

Sidney I. Dobrin, ed. *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing*

Review by Christopher Justice

Sidney I. Dobrin, ed. *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2015.

I often share this story with students to start conversations about posthumanism: Awhile ago, I noticed some unusual animal poop in my backyard. After some research, I learned it was fox dung. Cleverly, this fox started defecating closer to my house each evening, eventually marking my deck more than once. Hmm...I thought. Not a huge problem, as I love fox and find them exemplary canines for various reasons, but this one was getting a bit too bold. So, with my two-year-old, male German shepherd, Marlowe, and all of his energy and curiosity, I decided to go posthuman and vicariously start a conversation with this courageous fox.

Usually, I take Marlowe deep into the backyard to do his business. However, given this new visitor, I had Marlowe urinate closer to the deck, essentially using him on a leash as a posthuman stylus to create an invisible fence of urine to scare the fox. Days later, after doing this several times, the “fence” was in place, and not surprisingly, the dung vanished. Great, I thought. Mission accomplished.

To my students, I ask, “What’s it called when an animal pees like that?” One usually answers incredulously, “Marking their territory?” Yes, exactly, I reply, and this marking is not all that different from human writing. And so the conversation begins.

I tell this story because posthumanism’s impact on the humanities is becoming increasingly harder to overlook, which is why *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing* (WPPW) should be read by anyone interested in the future of writing studies. Edited by the consistently prolific and prescient Sidney I. Dobrin, WPPW offers a range of provocative essays that should serve as important milestones in posthumanism’s rapidly growing influence on writing studies.

One of the collection’s greatest strengths is its diversity. The authors revel in examining posthumanism from numerous angles: trauma studies, animal studies, zombie culture, sexuality, typography, pedagogy, rhetoric, laptops, graphology, writer’s block, spam, cyborgs, and cybernetics. Phew! That’s an eclectic group of essays, but Dobrin’s guidance makes this stew work.

Fortunately, the authors don’t fall into the trap of rigidly defining posthumanism. Dobrin sets the stage early by framing posthumanism as a critique of liberal humanism that challenges “alterations in subject and body by way of technological interaction” or “distinctions between (the) human subject and non-human subjects” (5). As he writes in his introduction, “the particular avenue of entrance into posthumanist inquiry is of less importance in this project than is that avenue’s projection upon writing and writing studies” (3). The book should then force writing studies scholars – if they haven’t already moved into this camp – to question writing’s complicated relationships to human subjectivity and the myriad forces that constitute, and reconstitute, it: capitalism, colonialism, biotechnology, prosthetics, pharmaceuticals, computers, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, evolution, sexuality, nonhuman life, and material objects. This is a smart choice because it allows each chapter to function like a lighthouse, a beacon that can lead posthuman writing down a number of provocative channels.

One of the collection's most compelling essays is Lynn Worsham's "Moving Beyond the Logic of Sacrifice: Animal Studies, Trauma Studies, and the Path to Posthumanism," which focuses on the extraordinary violence perpetrated against animals. Worsham argues language itself is fundamentally violent, and an example is the word "animal" itself, which has long been used to designate radical otherness. Since language is an "interpretation of reality," not a "description of reality" (24), Worsham believes "animal" is the foundation upon which contemporary oppression stands. However, Worsham moves this point further by arguing our discourse about animals reflects our own anxieties: how we treat animals symbolizes our myopic commitment to our own unique humanity and elevates our status as humans. Paradoxically, because we are similar to animals – we are born, die, and decay similarly; we eat, reproduce, and defecate similarly – we must remind ourselves through language how we differ from them. This challenge is managed through deflection, which "is a conceptual strategy for dealing with an experience of a difficulty of reality" (28). Worsham argues rhetoric is a potent example of deflection because it represents "symbolic violence," and by drawing upon Burke's notion of what language does, she demonstrates how language marginalizes and scapegoats minority groups. We use language to separate, to violently tear ourselves from the communal womb. Assigning blame through scapegoating is another form of linguistic violence through deflection. Animals are our "designated victims," Worsham writes, because we need to re-route the primordial aggression and embodied pain we experienced when, thousands of years ago, we too were prey "taken to be mere meat" (37). Our violence toward animals is damaging enough, but Worsham emphasizes its haunting repetitiveness, the fact that we continue daily to slaughter millions of animals as a sign that such behavior is deeply rooted in our experience as prey. In short, animals remind us of this "failed transcendence" (39). Worsham suggests humanists tap into metaphors from the healing arts, because until these linguistic categories such as "animal" are abolished, we cannot effectively commune with or about the non-human world.

Another essay rife with far-reaching implications is Diane Davis's "Writing-Being: Another Look at the 'Symbol-Using Animal,'" which challenges the notion that only humans write, or what she calls the "not-simply-human threshold" (57) of writing. Writing as communication establishes community and draws ontological lines of being that allow organisms to commune, ironically, through their otherness. Such a notion of the writer challenges humanist conceptions of authorship because "inscription of the differential relation that constitutes singular beings" (58) is unique to all animal species. In this sense, writing is an "exposition and not a representation" (60), and what Davis calls posthuman writing – writing that "traces out" its own limitations – is abundant in the animal kingdom. Reviewing Heidegger, Sartre, and Lacan's work on animals, Davis reveals how that trio of thinkers believe animals "have being" but don't "share being" because they cannot experience reality as reality and cannot understand things as things-within-themselves with essences, complex purposes, and histories. Animals, so these arguments go, cannot distinguish between response (a gesture based upon the singularity of interpretation *and* the plurality of communication) and reaction (a more limited gesture based upon instinct, repetition, and literalness). For that trio, animal codes or signals are fixed, not relational, which means animal communication is impervious to reflection or interpretation. Signs in the animal kingdom have fixed referents in ways similar to instincts: animal behavior is driven by a singular compulsion; animal signs mean one thing only, they argue. However, Davis challenges this reductionist thinking effectively by pointing out how writing is embedded in the trace, and how alphabetic or non-alphabetic "traces" communicate auto-deicticity, or the self-acknowledgement of an organism as a subject. With such self-awareness comes interpretation, symbolic representation, reflection, and responsiveness. She uses the branch dragging "writing" practices of bonobos, a member of the great ape family, to demonstrate how animals write.

Two other essays make provocative claims about the relationships between animals and writing. First, Sean Morey ruminates creatively in "Becoming T@iled" about tails and their orthographic, rhetorical, and posthuman functions. Although humans lose their pre-natal tails, Morey wonders what the psychological implications are of such a loss and how our lost physical tails may re-emerge through written discourse, namely in characters such as the popular @, which has periodically been referred to as "the monkey's tail". Morey's research uncovers a range of purposes for the @: historically, its meaning has been associated with various animals including dog (Russia) and snail (Korea); as a functional code, it serves as a prosthetic device directing our communications and augmenting our

identities; aesthetically, it serves as an attention-getter similar to how animals (peacocks, cats, etc.) use their tails biosemiotically to communicate with other animals; and theoretically, it serves as an embodied signifier within the context of Gregory Ulmer's electracry and as the unconscious in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblages. In short, Morey concludes that the @ is a digital fetish with its own agency: "Our missing tail that we lose in the womb becomes the fetish object that within the domain of the Internet becomes totemic" (146). Morey's article raises provocative questions related to other written characters.

Second, Jim Ridolfo in "Rethinking Human and Non-Human Actors as a Strategy for Rhetorical Delivery" frames the study of rhetorical delivery within a more material, posthuman context by examining how animals are integrated into human rhetorical acts to deliver messages that contest "asymmetrical power relationships" (187). Building upon previous trends in delivery studies that explore how digital media has redefined the circulation of texts, Ridolfo points to the provocative example of pigeons and their "distinguished history as non-human agents of delivery" (178). One particularly relevant example reveals how, according to a 2006 *Time Magazine* article, insurgents in Iraq used pigeons to deliver messages "to subvert cell phone detection, monitoring, and jamming technologies" (180). He then demonstrates how a student activist initiative against Coca-Cola at Michigan State University was enhanced due to remixed and recomposed texts that used a stenciled counter-message challenging Coke's response to the students' original complaint. This counter-message, he argues, functioned as a third-party, non-human agent of delivery.

Byron Hawk, Chris Lindgren, and Andrew Mara introduce the notion of "open box rhetorics" in their analysis of Nicholas Negroponete's One Laptop Per Child project. In their article, "Utopian Laptop Initiatives: From Technological Deism to Object-Oriented Rhetoric," they see an open box rhetoric in opposition to Latour's notion of a "black box" or how the inner-workings of a complex system seem to run by themselves and remain unknown to users. The authors argue that Negroponete's conception of a laptop is too technologically deterministic because it is founded upon this black box logic. In other words, give students a laptop, and their writing will somewhat magically improve. Instead, these authors opt for a more open box rhetoric, which "sees the human in relation to larger complex material ecologies and therefore has to also consider ways nonhuman agents...compose and are recomposed" (192). In this light, the writing performed on a laptop produces a "material coherence" composed of a complex range of objects, places, interests, and agents. Communication in this light becomes multi-dimensional, and audiences can become non-human. Their article raises critical questions about not only access to computers in writing classrooms, but *how* those computers are used.

Finally, Kyle Jensen sees spam as an eccentric agent capable of shattering writer's block. In "I Am Spam: A Posthuman Approach to Writer's Block," he argues that writing studies scholars have overlooked writer's block, or at least underestimated its intellectual value, partly because each individual case of writer's block is unique and partly because such studies fail "to imagine the operations of writing outside the human subjects" (234). By examining a brief history of spam, its negative effects, its ability to exploit outdated network infrastructures, and its unique ability to spawn an industry of anti-spamming software, Jensen argues that anti-spam technologies produce important conceptions of authenticity. In essence, these technologies tell us what is and what is not an authentic text, and implicitly, what is and what is not an authentic author. Jensen concludes by suggesting writing studies scholars must do a better job of understanding abject objects such as spam, a move which can elevate the role that posthuman writings such as algorithms play in society.

WPPW is an important collection for various reasons. Besides showcasing recent scholarship from some of the field's most forward thinkers, the collection charts a clear path for future writing studies research. Each article is fertile with implications for scholars of varying interests and ranks. Additionally, the collection's greatest achievement is that it firmly projects posthumanism as a key component for the future of writing studies.

BACK TO MARLOWE: I stopped this practice of having my dog pee an invisible fence after about a week, but after several weeks, the poop started reappearing. Then, one morning, my daughter took Marlowe outside and started screaming as if she was auditioning for the next John Carpenter movie. Marlowe caught the fox – a juvenile

stricken with mange – and rag-dolled him a few times, broke his neck, and put that sick fox out of his misery.

Had I known about this CFP previously, my addition to this collection would have been titled, “Canine Scripts: Dog as Stylus, Urine as Character”. Or something like that.

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