⁵ In my stories, I situate my work in the theoretical context of Haraway by borrowing language from her theory: words such as “kin,” “utopia,” and even “tentacular” along with the title signal to the reader that I am drawing on Haraway’s theory in the text even if I do not explicitly say so.

¹² José Esteban Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 354–7.

¹³ Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet,” 360.

¹⁴ See Loveless’ comments in Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, analysis and ‘family resemblances,’” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 1 (2012): 20.

¹⁵ Chapman and Sawchuk, “Research-Creation,” 20.

Intertextual referentiality is part of what makes this text “writerly” (scriptable): Roland Barthes’ term to describe a text in which meaning is not immediately apparent, where the reader is implicated in the task of meaning-making.¹⁶ My hope is that by leaving some things up for interpretation—i.e., does the journal entry in story two make the beach into an allegory for compulsory heterosexuality? Does the (re)visualization of the same environment in each story come to a truer sense of the relations to be made there than a “readerly” beach read with relied-upon tropes and easily identifiable plot and character might? Are there further interpretations that I haven’t even thought of yet since I am only one person and a story is a relationship between two or more people; as Jack Halberstam reminds us: “one bee is no bee”?¹⁷ I hope so—the reader can go on to make stories of their own of Hanlan’s Point and queer utopia more generally, whether those stories end up on paper or only in the reader’s mind. This is particularly important for research-creation and tentacular thinking as the goal is to destabilize hierarchical notions of intellectual activity. As Halberstam reminds us in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “everyone participates in intellectual activity, just as they cook meals and mend clothes without necessarily being chefs or tailors.”¹⁸ Both research-creation and tentacular thinking ask us to consider the myriad forms knowledge can take and the varied conditions in which knowledge is born. Intense critical thinking does not occur solely in the realm of academia; in fact, it may even occur on a nude beach in the head of a frog.

Finally, I would like to justify my choice to create a piece of writing specifically over any other medium. For the sake of this project, I conceptualize writing in a new materialist way as a process that decentres the author and includes the author’s environment and everything that is a part of the writing act.¹⁹ In simple terms, writing is not just writing. Rather, “language and language-use become part of a horizontal ontology emerging alongside other social-material forces, instead of merely a medium for representing them.”²⁰ Writing is a way of coming to know the world that requires a certain amount of classification, definition, and contextualization. When we write from a position of *already knowing* as is often the case with traditional academic theory, we create very different stories than when we write *in order to begin to know*. In terms of this project: the writing about the beach, the mundane everyday embodied experience of the beach, and the theory that is used to make sense of both, all reside on the same side

¹⁶ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

¹⁷ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 51.

¹⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 17.

¹⁹ Sarah E. Truman, “Becoming More than It Never (Actually) Was: Expressive Writing as Research-Creation,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 13, no. 2 (2016): 136.

²⁰ Truman, “Becoming More,” 137.

(in a very Moebius way). The methodology of research-creation is a “...mutual interpenetration of processes rather than a communication of product,” where this horizontal ontology is played out.²¹

Ultimately, my research-creation project is an experiment in writing practice. Research creation advocate Sarah Truman describes the many elements that make up parts of the apparatus of storytelling by way of introduction to her project.²² In honour of her work, here is a list of some of the elements that make up my project, and here they act as a conclusion (or a to be continued, as research-creation projects always are):

- These stories were written based on my memory of events that happened in the summer of 2021, and therefore are not entirely reliable, though this may be made obvious via the giant amphibious creature in story two.
- Jana and I did go to the beach. I did swim naked in the lake. It was nice.
- Around the time Jana and I went to the beach, there was a brutal incident of gay bashing at Hanlan’s Point. The perpetrators were two men and a woman.
- Reading Haraway was a key element of writing these stories.
- These stories were written through reading Haraway.
- The writing of these stories included casual interviews and revision by Jana, who was also there.
- Photos of Hanlan’s Point helped me visualize what I was remembering. Or the photos replaced my memory. Or both.
- The writing of these stories was made possible through copious consumption of both tea and coffee, and the view of a maple tree in Jana’s backyard.
- Understanding the perspective of another with whom I cannot speak in a language we both understand is difficult. I learn a lot about this process from my cat Katya, my dog Bowie, and the wild persistent plants that grow around my home.
- These stories are unfinished until they are read and interpreted by someone else. One bee is no bee.
- These stories were created because their author would like the world to change. Whether or not tentacles will be involved in that change remains to be seen.

²¹ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 88-9.

²² Truman, “Becoming More,” 138.

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