

REVIEW

Symbiosis as a Key World Building Principle

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Karpouzou, Peggy and Nikoleta Zampaki, eds. *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2023. 325 pages. ISBN 978-3-631-84501-1. Hb. €81.75.

The edited volume *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art* provides a cluster of convincing and thought-provoking arguments for a rethinking and reimagining of the more-than-human world and the planet at large through the lens of symbiosis. In general, symbiosis is understood in a dual sense. First of all, it is linked to the idea that the forming of symbiotic relationships between organisms as well as between biotic and abiotic phenomena, including technologies, is a key ecological and planetary principle. Drawing on this definition, the book is inscribed in and theorizes a “symbiotic turn,” which poses an “inescapable relationality” (25) as central to the planet’s processes of evolution. The understanding of the “turn” is indebted to biologist Lynn Margulis’s ideas of symbiogenesis, evolution through symbiotic merging (Margulis, 1998), with which she radically challenged the Darwinian principles of competition and survival of the fittest as the most fundamental evolutionary forces. Secondly, symbiosis is also understood along the lines of the volume’s aim to establish as well as try out theoretical and analytical ways of entangling two schools of thought: environmental humanities and critical posthumanism. While these schools share points of departure in radical transgressions and undoings of human exceptionalism, they also work within the frame of somewhat different accentuations. In the approach to the more-than-human world, environmental humanities gives more priority to issues related to ecologies and ecosystems, while critical posthumanism, in addition to ecological engagements, further leans towards implications of a human merging with technologies and *techné*. The editors, Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki, have composed the volume so that it cross-cuts these divisions, highlighting both schools’ shared focus on the undoing of human exceptionalism. The book reviews theoretical frameworks and explores the ways in which this undoing takes place in contemporary literature and art, as well as in continental philosophy.

The volume is introduced by a substantial and profoundly argued overview chapter. Karpouzou and Zampaki present the genealogies of the concept of symbiosis, and motivate its critical political and ethical importance in the contemporary “era of disastrous human impact on the Earth’s systems” (11). They also introduce the main theoretical themes such as cross-species agency, subjectivity, and citizenship, which the focus on symbiosis in contemporary literature, art, and philosophy puts on the agendas. The introduction is followed by three main sections. The first one, *Framing the Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies*, includes four chapters which dig into key theoretical frameworks that ground the volume focusing on hybridization, entanglement, and in-betweenness of human and non-human, biological and machinic bodies. The chapter also inquires into the ways in which the incommensurability of different kinds of bodies and their irreducible multiplicity need to be taken into account in a relational and egalitarian approach to the more-than-human world.

The second section, *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Literature and Art*, contains five chapters that analyze different literary and artistic explorations of what it means to work aesthetically and ethically *beyond* humanist frameworks that take human exceptionalism as an unquestioned point of departure. These chapters foreground discussions of plants as sentient critters, symbiotic relations between humans and techno-humans, cyberbodies as medium for art-making, and geomancy as an art of tracing “the complex relationalities between the various Earth’s energetic bodies and forces” (29).

Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Continental Philosophy, the third section consisting of five chapters, explores the ways in which continental philosophy resonates with posthumanist thought. The section hones in on deconstruction as a posthumanist methodology, Deleuze’s cosmopolitanism, and theories of cosmos as based on dynamic processes of differentiation, the posthuman aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as well as the unreadability of weather, contemplated through the lens of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Freud.

Overall, the volume presents a cornucopia of different theories and analytical approaches. Not all chapters discuss symbiosis directly, nevertheless they are robustly brought to resonate with each other through the introductory overview chapter’s framing of symbiosis as a key issue in the rethinking and reimagining of human/more-than-human relationships for which the volume as a whole argues. Let me highlight a couple of cross-cutting themes and discussions.

An important theme that runs through several chapters is the question of the ways in which a focus on symbiosis between humans and other kinds of critters requires that difference be taken ethically into account. Several contributors argue that positioning symbiosis as central in the understanding of multi-species relations, including those between humans and other-than-humans, should *not* lead to an erasure of difference that would imply a return to anthropocentrism. Teresa Heffernan's "Rethinking 'Queer Kin Groups': Cyborgs, Animals and Machines," for instance, offers an engaging critique of the ways in which some of the theorizations of cyborgs that followed in the wake of Donna Haraway's classic *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) failed to acknowledge the incommensurability between animals and machines, and thereby ended up implicitly re-centering human perspectives. Heffernan emphasizes that machines and animals should not be collapsed into each other. She critically foregrounds the Cartesian tradition of reducing animals to stimulus-machines. She also pinpoints the ways in which the human building of "smart" machines (from robotics to AI) leaves gigantic carbon footprints on the planet and, in so doing, contributes heavily to the anthropogenically induced ecological crises with their ongoing mass extinctions of species and ecosystems.

An emphasis on difference—in this case, horizontal difference between species—is highlighted by Nicole Anderson's "Animal–Human Differences: The Deconstructive Force of Posthumanism." The chapter dissociates the concept of deconstruction from its exclusive relation to poststructuralism, and argues for its use as a key tool for a critical posthumanist undoing of human exceptionalism. Deconstruction is launched as a critique of essentializing tendencies in posthumanist thought. Instead of asking the essentializing question of what posthumanism *is* and how it erases boundaries between entities, for example, human and animal, Anderson argues for critical posthumanist deconstruction as a path to a pursuit of horizontal, bio-egalitarian difference. She pinpoints how such a deconstruction also comes with an ethical requirement: that humans should respect the radical difference of animal others. To underscore the point Anderson tells an extremely beautiful and thought-provoking story about her longstanding relationship with a wild Australian brushtail possum, and the mutual creation of a space of encounter that for Anderson is guided by what she describes as a loving surrender to difference beyond her normative experience of herself as a human "I."

Another important strand of thought, unfolding in several contributions, concerns the inescapable givenness of symbiosis in terms of

the human embeddedness in more-than-human ecologies, which makes ideas about human exceptionalism stand out as ridiculous *hubris*. This theme is, for example, explored productively in analyses of speculative fiction. “Symbiotic Citizenship in Posthuman Ecosystems: Smart Biocities in Speculative Fiction” by Peggy Karpouzou explores *A Flash of Silver Green*, (edited by Maddox, Walker, and Lovejoy 2019), a collection of stories dealing with future cities. Karpouzou uses the collection’s exploration of “smart biocities,” constructed along the lines of respect for symbiotic entanglements of human and non-human phenomena, as entry point to argue for symbiotic citizenship and symbiotic planetary futures as well as for a dialogue between critical theory and speculative fiction.

Bruce Clarke’s “Cracking Open: Ecological Communication in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*” analyzes the theme of symbiosis and human embeddedness in the more-than-human world through the novel’s articulations of plant affectivity, plant cognition, and human–plant relationships. In particular, he focuses on the ways in which Powers’s novel (2018) imagines a human metamorphosis making one of the characters becoming attuned to the listening to plant communication, and in the end being so transformed that she can receive arboreal enlightenment. Theoretically, Clarke builds on Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers’s notion of “involutionary momentum,” which describes an important aspect of symbiotic co-becoming: “the very momentum through which organisms reach toward one another and involve themselves in one another’s lives” (Hustak and Myers qtd. 137; see also Hustak and Myers, “Involuntary Momentum” 96).

A chapter that touches both on themes of radical difference and the givenness of more-than-human planetary symbiosis is Cassandra Falke’s “Eco-Phenomenology in the Dark.” Falke takes a point of departure in phenomenology, more particularly in Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the chiasmus of touching and being touched, perceiving and being perceived, as well as in Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of saturated phenomena, the experience of which exceeds intentionality. Falke activates these phenomenological frameworks as a contribution to a symbiotic, posthumanist planetary ontology, while putting it in conversation with her experiences of a passionate relationship with the Arctic environment in the Northern part of Norway where she lives. She describes convincingly how we (humans), beyond what is circumscribed by our human intentionality, are materially bound into a relation of mutual transformation with the more-than-human critters in the environments we inhabit, and vice versa. Falke argues for an

eco-phenomenology that radically acknowledges the inescapable mutuality, which implies that humans are positioned as just one living thing among others.

There are other excellent chapters in the volume in addition to the ones I have foregrounded here, and plenty of other thematic lines that could be drawn between them. The volume is rich and moves in multiple directions. The kind of multiplicity that characterizes the book is often both the beauty and the problem of edited volumes. Nevertheless, the two editors of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies*, Karpouzou and Zampaki provide a robust framing of the volume's diversity in their overview chapter as well as through the clustering of the contributions in the three sections. They make the concept of symbiosis and the unfolding of it in conversation with many different artistic, literary, and philosophical approaches key to thinking critically about the current Anthropocene predicament as well as to speculating affirmatively about alternative futures. In this way, they enable readers to dig further into thematic lines of both convergence and divergence between the contributions; and I shall warmly encourage readers to do so. My thematic focus on the more-than-human symbiosis related to the ethical acknowledgement of species difference, on the one hand, and on the ontological givenness of human embeddedness in the more-than-human world, on the other, is meant to illustrate the very rich discussions that can be extracted through a close-reading of the volume.

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