



BOOK REVIEW:

*Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and
Posthuman in Literature and Culture*

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Karkulehto, Sanna, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, eds. *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-0367197476.

Weird ecologist Timothy Morton employs the term “mesh” to denote the sticky, fluid, overlapping entanglements between *things* – subjects, objects, forces, codes, bodies, etc.¹ In *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, editors Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis have done more than assemble a collection of essays on posthumanisms (broadly conceived); they have amassed a scholarly mesh of sorts, a strange ecosystem of questions, concepts, methodologies, and subject positions that play productively with the evolving formations of critical posthumanisms.² In this sense, *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* is less a book to be read than an environment to become entangled with. Latching onto Donna J. Haraway’s Chthulucentric thinking,³ the chapters that comprise the collection strive to

¹ See Morton, Timothy, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

² In an effort to avoid getting bogged down in fine-haired taxonomical distinctions, throughout this review I will refer to “posthumanisms” and “critical posthumanisms” as umbrella terms that include discussions of the anti-humanisms, non- and anti-anthropocentrism, neganthropocentrism, the posthuman, the nonhuman, and other concepts that generally invite us to think beyond the liberal humanist subject and its life-word.

³ See Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016.

“create new gripping surfaces between art, theory, and the world by conducting concrete case studies of various contemporary art works and cultural phenomena” (10). Such approaches compel readers to become acutely aware, when tussling with literary studies specifically, of the ways in which “research materials often defy the traditional definitions of representation and textuality” (10). Thus, *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* announces itself as something other than a traditional study of what might be thought of as a canon of posthumanist texts: it presents itself as a self-reflexive collection of posthumanist experimentations both within and beyond text and narrative.

Chapter by chapter, this volume establishes new lines of kinship between visual arts, literature, comics, video games, medical humanities, and theory. While the discrete essays in the collection might benefit from growing longer tentacles and groping with a slightly larger networks of scholarly bodies, the book is dazzling in its playful intelligence and indefatigable curiosity. Because of this spirit of interrogative play, I consider it to be part of the now-vital network of collected essays on critical posthumanisms that includes Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova’s *Posthuman Glossary* (2018), Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini’s *The Cambridge Guide to Literature and the Human* (2016), Neal Badmington’s *Posthumanism* (2000), and Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston’s *Posthuman Bodies* (1995). I justify this privileged placement by charting the eccentric, multinational texts, lives, and phenomena introduced throughout the book, accenting moments that might be of particular provocation or significance for scholars both familiar and unfamiliar with critical posthumanisms.

Unlike some collections of essays on literary and cultural studies, in which subsections and intellectual groupings seem to be constructed haphazardly as a last-ditch effort to offer some semblance of theoretical or thematic cohesion, the book’s thirteen chapters (and introduction) are structured in five thematic clusters that readers familiar with the field of critical posthumanisms will recognise immediately: posthumanist literature and theory; posthumanist figurations in literature and life (in this case, aliens and monsters); the non-human animal; posthumanist technologies; and materiality. These chapters and clusters are entangled by what the editors call the “meta-disciplinary streak running through the entire book” (10) – a call to recognise and attempt to think beyond the limitations of our current discipline-specific assumptions and methodologies. In this way, the book almost begs to be read as a cohesive, if wide-ranging and diverse, monograph that begins with literary analyses, moves to discussions of cultural productions in varied mediums, and ventures fully into the terrain of nonhuman and posthumanist phenomena and materiality.

The three chapters in Part I propose a set of posthumanist reading practices that interrogate the very possibility of what might be termed a posthumanist literature. Carole Guesse and Karoliina Lummaa open the collection with essays that feature literary texts that might, through their topics and techniques, be thought of as posthumanist. Guesse positions Michel Houellebecq’s 2005 novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, as an attempt to thematise (and possibly enact) posthumanist perspectives via a clone’s first-person account of a postapocalyptic future. In remarkably lyrical prose, Lummaa describes how two digital poems (Marko Niemi and Dan Waber’s

2008 flash poem, “a as in dog”, and Jouni Tossavainen’s 2008 sound poem, “a short interview with a lost voice”) might be read with sensitivity to the thematics of posthumanisms as well as the materialities involved in the production and reading of literature. Through deft and engaging readings of these texts, Guesse and Lummaa invite readers to move beyond *themes* of more-than-human-assemblages and anti-anthropocentric points of view. They ask instead: how might a text do more than narrate the possibilities of a posthumanist ethics? How might it activate posthumanist agencies?

The inaugural section of the collection concludes with Kaisa Kortekallio’s remarkable “Becoming-instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*”. Questioning the worth of putative readerly empathy, Kortekallio instead outlines a practice of enacting fictional experience that opens readers to “nonhuman influences through self-aware engagement with estranging first-person narratives” (57). Aligning VanderMeer, Morton, and her own essay through their use of first-person narration, the chapter highlights the value of texts that compel an awareness of the artificiality of characters while attempting to induce an absence of subjectivity in the reader. Rather than remaining a sovereign subject, Kortekallio suggests, the reader should strive to *become-instrument*: “something that is manufactured, calibrated, and played for a specific creative purpose” (57). Kortekallio carefully establishes how, via Vandermeer and Morton, becoming-instrument estranges and stimulates an asubjective stance that compels the openness for which she calls in reading. For me, the bold assertion of such reading practices that breach the boundaries between text and world and deny the validity of a humanist subject are precisely the type of thinking critical posthumanisms needs in order for us to further enact its ethical promises. Perhaps more importantly, Kortekallio’s chapter primes the reader for how they might themselves become-instrument while venturing through the rest of the collection.

Part II extends the theories conceived and tested in Part I by emphasising the figures of the alien and the monster in literature and culture. Not only do they establish a provocative collection of primary texts in multiple genres and mediums (which is useful in and of itself), but the authors remain attentive to the diacritical specificities of each text and medium. Instead of providing readings that are thematic or cultural, here, particular aesthetic, generic, cultural, and embodied forms are studied in relation to the potential posthumanist work of the texts. One of the most productive features of these chapters is their visual facsimiles of primary texts. In her chapter on *Sandman: Overture*, Essi Varis reproduces and analyses a selection of beautifully rendered panels that foreground the ways in which the comic simultaneously defamiliarises the reader by evoking nonhuman experiences and characterisations while reminding the reader that a trace of anthropocentrism scaffolds every image, every narrative, every bit of dialogue. As Varis clarifies, within the comic, “animals always speak in human language, the machines are always androids, and every non-carbon-based creature has a human face” (96). For her, *Sandman: Overture* is productively posthumanist in that it inspires an acute responsiveness to textual styles, representations, and modes of cognition in the reader. Similarly, in a chapter on nonhuman experiences in video games, Jonne Arjoranta analyses a variety of screenshots from *Alien vs. Predator* to

express how the game's synesthetic design, visual indicators, colour filters, and highlighting expresses nonhuman embodied cognition.

Dedicated primarily to studying the nonhuman animal, Part III continues to play with a carnivalesque zone of texts and theories, but it also marks a shift away from the collection's focus on literature and narrative. Such a redirection of intellectual energies from the narrative to the lived not only reenergises the collection (and makes it stand apart in the field), but invites the reader to reconsider the six essays that came before. While many of the chapters in Parts I and II reference first-person perspectives and the subjective position of the authors, the essays in Part III (and to some extent Part IV) reach beyond traditional argument-driven rhetoric to experiment productively with the affective. Both Mikko Keskinen and Hana Porkertová consider human-animal becomings, specifically through human-canine relationships. Keskinen analyses Charles Siebert's 2000 novel *Angus*. Rather than studying the narrative and its deceased, nonhuman narrator, Keskinen analyses how the human reader engages with the novel's stylistic techniques, particularly the eponymous character's play with standard English, the narrative's structure (which mimics canine memory capacity), and the title's metafictional valence, which positions the novel itself not as a narrative but as an inter-species "translation machine" (153). Porkertová maps the Deleuzian notion of assemblage onto the relationship between Eva and Nessie, a blind woman and her guide dog. For me, this is one of the most impactful essays in the collection: its use of Deleuze to perform an ethnography that imbricates the author with her human and nonhuman subjects, technologies, and lived disabilities results in a remarkably thoughtful and affective experience. As I read emails between Porkertová and Evie, her human subject, about the perceived co-experiences between human and canine via disability, I could not help but *become-instrument* and contaminate the anthropocentric discourses regarding law, technology, disability, and species designations that inform my own sense of personhood. Continuing to *tune the instrument that therefore I was becoming*, the final essay in Part III, Brad Bolman's "Carnivorous Anatomies: Art and Being Beasts", charts an anti-anthropocentric intellectual history of the concept of anatomy via the bodies of pigs as they have been depicted in "anatomical and physiological reference works" (163). The result is an exercise in the very types of estrangement and defamiliarisation for which posthumanist texts are known. In other words, the book's theoretical engagements with more-than-human assemblages often produce the affective and intellectual experiences typically reserved for the area of the aesthetic.

Part IV migrates away from narrative studies altogether and experiments instead with "Technological Co-Agencies". These chapters vary in approach and content, but they align through a similar ambition to locate anthropocentric structures and biases and postulate alternative conceptions and practices. Cléo Collomb and Samuel Goyet construct a careful argument to reposition the computer in the public imagination as more than a tool (or platform for tools). In a revealing section analysing a Google search page, they demonstrate the bewildering maneuvers and machinations that such a seemingly simple "tool" performs. Their work becomes more provocative when they assert that, when human thinkers calibrate themselves to the specific methods of action that computers perform, the complicated calculus of computation can be rethought as a type of computational (versus textual)

writing. Analysing what is perhaps one of the most recognisable human-computer assemblages, gaming, Marleena Huuhka develops Nakamura and Wirman's notion of counterplay as a strategy of gameplay that makes visible the "logic of capitalism, conquest, and possession" inherent in popular games such as *Minecraft* (233). By amplifying the ways in which games might fortify the anthropocentric, capitalist, and postcolonial values of conquest and possession, Huuhka stresses the importance of what might otherwise seem a facile strategy of resistance. Because it introduces the powerful alternative of refusal, counterplay promises to help individuals dis-imbricate themselves from the logic of particular games as well as the cultural processes that may shape their own desires.

One of the most galvanising chapters in the collection, the final essay in Part IV, Patricia Flanagan and Raune Frankjær's "Cyborganic Wearables: Sociotechnical Misbehavior and the Evolution of Nonhuman Agency", analyses a cyborganic wearable created by the authors. Named "Bamboo Whisper", the goal of the "human-nature-machine hybrid" is to perform what much posthumanist literature and theory thematises: the deconstruction of anthropocentric authority via haptic sensitivities and human-nature-technological assemblages (253). Assisted by a collection of stunning photographs of people wearing Bamboo Whisper, the essay argues convincingly how such "fictional posthuman entities" might help wearers (and readers) to overcome anthropocentric sensory biases and encounter the unseen signals sent by the material movements of nonhuman biological agencies (253).

If readers do as I have suggested and read the collection as a monograph of sorts, then by the time they reach Part V – comprised of a single chapter, "Unnarratable Matter" by Juha Raipola – then they will most likely be ready to concede the potential impotence of narrative when engaging perceptions and materialities beyond putative human frameworks. Returning to the collection's evident interest in the limitations of literary studies, Raipola argues that stories themselves might be part of the problem of anthropocentrism. He argues that, despite the fact that nonhuman agencies are always already part of human stories, such stories fail to compel us to actualise an ethic of interspecies equality because the very logic of storytelling – its meanings and structures, its pleasures and affectations – are always already anthropocentric. Thus, the work of critical posthumanisms might do well to continually reach outside of literary studies to keep questing in environment-worlds that, while they incorporate narrative, also refuse to engage completely in the logic of stories.

Despite my celebration of the collection, I did encounter a single strange and unexpected sticking point: *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* might not reconfigure enough. Most chapters seem haunted by the anthropocentrism that they claim to counteract. Many of them actually incorporate the phrase "what it means to be human" as if the human itself were still a valid ontological construct that must be reckoned with instead of an ideological category of power, control, and convenience that, in no real way, has ever existed as such. Again and again, the human returns in some chapters as the baseline from which all theorisation, experimentations, and creations must be considered, compared, evaluated, etc. To be fair, some of the authors may do this to carefully think around concepts of agency and power, ontology and epistemology; yet, it seems odd that the premise of the liberal human subject is not ejected completely from the collection or at least

quarantined for a time to allow us to imagine and encounter new possibilities. Especially considering the intense focus these authors place on materialities, assemblages, and co-constitutions, it is surprising that there is not more engagement with contemporary thinkers who do the same, such as Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) or Arthur Kroker in *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway* (2012). This single critique should certainly not dissuade anyone from reading the collection. I share it mainly to emphasise that the book is at its best when it successfully exorcises the specter of the human and clarifies the ethical value of thinking and living anti-anthropocentrically, posthumanistically, and neganthropocentrically.

Surprisingly, one of the features of the book that performs the cultural work defined above is the index. Scuttling about the index's pages are those species of terms now recognisable as the lexical imaginary of critical posthumanisms: *alien, Anthropocene, assemblage, becoming, cognition, cyborg, defamiliarization, ecology, embodied cognition, emergence, empathy, gender, ghost, human, hyperobject, matter, nonhuman, spectrality, subjectivity, weird ecology*, etc. However, these terms are not alone. Migrating among them, hums another species of terminology that intermingles the territories of critical posthumanisms with the territories of narratology, narrative genre, and interdisciplinary media: *character, children's literature, comics, contemporary art, digital literature, fictionality, narrative, narrative theory, narratology, speculative fiction, storied matter, videogames, visual storytelling, writing*. Such a lexical mesh evinces a dedication to grounding abstract theorising with the specificities of discrete aesthetic forms. My hope is that this move might invite thinkers interested primarily in formalist, structuralist, and aesthetics approaches to consider more fully the value of critical posthumanisms while also encouraging practitioners of critical posthumanisms to become more attentive to the limitations and challenges aesthetic forms may place on their thought. Hence, the prime value of the collection, at least for this reviewer, is its effort to bring into conversation a wide array of theories, disciplines, primary texts (comics, novels, video games, etc.), materialities, and aesthetic sensitivities that both enhance and question the emerging fields of critical posthumanisms.

Biography: Tony M. Vinci is an Associate Professor of English at Ohio University Chillicothe and author of *Ghost, Android, Animal: Trauma and Literature Beyond the Human* (2020). His recent publications reorient literary and cultural studies toward the radical ethics of the posthumanities, establishing the manner in which narrative genres engage trauma as a means to experiment with emerging conceptions of human and nonhuman networks and subjectivities in an effort to theorise new systems of ethical relations.