

Holding up a Mirror to the Nonhuman Within: Karen Joy Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

Alice Lambert

Abstract

Kari Weil suggests that a “post-humanist autobiography” takes account of the nonhuman that is at the heart of the human author (93). Broadening her concept to include autobiografiction such as Karen Joy Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, this paper contends that posthumanist autobiography is a powerful means of

challenging our humanist mindset, encouraging the reader to explore the nonhuman within. In short, I argue that Fowler’s use of a post-humanist autobiographical mode forces the reader to recognise “humanity” as a social construct and consequently to rewrite their own sense of self.

As we enter the age of the Anthropocene, in which humankind is re-defined as a significant geological and environmental agent, we are simultaneously experiencing widespread anxiety about our role—or more accurately our privileged position—in an increasingly technological world. It is hardly surprising, then, that definitions of the human and the humanist discourses and aims that accompany them are increasingly problematised in academia today. I say increasingly problematised because, of course, the question of what it is to be human has been a scholarly pursuit since Aristotle claimed that animals lack *logos*. Karen Joy Fowler’s novel, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2014), is a timely literary intervention into these Posthumanism and Animal Studies debates, questioning the systematic privileging of the human species and the fundamental distinction between the human and nonhuman. One reviewer from *The Miami Herald*, cited in the front section of Fowler’s text, writes of the novel that it “reminds us what it means to be human, in the best and worst sense” (Fowler n.p.). Reading Fowler’s fictional autobiography as an example of what Kari Weil dubs “posthumanist autobiography,” I will challenge this interpretation, arguing instead that Fowler’s text does not “remind us,” but rather makes us question what it is to be human. Ultimately, I ask to what extent Fowler’s narrative—and posthumanist autobiography more widely—presents an alternative perspective which enables us to redefine ourselves in more posthumanist terms.

Posthumanist Autobiography

In her chapter from the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (2017), Weil coins the term “posthumanist autobiography” to define a body of life writing which takes account of the nonhuman that is at the heart of the human author (93). The author writing the “I” in posthumanist autobiography recognises, she argues, that they are co-constituted by their nonhuman others. She thus troubles the deception at the heart of the word *autobiography*: no author can write the self without its other(s). Indeed, for Weil, the “posthumanist autobiography [is] one that attempts to know or at least account for that

in- or non-human out of and through which one comes to recognise and be recognised as a ‘human’ self” (86). Her understanding of the posthuman, then, is fairly straightforward. Drawing attention to the permeable boundary between the human and its others—which, given our technological age, denotes both animal and machine—her position is akin to that of Dominic Pettman in his book *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines*. In this text, Pettman conceives of a “‘cybernetic triangle’ to denote the unholy trinity of human, animal and machine” (5). This flexible triangle destabilises the human/nonhuman dichotomy when configured as a “humanimalchine” (6): a conception of the triangle which collapses the three points, thus highlighting the artificiality of the boundaries between them. It also breaks down any notion of human superiority by figuring our inter-relations as a “web of distributed dependencies” (1).

Although Weil’s conception of posthumanism is clear, her concept does nonetheless appear to be unnecessarily tethered to a view of autobiography as a genre or mode of writing which recounts the experience of a human author. Yet, to tie the notion of posthumanist autobiography to such a narrow definition of autobiography, if this is indeed what Weil intends, is to fail to account for what Max Saunders dubs the “diversity of the autobiographic” (301). I want, therefore, to expand Weil’s concept to include autobiografiction, of which Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is a clear example. As Saunders observes, “the boundaries between fiction and auto/biography have always been blurred” and autobiografiction, one of several terms used to describe fiction which impersonates autobiography, has a long history (302). Furthermore, there is no reason why Weil’s description of the I, as one that “comes after, or more rightly, is after the animal who might be ‘my primary mirror’, the one before whom and with if not in whom I discover myself” (92), could not be equally applicable to a fictional autobiographical subject. Incidentally, it is worth pointing out, although I have insufficient space to explore it here, that the inclusion of autobiografiction opens up a space where the answer to the question of “who/what authors the ‘I?’” (92) need not lean towards the human.

Reading as Self-Writing: Who/What Reads?

Taking account of the author's co-constitution alone is insufficient: to borrow Weil's opening questions, it is not merely "who/what writes?" but "who/what reads?" (84) that is at stake. Despite beginning her analysis with these open, yet crucial questions, Weil ultimately focuses entirely on the former. Only at the end of her analysis does she hint at how the posthumanist autobiography affects its reader, writing that its task is:

to take account to those who and that which have made us who we have been, and help us be open to the myriad ways we will continue to be affected, if not infected, by others and the world we are part of. This hospitality of the self is a first step toward accounting, in turn, for the ways that we are also affecting that world and the many creatures of whatever name within it. (93)

Taking this further, I would like to suggest that the posthumanist autobiography—loosely defined—does more than *take account* of how humans are co-constituted through nonhuman others and how they affect those others. In tandem with Leigh Gilmore, I view autobiography as "a site of identity production; as texts that both resist and produce cultural identities" (4). And considered thus, posthumanist autobiography becomes a vehicle to challenge our humanist mindsets, opening up new ways of thinking and seeing the self.

To recognise posthumanist autobiography as a productive site, one must first acknowledge the role that cultural products play in the construction and continuation of humanist discourses. Borrowing Benedict Anderson's now infamous phrase, Pettman notes that humanity is the "ultimate imagined community" (2). It is to be understood as nothing more than an autogenetic narrative driven by what Giorgio Agamben dubs the "anthropological machine." As Pettman notes, this machine is:

rigged (in both senses) to encourage self-reflection and nurture a sense of exceptionalism and superiority by virtue of one's proper humanness. The anthro-machine provides us

with lenses and mirrors from before even our first word,
compelling us to look for our own reflection, to recognise it.

(8)

This anthro-machine has no single author: it is authored by us all as we internalise and then perpetuate our conceptual inheritance. Cultural products, including literature, serve to diffuse and distribute this narrative. As such, literature is an equally powerful means to offer up a counter-narrative and expose the artificiality of this construct to which so much is beholden (not least legal, political, and social frameworks). Autobiography is peculiarly well-suited to this endeavour: as Gilmore observes, the “emphasis is on the subject as an agent of discourse, where the agent itself is understood as necessarily discursive” (3). Discursively problematising the “I” at the heart of the author, posthumanist autobiography also holds up a mirror to its readers. However, unlike the lens of the anthro-machine, it is a mirror akin to those found in amusement parks: encouraging self-reflection and yet distorting the recognisable. I want to turn now to consider how this is achieved in Fowler’s autobiog-
rafiction *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*.

Shifting Perspectives: Learning to See through a *Humanimal-machine*

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is narrated by the fictional character Rosemary, known as Rose, whose quest for both self-understanding and societal understanding drives her autobiography. She is the youngest member of the Cooke family which fostered a “sister,” Fern, when Rose was born. To spoil a great plot twist, Fern is, in fact, a chimpanzee. Together they become the subjects of her father’s scientific research project to determine if chimpanzees can learn—and not merely imitate—human communication. This unidirectional research project ended prematurely, and the novel traces Rose’s attempt to not only make sense of Fern’s disappearance but to determine who and what she is: to gradually come to terms with her simian past. Simply put, she cannot escape

the fact that she is “the human half of the fabulous, the fascinating, the phantasmagorical Cooke sisters” (108).

As Buell, Heise, and Thornber observe, “animals are evolutionarily connected more closely to humans than other parts of nature, but they are also often represented as being separated from humans by a fundamental boundary” (430). Fowler’s novel acknowledges this and attempts, if not to break down, certainly to blur the distinction. Demonstrating an awareness of the dominant cultural narrative and striving to overcome the limitations of the reader’s imagination, Rose explicitly informs the reader that she is going to “[s]kip the beginning. Start in the middle” (1). Her non-linear narrative frame is a deliberate move to force us to see her complex relations with her sister through a “normal” lens. She withholds her sister’s “essential simian-ness” until page 77 for two reasons:

I spent the first eighteen years of my life defined by this one fact, that I was raised with a chimpanzee. I had to move halfway across the country in order to leave that fact behind. It’s never going to be the first thing I share with someone. But much, *much* more important, I wanted you to see how it really was. I tell you Fern is a chimp and, already, you aren’t thinking of her as my sister. You’re thinking instead that we loved her as if she were some kind of pet. (77)

In alluding to how readers would otherwise have received Fern as a pet, Rose highlights how the humanity narrative restricts our view. However, in delaying this reveal, she simultaneously exposes this humanity narrative as a fictional construct. After all, she has successfully manipulated the reader to connect with Fern’s disappearance as that of a sister, rendering it impossible to make Fern fit socially endorsed frameworks.

However, regarding the big reveal, Rose also notes that “[s]ome of you will have figured that out already” (77). By implying that readers will have discovered Fern’s “simian-ness” in the preceding chapters, Rose seems to suggest that no matter how it is framed, this essential truth will naturally come to the fore. Yet, to suggest that there is a fundamental and identifiable difference seems to run counter to the novel’s

message. It is far more likely that readers will have seen that the Cooke family dynamic is not quite normal, that the family is, to borrow the name of one of her father's experiments, all at once "Same/Not Same" (202), before they know exactly why. In short, readers have experienced the uncanny-valley response alluded to in the text. Understood thus, Rose's comment serves to highlight the entrenchment of socially constructed notions of "human normalcy" in all matters of human life. Structurally and thematically, then, the boundary that rigidly separates that which is the same from that which is different, is blurred and brought into question in this text: it is possible to be simultaneously the same and different. This is precisely Matthew Calarco's argument in his lucid exploration of Fowler's text. Offering us two ways to reframe our thinking about human-nonhuman relations, he argues that the text explores Rose and Fern's shared "indistinction" whilst also allowing them their own differences, their own "radical alterity" (624).

The simultaneous presence of similarity and difference between Rose and Fern is the product of their upbringing. As Calarco notes, they "co-constituted each other's subjectivity" (625):

[s]urrounded as she was by humans, Fern believed that she was human. This wasn't unexpected. Most home-raised chimps, when asked to sort photographs of chimps and humans, make only the one mistake of putting their own picture into the human pile. This is exactly what Fern did. What seems not to have been anticipated was my own confusion. [...] As much time as Fern and I spent together, that mirror went both ways. (Fowler 101)

The novel thus clearly states that the assumption that the human is a clearly demarcated but fixed construct is false. Rose's identity, though not the ostensible focus of the experiment, was fundamentally affected. For Rose, "Fern was the beginning. [...] Whoever I was before [Fern] is no one I ever got to know" (105). The title of the novel, which coopts the phrase 'we are all completely beside ourselves' and lends it new emphasis (literally—the word "completely" is italicised in my edition),

alludes directly to this two-way mirror, pointing to how, despite obvious differences, the sisters see themselves in each other. Arguably, then, if the anthro-machine “provides us with lenses and mirrors from before even our first word, compelling us to look for our own reflection, to recognise it” (Pettman 8), then Rose and Fern were introduced to a *hum-animal-machine*, one which collapses two points on Pettman’s cybernetic triangle and is rigged to nurture a sense of sameness. Even at the end of the novel, after years of separation, when Rose sees Fern, it is “[a]s if I were looking in a mirror” (308), although admittedly she cannot be sure that it is still functioning both ways. Arguably, the fact that Rose still relates to Fern despite her years in the human world highlights the difficulty of challenging the humanimal-machine and by proxy the anthro-machine. However, Rose is not unchanged and as the novel progresses she comes to see herself through a human lens, assuming the persona of “monkey girl” (84). Though this is not necessarily to be read positively, it nevertheless points to our capacity to internalise alternative discourses. Consequently, it alludes to the potential change that a novel such as this might elicit.

Identifying herself in and through Fern, it is not surprising that Rose’s imaginary friend is also a chimpanzee. Giving her “the half of my name that I wasn’t using, the Mary part,” her chimpanzee other is an intrinsic part of Rose’s sense of self. As Rose reflects on when she was told that Mary could not accompany her to school: “I felt I was being told I mustn’t be myself at school, not my whole self” (25). This was the beginning of what Calarco dubs Rose’s “humanisation” (623). As Calarco observes, “this is a physically and psychologically painful process of domestication and humanisation, one that forces Rosemary to go against some of her most powerful urges, habits and desires” (623). Gradually introduced to the socially endorsed human/animal distinction, for Rose, the anthro-machine narrative offers a mirror that both compels her to look for her own reflection and prevents her from recognising it. She comes to see herself as a “counterfeit human” (102), different to her six-year-old classmates who respond to her with an “uncanny-valley response—the human aversion to things that look almost but not quite like people” (101). However, the novel makes clear that although it

is Rose who must undergo a process of normalisation, the world at large is in a never-ending state of denial: “they refused to believe they were apes themselves. Their parents assured them that they weren’t” (102). Fowler continually addresses the reader as part of a culture that shares the parents’ denial revealing the extent to which she has internalised her difference: “I’ll creep you out a little bit in that uncanny way I have” (298). However, having forced the reader to acknowledge both the artificiality of the human/animal divide and the performativity of humanness, it is not Rose but humanity that begins to seem uncanny by the end of the novel.

Ultimately it is important to note that it is “we” who are completely beside ourselves in Fowler’s title, not merely Rose and Fern. The novel makes frequent allusions to species-level similarities and differences, often to the detriment of the human—“[w]e’re like horses in that, only less gifted” (240). This is often conveyed structurally as well as through the content: “unfairness bothers children greatly” (66) is lexically reproduced a few pages later as “unfairness bothers chimps greatly” (79). Simply replacing one noun for another highlights how readily one so-called human characteristic can be applied to a nonhuman other. Taking this “animal-centric approach” (Calarco 620) brings about an ontological revision that enables us, as humans, to view ourselves in a more detached way. According to Ben de Bruyn, a reader encountering literary passages which allude to our shared commonality is encouraged “to abandon human privilege, to take up a distanced perspective on our activities, and to learn to be a species” (83)—something that Dipesh Chakrabarty deems necessary to make sense of our condition in the Anthropocene (de Bruyn 76). Importantly, learning to see ourselves as a species may help to “invalidat[e] pernicious forms of anthropocentrism and [reconnect] us to the other animals [...] on our increasingly humanised planet” (76). Certainly, this seems to be the case for Fowler’s text, which encourages us to become sceptical of the sense of human exceptionalism and superiority embedded in the humanity narrative (and arguably the experiment to which Rose and Fern are subjected). It encourages us, like Rose’s father, to become “a great believer in our animal natures, far less likely to anthropomorphize Fern, than to animalize

me. Not just me, but you, too—all of us together, I’m afraid” (91). We, as readers, are invited not to see Fern as a human but to recognise our animal selves: in short, to understand our human self in and through relation to our nonhuman others, where each is completely beside themselves. In a way, the reader is therefore invited on the same journey of self-discovery as Rose, but where Rose learns to act human, we come to learn that being human is an act.

Some Concluding Remarks

Making clear meta-textual reference to itself as a book with an educational impulse, Rose’s narrative is explicit in its desire to shake the foundations of the anthro-machine. As Rose observes, “[e]very word I say out there will be on my sister’s behalf. I’ll be widely admired. Fern will be stealthily influential. That’s the plan” (299). Notably, if that fails, or as Rose says, if “you won’t listen to *me*” we are to heed the call of a fairy tale and “rise up already” so that the “spell” might be broken (300). In turning to a fairy tale, Rose points to the power of fiction to challenge our perception of the world around us. It is precisely this power that Fowler’s text as an autobiografiction embodies. On the one hand, the “mark of autobiography,” to borrow Gilmore’s term, lends it a degree of authenticity that prompts the reader to accept as fact the narrative and thus the problems it poses. On the other hand, as a fictional piece of writing, it encourages us to invest imaginatively in the work, placing the reader in a more open frame of mind.

The direct address creates a rapport with the reader. Addressed as someone who would perceive Rose as an oddity, the reader’s sense of self is fundamentally challenged through the text’s uncanny ability to invite the reader’s uncanny-valley response whilst also forcing them to question it. Subtly working to undermine the reader’s worldview, the reader comes to see themselves anew not through their nonhuman others but through an-Other human, Rose. In other words, the reader begins to see humanity, and consequently themselves, through not the anthro-machine, but the *humanimal-machine*. And this is arguably the power of posthumanist autobiography. It not only enables the author

to write themselves (be they fictional or factual) but to rewrite their readers. It provides them with a new mirror and consequently a new reflection.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio.** “Anthropological Machine.” *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell, Stanford UP, 2004, pp. 33-39.
- Buell, Lawrence, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber.** “Literature and Environment.” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, vol. 36, 2011, pp. 417-40.
- Calarco, Matthew.** “Boundary Issues: Human-Animal Relationships in Karen Joy Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2014, pp. 616-35.
- De Bruyn, Ben.** “Learning to Be a Species in the Anthropocene: On Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins*.” *Frame*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2016, pp. 71-90.
- Fowler, Karen Joy.** *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, Serpent’s Tail, 2014.
- Gilmore, Leigh.** “The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre.” *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, edited by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters, U of Massachusetts P, 1994, pp. 3-18.
- Pettman, Dominic.** *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines*, U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- Saunders, Max.** “Biography and Autobiography.” *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, edited by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, Cambridge UP, 2008, pp. 286-303.
- Weil, Kari.** “Autobiography.” *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, Cambridge UP, 2017, pp. 84–94.

Biography

Alice Lambert is a Research Master’s student at Utrecht University. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in English and French and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from the

University of Southampton. Her primary research interests are in reception studies, the book-object, and transculturality.