

Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel. Yvonne Liebermann, Judith Rahn and Bettina Burge (eds.), Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 320 pp.

Plural and ambiguous as they are, nonhuman beings and entities have become central figures in recent criticism and theory. In fact, literature has never tackled the human being other than in a specific context, be it material, spatial, historical, etc. – a context seen as essential to the construction of credible characters. Yet it is only with the last decade that the importance of this nonhuman context has become increasingly apparent as *co-text* rather than background.

Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel is an overview of “the variety of nonhuman actors that take centre stage in the twenty-first-century novel” (v), specifically in a number of relevant Anglophone novels. The editors Yvonne Liebermann, Judith Rahn and Bettina Burge have gathered here several European scholars in the field of literary studies. They all perform the more and more necessary task of investigating the elements that constitute and articulate a nonhuman world. Apart from this, they investigate the reconfigurations this generates in literary texts. The volume is divided into four sections and preceded by an Introduction, each section dealing with a particular aspect of twenty-first century Anglophone literature. The four sections are: I. Nonhuman Poetics: Agency of Literary Forms; II. Negotiating the Human in the Light of the Nonhuman; III. Imagining Biocentric Communities; IV. Negotiating Reality: Approaching the Nonhuman’s Inescapable Alterity. The sections are further divided into three or four chapters, each written by a different author. Thus constituted, the volume itself possesses a rhizome-like structure, which seems fitting in a context in which the contributors often refer to Deleuze’s famed concept. Focusing exclusively on (recent) novels, the volume also addresses the changes in the larger paradigm triggered by

the increased attention to the nonhuman. Amongst the nonhuman actors that it considers are elements as diverse as the Anthropocene, the digital turn, the animal rights movement, the weather, and even stretches to research into plant consciousness.

The volume has a three-fold aim: investigating how recent novels narrate the nonhuman; analysing aesthetic tactics for overthrowing human protagonists from their position of superiority; and discussing the ethical questions the novels raise to their readership. Insofar as the book champions the abandoning of anthropocentrism, it takes on a daunting task: the history of the novel is in no small part a history of who we are. To move the human from the center to the periphery is to excise from the novel precisely that facet that most recommended the form: its capacity to shape individuals in their character and in their taste. At a formal level, to overthrow human protagonists, literature needs to undermine its own categories of character and individual agency. The authors here will detail how such a task is being accomplished through replacing traditional literary categories with processes, entanglements and enmeshments. In the wake of Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton, ideas of connectivity, multiplicity and entanglement loom large in the novels treated here.

The first section of the book, "Nonhuman Poetics: Agency of Literary Forms," comprises three substantial chapters which investigate chiefly the way literature and literary studies engage with the nonhuman. The authors appropriately consider in turn what transformations in literary categories occur and which are more suitable to do justice, as it were, to the nonhuman. In Roman Bartosh's reading of Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019), Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), and Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* (2018), agency in literature is a larger issue, a matter that involves collaboration and interconnectedness on all levels. It demands, for instance, the active collaboration of readers with the text. Besides, the novels themselves favour an understanding of the agency of humans and nonhumans that joins rather than separates; interconnectedness is set forth as a more

profitable lens from which to view such agencies. Intertextuality is also part of the equation in Bartosh's view of literary agency as "less some power of the literary text *alone* but as an entwined and cocreated meaning-making process that also, and significantly, draws on intertextual relations [...]" (40; my underl.)

Through deploying its vast array of rhetorical devices, literature itself acts to model our perception of nonhuman agencies while being in turn modeled by them. In her take of Adhiambo Owuor's 2019 novel *The Dragonfy Sea*, author Birgit Neumann brings to the fore both stylistic literary mechanisms and the often ignored *materiality* of literature, "typography, writing systems, colouring" (52) to deal with Adhiambo Owuor's specific view of the Global South. The sea at the heart of the novel together with insects and fish all underline "the generative vitality and connective potentiality of nonhuman agents" (58). While the sea infuses the text with its own majestic materiality, the text models itself stylistically and graphically to render the sea most vividly.

In certain cases, the nonhuman is shown to defy literature's abilities to reflect it adequately. Certain novels might prove unable to preserve intact the problematic, unfamiliar nonhuman element throughout the whole of their work. In Peter Vermeulen's comparative view, such is the case with Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), and Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2012). A common flaw is to be found in all three works in so far as they are unable to preserve consistently the unruly nonhuman strand of their plots; they revert instead to more sense-making and familiar *human* narratives. Perhaps, moots Vermeulen, "the nonhuman is simply not a category that applies to any stable reality" (84).

Far from abandoning the human, recent literature repositions it in a decentralised, non-anthropocentric perspective that still acknowledges the human presence at the heart of the nonhuman. It is also a means of putting in proper relief the coevolution and interconnection of the two. The second section of the book –

“Negotiating the Human in the Light of the Nonhuman” – addresses this problem. Philipp Erchinger explores the relationship human-nonhuman historically. He ranges far and wide – citing everyone relevant from Aristotle to Giorgio Agamben and Wolfgang Iser – in seeking to illumine Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* (2016), *Solar* (2010), and *Machines Like Me* (2019). Read properly, he contends, the three novels show that the organic and the inorganic have always been entangled with each other, the invariable consequence of belonging to the same material universe. In the author’s words, “[o]ur human lives and works are deeply involved with, and therefore vulnerable to, the more-than-human forces and matters through which we become who we are” (107). Connection is also at the heart of Jopi Nyman’s investigation of Gary Paulsen’s *Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Alaskan Dog-Racing* (1995), a memoir of human-dog team work in the Alaskan Arctic, inspired by mobility studies and animal studies. As if echoing Bruno Latour’s compositionist, reconstructive ideas, Nyman shows how nonhuman animals (dogs) play a key role in rebuilding the narrator’s (human) identity, as they physically embed him in the environment and reshape his awareness of nonhumans.

Next, we turn to the consideration of the clone. By choosing to analyze Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Maria Ostrovskaya underlines how difficult it is to separate naturally and artificially produced beings due to their close and complex relationships (129). Ostrovskaya discerns the powerful presence of Brian Massumi’s notion of affect and Judith Butler’s concept of grievability in Ishiguro’s novel.

Hitherto nonhuman studies have investigated the corpse in literature mostly in connection with Poe and Borges. Reconsidering the topic in light of recent literature, Nicky Gardiner performs here an exercise in necropoetics regarding Jim Crace’s novel *Being Dead* (1999). In Gardiner’s view, Crace forces us to take paradoxical note of the nonhuman agency of the corpse, an entity that both preserves and denies its human character. In a context in which “the corpse remains a culturally significant, yet radically under-theorised site of (non) human

agency within contemporary literary studies" (149), Gardiner underscores the strong material and biological dimensions of the human that death reveals and that only art can reenact.

The third section of the volume, "Imagining Biocentric Communities," leaves the human behind to focus exclusively on the nonhuman and its rhisome-like interconnections. Trees, the world of roots and fungi, water, and the weather are only a few of the elements we encounter here. Trees take centre stage in Timothy C. Baker's discussion of four recent novels, Melissa Harrison's *At Hawthorn Time* (2015), Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016), Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) and Jeremy Cooper's *Ash Before Oak* (2019). According to Baker, all four novels are united in an effort to dismantle the pernicious divide between nature and culture. The author especially decries the binary association of women with nature and men with society. He contends that it is the agentive account of trees as enmeshed that unsettles such "traditionally gendered accounts of nature" in the novels (170). *The Overstory* is also the focus of Shannon Lambert's essay which examines trees from a different perspective. Within Power's dialogic, plurivocal text, Lambert discerns a matrix between its entangled human lives and the entanglements of its nonhuman biological entities – trees, specifically. Representations of tree-fungi-human enmeshments or mycorrhizal multiplicities become "forms of collective agency" (187) in Lambert's interpretation. Such types of agency act to redefine, enrich and expand our own, human notions of collectivity.

Harmonious interconnectedness does not define every aspect of the world we inhabit. A state of conflict between humans and environment as brought into being in time by the repeated human interventions in the natural order – the Anthropocene – has been to a certain extent muffled with the avoidance of binarisms in recent research. Discussing Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017), Yvonne Liebermann is one of the researchers unafraid to address it. In contrast to famed scholars Amitav Ghosh and Timothy Morton who insist that climate change phenomena are

ungraspable owing to their vast scale, Liebermann shows that at least the two novels under analysis here can and do make sense of such occurrences. To this aim, the novelists adopt two tactics: focusing on the quotidian, i.e., the “*everyday* quality of climate change” (213, my underl.) and on *weather* and its immediate effects on the body. The tactics act to bring the reality of environmental changes closer to the reader, making them more palpable and immediate without affecting their unpredictable, incalculable (nonhuman) character.

No such collection would be complete without postcolonial perspectives on the nonhuman, a defect that is supplied by Judith Rahn in her discussion of Indian novelist Shubhangi Swarup’s *Latitudes of Longing* (2020). Rahn shows how the novel expresses a typical (postcolonial) Global South perspective in its rejection of binary divisions. What it favours instead is a system of entanglements in the specific context of India’s rich agentic diversity. The novel rejects clear-cut categories and classifications in matters of science, the environment and postcoloniality. Rahn maintains that dualisms are simplistic and typical of the exhausted and bankrupt Western binary system of thinking. The novel therefore calls for richer, “more open and equivocal manners of reflection” (237). Only in this way can justice be done to the nonhuman stigmatized as devoid of agency, and therefore taken as ripe for exploitation.

The troubling possibility that a human perspective might after all fail to do justice to the nonhuman is what the authors debate in the volume’s concluding section, “Negotiating Reality: Approaching the Nonhuman’s Inescapable Alterity.” Kahn Faassen insists that we cannot render the nonhuman other than within an anthropocentric perspective. He proves it through comparing the short story “The Willows” ([1907] 2011) by Algernon Blackwood to the novella *Annihilation* (2017) by Jeff VanderMeer as examples of old versus new weird in fiction. Faassen convincingly demonstrates that there is actually no way we can evade anthropocentrism, as all attempts at eluding it display even more consistent human-centred tendencies. The solution, he insists, would

simply be to acknowledge it and stop demonising it, thus ensuring a more honest rendering of the nonhuman (274). *Annihilation* (2017) is also what Gry Ulstein discusses in the next chapter. To him, extreme literary experimentation is needed to express the nonhuman adequately as a form of life that surpasses human understanding and perception. In an intricate, multilayered, reference-rich analysis, Ulstein explains the complex identity construction of the “bird-squid-human chimera” protagonist in *Annihilation* as one defined from the outside in, from an external, “surface” perspective that belongs mostly to the Bird’s human observers and creators (294). To him, such an identity replaces the subject-object divide with entangled human and nonhuman subjectivities. Novelists sometimes choose literary genres considered marginal, such as the new/old weird in the analyses above, or the Young Adult (YA) genre as in the following novel under analysis, to match the alterity and marginal character of the nonhuman itself. In her reading of Australian novelist Ambelin Kwaymullina’s Young Adult trilogy *The Tribe* (2012-2015), Bettina Burger investigates the tactics Kwaymullina employs to intermingle successfully non-human perspectives and human ones while avoiding to anthropomorphise the former. Such tactics include communicating in images, using different syntax and vocabulary, and setting nonhuman voices apart from the human narration through a different typesetting. More importantly, Burger underlines the way Kwaymullina, an Aboriginal Australian, makes substantial use of local, aboriginal beliefs in the text to design a special worldview. According to such an animistic and totemic perspective, “familial relationships [...] extend beyond human beings to all life in the world,” giving a voice to several nonhuman beings, from animals, to rocks, plants, trees and the wind. The resulting prose portrays a “web of living, inter-connected beings” which also includes the human (314-5).

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