



BOOK REVIEW

Posthumanism and Literacy Education: Knowing/Becoming/Doing Literacies

Candace R. Kuby, Karen Spector and Jaye Johnson Thiel
New York: Routledge (2019) pp 254, paperback £31.99
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The editors and contributors take a playful approach in this volume inviting you to come to the book with all senses present, even as the issues with which they engage brush up against the monstrous and the deadly in many forms and across sites of literacy practice from early education, to programmes for re-engaging youth, to literacy practices within social and political arenas. In writing the review I take up their challenge to remain aware of the more than human around me:

I am looking out at a gun metal grey sky over the Forth Estuary from Portobello, Scotland. Below it the sea is a thin pale-blue plate. Whilst reading the chapters in this book the links I've read on social media the past few weeks are also present: that Alaska's coast line is completely ice free, that Greenland's glaciers has lost 12 billion tons of ice a day this summer, and that a new study estimates we are eating as many as 121,000 particles of micro plastics each year as their distribution across oceans and populations circles back around the food chain of which we are part. On one scale these form my sense of entanglement and intra-action with which I come to this book. On another scale embodied moments in the city in which I live also entangle with my reading.

At a few points in the book the assertion is made: there is no alibi. Which I take to mean we can never claim to be elsewhere. We are already always implicated. In reading this assertion past moments, folded down under and in, work their way back to the surface becoming present again for me. In my early commitment to activism I came across these words of Adrienne Rich: "my heart is moved by all I cannot save; so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world." Then I recognised these words giving shape to some deep sense-making I was struggling towards. They have become by-words, words that travel with me, orientate my journey and its diffractions. I first read them in 1983. She wrote these words sometime between 1974 and 1977. They are part of a much longer poem that explore in mythic terms earth, our excavations of it and the ensuing mutual becoming. They seem resonant with the ethics, ontology and epistemology that rises within the chapters of this book and are an exemplar of one of the assertions explored in the book. The assertion that time is not linear, I am asked to reconsider how I understand time, if it flows or coagulates or is folded in with space and mattering.

If this is not new, what does it mean that more voices are beginning to speak in these terms? What does it matter, if we think/speak/act as humans not defined as the discrete neo-liberal rational subjects but as interactants entangled within and around other bodies with whom we share the agency and potential of every moment? A central tenet of the case that Barad (2007) makes for a posthuman standpoint is that we count as real that which intervenes, what affects and is affected. So what real work does turning to this way of speaking/seeing/relating/becoming together do?

The editors at the outset acknowledge that much in critical traditions which address power, social justice ethics and activism are important to continue to engage with in the diffractive pages of the book, particularly indigenous scholarship that lays out ways of being in the world that are at times complementary and often intellectually prior to posthumanism. Reflection which connotes a process of examining a rebounding image is deconstructed and the more complex optic process of diffraction, that is, to realise in continuing to become the differing wave fronts also moving that cross, amplify, dampen and thus co-create what matters in the moment, is proffered in its place.

The book exemplifies what can be meant by putting posthumanist literacies into practice. Each chapter looks at what literacy could mean if we decentre the human and become open to the more than human that there is to be read. The organizing concepts of agency, intra-action /entanglement, subjectivity and affect provide the orientation for the four sections of the book. Drawing on Latour's admonishment not to abandon our monsters, an additional resource /voice/option of mutating monster moments are brought into play by Candace Kuby and Jaye Johnson Thiel at different points in the book with an invitation to read them and the book as a whole as belonging to the choose-your-own-adventure genre that you enact through turning to different pages to read your adventure in the sequence you choose. Each section concludes with responses that diffractively read the preceding chapters through one another, through the organizing concepts of the book, through something new each author brings and a combination of all of these. I found Stephanie Jones' close recombination of voices from the chapters with her own experience of dismembered bodies particularly poignant and provocative.

On a break from work to take in the street entertainment available as part of Edinburgh's International Fringe Festival I watch an acrobatic street performance as sirens become audible in the distance. As they grow louder the two performers who are visibly of African inheritance drop to their knees and put their hands behind their head. The two performers of visibly European extraction lounge nonchalantly with a look of boredom. Once the emergency service vehicles pass without stopping the show recommences without explanation or comment. The crowd is left to read this embodied moment with whatever experience they can bring to it. The carnival atmosphere is pierced here by an urgent reminder that to become racially literate is not a luxury. I read the moment as the mother of an African-American son who watches the headlines breaking day by day from America with gratitude to these men for making the predicament visible and with dread at the magnitude of the dynamics in which we are all caught up. The chapters by Alyzza Niccolini on *Books, Activism and Autopoietic Politics* and by Asilia

Franklin-Phipps and Courtney Rath on *Toward a Posthuman Racial Literacy* within the book are part of the diffraction of this moment for me and offer possible ways to move beyond dread.

Threads and Fingerprints by Teri Holbrook and Susan Ophelia Cannon disrupts normative expectations by enfolding differing sense-making approaches together, troubling assumptions about lines of reading and reasoning. They ask the reader to go back to the line, circumvent the line, draw other lines, or abandon/return to the piece at any time. For the text is designed for you to make multiple reading decisions, none of which are disinterested (p.35). *The Untimely Death of a Bird* by Christopher Schulte takes a more sequentially structured approach to engaging in conversation with posthumanist ideas, juxtaposing them with activity within an early-years setting that brings the children's concerns to life even as he explores a more than human understanding of death. The chapter that most vividly brought together for me lived experience of practising posthumanist pedagogy whilst making accessible its concepts and perspectives was Karin Murriss' *Choosing a Picture book as Provocation*. The experience she recounts of teachers coming to fuller posthuman capacities as they explore how picture books can be a resource for philosophy with children highlights the important shift that post human questioning can make possible.

The playfulness within the text should not belie the seriousness of the intervention it seeks to make. As the editors articulate in the introductory chapter, *Cuts Too Small*, there is urgency to the need to shift constructions of child and childhood and therefore literacy theories and what counts as literacy, for we live in times when it is becoming increasingly urgent that we connect up what we do with what we count, read and think. Barad's call to see the ethical ontological epistemological as inseparable is an important step towards resituating our responsibility within the environment which we have for too long been habituated by our literacy practices into seeing as separate.

Thus, the questions they suggest the text should be read with make good reading companions:

What is possible with new, perverse and monstrous literacies?

What surge of knowing/becoming/doing can breathe new life into this scene and others like it?

Where is there room for the emergent—for life—in literacy education?

When is the time for plugging in and becoming?

How do we artfully curate the kinds of spaces that invite newness, innovation, improvisation, experimentation? (p.15)

One of the claims of posthumanism that we are invited to explore is the possibility that past, present, future interact together. How this might be remains unresolved from my reading. In giving my take on this collection, I am aware that what serves to inform my own practice as an educator will not be the same as others. Others will move through their experience of engaging with this book with different moments of intensities, resonances and dissonances. Possibly, *gales wrap around the buildings of Aberdeen University and the dissonant cacophony of traffic*

and gulls rise and fall, as the book review editor with both review and book works through a different process of becoming as she reads.

The storm that was hanging out at sea as I began to write this review curved north and then bore down swiftly on beach combers and sidewalk café dwellers who scurried for cover as I watched from inside. The sky lightened, nearly white where the clouds broke, while below restless waves churned, gun metal grey. I realise the front is circling round again. Now is my moment to grab my bike and peddle home to make dinner for my youngest son. As I am gathering my things, I pause at a link I had opened to re-familiarise myself with the writing of Adrienne Rich, my eye falls on a passage from *On Lies, Secrets and Silences*:

There is no “the truth” “a truth”—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.

This book is an invitation to think again with sensitivities that the world has been reverberating with for a while. In this era of post truth, the difference this thinking can make matters.

References

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