

Moslund, S.P., Marcussen, M.K., Pedersen, M.K. (Eds.). (2020). *How Literature Comes to Matter. Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press.

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How Literature Comes to Matter is a recent addition to the New Materialisms Series, which enquires into how “materiality permits representation, actualises ethical subjectivities and innovates the political”. Edited by Sten Pultz Moslund, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen and Martin Karlsson Pedersen, the book provides an incisive look at how the binaries of human/non-human, subject/object, organic/inorganic, and agency/non-agency can be rethought and re-evaluated through a creative intermingling of literary criticism and materialist thought; a binary transcending intermingling that echoes Francesca Ferrando’s notion of posthumanism/critical materialism as a “post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism.” (2019, 40).

The book starts off with a brief but succinct philosophical introduction to the material/ontological/thing-oriented turn in theory, with special emphasis laid on Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and New Materialism. Various theories – Quentin Meillassoux’s attack on “correlationism,” Jane Bennett’s “thing-power,” Rosi Braidotti’s “matter-realisms,” Harman’s ‘immaterialism’ – are touched upon, in an attempt to shed light on recent trends in post-anthropocentric thought. As to the possible relationship between (New) Materialist thought and literature, the introduction argues that it is paradoxically only in literature, “presumably the most semiotic and subject-centric medium of all, that a rethinking of the relationship between the subject and the object and the human and the non-human may be brought to the fore.” (21). Literature, in this sense, is capable of *allusively* depicting the fundamental instability of things as they are in themselves, while also bearing witness to the fact that there is always a surplus in reality that we cannot access.

The notion of literature as a site of ambiguity and instability is brought out quite succinctly in the very first section of the book, titled “Matter-Oriented Perspectives on Literary Techniques, Language and Representation.” In the first chapter, Marlene Marcussen theorises Georges Perec’s text *Still Life/Style Leaf* as an encounter between post-anthropocentric theory and narratology. Classical narratology tends to firmly distinguish between narration and description, where the latter becomes a mere rhetorical backdrop for the actions of the human subject. As against this subject-centric view of literature, Marcussen posits a new matter oriented reading in which, echoing Timothy Morton’s concept of ambient poetics, “objects actively co-shape (literary) settings and human reality” (34), thus bringing to the fore a vibrant more-than-human background.

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The descriptive rendering of a more-than-human world is also the focus of the second chapter, which takes up as its subject matter the recent phenomenon of slow narrative. Marco Caracciolo analyses the formal strategies of slow narrative, such as the slow rhythm or pacing of sequences, its de-emphasis on plot, a sense of boredom and detachment, and the evocation of multiple scalar viewpoints, and argues that such practices, apart from initiating new modes of experiencing literature, also challenge anthropocentric models of agency and perception.

In contrast to the first section, the three chapters in the second section undertake a materialist reading of precisely those texts/authors that have conventionally been understood to be overwhelmingly subject-centric. Thus, both Moslund and Pederson, in their respective chapters, focus on the writers Ayi Kwei Armah and Sylvia Plath, and attempt to show how a thing-oriented perspective can crucially alter the manner in which they are usually read. As opposed to the dominant postcolonial or Marxist readings of Kwei Armah's pathbreaking novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), Moslund places emphasis on what he refers to as the sensuous or "*aesthetic*" (74) dimensions of Armah's book. Such an approach resists the inherent metaphorisation inherent in socio-political commentary and instead makes us aware of a certain excess/surplus of reality, in which human agency becomes inextricably enmeshed with non-human forces. Similarly, Pederson makes ingenious use of the OOO concepts of relational agency and the self-withdrawing of objects in order to undermine the dominant reading of Plath's poetry as an expression of intense subjectivity. Here, Plath's famous work 'Tulips' reflects an almost violent intrusion of a thing into a subject-centric viewpoint – "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me" (2008: 6) – and becomes a vehicle to express the immanent vitality of (a) life.

The last chapter in this section takes up the oeuvre of the Danish master of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen, in an attempt to trace an anti-anthropocentric tendency in his works. Employing New Materialist theory, the chapter brings to light the diverse material configurations of objects in Andersen's famous fairy tales, in the process radically reworking the entanglements between the discursive and material, and also between the human and non-human.

The third section of the book, titled "Carnal Realities: Lively Flesh in Feminist and Queer Readings," moves away from formal methodologies and techniques of literature towards a study of the relationship between material realities and gendered readings. Tobias Skiveren's chapter, for instance, revisits the history of feminist theory and literary criticism, ranging from first and second wave feminism, French feminist theory, and finally to queer theory, from a decidedly feminist New Materialist perspective. Seen from such a framework, literature becomes an affective and imaginative site for "witnessing what it feels like to live as a specific carnal configuration, subjected not only to the powers of discourse, but also to the recalcitrant materiality of the flesh." (132). The gendered nature of literature is also taken up in the next chapter, which proposes a novel reading of "affective materialities" in Djuna Barnes's modernist fiction. Relying primarily on Stacy Alaimo's account of "trans-corporeality" and Bennett's notion of effective assemblages, Laura Oulanne analyses Barnes's work as effecting a destabilization of both normative heterosexual identity as well as anthropocentric ideologies of domestic space.

The highlight of the book is the chapter by Karin Sellberg, which problematises not just the content of literature but also the very temporal structure that undergirds it. Sellberg critiques the linear time of realism (and of capitalism and patriarchy) as being characterised by binary and heteronormative narratives of progress. Instead, in and through her close reading of two Shakespearean novels, she posits a new type of temporality, 'queer time,' which is not linear or binary but rhizomatic, a



celebration of the diversity of temporal experiences and entanglements of various human and non-human bodies in time.

The concluding section of the book directly tackles the implications and relations between literature and the crises caused by the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. What is equally stressed by the three chapters is the struggle to properly comprehend, tackle, or even represent anthropogenic change. In Rune Graulund's chapter for instance, dystopian science fiction becomes the privileged site for encounters with radical alterity and the non-human. Graulund extends the notions of use and resource – which so far have been used in a distinctly human perspective – to the point of view of other forms of being, in the process bringing one closer to a (speculative) understanding of more-than-human viewpoints. In a similar manner, Karlsson Pedersen develops a post-anthropocentric alternative to the realism of the financial novel, through a material-affective reading of the novel *This Bleeding City* (2010) by Alex Preston. In Pedersen's layered reading, digital information technologies and money-signs become part of complex machinic assemblages that actively shape human subjectivity and its affective realities.

Finally, in the last chapter, Maurizia Boscagli turns to poetic praxis – the making and fabulating of the present through art and literature – as a possible form of capitalist critique. Employing Felix Guattari's theory of the three ecologies, Boscagli analyses Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014) as subtly moving from an apocalyptic to a realised here-and-now utopia. Implicit in such a move is also a critique of the concept of the *posthumous*, which skips the political question of what to do now in favour of thinking about “life before life, or life after life.” (240).

In conclusion, the edited volume aims to establish a link between literary criticism and new post-anthropocentric theory, and to broaden the scope of how such theory(ies) might be used to interrogate the presence and significance of the objectal and the non-human in literature. A unifying link throughout the chapters is the fundamental instability and inscrutability of matter, accentuated by Morton's emphasis in his afterword on the non-reductive “thingliness of things,” which is always-already beyond human will and intention.

One niggling critique that could be made about the book pertains to its near total neglect of non-Western perspectives. Apart from the one chapter on Kwei Armah, there is hardly a mention of non-Western literature, let alone indigenous concepts and theories (or theorists) from other parts of the world. If critical materialism is first and foremost a critique of modern Western philosophy and its attendant dogmas, of which colonialism/imperialism is a constitutive part, then it becomes imperative for post-anthropocentric theories to move beyond a Eurocentric conceptual framework. Not doing so paves the way for a possible critique of Posthumanist/New Materialist thought as being rooted in Anglo-American scholarship, and in reproducing, as Juanita Sundberg puts it, “colonial ways of knowing and being by enacting universalizing claims and, consequently, further subordinating other ontologies.” (2013, 34).

Nevertheless, the book is an exciting and often path-breaking look at how literature might contribute to contemporary reflections on the entangled relations between humans and more-than-human material realities. Far from being inert and dead, matter – in all its attendant complexity and glory – turns out to be teeming and writhing with life. In the final analysis, matter matters, perhaps much more than the human.

References

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