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Serpil Oppermann, *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*. (Morgantown: West Virginia Press, 2023), 221 pp.

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For decades, the term *Anthropocene* has commonly referred to our “current” geologic age—an age precipitated and shaped by human impact on the natural environment. The term has been instrumental in drawing public attention to the impacts of human action and to the urgent necessity of revisiting and reframing the relationship between human and non-human, or more-than-human, actors. And yet, just this past March, a committee of scholars voted overwhelmingly against recognizing the Anthropocene as an official unit of geologic time due to varied interpretations over how exactly to confirm such a shift. Even if a “clear and objective” sign of recent geologic change can be located in the mineral record, a consensus would still have to be arrived at in terms of how to interpret—essentially, how to narrate—that sign (Zhong 2024). Several committee members expressed concern that marking a “clear and objective” beginning to the Anthropocene in the relatively recent past might misleadingly “confine” and “constrain” the narrative arc of earth’s history—potentially even undermining the importance of identifying, and measuring, the full range and extent of human impacts.

In effect, the recent refusal to make official the age of the Anthropocene as a unit in geologic time is an affirmation of the argument central to Serpil Oppermann’s *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene*. “We are surrounded by nonhuman narratives,” Oppermann writes, “stories embedded in places, things, and beings, which pervade and mediate our understanding of the world” (14). What’s essential, she urges, is that we cease to see ourselves as “the only storied beings” (7) and begin, instead, to find “expressive creativity” encoded in every form of matter (7). It is by learning to read our environment in the context of, and more importantly in continuance with, its “storied” past, that—the book suggests—we may come to terms with both the pressures and possibilities of our entangled present. Such a perceptual shift beyond both the subjective and objective bounds of human narrative entails “critical self-reflection on our part as humans and [...] moral accountability” (7). It also requires that we engender new forms of hope, as well as new forms of activism—essentially by acknowledging the two as inextricably tied. Like other stories we tell ourselves, hope is never, in fact, without its own actual and material underpinnings—and potential impacts. For Oppermann, material ecocriticism provides a way of

acknowledging these impacts and underpinnings by uniting an ecocritical approach to language and reality with “the material turn.”

From a position of rootedness within the material of the observable world, Oppermann models a creative and critical orientation beyond empirical reading practices and rational modes of interpretation. Indeed, as a way of encountering new forms of narrative material—and its sheer multiplicity—she adopts what I would deem a fundamentally poetic stance. We are invited to encounter the world and form itself anew—and specifically warned against blind acceptance of established subject-object relationships, exhausted narrative arcs, and extractivist epistemologies. A linear, narrative summary of what the book offers is, therefore, structurally impossible, and even Oppermann’s brief recap of her analytical aims in the opening pages seems, ironically, to foreshorten the project’s true potential scope. To think *with* nature, posits Oppermann, “ensures respect and protection for all life-forms and their right to survival” (8)—and yet the project as a whole strives to move us outside the anthropocentric narrative frameworks, timeframes, and goals, this statement stems from and supports. Oppermann’s narrative *description* of the potential benefits of thinking-with-nature is no match, in other words, for the kind of generative thinking-with she demonstrates poetically elsewhere in the book—most radiantly, perhaps, in Chapter 5. Here, a prismatic reading of color (from the perspective of an insect, a poet, and the sea) allows us to glimpse, and—more than that—actually participate in, the creative complicity she observes between human language, the aesthetic imagination, and the “becoming expressive” of more than human world. I share Oppermann’s sense of urgency and agree with her supposition that the cultural shift required to respect and protect “all life-forms and the right to survival” is contingent upon arriving, collectively, at different ways of seeing and of reading the world around us. But it is because of this that I find myself both all the more excited by the protean space of affinity and felt-encounter Oppermann elaborates in her book and all the more wary of summary description, predictive modes of thinking, and prescriptive claims.

Oppermann takes inspiration from diverse literary and artistic work. From Canadian poet Adam Dickinson to the Turkish installation artist Rahsan Dürren, and (most extensively) from the Turkish writer best known as The Fisherman of Halicarnassus, she shows us that every human effort at reading the poetics of the natural world is, necessarily, going to be deeply imaginative as well as limited and difficult. As a result, we come to see that no specific outcome from the effort can ever, in fact, be “ensured.” This is to be acknowledged, lest we fall back on the same prescriptive habits—both over-writing and projecting past the possibility of encounter *beyond* the human, which the human body and its imagination quite naturally afford. In five concise chapters, Oppermann’s book tackles a range of contemporary social and environmental issues including migration, postnatural transformations, and mass extinction, but ultimately, it is the prismatic interplay between different forms of reading and expression—in both nature and culture—that comes to light. A model of attention to the possibilities immanent within a time of

crisis is favoured over a solutions-oriented approach *to* that crisis, and yet, all the same, we are explicitly called to task. In all five chapters what Oppermann asks us to confront is the fact that we are “clearly and objectively” surrounded by stories—whether or not we recognize them as such. At the same time, she asks to acknowledge that it is the stories we *do* recognize that allow us to make sense of the past, shape the present, and bring about the future.

Above all, what *Ecologies of a Storied Planet in the Anthropocene* makes clear is the urgent necessity of addressing ourselves beyond traditional anthropocentric modes while, at the same time, endeavoring to humanize even the most (apparently) objective or material gaze. In the tradition of Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (2013) and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), and drawing specifically on the theory of “agential realism” proposed by physicist Karen Barad, Oppermann’s text elaborates—and actively participates in—both the problems and possibilities of contemporary ecocritical and posthuman thought. In that it both builds upon, and responds to, the work of preeminent literary analysts, bioethicists, cosmologists, and cultural historians (Stacey Alaimo, Jane Bennett, Cecilia Åsberg, Samantha Noll, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Rosi Braidotti, to name just a few) the book both invites and requires interdisciplinary interpretation. It will appeal to humanities scholars, natural scientists, and general readers with an interest in thinking deeply and imaginatively about the various ways that nature and culture coextend—as well as what our responsibilities might be within that space of overlay as human readers, writers, listeners, and actors. The book integrates deep geological history and literary analysis into its clarion call for expanded ecological awareness and concrete change. Through generous and generative readings of the work of contemporary theorists, as well as of our current moment, Oppermann powerfully expresses the slippage and contradictions implicit between disciplinary boundaries. She also, and more pressingly, explores the slippage and contradictions that exist within human language and thought as we grapple with problems of agency, scale, and narrativity in an age that has not yet even officially begun. The work is at its most radiant when it takes us to this brink: the point where narrative breaks down and the “absorption of certain wavelengths of white light by the atoms and molecules of biological entities” (137) becomes, at once, a more-than-literary poetics and an invitation to “rethink the story of life” (139).

Works Cited

- Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think*. University of California Press, 2013.
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- Zhong, Raymond. “Geologists Make It Official: We’re Not in an ‘Anthropocene’ Epoch.” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/20/climate/anthropocene-vote-upheld.html>. Accessed 11 September 2024.