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Book Review



Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. Hardback. 294 pages. \$35.00 USD. 9780231189460.

If Donna Haraway was right when she said that “monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* [Routledge: New York, 1991], 180), then Rubenstein’s story is one of how what she calls *pantheologies*—or ways of thinking about a world composed by an “open, relational, and self-exceeding concatenation of systems that are themselves open, relational, and self-exceeding” (24)—have made long-term homes at the frayed edges of the Western thought collective. In *Pantheologies*, Rubenstein traces moments of historical insult-flinging that have pushed pantheism towards those margins (examples of insults include “monstrous,” “poppycock,” “an execrable abomination,” “full of jellybeans,” and “sexed-up atheism”) in order to consider what exactly pantheological thinking offends in the Western imagination. In doing so, Rubenstein draws out a history of oft-rejected cosmological and ontological thought which, she argues, may have a chance to help remedy some of the most pressing ills of Western metaphysics.

By bringing her readers through territories of thought spanning thousands of years—through early modern philosophy, new materialism, new animism, Amerindian and Aboriginal indigenous ontologies, biological theories of symbiosis at multiple levels of scale, and quantum perspectivism—Rubenstein draws “pantheological” thinking from a wide range of entangled thought systems in contact. Through this work, she presents her readers with two deeply generative threads: 1) a genealogy of pantheological thought as a historical concept, and 2) an enacted theory drawn from that history for thinking with “science” and “religion” as categories. Readers of *Worldviews* may find this book helpful because this astonishingly nimble theoretical work helps us think anew about the categories with which we work. Through this monstrous methodological and topical mix of science, philosophy, history, and theology, *Panthe-*

ologies leads us into a pluralistic ontological landscape where multiple forms of being and thinking exist in concert with other constituent parts of the cosmic mess. Rubenstein offers the germ of a mode of interpretation which has the potential to become—perhaps—just monstrous enough to meet the worlds it faces.

Though “pantheism” has materialized in many forms in the history of Western thought, *Pantheologies* draws from a form of pantheistic thought which William James called “pluralistic pantheism” in his 1909 book *A Pluralistic Universe*. Rubenstein’s pluralistic pantheism is a form of pantheological thought in which the *all* (pan) is divine but not unified, teeming with multitudes of worlds and beings and thoughts, relational and lacking rigid hierarchized organizing distinctions. Rather than dissolving the *all* into an undifferentiated divine mass (as Rubenstein argues can happen in models of monistic pantheism) internal distinctions persist in pluralistic pantheological thinking, ordered without a dependence on an organizer outside of that system. She argues that this tendency to preserve internal order with multiple constituents has *demolished* foundational binary distinctions in Western metaphysics, which is one of the major reasons why pantheism has been pushed to the sidelines of Western thought for so long (xx, 19). Pantheological thinking’s potential to dissolve raced and gendered constructions like those embedded in divides between spirit/matter, activity/passivity, God/world, creator/created, and animacy/inanimacy can clear the way for forms of thought that erase these dichotomous locations of violence and power. Rubenstein welcomes these dissolutions, and argues that the forms of thought that dissolution invites are essential for thinking in the Anthropocene. By embracing pantheological thought, the constructions of the Western organizing order are transformed into a sea of matter in which all becomes co-constitutive, chthonic, and “monstrous”—or, all becomes divine, depending on your perspective. Rubenstein traces a history of this sort of thought, and she enacts it in her analysis of that history.

The book is arranged in four chapters which clarify key concepts found within pantheisms: *pan* (all), *hyle* (matter), *cosmos* (world), and *theos* (god). Between chapters, Pan himself visits, in interludes where he unifies (as per his nature) and organizes (less typical) the many lively temporal and thematic threads of Rubenstein’s tale.

In the first chapter, “Pan,” Rubenstein reads against Hegel’s assertion that Spinoza’s *Deus sive natura* swallows all of reality into an undifferentiated abyss, transcendent of form. She argues that Hegel’s misreading of Spinoza misunderstands the core of Spinoza’s project, in no small part because it filters Spinoza’s thought through Hegel’s shallow understanding of Hindu cosmology. Instead, Rubenstein reads Spinoza’s argument as one which interprets substance to

be *constituted by* modes, even in its unification. In this reading, the *pantheistic* “all” erupts as material, dynamic, and pluralistic. In the second chapter, “Hyle,” Rubenstein gives a genealogical counter-narrative to the rational/scientific idea that material is inherently inert. She moves from Ionian, Stoic, and Epicurean schools to the work of Giordano Bruno, drawing out alternative matter-worlds from within western philosophy, which hold the possibility for “enspirited,” active, animate, divine matter (26). She argues that these relations resonate with those which can be found in new “animism”—and that it was indigenous cosmologies’ contact with Western narratives that helped create a racially-motivated fear of the pantheistic in the first place.

The third chapter, “Cosmos,” is particularly exciting for readers of *Worldviews*. Rubenstein asks what it means for a “world” to be constructed via the moving parts of its metaphors, and draws out the consequences of these metaphors in contemporary science, philosophy, and theology. She traces the lineage of the “clockwork universe,” modeled as a singular, “gridlike” world, from the seventeenth century through to contemporary reductionist techno-scientific capitalism (108). To imagine “other worlds” than this one, she thinks with Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock’s late twentieth century Gaia hypothesis, which imagines a cybernetic, self-maintaining, living material Earth. Lovelock and Margulis’ hypothesis is as “mechanistic” as it is reflective of a world composed by a swarm of irrevocably entwined living sympoietic worlds in the plural, and yet because of its animist resonances has endured differing levels of “mainstream” scientific acceptance. Rubenstein shows how indigenous thought and new animist ontologies offer a significant potential avenue for “re-worlding,” or re-defining cosmology from a clockwork model to one of richly entwined plural worlds, in conversation with Gaia. This re-worlding constitutes an act of resistance against the violence of the Anthropocene. It deals with the end of the world by diving deeply into possibilities for re-creating visions of it.

Chapter four, “Theos,” asks what divinity might become amidst this pantheist plurality—or, how an imminent God might remain a God for very long at all. Rubenstein moves through a discussion of (another accused pantheist) Albert Einstein’s dedication to a particular Spinozism, which maintained a “baffling” insistence on a “natural-divine Absolute” (159) which preserves subject/object distinctions, as it comes up against the relative cosmos constructed the work Niels Bohr. Bohr’s universe includes an intrinsic relativity in all matter—not just in observation, but in its very existence, which Einstein resisted despite the implications of his own work. In this section, Rubenstein deepens a thread which runs throughout the book: cultural concepts have a profound influence in the creation of scientific knowledge, and that social tensions around these cultural concepts—like pantheism—seep their way into even the “pure”

domain of scientific knowledge. Rubenstein excavates theologies embedded in science, science's turn back to the structures and aims of theologies, and the inherent inseparability of either of these domains from organizing (and sometimes incommensurate) philosophies. In her bubbling "pancarnation," it is impossible not to see how forms of knowledge bleed into others, and so create worlds in the processes of their relation (173).

This world creates the possibility for ethical thought which replaces resignation to a *deus ex machina* with participation in an imminent divinity, composed of competing interests, where ethical judgements are relational. This returns responsibility back to the world's participants for their own mess, in a contextual ethic where "'evil' ... is therefore not a mystery to be explained but rather a concrete reality to negotiate and try to overcome" (177). At the end of her story, Rubenstein leaves us with a resonant thought: why presume divinity looks, acts, or thinks human? What if divinity were "recoded as change: as the ongoing, intraspecies processes that world and unworld worlds"—how might that change being and thinking? (187) To imagine a world composed of its manifold possible incarnations might just draw from *all* tools.

I would like to note: this is not a book of theological apologetics. Rubenstein is not writing to recruit converts to a sort of theological school, nor is she declaring a commitment to a "pantheological" method. Rather, she is testing pantheological thought as a way to nourish a conceptual revivification of the tools and histories of pantheism—and its potential to show the world(s) in a new light. So as we think through this book, Rubenstein calls us to do so in a spirit of experimentation, in the joy of thinking otherwise. This is a delicate distinction, but one which Rubenstein maintains beautifully.

Rubenstein's discussion is related to other reclamations of the "monstrous" as a blurring of bio-social-gendered distinctions enacted by philosophers like Donna Haraway, Catherine Keller, and Bayo Akomolafe, among others. She also draws inspiration from feminist theologian Grace Jantzen (another theorist, Rubenstein argues, whose work on pantheism is often ignored, as a symptom of the phenomenon of marginalization this book identifies). Like these authors, whose language is an intrinsic part of the projects of reformulation they are enacting, Rubenstein's writing is delightfully witty and often poetic in a way which can uniquely maintain its many strands.

Pantheologies would be a welcome addition to syllabi in many fields, though it is especially relevant to undergraduate science and religion or STS courses, where it is both a natural antidote to the science-vs-religion conflict narrative and a careful study of the influence of raced and gendered binaries in the history of thought in the "West." It would lead to lively discussion in religious studies and STS seminars which deal with cosmology. *Pantheologies* shows just

how complex cosmology becomes in modern thought, and what theory can do in allowing us to see these complexities anew.

There is much more to say, but I will close with this: monsters await here in Rubenstein's work, which she makes available as companions for thinking differently amidst these monstrous times. Rubenstein helps us to see how pantheologies can offer us weary thinkers a way out of the systems from which they have been rejected, via the promise that they are—and always have been—in and of it *all*.

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