Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel

Edited by
Yvonne Liebermann · Judith Rahn
Bettina Burger

palgrave
macmillan

Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel

Yvonne Liebermann
Judith Rahn • Bettina Burger
Editors

Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Yvonne Liebermann
Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf
Düsseldorf, Germany

Judith Rahn
Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf
Düsseldorf, Germany

Bettina Burger
Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf
Düsseldorf, Germany

ISBN 978-3-030-79441-5 ISBN 978-3-030-79442-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-030-79442-2

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface: About the Book

Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel offers an overview on the growing field of nonhuman studies in relation to Anglophone novels. A selection of established as well as emergent scholars presents their research on various nonhuman agencies in the twenty-first-century novel. This collection is divided into four sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the twenty-first-century literature that engages with the nonhuman.

This volume provides an overview over the variety of nonhuman actors that take centre stage in the twenty-first-century novel and the formal changes that the Anthropocene, the digital turn, animal rights movement, and research into plant consciousness have brought to the novel as a form. The selection of texts in this collection reflects the current repertoire of novels that feature nonhuman actors. The volume will, among other things, investigate how the environmental changes and the increasing use of AI technologies have influenced realist modes of writing and also fostered the flourishing of genres like speculative fiction as well as its newly emerging subgenres like the New Weird and Climate Change Fiction (cli-fi), how it makes us embrace new perceptions of life in relation to genetic engineering, and how it forces us to engage with newly emerging political contexts. The texts, themes, and theoretical paradigms interrogated in the volume document the range and complexity of nonhuman actors in the twenty-first-century novel by focusing each on a different kind of nonhuman actor, ranging from animals, trees, and the sea to corpses, clones, and

language itself. In discussing thematic and formal features of novels by contemporary writers like Jeff VanderMeer, Shubhangi Swarup, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Richard Powers, Kazuo Ishiguro, Yvonne Owuor, Yann Martel, Ali Smith, and Ian McEwan, the volume also encourages a transnational and transcultural take on the developments of the novel.

Düsseldorf, Germany

Yvonne Liebermann
Judith Rahn
Bettina Burger

Acknowledgements

As editors of this volume, our gratitude goes first and foremost to the contributors of this collection, who have borne with us through this endeavour and without whose contributions this volume would have remained an idea.

Furthermore, we are greatly indebted to the Philosophical Faculty (Philosophische Fakultät) at Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf and the Gesellschaft von Freunden und Förderern der HHU Düsseldorf (GFFU) for their generous support of this project. Equally, we would like to thank the Haus der Universität for providing us with a space in which we could bring together people and exchange ideas, ultimately leading to the creation of this volume.

Furthermore, we would like to thank the Chair of Anglophone Literatures and Literary Translation at Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf, Prof. Dr. Birgit Neumann, for her advice and encouragement, as well as her team for their assistance and Lucas Mattila for his proof reading.

We are likewise grateful for the help and support we have received from the staff at Palgrave Macmillan, especially Allie Troyanos and Paul Smith, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions, recommendations, and insights.

Contents

Notes on Contributors

Timothy C. Baker (University of Aberdeen) is Senior Lecturer in Scottish and Contemporary Literature at the University of Aberdeen. He is the author of three monographs: *George Mackay Brown and the Philosophy of Community* (2009), *Contemporary Scottish Gothic: Mourning, Authenticity, and Tradition* (Palgrave, 2014), and *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (Palgrave, 2019). His research is focused on the use of the fragment in contemporary women's environmental narratives.

Roman Bartosch (University of Cologne) is Associate Professor of Teaching Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the University of Cologne, Germany. He is the author and editor of more than 10 books and over 50 scholarly articles and is interested in environmental and transcultural learning, inclusive education, and the intersections of literature pedagogy and literary theory. Recent publications include *Literature, Pedagogy, and Climate Change: Text Models for a Transcultural Ecology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and, as editor, *Cultivating Sustainability in Language and Literature Pedagogy: Steps to an Educational Ecology* (2021).

Bettina Burger (Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf) is a PhD student and Lecturer in Postcolonial and Anglophone Literatures at the Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf. She has previously organised a successful conference on the topic of Nonhuman Agency in Anglophone Literatures. Her publications include contributions to the Literary Encyclopedia (https://www.litencyc.com/) and an article on challenges

to Western science in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction, which is being prepared for inclusion in a journal edition on Afrofuturism.

Philipp Erchinger (Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf) teaches Modern English Literature at Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf. His publications include *Artful Experiments: Ways of Knowing in Victorian Literature and Science* (2018), *Kontingenzformen*, a book on the contingency of narrative form (Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), and *Earth Writing*, a journal special issue on the ecology of literature (*Philological Quarterly*, 2018).

Kahn Faassen (KU Leuven) is a PhD candidate working on Weird fiction at the KU Leuven. His project focuses primarily on encounters with the sublime in the oeuvre of Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, and Algernon Blackwood, and on how these works engage with changing epistemic paradigms in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain leading up to the First World War.

Nicky Gardiner (University of Huddersfield) received his AHRC-funded PhD investigating new materialism and the corpse from the University of Huddersfield in 2020. Gardiner is working on his monograph *Dead as a Doornail: New Materialisms and the Corpse in Contemporary Fiction* and as a learning developer at the University of Newcastle.

Shannon Lambert (Ghent University) is a PhD researcher at Ghent University, Belgium. She is a member of the ERC-funded project "Narrating the Mesh" (NARMESH), led by Prof. Marco Caracciolo. Her research within the NARMESH project draws together narrative and affect studies to explore different forms of relationality in representations of contemporary science. Her work on topics such as interspecies communication, early modern automatons, environmental affect, and narrative transformations has been published in various journals, including American Imago and SubStance.

Yvonne Liebermann (Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf) is a lecturer and research assistant at Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf. She is completing a book on *Latency and Memory in Contemporary Anglophone Literature*. She has written articles in the field of contemporary literature, which have been published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g. "The Return of the 'Real' in Ali Smith's *Artful* (2012) and *How to Be Both* (2014)" in: *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 23 (2019, in print)

and "Music and Latency in Teju Cole's Open City: Presences of the Past" in: *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 50.1 (2019), together with Birgit Neumann). Her research interests include memory studies, posthumanism and new materialism, narrative frame theory, intermediality, and postcolonial studies.

Birgit Neumann (Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf) is Chair of Anglophone Studies and Literary Translation. She is an elected member of the Academy of Europe and of the editorial Committee for the Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages (CHLEL), as well as member of a number of international research networks. Her articles have been widely published on postcolonial ecocriticism, visuality in postcolonial literatures and Anglophone world literatures.

Jopi Nyman (University of Eastern Finland) is Vice Dean for Research and Professor of English at the Philosophical Faculty at the University of Eastern Finland in Joensuu, Finland. He is the author and editor of several books in the fields of Anglophone literary and cultural studies. His recent volumes include the monographs *Equine Fictions* (2019); *Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing* (2017); and the co-edited anthologies *Mobile Narratives: Travel, Migration, and Transculturation* (2014); *Animals, Space and Affect* (2016) *Ethnic and Racial Identities in the Media* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016); *Mobile Identities* (2020); *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings* (2021); and *Palimpsests in Ethnic and Postcolonial Literature and Culture: Surfacing Histories* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021). His research interests focus on transcultural literatures, border narratives, and the environmental humanities.

Maria Ostrovskaya (Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf) is a research assistant in the Department of Modern English Literature, Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf, led by Prof. Roger Lüdeke. She holds a Master of Arts degree from the Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf (master's thesis on the topic "Narrative Scenography in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction"). She is working on a dissertation on writing scenes in Virginia Woolf's short fiction.

Judith Rahn (Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf) is a lecturer in the Department of English and American Studies at Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf. She is finishing her book *Exploring Posthuman*

Life in Contemporary Fiction and is co-editor of the special issue *Afrofuturism's Transcultural Trajectories* (*Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37.4, 2020, with Eva U. Pirker). She is the author of "(Re-)Negotiating Black Posthumanism – The Precarity of Race in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon"* (*Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 30.2. 2019) and has published on the cultural significance of monstrosity in the nineteenth-century literature. Her research interests include post-humanism, affect and new materialist theory, Afrofuturism, Black British fictions, and postcolonial literatures.

Gry Ulstein (Ghent University) is a PhD candidate at Ghent University in Belgium, where she is a member of the ERC-funded project "Narrating the Mesh" (NARMESH), led by Prof. Marco Caracciolo. Ulstein is particularly interested in contemporary weird literature as an expression of ecological anxieties, and lately her work has centred on questions of agency, uncertainty, hope, and monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's fiction and other New Weird texts.

Pieter Vermeulen (KU Leuven) is Associate Professor of American and Comparative Literature at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He is the author of *Romanticism After the Holocaust* (2010), *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (2015), and *Literature and the Anthropocene* (2020), and a co-editor of, most recently, *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets* (2015), *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (2017), and a double special issue on theme 'Contemporary Literature and/as Archive' (2020). His writing project explores the dynamics of world literature through the notion of world literary value.

List of Figures

'Mycorrhizal Multiplicities': Mapping Collective Agency in Richard Powers's The Overstory

Introduction: Narrating the Nonhuman

Bettina Burger, Judith Rahn, and Yvonne Liebermann

Approaches to the Nonhuman

Numerous recent publications in the field of literary studies and the humanities in general attest a heightened interest in the nonhuman—be it nature in the widest sense, animals, machines, or ambiguously nonhuman[1] creatures such as cyborgs, corpses, or clones. This is of little wonder considering how most contemporary global crises (of which there seem to be an increasing number of ever-growing magnitude) primarily engage the nonhuman with issues ranging from the collection of big data, biotechnology, and self-learning algorithms to climate change and its concomitant effects, such as increased floods and droughts, as well as changes in the cryosphere resulting in sea level rising and ecologically caused migration. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerability of human

[1] Some of our contributors have chosen to refer to these agents as '(non)human' in order to reflect their unstable position between categories.

B. Burger • J. Rahn (✉) • Y. Liebermann
Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany
e-mail: burgerb@hhu.de; judith.rahn@hhu.de; yvonne.kappel@hhu.de

Y. Liebermann et al. (eds.), *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79442-2_1

communities worldwide to nonhuman forces. It has brought to the fore the agentic nature of these viral, nonhuman actors and makes us more sensitive to our remarkable dependence on the nonhuman. The unpredictability of pandemics exemplifies the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life and points to the necessity of factoring in nonhuman forces in our daily lives. As Joyce Chaplin attests: "our ongoing state of emergency […] is a central problem of the Anthropocene" (2017, 510), of which the Covid-19 pandemic is a prominent example.

The Anthropocene, a term coined in 2000 by the chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to refer to a new epoch of geological time, relies on the understanding that humans must be considered a geological force that more than ever shapes the future of the planet. However,

> despite its name, the Anthropocene is not an anthropocentric concept. The epoch does not get its name because nature is now completely subordinated to human agency, as if clouds now form and swallows now fly only after getting permission from human beings. The name suits it because human societies exert a novel and distinctive degree of sway in the physical world, but other creatures still continue independently to exert their own powers and to pursue their own interests in this new field of action. (Davies 2016, 7)

As humans have unleashed forces that they cannot quite control (Vermeulen 2017, 182), the Anthropocene blurs the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. In the Anthropocene, despite the human-centred name of the epoch, human intentionalities start merging with nonhuman agencies that counteract them. Concomitantly, it has been argued, that as a response to this, the future of academia will also bring a greater convergence between the natural sciences and the humanities (e.g. Pálsson et al. 2013; Holm et al. 2015; Brondizio et al. 2016), thus carving out a space for discussing the social, political, and ethical as well as the accompanying narrative and aesthetic challenges of the new epoch.

The current literary and theoretical landscape undeniably confirms a turn towards the challenges of the Anthropocene and its collateral entanglements that go, perhaps ironically, far beyond the *anthropos*: theories of the nonhuman have become ubiquitous and wield significant influence on the aesthetics of the novel and the philosophical approaches that are used to analyse them. These famously include Bruno Latour's ongoing engagement with nonhuman agency in its relationship with and in the political (e.g. Latour 1993, 2005) as well as theories of new materialism that have

turned away from ideas of dualisms (e.g. Latour 2013; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Moreover, the rather recently established field of Animal Studies, which continues to highlight the importance of animal rights and questions of speciesism, has once more brought the animal into theoretical focus. These fields of study inform theories of affect with their philosophical and psychological focus on that which exceeds rational thought. These developments in literary, philosophical, and aesthetic theory that have been increasingly flourishing since the 1990s work towards decentring the human in favour of more balanced approaches that include the nonhuman in a variety of terms (e.g. animals, materiality, affectivity, organic, and inorganic systems). Although there have been many schools of thought that see the human as one of many, rather than the central, factors in the world throughout history (see, e.g. the works of Baruch Spinoza and many indigenous traditions), there has been a distinctive wave of recent theoretical thought that set out specifically to re-define traditional Western notions of human exceptionalism. Among these new ways of thinking both the human and the nonhuman, new materialism is an interdisciplinary, theoretical, and politically committed field of enquiry that began to emerge roughly at the millennium as part of what may be termed the post-constructionist, ontological, or material turn. In its wake follow notions of the Anthropocene, posthumanist, and affect-oriented thought as well as animal and plant studies, among others.

It is the aim of this edited volume to provide an overview of different nonhuman agencies and, by bringing them together, address the philosophical and ethical conversations that they bring about. This book will highlight what an engagement with the nonhuman in literature offers to the humanities by showcasing how various literary nonhumans engage with the reader and thus aid in promoting mindsets, which not only recognise the alterity of the nonhuman but also the interdependence between human and nonhuman spheres of all variations. Approaches that recognise human exceptionalism as one of many schools of thought will certainly gain greater influence across the humanities and beyond. The volume chooses to use the term ‘nonhuman’ across all contributions instead of less generic terms in order to endorse the notion of thinking all kinds of nonhuman actors as undeniably interwoven with our human understanding of the world. Rather than focussing exclusively on matters of, for instance, nonhuman animals, objects, plant, and tree life, or climate change, this volume intends to show the immense variety of possibilities the nonhuman allows for. While other terms like ‘object’ in object-oriented-ontology, ‘actor’ in

Latour's actor-network-theory, the animal, 'companion species,' and artificial intelligence are each applied in their specific theoretical and literary contexts, the nonhuman is an open term that invites unlimited interpretation and invites interconnective ways of thinking about the animate and inanimate nonhuman world. In deliberately using the term 'nonhuman' as a general term, we attempt to open up ways in which to approach the multiplicity of nonhuman actors that authors have engaged with in the twenty-first century, endorsing their singularities while at the same time trying to find common ground. Nonhuman actors in literature, this volume suggests, challenge our human understanding of learned categories and incite readers to find new ways to explore the world from unique perspectives. Often, authors favour to address the nonhuman through notions of affect that go beyond representational approaches to the nonhuman and engage readers away from clear signification. They almost always highlight the ways in which nonhumans enact their agency upon *us*, which does not distract from the nonhuman agency at the centre of our volume but rather acknowledges that as human writers (and scholars) we can by necessity only approach the nonhuman from our own vantage points and thus have to focus on moments of connection. Such moments, we would like to argue in this volume, can be found in the affective entanglements between humans and nonhumans as highlighted by the novels here discussed—nonhuman actors, even while they are being represented through the novel, an ultimately human form of expression, challenge us to abandon our learned categories and let us be affected.

The potential of the nonhuman derives from its ability to enable new reflexions upon the co- and interdependencies that encompass both human and nonhuman agency. This can only be achieved if the nonhuman is allowed a cultural space alongside the human, rather than a space existing within traditionally Western epistemologies and value systems. Ursula Heise identifies the origin of humanity's lack of interest in and respect for the nonhuman agents in "the human stories that frame our perception and relation to endangered nonhumans" (2016, 5). It is her argument that "biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues" (5). The stories we tell—and, by extension, the novels we write—thus take on a significant responsibility in shaping how we frame and respond to nonhuman agency. Especially when considering that it is not only politics that determine the crises we are currently living through but also epistemologies that determine which possible worlds we can imagine and deem achievable, it is adamant for the humanities to:

> move beyond our anthropomorphism as regards ourselves: our image of ourselves as humanly standing apart from other animals; our inveterate vanity regarding our assumed species identity, based on the specious grounds of our sole proprietorship of language, thought, and creativity. (Massumi 2014, 3)

Particularly valuable is the engagement with the critique of the Kantian dualistic paradigm that considers the understanding of the nonhuman to be a direct result of 'a priori' human knowledge. Therefore, more and more theories are emerging that attempt to circumvent the purely representational and approach the (human and nonhuman) world from a stance of non-representation. "[These theories] see[k] to better cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds" (Lorimer 2005, 83). This attempt to interfuse disparate but correspondent theoretical approaches incorporates actor-network theory, speculative realism, social ecology, poststructuralism, new materialism, and critical theory, and typically includes the works of Bruno Latour, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Brian Massumi, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred North Whitehead, Tim Ingold, and, of course, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The endeavour to find ways to engage with the nonhuman is generally characterised by its focus on affects, moods, intensities, and virtualities, and transcends the sphere of the human through its engagement with the nonhuman world by means of, for example, technology, space, matter, events, digital spaces, and the collection of big data.

This volume, *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel*, situates itself within these existing discourses around the nonhuman and attempts to analyse how twenty-first-century novels narrate the nonhuman, what kind of aesthetic strategies they employ to topple human protagonists from their pedestal of superiority, and what ethical questions they try to pose to their readership. Literature is an important part of world-making epistemologies, and novel writing is, of course, a tradition immensely entangled with humanistic traditions, resulting in conceptual 'worlds' of primarily human making. After all, it is humans who write and read texts. Writing and reading the nonhuman concomitantly also entails an examination of the limits of representation:

> Ordinarily, representation is bound to a specific form of repetition: the repetition of the same. Through representation, what has already been given will come to have been given again. Such is its fidelity: to give again and

> again, what has already been given, without deviation or departure. Such is its fidelity to an original that is fated to return though a profusion of dutiful copies, an original whose identity is secured and re-secured through a perpetual return of the same and whose identity is threatened by the inherent capacity of the copy to be a deviant or degraded repetition, a repetition that may introduce an illicit differentiation in the place ostensibly reserved for an identification. (Anderson and Harrison 2010)

As literature has long since moved away from ideas of mimetic representation, its playing field is open to the "otherness" of the nonhuman without trying to capture it within categories of the known. Nonhuman agency in literature thus manifests in the moments where the text pushes human meaning-making endeavours to their limits and highlights the gaps in our hermeneutic practices. In novels, this manifests itself, for example, when human claims to interpretive authority are questioned by texts which showcase that nonhuman agency may exist beyond human understanding.[2] By doing so, literature can challenge its own categories, such as the character as well as individual agency and subjectivity. A focus on enmeshments and relationality connotes that the isolated human individual loses its value and becomes a necessary part in the comprehension and examination of processes, meshworks (Ingold 2011), and pluralities. The nonhuman therefore thrives with the consideration of motions and doings that aid to "unlock and animate new (human and nonhuman) potentialities" (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000, 411). Thus, the potential of nonhuman agency lies in its capacity to produce creative spaces that allow for imaginaries that engage with the entangled relationships between the nonhuman and the human.

While we are aware that singling out the Anglophone novel for this volume as a space for negotiating the approaches to the nonhuman in literature only provides one take on examining artistic and aesthetic expression in the age of the Anthropocene, we have established this frame in

[2] In our volume, this is showcased especially well by chapters like Judith Rahn's "Postcolonial Fictions of the Anthropocene – Tracing Nonhuman Agency in Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*," which emphasises the difference in human and nonhuman perceptions of time, or Nicky Gardiner's "Hopeless NecRomantics: Transcorporeal Love, Decomposition and (Non)Human Agency in Jim Crace's *Being Dead*," which uncovers microbial agency that usually remains ignored by human observers, who frame these processes not only as passive, but, more importantly, as embodiments of death, perceived as the ultimate contrast to agency.

order to exemplify how an engagement with the nonhuman as an overarching category can make possible a situating of the human within a network of plural relations on a generalised level. Focussing on Anglophone literature in particular allows for the discussion of a relatively broad spectrum of cultures and epistemologies. The nonhuman has already been approached many times and from many angles (ecocriticism, animal studies, biopolitics, new materialism, trans-culturalism, and posthumanism, among others), but as we are now entering an age of global climatological, environmental change, the nonhuman and its agency emerge as an ever more important category of interpretation. Theoretical approaches that think the nonhuman alongside the human as independent but interconnected are published with increasing frequency (Heise 2016; Haraway 2016; Clark 2015; Ingold 2011; Bennett 2010; Barad 2007; DeLanda 2006; Latour 2005) and point towards the significance this topic has in current literary and philosophical thought.

Previous literary scholars have predominantly engaged with the nonhuman in literature with a focus on the animal. Jacques Derrida's speech "The Animal That Therefore I Am" at the Cerisy Conference in 1997 has proven crucial for literary Animal Studies in its formative years. In this speech, Derrida recognises his cat, here somewhat problematically standing in for animals as a whole, as "the absolute other" (2002, 380) that cannot be fully understood in human terms nor subsumed under the umbrella term 'animal.' Derrida urges his listeners to re-evaluate man's relationship to the animal and overcome "the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic cross-breeding, cloning, and so on) of meat for consumption […] in the service of a certain being the so-called human well-being of man" (394). He thus calls for an appreciation of "the absolute alterity" (380) of animals without reducing them to their relation to humans. Derrida's thoughts have since been continued by various scholars in the field. David Herman's edited collection *Creaturely Fictions. Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century Literature* (2016) assembles a range of scholars who examine how twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary texts configure "relationships between humans and other animals" (1). In his introduction, Herman problematises the term 'animal' by stating that the notion "carries mythopoeic, biological-ecological, sociohistorical, and legal-political resonances that are multiplied when human-animal interactions come into view" (2). Furthermore, he stresses the volume's use of the concept 'creatural' as denoting "not human distinctiveness but rather

relational ties between humans and animals that might otherwise be overlooked" (3, see also Ohrem and Bartosch 2017; Vermeulen and Richter 2015), thus actively countering a strain of thought that Catherine Parry, among others, identifies in her 2017 monograph on *Other Animals in Twenty-First Century Fiction*:

> The story of the human in the West tells us that we are not like other animals, that there are humans and there are animals, and that animals are part of a world ready and waiting for us to use. This potent story of humans and animals as separate from one another has been the structuring principle of the Western world for many centuries. (Parry 2017, 2)

Parry's title both reiterates and challenges this notion of the animal as wholly other—animals are seen "as other, different from humans, distinctively not us, less than us, distinguished by their alterity, beings whose interests and experiences are not human" (2017, 3). At the same time, according to Parry, the designation 'other' also suggests a certain fluidity, in which the human-animal border becomes porous and its exact delineation unstable (3). Her monograph addresses literary animals, which highlight the "anxiety-ridden and contested" (3) boundary between human and animal, and seeks to identify how twenty-first-century fiction narrates animal lives by putting particular focus on injustice in human-animal relationships. Involved in a similar endeavour, Timothy Baker's *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2019) also problematises the fact that animals are seen as humanity's other, "either individually or as a collective identity" (1). His argument that fiction remains an important way of intellectually approaching the animal (8) also informs the present collection as our authors show how diverse twenty-first-century novels explore "culture, including nonhuman cultures, as always in tension, modified by and modifying each other" (25) and attempt to correct misconceptions of a clear separation and strict boundaries between human and nonhuman agencies (26).

This volume builds on this previous research by taking on nonhuman entities including animals and objects but also extends its scope to plants and mycorrhizal networks, landscape, and atmospheres, as well as the no-longer and not-quite human. Our contributors are drawing from various critical scholars central to debates about nonhuman agency. A good starting point for many of the discussions led within the pages of this book is Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism*

and Schizophrenia (1987), which introduces concepts such as 'the rhizome' and 'the assemblage'—both of which have influenced later scholars such as Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton in their work on multiplicities. A rhizome is a network of multiples, in which "any point […] can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7) and which "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7)—Deleuze's and Guattari's multiplicities, when connected to each other, can also be expressed as an 'assemblage,' a term first employed in its ontological sense by Deleuze and Guattari and then developed by Manuel DeLanda in his *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006). An 'assemblage' is composed of "self-subsistent components" (11), which form a new symbiotic entity, one that can no longer be reduced to its individual components. The two concepts allow scholars to analyse human-nonhuman relationships of various kinds through their interconnections without denying the individual characteristics of each component. The nonhuman partner(s) in particular are thus highlighted with their specificity as opposed to merely viewing them as other.

Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005) builds on this theory of assemblages and introduces crucial aspects for the analysis of nonhuman agency. Latour's argument for the presence of nonhuman agency, at least when it comes to (human) language and thus, by extension, to literature, is a convincing one:

> After all, there is hardly any doubt that kettles 'boil' water, knifes 'cut' meat, baskets 'hold' provisions, hammers 'hit' nails on the head, rails 'keep' kids from falling, locks 'close' rooms against uninvited visitors, soap 'takes' the dirt away, schedules 'list' class sessions, price tags 'help' people calculating and so on. Are those verbs not designating actions? (Latour 2005, 71)

This insight allows Latour to include so-called inanimate objects in his 'actor-network-theory' as he is able to define an 'actor' or 'actant' as "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (2005, 71). While he attributes to objects the ability to 'act' according to their unique relationships and close proximity to humans (79), his argument still affords nonhuman things the ability to have complexity and agency, even if it may not coincide with human notions of life. Latour's actor-network theory resonates with Jane Bennett's study *Vibrant Matter: A*

Political Ecology of Things (2010). Bennett even goes one step further and disentangles the agency of things from human intentionalities. She argues for a "moment of independence […] possessed by things" (3) because of the way in which apparent objects affect and thus act on other bodies, both animate and inanimate. Her intent of "giv[ing] voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality" (3) is an ambition shared by the scholars united in this volume as they strive to detect how agents as diverse as, for example, mountains, trees, and corpses find expression, albeit mediated by human voices, in the twenty-first-century novel. Bennett's and Latour's emphasis on forms of agency that are easily overlooked—the political agency of worms, for instance (Bennett 2010, 98)—is of particular interest to some of our contributors, who explore agents that are no longer human. A corpse's agencies, for example, lie not (only) in the human form but also, and perhaps more vitally, in the bacteria and other life forms who take over the human body after death, or clones, whose human ancestry is ignored, while the artificiality of their origins is highlighted, have both been addressed in this volume. The questions Bennett asks—is the fact that inanimate objects can "be fascinating to people and can thus seem to come to life […] a property of stuff or of people?" (5)—are also most relevant for literary scholars engaging with the allegedly inanimate nonhuman in twenty-first-century writing. Bennett claims that being fascinated by objects can be an essential starting point for affording nonhuman actants the attention they deserve (17) and, as the authors of this volume as well as the novels they analyse insist, literature is an appropriate and effective means of engendering such fascination.

Likewise, Timothy Morton's 'mesh' also prompts readers to change their way of thinking regarding the entanglements between different entities, which, essentially, make up reality (Morton 2011, 20–21). Similar to Latour and Bennett, Morton stresses that the mesh removes boundaries between animate and inanimate matter (22) and can thus include a variety of human and nonhuman agents. Importantly, two of the most important aspects of the 'mesh' according to Morton are "(1) the utter singularity and uniqueness of every life-form and (2) the lack of fixed identity anywhere in the system of life-forms," which can be further specified by the two axioms "things are only what they are in relation to other things" and "[n]othing exists by itself and nothing comes from nothing" (22–23), which highlight not only the interconnectedness of existence but also explain how something can be utterly unique and yet at the same time intensely entangled with other forms. Morton uses the word 'mesh'

because it is not "compromised by vitalism, the belief in a living substance" (24), nor is it as associated with the internet as the terms 'network' and 'web' are. In the Anthropocene, in which "everything is connected to everything else" (26) and human impact on the world becomes ever more apparent, the concept of the 'mesh' increasingly gains traction. Morton connects his ideas explicitly with the study of literature, asking us to "reimagine ecological literary criticism based on the nonessentialism and intimate entanglements of all life-forms [...] from evolution to symbiosis" (29), which is, undoubtedly, also at the core of nonhuman literary studies.

Such entanglements are often at the heart of Donna Haraway's engagement with the nonhuman. In *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she argues for an interconnectedness which makes "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social" (2016, 30)—she imagines "multispecies muddles" (31) and claims that tentacular connections permeate the world (31). This is also why she suggests replacing the term 'Anthropocene' for the current geological period with the term 'Chthulucene,' which reflects the myriads of connections between earthly creatures and references, in particular, those beings Haraway calls the "chthonic ones," for which she provides an almost mythical definition:

> Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. Chthonic ones romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo. Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences. Chthonic ones are not safe; they have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade. They are who are. (Haraway 2016, 2)

Referencing the Chthonic ones is doubly useful for Haraway as they not only exist in a 'multicritter humus,' thus modelling the interconnected world imagined by so many scholars of the nonhuman, but are also among the most foreign nonhuman Others many could imagine as they are multipedal and tentacular. The association with H. P. Lovecraft's tentacular old god Cthulhu certainly also plays a role as Haraway specifically states

that fiction is a useful method of engaging with Chthulucene's multispecies muddles as "it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic world, gone, here, and yet to come" (2016, 31). According to her, it is fiction's task to teach humanity "to narrate – to think – outside the prick tale of Humans in History" and "change the story" (40) to imagine a world that contains a nonhuman presence. Predating her interest in the current epoch as the Chtulhucene, Haraway has been concerned with nonhuman agencies since the 1990s, publishing works such as *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1990), *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), and *When Species Meet* (2008), which all centre around human-nonhuman relationships. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* deals with human-machine assemblages, here manifested in the form of the cyborg, which Haraway defines as "a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine" (1990, 1). Human-machine hybrids are thus one of Haraway's core concerns in this monograph as she attempts to establish ways of reading and writing which do justice to various bodily experiences and interactions with nature (4) including that of machine-human or even machine-animal hybrids. As she also refers to the cyborg as "a condensed image of imagination and material reality" (150), she openly acknowledges the role of fiction in imagining future developments for cyborgs and other nonhumans originally conceived by humans. While Haraway only directly references hybrid beings which combine animal and machine agencies, she also alludes to less bodily incarnations of sentient machines which "have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines" (152). Thus, her arguments can easily be extended to artificial intelligences, which, while initially programmed by humans, may reach a point when they no longer depend on human bodies or minds for their continued existence, assuming that they will eventually gain the ability to take care of power generation and maintenance.

Similarly drawing on observations garnered from the advancement of scientific research, rather than on abstract conceptualisations, Karen Barad uses her doctorate in theoretical physics to approach object agency in *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) as a natural scientist. She suggests a rethinking of a number of theoretical and ethical concepts, stating that, in response to current scientific findings, especially in the realm of quantum physics, "power needs to be rethought. […] Agency needs to be rethought.

Ethics needs to be rethought. Science needs to be rethought" (2007, 23). 'Intra-action,' a term coined by Barad, serves to describe agencies, which do not precede one another and interact as distinct entities but agencies which emerge conjointly as a result of their entangled "intra-action" (33). Barad bases her argument on current scientific theories not limited to the humanities but including such diverse fields as quantum physics, feminism, critical race theory, and Marxism (25). Drawing on such a variety of theories in order to found "a new ontology, epistemology, and ethics" (25) allows for a wide scope of findings, which can be applied to literary texts engaging with entangled agencies, as some of the scholars in this volume strive to do. Particularly important in this endeavour is Barad's concept of "'agential realism' as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and social-material practices" (26). Ironically, the very first thing Barad criticises in the core chapter of her monograph is the fact that "[l]anguage has been granted too much power" (132) and her critique of the fact that "language and culture [have been] granted their own agency and historicity" (132) seems to create an interesting tension with the broader aim of *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel* as this collection seeks to analyse how nonhuman agency comes to the foreground in various—always human-authored—contemporary novels. However, we would like to argue that human novels *can* be used to displace humans from the centre of their universe by making their equally human readers at least aware of the fact that their anthropocentrism is a mere construction and no longer upheld by science nor legitimated by twenty-first-century fiction.

The Nonhuman and the Novel Form

Literature in the twenty-first century seems to be fascinated and irrevocably bound to the complex relationships connecting human and nonhuman agency. Since the novel has always been a "vibrant arena for negotiating conflicting social, political, and normative tendencies" (Baumbach and Neumann 2020, 13), it is only logical that it also attempts to react to our current "era of truly dizzying uncertainty" (Lea 2017, 4). Literature concerned with the nonhuman, especially since the turn of the millennium, seems to be "stumbling, as it were, at the threshold of the Anthropocene" (Johns-Putra 2019, 37). If one turns towards current scholarship on

literary examinations of the nonhuman, one finds extensive research on the nonhuman within or as part of the changing climatological circumstances. The nonhuman in climate change writing seems to be divided into futuristic and present-day climate change fictions, the first drawing its authority from the anticipation of the catastrophe, while the second considers the impact of that same catastrophe (Mayer 2014). Astrid Bracke therefore attests that "[t]hese stories do not only reflect how climate crisis is imagined by a culture. They also work the other way around by influencing how climate crisis is perceived" (2018, 5). This points to a larger matter of reciprocity which is characteristic for any form of cultural narrative but particularly poignant with regard to the literary arts: the ability of the literary text to shape the readerships' imagination and the readers concomitant possibility to always actualise new meanings in the text. This relationship of reciprocity, of course, also applies to literature's engagement with other nonhuman agents. Not only is our age characterised by the so-called climate crisis but also with an ever-expanding digitalisation and steadfast technological advancements. Novels such as Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019, long-listed for the 2019 Man Booker Prize), attest to a renewed interest in the nonhuman. Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004, winner of the 2004 Crossword Book Prize and among the final nominees for the 2006 Kiriyama Prize), Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018, shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker Prize), Daisy Johnson's *Everything Under* (2018, shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker Prize), and Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) demonstrate a fascination with the natural world and the ways it "keeps giving writers the slip" (Morton 2009, 2). The fact that novels engaged with topics such as trees, rivers, machines, and other nonhuman agents increasingly receive nominations for large prizes attests to the validity of the nonhuman within contemporary culture. As these examples indicate, the novel, which has seen an internal repositioning from a largely nationalistic to a global form (Boxall 2013, 7), has also undergone a significant shift in the choice of actors that obtain agency through the literary and the ways it distributes attention. As Amitav Ghosh rightly notes, the "relocation of the unheard-of toward the background" (2016, 17) that was initiated with modern writing techniques that favoured the everyday over the spectacular, trying to imitate "the new regularity of bourgeois life" (19), needs to be rethought in the age of the Anthropocene, ever-faster digitalisation, and technological innovation.

Even though it seems evident what constitutes the novel form, it remains strangely elusive when trying to define it. There have been numerous attempts to pinpoint the essence of the novel, and yet, scholars continue to find different emphases in their classification of core elements. Michael Schmidt, in his 'biographical' take on the novel, defines the novel form as follows:

> [A] novel is a narrative, generally in prose, certainly longer than a short story, probably (though not invariably) more than 25,000 words in extent, often combining a number of stories, incorporating elements of invention, in which characters, individuals, or voices are presented in relation to one another and their worlds in appropriate language. (Schmidt 2014, 14)

While this statement outlines possible formalities of the novel, there is more to the novel, namely, its malleability to different contexts, languages, cultures, geographical, and political circumstances. Therefore, Schmidt goes on to emphasise that "[t]he novel takes in and takes on invention like no other literary form" (2014, 14). Openness to change remains the only constant in the novel; it portrays, echoes, and induces change both within the literary form and within the reader. Yet, the incentive of narrative is always a self-serving one, but it is never monodirectional, engaging author and audience at the same time. "Narrative is always strategic, for both teller and listener, in ways that can range from the callously selfish to the generously prosocial" (Boyd 2009, 176). Nevertheless, more than being the focal point of self-interest and individuation, narratives—consciously or unconsciously—address emotional and affective virtualities that engage audiences with the literary. Literature "develops our capacity to see from different perspectives, and this capacity in turn both arises from and aids the evolution of cooperation and the growth of human mental flexibility" (176; see also Baumbach and Neumann 2020).

It is this potential of the novel to thrive within currents of change and "both shap[e] the world and resis[t] its demands" (Boxall 2015, 12), which, as Schmidt notes, "burs[t] like tsunamis over what was there before and wash it away" (2014, 9) and does away with presumed truths to conduct new investigations into the relationship between actors and their potentials. The 'value' of the novel (Boxall 2015), therefore, lies in its ability to reassess connections with the world and to "make[…] possible the imagining of possibilities" (Ghosh 2016, 128). After all, as Amitav Gosh puts it, "to reproduce the world as it exists need not be the project