

Karkulehto S.A., Koistinen, K., & Varis, E. (Eds.). (2019). *Reconfiguring human, nonhuman and posthuman in literature and culture*. Routledge.

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The current climate crisis and the rapid and drastic changes our planet is undergoing at the moment demand a re-thinking of the way in which humanity and nonhumanity are understood. *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* aims to investigate human, nonhuman and posthuman representations in contemporary culture and literature, and analyse the way in which these concepts are reconfigured within the context of the Anthropocene. The volume is part of the *Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture* series edited by Karen Raber, a series that investigates how the non-human is represented in literary and cultural studies. Building on seminal works of authors such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, N. Katherine Hayles, but also on newer scholarship such as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann’s “material ecocriticism” or Marco Caracciolo’s phenomenology of narrative, this volume seeks to understand the cultural changes engendered by the Anthropocene. Within this frame of reference, as long as nonhumanity is “carved in the negative space of humanity” (1), a reconfiguration of the *human* is bound to happen as well. Now more than ever, claim the editors, it seems mandatory to turn one’s attention to types of otherness that diverge from what is understood as “the norm”, and rather recognise the world as an intricate system of human and nonhuman entanglements.

Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture is divided into five parts, “all of which approach the tensions between literature, culture, narration, meaning-making, and the nonhuman slightly differently” (11). The first section is called “Toward Posthumanist Literature and Posthumanist Reading”. The first chapter of this part, “On the Possibility of a Posthuman/ist Literature(s)” by Carole Guesse, questions whether “literature can truly be posthuman” (11). Guesse outlines some theoretical considerations regarding concepts such as the posthuman and posthumanism, which are later followed by a case study of Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island*, a novel in which genetically enhanced clones have taken over a post-apocalyptic world.

The second chapter, Karoliina Lummaa’s “Posthumanist Reading: Witnessing Ghosts, Summoning Nonhuman Powers”, makes use of the posthumanist concept and imagery of spectrality, in an attempt to read contemporary Finish poetry as literature which summons nonhuman powers. The chapter ends rather provocatively: “We are the sorcerers”, claims Lummaa, who can conjure these nonhuman powers and challenge human exceptionality. The third chapter, called “Becoming-instrument. Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*” by Kaisa Kortekallio, introduces a new methodological tool which the author calls “becoming-instrument”, building on Marco Caracciolo’s theory about empathic engagement with first-person

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narratives and Merja Polvinen's analysis of self-aware readerly engagement. Kortekallio claims that "the experience of being opened up to nonhuman influences through self-aware engagement" (58) in first-person narratives such as Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* can help us reconfigure our humanist understanding of both personal and environmental change.

The second section of the volume, "Imagining Aliens and Monsters," opens with Essi Varis's essay titled "Alien Overtures. Speculating about Nonhuman Experiences with Comic Book Characters". The chapter starts with a theoretical incursion inside different branches of cognitive narrative studies and the way in which character theory and comics analysis can intersect with this field. Finally, set against these theoretical backgrounds, Varis attempts to understand whether the characters in *The Sandman: Overture* can mediate nonhuman experience. The fifth chapter, penned by Jonne Arjoranta and called "Playing the Nonhuman. Alien Experiences in *Alien vs. Predator*", investigates the way in which videogames portray the nonhuman, but also what kind of tools they employ in order to convey nonhumanness. The author's main focus is the game *Aliens vs. Predator* (2010), which proposes three different modes of playing: you can choose to be a human, an alien, or a predator. This offers the player an immersive participation inside the mind and the body of two nonhuman subjects, alluding to theories of embodied cognition. The sixth chapter is authored by Marleena Mustola and Sanna Karkulehto and it is titled "Wild Things Squeezed in the Closet. Monsters of Children's Literature as Nonhuman Others". The authors contend that the monsters depicted in the works investigated in this chapter (but also in children's literature in general) embody contemporary anxieties. In this context, children are always portrayed as "others" by the dominant, default adult perspective, which brings them closer to the monsters they encounter in such stories.

The third section of the volume, "Becoming with Animals", opens with Mikko Keskinen's chapter titled "Dead Dog Talking. Posthumous, Preposthumous, and Preposterous Canine Narration in Charles Siebert's *Angus*". Keskinen analyses Charles Siebert's novel *Angus* (2000), which is particularly relevant because it disrupts the dominant human narrative twice, since "unlike actual humans, dogs never really possess the ability to speak or narrate, and unlike human characters, dead dogs rarely make posthumous [...] appearances in literature" (145). *Angus* thus becomes a hybrid creature, always fluctuating between a human and a nonhuman identity. The eighth chapter, "Carnivorous Anatomies. Art and Being Beasts" by Brad Bolman, examines the ethically complex shared history of pigs and humans. The author discusses one of the earliest anatomy books, *Anatomia porci*, and the works of contemporary artist Miru Kim, who explores the sensibilities shared by both humans and hogs, through photography. Chapter nine, titled "Reconfiguring Human and Nonhuman Animals in a Guiding Assemblage: Toward Posthumanist Conception of Disability", is written by Hana Porkertová and it examines the way in which disability can be reconfigured by the dynamics that occur between humans and nonhumans. To do so, the author delves into the relationship established between Eva, a visually impaired human, and Nessie, her guide dog. The author claims that the two form a sort of interdependent Deleuzo-Guattarian *assemblage*.

The fourth section is titled "Technological (Co-)Agencies." It starts with Cléo Collomb and Samuel Goyet's chapter titled "Meeting the Machine Halfway. Toward Non-Anthropocentric Semiotics," which discusses the sometimes narrow and limited conceptions of machines that circulate around humans. The way in which machines function is always understood in terms of their utilitarian capacity as that is perceived from a human standpoint. The authors of the article plead for a renegotiation of the dynamics between human and nonhuman technological identities and maintain that the agency of computers is not to be found in the human-designed interfaces, but in glitches or bugs, the semiotic characteristics of "computational writing". Chapter eleven, penned by



Marleena Huuhka and titled “Journeys in Intensity. Human and Nonhuman Co-Agency, Neuropower, and Counterplay in *Minecraft*” analyses the concept of “counterplay,” conceptualised as a sort of play that resists oppressive, colonialist, and violent practices inside the game. Instead of always striving to achieve and accomplish something in the game, counterplay pleads for gentle gaming techniques such as immobility or aimless wandering. “Cyborganic Wearables. Sociotechnical Misbehavior and the Evolution of Nonhuman Agency” is the last chapter of section four and it is authored by Patricia Flanagan and Raune Frankjær. This chapter analyses the way in which wearable technology can alter the human body and dim the boundaries between what is human and nonhuman. This kind of wearable technologies can augment human perception and sensual capacity and are therefore able to make us reconsider and reconfigure human identity. The authors base their research on the concept of the “cyborganic”, theorised by authors such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti and understood as “the interconnectedness between [humans] and between objects and materials in the world” (245).

Part five, called “Afterword: Unnarratable Matter?”, consists of only one chapter, namely Juha Raipola’s “Unnarratable Matter: Emergence, Narrative, and Material Ecocriticism”. This chapter examines how humans can understand and make sense of the emergent and self-organising material world. Rejecting material ecocriticism’s claim that nonhuman matter possesses narrative agency, Raipola argues that matter does never perform stories for the human audience, but rather exists and acts of its own accord: “No matter how hard we try to fit this world into our cultural landscape of narrative sense-making, a major part of its behaviour always remains unreachable” (276).

Karkulehto, Koistinen, and Varis’ edited volume represents a complex, multidimensional, and well-needed investigation of the way in which human, nonhuman and posthuman identities can be reconfigured in contemporary culture and literature. Both the theoretical texts and the case studies are noticeably diverse, encompassing a large range of perspectives and angles; despite this diversity, which can appear confusing at times, the volume remains coherent and consistent, particularly because many theoretical references are frequently reiterated throughout the book. While this could seem redundant, the recurrence of fundamental texts such as Thomas Nigél’s essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (1974) offers the volume a certain consistency. Nonetheless, this collection of essays remains rather inaccessible to the general public, since it often demands prior knowledge of posthumanist reasoning. Furthermore, as most of the volume’s authors note throughout their research, a good part of our efforts to destabilise anthropocentric biases is biased in itself. Thomas Nigél’s aforementioned essay is cited multiple times in the volume, and for a good reason. Indeed, one cannot know what it is like to be a bat, unless one is one.