



Ina Batzke, Lea Spinoza Garrido and Linda M. Hess (eds.), *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, ISBN: 9783030779733).

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Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene (2022) belongs to the Palgrave Studies in Life Writing, an interdisciplinary series edited by Clare Brant and Max Saunders that engages life writing with critical thinking across disciplines. Situated within the environmental humanities, this volume examines a variety of life writing in the context of the Anthropocene. It builds the argument that life writing has a critical role in contesting human self-centredness which has caused the ecological damage that continues to define the Anthropocene. As such, the book rests on a paradox: how can a genre defined by the figure of a 'human self' contribute to dismantling power structures, such as speciesism, without perpetuating these damaging structures of domination? Seven chapters and one interview emphasise that the Anthropocene has been a discursively produced narrative of fatal material consequences; for this reason, minimising and hopefully restoring some ecological damage requires that we find more equal and responsible ways of relating to non-human life forms and the environment in language.

Divided into two sections, 'Responsible Relationality' and 'Relational Responsibility', the seven essays in the book insist on the risks of masking human responsibility when equating types of agency across human and non-human life forms. In other words, taking responsibility for ongoing ecological damage demands that we do not forget 'who causes and who suffers damage in the Anthropocene age' (7). Although their thinking is heavily informed by posthumanist and new materialist theories that deem the category 'human' outdated, authors throughout the volume emphasise human impact on the planet in order to stop and revert it. More

importantly, they see differentiating groups of humans as an urgent matter that evinces the connection between ecological damage and social inequality; it is not a coincidence that historically, the status of human has been granted first and foremost to white men. The book argues that key to redefining the role of humans in the Anthropocene is human accountability for settler colonialism and ecocide, and it makes a case for the practice and study of life writing as an opportunity to reshape humans' relationship with the Earth without simplifying the category of 'human' or equating it with non-human elements that are part of 'the web of life' (114).

The introduction of the book, 'Life Writing: A Genre in Trouble?' offers a comprehensive and nuanced account of the scholarly conversations the book enters, namely, critiques of the Anthropocene, such as Posthumanism and adjacent feminist and postcolonial theories. Acknowledging the paradox of the consideration of posthumanism as a critical lens for life writing, editors Ina Batzke, Lea Espinoza Garrido, and Linda M. Hess aver that posthumanism is a theoretical framework that allows them to critically differentiate the contribution of humans to environmental destruction while remaining accountable for forms of speciesism that caused damage in the first place. Their stance maintains Rosi Braidotti's notion of 'posthuman accountability', a localised, responsible, and relational subjectivity that is always becoming in relation to other (non-human) life forms (2013: 49). At the core of the volume, then, is the concept of relationality, as well as a profound reassessment of terms that have defined the genre of life writing: for example, the notion of agency. The introduction identifies three central issues connected to agency. First, the problems of 'ventriloquized representationality' (Barad 235), whereby human speaks for others; secondly, human centrality cannot be challenged if marginalised groups cannot assert their agency; and thirdly, equating agency amongst life-forms obscures human responsibility of and in the Anthropocene.

The first cluster in the volume, 'Responsible Relationality', attends to a range of life narratives that examine forms of human relationality. The first contribution, Katja Sarkowsky's 'Relationality, Autobiographical Voice, and the Posthumanist Paradox: Decentering the Human in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Life Writing*', serves as a foundation of the book, as it openly states the paradoxical role of autobiography in decentering the human by looking at some works by Silko. Sarkowsky wonders how narratives make nature's agency intelligible and what is at stake in this process. Notwithstanding the 'inevitably anthropocentric' (24) character of the genre, Sarkowsky argues for a 'strategic anthropocentrism' in autobiography that makes room for non-human forms of agency. She admits that non-human experience is always discursively produced,

but insists, through her nuanced analysis of Silko's work, on the criticality of the use and concept of voice.

The second contribution to the first cluster, 'The Big Picture: Life as Sympoietic Becoming in Rachel Rosenthal's Performance Art', by Christina Caupert, reads the French artist's work as an interdependent and ecologically aware autobiographical form. Caupert argues that this form allows Rosenthal to shape 'the big picture', a term the artist used to describe 'the evolutionary and ecological entanglement of all lives on our planet' (55). Comprehensive and attentive to the complexities of Rosenthal's vast performative art, this chapter is informed by Braidotti's reworking of the distinction between *bios* (human life) and *zoe*, 'the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself' (2013: 60) to illustrate how animals, plants and even ideas act as 'co-performers' in works such as *Charm* (1977) and *Pangaeian Dreams* (1990). Although Rosenthal's pieces predate Braidotti's and Haraway's posthumanist notions, Caupert convincingly demonstrates why Rosenthal is a 'posthumanist *avant la lettre*' (56).

Jessica White's 'Edges and Extremes in Ecobiography: Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*' (2016) furthers the idea of responsible relationality by subverting the conventional image of nature as mere scenery where human stories take place. White looks at Liptrot's novel about living in liminal spaces – both literally and metaphorically – through feminist posthumanist theories, such as Braidotti's and Elizabeth Grosz's, that uphold forms of localised and embodied subjectivities. Specifically, she examines the genre of ecobiography as a literary form that attends to 'the inseparability of the human and their ecosystem' (98). Even though White distinguishes between 'external nature' and the novel's main character's 'internal nature', the notion of 'natural' remains somewhat underexamined. Nonetheless, the chapter is cogent in its leading argument that ecobiography reveals the interconnectedness between human and environment, as well as the impact on self-knowledge such relationality has.

In what is likely the most fascinating piece in this volume, poet and scholar Clare Brant tells us about 'The Sentience of Sea Squirts'. Openly autotheoretical and interdisciplinary, Brant's writing dives into the 'small lives' of the ocean in order to think about beauty and language in human-non-human relationships. Challenging the hierarchy of underwater interests, Brant devotes her attention to sea squirts, arguing that their seemingly simple lives have a lot to teach us about human appreciation of forms and colours, as well as the anthropocentric thinking modes that inform such descriptions. Resisting the 'human constructedness' of science (134) and the pleasure of anthroplasticity, the author aims to relate differently to these beings, 'defending them against discourses—and practices—of human arrogance' (148). For this, she relies on the enigma of sensuous perception put forward by neologisms such as

‘zoography’ and ‘zoopoetics’: a posthuman vocabulary that rethinks the articulation and appreciation of ecological relations.

The second cluster in *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene*, ‘Relational Responsibility’ continues the conversation about human responsibility and insists on ethical issues in ecological relations from the point of view of postcolonial and gender studies. In ‘Humanity, Life Writing, and Deep Time: Postcolonial Contributions’, Renata Lucena Dalmaso uncovers the correspondence between the naturalist gaze in nature writing and the colonial gaze. A fine philosophical endeavor that moves from the use of the first person to the storytelling of tree rings, Dalmaso’s chapter asks us to rethink humankind’s relation to time in favour of the articulation of posthuman subjectivities. As she demonstrates in her study of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) and Ailton Krenak’s *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2019), postcolonial life writing has the power to challenge ‘human exceptionalism’ (Braidotti 2013: 19) as its treatment of time does not rely on one subject’s historical perspective, but attends to ‘the connection between different agents across time’ (165).

The second chapter in this cluster, ‘Helen Macdonald’s *H Is for Hawk* and Critical Posthumanism’ by Monir Gholamzadeh Bazarbash, offers a close examination of the unique relationship between a woman and her hawk in Macdonald’s memoir. In spite of the violence entailed in falconry – which Macdonald herself acknowledges – Bazarbash convincingly demonstrates that this is an instance of life writing that ‘resists patriarchal and anthropocentric notions of hierarchy and domination’ (193), according to the author’s experience of a more equal and responsible form of interspecies relationality. Bazarbash is careful not to attribute Macdonald’s empathetic approach to falconry to a patronising superiority between species. In fact, she identifies posthumanist concerns in the narrative, arguing that interspecies encounters between hawk and human contest the superiority of the human as the woman identifies more and more with the hawk. Equally, Bazarbash notes how Macdonald’s relationship with the hawk invites a rethinking of human subjectivity in a way germane to ‘critical posthumanism: presenting herself as situated, relational, and affective’ (195), even in those moments when the hawk attacks her.

In the last chapter of this volume, Jens Temmen examines narratives of Mars colonisation in ‘Writing Life on Mars: Posthuman Imaginaries of Extraterrestrial Colonization and the NASA Mars Rover Missions’. Temmen takes a close look at the stories of NASA rovers that have nurtured humankind’s hope for a new world and argues that such narratives repeat patriarchal and imperialist notions. He observes that the characterisation of the rovers as ‘adorable’ (212) has contributed to the weaving of

an anthropocentric narrative that seeks to engage people emotionally and humanise the use of technology. Similarly, he rightly notes that New Space Entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos reinforce utopian visions of the future that rely on the imaginary of humans leaving Earth behind (its limitations and dangers) as an act of heroism. Seemingly non-urgent, these futuristic narratives reveal unethical and altogether irresponsible capitalist practices that continue to impact the present and material conditions of some; in other words, they fantasise with 'a fresh start for humanity' (212) without any accountability of the damage caused by our species.

The volume ends with a thought-provoking conversation between narratologist Erin James and Birgit Spengler that invites readers to further reflect on narrative representations of the environment, human relations to it, and how these articulations impact on our reality. As authors throughout the volume do, James agrees that accountability for the Anthropocene is necessary for an honest and effective decentralisation of humankind in the narrative of the world as we know it. James highlights that given the inevitability of anthropomorphism in readings of other live forms and their presumed languages and storytelling, life writing cannot let go of the category of the human for this task. What is more, she insists on the value of postcolonial critiques in the writing of the posthuman Anthropocene. Long in advance of the very conception of 'climate change', critical theories were already contesting Western realism as universal, and aiming to restore brutally destroyed forms of life.

Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene is a foundational compilation of academic criticism that urges readers to think about the role of life writing, and more generally, of language, in the construction of reality. Such a poststructuralist approach, however, is not oblivious to the material reality that has been sacrificed in favour of specific human groups. Although the book does not resolve the paradox of life writing as a mechanism to decentre humanity in the Anthropocene, it engages with complex and exciting ideas that help reshape and even contest the autobiographical terminology that has defined the genre. In so doing, the volume asks the intimidating question of what it means to write (a) life, creating an even larger space for answers we can only begin to imagine.

Works Cited

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