TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

University of Sydney & Deakin University

Briohny Doyle & David McCooey

Editorial: Life writing beyond the human

Life writing would seem, on the face of it, to be essentially concerned with *human* life. Focusing on the human subject, life writing studies initially sought to conceptualise autobiography, and to a lesser extent biography, as central to a long humanist tradition of self-expression. As such, the "life" in life writing – the "bios" in biography and autobiography – was largely assumed to be human life. "Life writing beyond the human", the focus of this special issue of *Text*, might, then, seem paradoxical, if not contradictory.

Of course, there have always been exceptions to the conflation of "life" with "human life" in life writing. Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (*A Journey Around my Room*) (1794), written in the style of a travelogue, details the objects in its author's room in ways that range from the realistic to the whimsical. Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography* (1933) is a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. Necessarily bringing together fictional and nonfictional elements, Woolf's work is an early example of life writing's potential for investigating animal ontology. These examples might seem especially contemporary in their concern with things and non-human agency. Certainly, the sensibility behind such works can be seen in more recent times. The novels-of-circulation (with their "it-narratives" focusing on a non-human object), which were so popular in the eighteenth century, have been of increasing interest to contemporary writers, as seen in the minor vogue for novels narrated by bowls, paintings, and so on.

The interest that "thing theory" shows in "the way objects and subjects animate one another", as Bill Brown puts it (Brown, 2003, p. 16), is clearly related to other contemporary methodologies, such as object-oriented ontology, animal studies, and the new materialism, all of which seek to undermine the idea of the human subject as both sovereign and self-contained. These are all methodologies concerned with understanding life beyond the human, and we are delighted to find them variously deployed by the contributors to this special issue.

Reading the contributions that comprise this special issue provides an opportunity to reorient life writing in terms of its inherent, if sometimes unconscious, concern with the non-human, in the sense that those things and beings "beyond" the human (biologically, sociologically, and conceptually speaking) are in fact never entirely "beyond" that category. Such interrelation is perhaps most urgently seen in the interpenetration of writing and ecology in the current period unofficially known as the Anthropocene. The thematisation of the nonhuman in such a context is implicitly an ethical gesture, and such an ethics is concerned with human responsibility to nonhuman objects and subjects. As Stephen Mansfield writes in "Ethics of Autobiography", "recent studies into post-human autobiography have extended the autobiographer's sense of obligation to be ethical, by raising questions regarding our obligations to non-human subjects (such as animals and robots) in life writing" (2019, p. 273).

Posthumanist methodologies, such as those listed above, are all modes of thinking that displace traditional ideas of the human as central, knowable, and exceptional, bringing nonhuman animals, objects, and the "vibrant materiality" of matter (to evoke Jane Bennett) into consideration. This consideration, as writers have long realised, can be staged in meaningful and compelling ways in the variety of forms and genres found under the umbrella term "life writing". Such forms and genres include not just biography and autobiography, but also memoir, lyric essay, graphic life writing, photography, and film, as well as autofiction and biofiction. As those examples suggest, such forms are commonly, and perhaps appropriately, hybrid.

In our call for papers for this special issue, we solicited submissions of/about all modes of life writing that consider experiences, relationality, and intersubjectivity beyond the human. We posed the following questions to our potential collaborators:

- How do we write the abundance of more-than-human and nonhuman life in which we situate our own?
- What forms emerge when lives aren't coded via anthropocentric timelines?
- How might anthropogenic climate change prompt urgent new forms of life writing that exceed and entangle human subjectivities?

As the essays and creative works within this special issue attest, such questions were only a partial list of possible lines of enquiry when it comes to life writing beyond the human. But all of these lines of enquiry are underpinned by a desire to undo the myth of human superiority.

In this special issue of *Text*, we are thrilled to include contributions by postgraduate students, early career researchers, and established writers and scholars. Each contributor brings their unique orientation to the theme and its provocations, writing into and through the human as an always ambiguous and permeable category, whose boundaries shimmer and smudge in connection with vibrant material, technologies, animals, environments, illness, and finitude. As in any curated anthology, the specific enquiries of individual researchers here attain further complexity in conversation with one another.

In Vanessa Berry's classroom, a dried leaf, suspended by a weak air conditioning unit draws student and teacher attention to "a mesh of material, spatiotemporal, and planetary connections, including the disruptive forces of an imperilled climate, that set the conditions for the class, and our work as writers within these relations" (Berry, 2026, p. 2). Berry's essay considers the ways that object-based writing practices attune us to these very conditions and connections. Writing in a museum, students are "enlivened by the vibrant materiality of the objects" (p. 7). Something similar occurs for Katerina Bryant, who approaches objects via an entanglement of Berry's strategies of "Description", "Feeling", "Knowing" and "Time" in her essay exploring how making objects during a period of illness might stand in for life writing. For Bryant, turning to the material world provides necessary reorientation from an indescribable or unruly inner life.

Johanna Ellersdorfer's essay describes visiting the world's largest fake fruit collection in Turin, which is considered by many as a mere curiosity. Perhaps due to a redemptive impulse, Ellersdorfer notes that "among the now obsolete meanings of the word 'curiosity' is 'a careful attention to detail', which speaks to a quiet kind of observation, allowing small things to make themselves known" (Ellersdorfer, 2026, p. 3). It is a kind of observation that allows the writer to "glimpse the instability of the material world in details like these, on model specimens made to resist the passage of time." In this object writing, or perhaps "life writing with objects", the stuff of the world contains temporalities and experiences, which writers speculate on from our human perspective.

In this issue, a variety of practices extend life writing beyond the human. Julia Faragher and Emily Stewart join the rich tradition of walking as writing with the latter's fragmented digital images of cars extending a poetics of extinction to encompass technologically mediated bodies. Leonie Brialey's essay centres the sketchbook, both her own in which she sketches her dog and her friend's, read posthumously as sketching life in details beyond the human "the sun in the sky maybe setting, the drinks on the table, the dog attentive" (Brialey, 2026, p. 10). Angela Glindemann's spatial writing renders encounters between flesh and chemical explicit, as everyday human activity spreads into plastic, laminate, dust and stain-resistant building materials. Texts, after all, are themselves material, and Merril Howie emphasises the ways we can think through texts while also "thinking about the human/material exchange" (Howie, 2026, p. 9).

Mia-Francesca Jones's essay positions eco-autobiography to offer "the potential to explore notions of both reciprocity and complicity by reflecting on how we are 'formed' by place, and how our interactions with environments, in turn, form them" (Jones, 2026, p. 2). Her vision of an "expanded genre that can represent entanglements and reciprocal thinking" might guide our reading of Nicole Mathews' and Melanie Ross's creative works, which approach the more than human relating to and with forests. Mathews and Ross ask, respectively, what does the woodsman know of the woods, what do trees know of agriculture? Both contributions enact what Jones calls "a space for life writers to reflect on their place within the 'mesh'".

Similarly, poetry by Lucia Moon and Sophie Finlay explores the natural world, continuing a rich tradition of environmental poetics into the Anthropocene, where the human subject is an entangled, implicated witness.

Transformations are important to life writing beyond the human, too. For Jennifer Hamilton, concrete and weather transform the subject, prescribing the machinations of everyday life. For Kat Capel, the human can transform through masochistic practice, becoming "a dog when they are placed on a leash, or a clock when bruises and welts are surveyed" (Capel, 2026, p. 3). For Dani Natherclift, the human life always contains its final objectification as a corpse, from which the writer turns to the elegiac lyric essay as a response.

As Richard Grusin writes, the nonhuman turn "is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies" (2015, p. vii). Such a decentring has particular resonance in life writing. Starting in the 1990s, life-writing studies began to critique the classic conception of the human subject as both universal *and* limited as male, European, self-present, and autonomous, reconfiguring subjectivity as diverse, provisional, and intersubjective. The "nonhuman turn" furthers this project, allowing us to understand not only the relationality of selfhood in terms of other humans, but also in terms of the nonhuman. The human subject from this perspective cannot be fully understood without attending to the radical intermingling of the human and the nonhuman. In putting together this special issue, we found life writers, and theorists of life writing, who are willing to re-engage with life writing as a mode of representation that could accommodate, and find ways of configuring, such radical intermingling.

We hope this special issue "Life writing beyond the human" will find readers keen to attend to these intermingled lives. We invite you to break your reading to reflect on the materiality of the paragraph or the screen. Glance at the dirty cups on your desk. The houseplant that has a fungus you might identify with an app on your phone. Attend to the curled cat or the dog whose curled up tail might inspire a drawing. We can read and write our lives as, simultaneously, a virus attacks our sinuses, our bodies adjust to unseasonable weather, and we grieve and care for plants, animals, and each other. We can never truly read or write about our "selves" alone as our lives are always lived in excess of and beyond the human.

References

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.

Brown, B. (2003). *A sense of things: The object matter of American literature*. University of Chicago Press.

Grusin, R. (ed.). (2015). *The nonhuman turn*. University of Minnesota Press.

Mansfield, S. (2019). Ethics of autobiography. In M. Wagner-Egelhaaf (Ed.), *Handbook of autobiography/autofiction* (pp. 268–74). de Gruyter.