

BATZKE, Ina, et al., editors. *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

The “I” and life writing in the posthuman anthropocene

Raphael Albuquerque de Boer¹*

¹Universidade Federal do Rio Grande, Rio Grande, RS, Brasil

The editors of *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene* (2021) open the book with a thought-provoking question: “How can life writing, a genre so intimately tied to the human perspective and thus presumably human-centered *qua* definition, provide adequate perspectives for an age in which humanity’s self-centeredness is considered the driving force behind ecological disasters and global climate change?” (i). In this paradox of the subject, we find the key contents of this volume: life writing and the Posthuman Anthropocene. On the one hand, life writing is the genre that embraces the “I” as subject matter, therefore, it “is taken broadly so as to reflect its academic, public, digital and international reach, and to continue and promote its democratic tradition” (iii). On the other hand, the still not official term Anthropocene, introduced, in 2000, by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, stands for our contemporary geologic epoch in which the effect of human activity on Earth’s ecosystems becomes prominent.

Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene is part of a book series that introduces themes in life writing with an interdisciplinary approach. The targeted audience of this book is researchers, scholars, and students who are interested in learning from a range of topics that focuses on life writing “in relation to human rights, migration, trauma and repression, and the processes and effects of the Anthropocene, including environmental subjects where lives may be non-human” (ii). The book is divided into two parts: Part I Responsible Relationality and Part II: Relational Responsibility. Part I encompasses four articles in life writing focusing on the relation of humanity to human and non-human forms of life. Part II embraces life writing in three articles that tackle social, political, and cultural issues on the grounds of ethics and responsibility.

* Raphael Albuquerque de Boer is currently an adjunct professor at the Institute of Letters and Arts (ILA) at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande (FURG). He holds a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies and a Master’s in English and Literatures in English from the Graduate Program in English (PPGI) at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. His research interests include film and media studies, representations and language(s). Email: raphaelfurg@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4775-9140>.



Even though the two parts present distinct perspectives on the relations of life writing and the Anthropocene, there are great expectations “that they do not appear as opposed poles but indicate differently weighted, yet intricately connected, considerations of how life writing might provide adequate perspectives for an age of ecological disasters and global climate change” (iii). It seems a true hope in the sense that the two sections of articles intertwine their voices echoing meanings that contribute to the thought of positioning the “self” as the main character on the effects they might produce on the destruction of our environment. In this vein, I would like to highlight the relevance the authors give to examining our intricate responsibility/relation to non-human life forms, thus in a posthuman perspective.

In PART I, the opening article of this volume, Katja Sarkowsky’s “Relationality, Autobiographical Voice, and the Posthumanist Paradox: Decentering the Human in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Life Writing” reflects on the intricate role of voice in life writing and its relationality to non-human forms of life. For the author, “[g]iving voice to life and life experiences appears inevitably bound to the human voice, even if narratives seek to capture more-than-human lives and worlds” (25). However, Sarkowsky believes that the Pueblan Laguna writer Marmon Silko’s autobiographical works seem to have found a solution for the complex equation of decentering the voice in life narratives, thus opening space for the relation to human and non-human forms of life. For the author, Silko intends to promote a writing of her own, decentering the notion of bios and turning it into *zoe*. In Sarkowski’s words: “A recurring constellation in Silko’s autobiographical work is the connection between place, story, and the kinship relation between different species” (31). Therefore, Sarkowski acknowledges the autobiographical works of Silko as a vital exponent for deconstructing the tight connection between the issue of voice and its centrality to human activity, thus opening space to the “voice” of non-human forms.

The second article, Christina Caupert’s “The Big Picture: Life as Sympoietic Becomings in Rachel Rosenthal’s Performance Art” focuses on the work of innovative performance artist Rachel Rosenthal, mainly on its relation to decentering the self in her autobiographical performances. For Caupert, even though autobiography—her “I”—was part of Rosenthal’s work, she transcended it. She believes that the performance artist is beyond centering only the self. The author adds that Rosenthal entangled, from a post-humanist perspective, elements of her life in connection to non-human life forms. She called it the “Big Picture:” “a term that, for the [artist], described the evolutionary and ecological entanglement of all lives on our planet, both with each other and with the Earth itself” (55-56). Rosenthal transcends human forms in her performances. For Caupert, “in her pieces, she conceives of animals, plants, ideas, seemingly inanimate objects, and intangible energies as powerful agents and co-performers” (56). For Rosenthal, the sympoiesis, in contrast to autopoiesis, a term coined by Donna Haraway, was a method of her performances in which she wittily subverted the pretense of human self-centeredness in relation to nature; non-human matter. According to Caupert, Rosenthal’s pioneering work has prominent connections to

Rosi Braidoti's ideas on the post-human Anthropocene, thus, "it seems justified to call Rosenthal a posthumanist *avant la lettre*" (56).

In the third article, "Edges and Extremes in Ecobiography: Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*," author Jessica White investigates how Liptrot conveys the idea of interconnection between her "self" and external elements that have influenced Liptrot's sense of the "I." Liptrot's *Outrun* is about her trajectory while living in London, where she dealt with addiction issues, then to her moving to Orkney, Scotland, where she then reconnects with nature, especially with her interest in corncrakes, an endangered species of birds that helps her overcome her fears and leave behind experiences with addiction. From a posthuman perspective, the core of White's article is to show that ecobiographies such as Liptrot's "[show] that humans are never alone in nature, but that they are always bound up with, affected by, and responsible to other species and the non-human environment" (99).

The closing article of PART I, Clare Brant's "The Sentience of Sea Squirts," takes us in what the author calls "underwater literature." Based on her own dives into the waters of Dorset, on the coast of England, to photograph the sea squirts, the author brings up relevant issues in posthuman life writing, language, and the Anthropocene to de-center humanity in the relational system between human and non-human life forms. In this case, Brant believes that life writing allows us to bring human sentience "to, for, with, from sea squirts" (127). For Brant, we have a lot to learn from underwater little life forms "[...] as representative species of "lower" life forms which are also lives, and to think of that as necessary work to encompass more of the world that we need to recognize in order to act differently and ravage it less" (141).

In the first article of PART II, "Humanity, Life Writing, and Deep Time: Postcolonial Contributions," the author Renata Lucena Dalmaso presents an insightful discussion about life writing and nature writing entangled with the notions of deep time and post-colonial subjectivities. Dalmaso places the autobiographical "I" in nature writing both in the nineteenth-century works of Thoreau and Darwin, and in the contemporary texts of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), as well as in Ailton Krenak's *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2019). For the author, on the one hand, in nineteenth-century texts "the autobiographical "I" is presented as remaining detached from the world at large and portrayed as unaffected by it in its Cartesian wholeness and individuality" (165). On the other hand, Ghosh's and Krenak's works portray the *self* as intertwined with nature, which is not merely seen as an object in its relationship with humanity, "but it is described as an agent in its own right whose ability to act substantially impacts those around it" (166). Such arguments rely on the author's idea that "postcolonial life writings are apt to materialize the bonds of their author's limited life span to deep time in ways that can contribute to a better understanding of the entanglement between humankind and a grander temporality" (159).

In the second article, “Helen Macdonald’s *H Is for Hawk* and Critical Posthumanism,” the author Monir Gholamzadeh Bazarbash begins the text by restating the importance of debating the Anthropocene in the contemporary world. The author also emphasizes the relevant entrance of the Anthropocene into literature by mentioning the 2015 Nobel prize-winning non-fiction book *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* written by Jedediah Purdy. Besides that, Bazarbash recalls in her article the current post-human position of humanity in the Anthropocene. For her, this is an “irrevocable change” of the centrality of the human Anthropocene. It is in this realm of a critical post-humanistic perspective that Bazarbash analyzes Macdonald’s memoir *H is for Hawk*. The work, by expressing the relation between the main human protagonists and the non-human bird goshawk, becomes a pivotal instance for critical post-human research as it contests the male-centered and colonialist “premises underlying traditional falconry [which] are saturated with (critical) post-humanist ethics” (186).

In the final article of PART II, “Writing Life on Mars: Posthuman Imaginaries of Extraterrestrial Colonization and the NASA Mars Rover Missions,” the author Jens Temmen, drawing on Alexandra Ganser’s notion in “Astrofuturism,” explores narratives of human activity in Mars. On the grounds of gender, postcolonial, and posthuman commentary, the author believes that these astrofuturist narratives appear to repeat problematic patterns of colonial oppression. Temmen’s analysis is twofold: first, he claims that the NASA Mars rover missions “become one of the central scientific vehicles through which knowledge of the red planet is crafted” (207). Second, the author, through a postcolonial and posthumanist perspective, focuses on the life narratives of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk in *The Space Barons* to denounce “their complicity in the technoliberal project of space privatization” (207). Finally, this chapter conveys the idea of the colonial and exploitative role that humanity plays in the planet’s destruction, arguing that this is not only a practice on Earth, but one that exceeds the boundaries of this planet.

This volume ends on a high note, with an interview with Erin James conducted by Birgit Spengler in which the two discuss the pivotal role of life writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene. Spengler brings up the questions: “[h]ow can life writing help to answer the question ‘how to write’ the Anthropocene?” and “[h]ow can life writing contribute to teaching the ‘arts of living on a damaged planet?’” (226). Thus, the interviewee Erin James, through a narratological perspective, reinforces that many narratives restate anthropocentric and colonial values, while life writing texts, like the ones in this volume, have the power to resist and contest such oppressive views.

This volume vividly encompasses articles that explore the role of life writing to portray humanity in the “responsible” and “relational” system in the Posthuman Anthropocene. Thus, I would like to highlight the paramount importance of all the texts of this volume as they raise central questions to debate the era of ecological crisis we are all living in today. Moreover, the texts presented in the volume become pivotal

for fostering debate on life writing theory related to the Anthropocene whether for academic or non-academic purposes. Finally, as a reader of this book, with a subject that is new to me, I was sincerely invited to investigate/think about further texts on this topic as well as to reflect on my own place relating to non-human life forms. I hope that the encouraging feeling I had with this book will be/is being shared with other readers of this volume, and I wish that this book would illuminate people to also reflect on their responsible/relational position in this epoch of the Posthuman Anthropocene.

Work Cited

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Recebido em: 26/02/2023

Aceito em: 01/06/2023