

Curious Kin in Fictions of Posthuman Care

by Amelia DeFalco (2023) Oxford (UK), Oxford University Press, 212 pp.

Stephen Katz 

Trent University

Author Amelia DeFalco is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Leeds, but it is her broader interdisciplinary background in medical humanities, literary fiction, feminism, science and technology studies (STS) and the biopolitics of care that is well represented in *Curious Kin in Fictions of Posthuman Care* (referred to as *Curious Kin*). In the book's four chapters, Introduction and Conclusion, DeFalco takes readers on an exciting journey through the landscapes of posthumanism, both real and imagined. Here, she concentrates on the excluded places and abandoned forms of life that congregate to create new modes of survival and vitality.

Throughout *Curious Kin* DeFalco lines up the tenets of humanism against their posthumanist critiques in the contexts and ethics of care. Historically, humanism has a double legacy. While liberating scientific inquiry, economic enterprise and the potential of “mankind” from the bonds of theological feudalism, humanism also legitimized the Eurowestern division, domination and “civilization” of the world's peoples and cultures (Braidotti 2019). Against this legacy, DeFalco posits posthumanism as a “shorthand for a wide range of critical perspectives united by their skepticism toward anthropocentric humanist taxonomies and the gendered, racialized, bounded individualized ‘Man’ they have begot” (p. 18). As such, posthumanism in this book provides an alternative and inclusive vision of non-human, more-than-human, inhuman and hybridized lives, whose recognition overturns humanist binaries between “Man”/other, nature/culture, mind/body and life/non-life.

In pursuit of this vision, DeFalco has written a boundary-challenging book, extending her core arguments about relationality to the pathologized and toxic badlands of dystopian modernity. In support, DeFalco frequently cites Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Elizabeth Povinelli and other posthumanist thinkers who have aligned their theoretical work to disability, queer, environmental, decolonial and feminist movements. STS scholars will find many parallels between the book and posthumanist approaches to STS in Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017). However, the “shorthand” of posthumanism can be difficult to understand because it is neither a unified theory nor a philosophy, but a pooling of various ideas from the work of Gilles Deleuze, affect theory, non-representational geography, Indigenous Knowledges,

STS and materiality studies, the post-humanities, feminist-ecology and more. In my view, a unifying way of characterizing the many components of posthumanism would as a thought space or a “style of thought” as elaborated by sociologist Nikolas Rose. For Rose, a style of thought is a sense-making modality that emerges within assemblages of expertise, fields, crises and trends that is “not just about certain forms of explanation, about what it is to explain, but about what there is to explain” (2007, 12).

Curious Kin posits that a posthumanist style of thought can reclaim the relationship between kin and care in ways that disturb humanist, colonialist and capitalist orders. DeFalco, as other feminist posthumanists do, theorizes kin beyond traditional biological and reproductive designations in order to imagine “who and what we are” (p. 11). When care is added to this view of kin, then ethical principles of reciprocity, interdependency, responsibility and vulnerability become obvious priorities. This entanglement of kin and care has featured in other philosophies and cultures, but here DeFalco’s posthumanist slant deconstructs anthropocentric hierarchies and recomposes them into their horizontal and relational components. Each of the book’s substantive chapters accomplishes this task by looking at examples of literary and media fiction to explore posthuman dilemmas of kin and care through the remarkable experiences of fictional characters. This is where *Curious Kin* shines with originality and liveliness, offering a perspective from the critical humanities and literary studies to enrich debates in STS and affiliated sub-fields about human, non-human and technological relationships.

Chapter 1, “Care Robots and Affective Legitimacy” is about care robots. Since the commercial appearance of baby-seal pet robot Paro in 2004, the therapeutic pet robot industry has grown significantly. However, so have criticisms concerning their simulated “care”, especially for impaired older adults. Still, robots set off important questions about the meaning and labors of care as they are configured by non-reciprocal human biases about givers and recipients of care. To explore the problematic nature of care, DeFalco reviews the movie “Robot and Frank” (2012), the TV series “Real Humans” (2012-14) and Louisa Hall’s novel *Speak* (2015). Each exposes tensions of intimacy between human and machine while remaining cautious about a future relying on robotic care. These fictions also reflect current problems in a globalized health economy that “suggest a provocative affinity between diverse vulnerable bodies – old, young, female, and mechanical” (p. 53). Even as robots become more human-like, and the boundary between carbon and silicon more blurred, the care roles that these robots perform (traditionally female) ultimately represent the exploitative relationships by which care work is structured and devalued. I am convinced by DeFalco that we should take robot stories seriously for what they reveal about the everyday ethics of deciding who is (and who is not) deserving of care. My quibble with this chapter, however, is that the fictional examples are somewhat dated given the rapid development of robotics since their time and the radical incursion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in active care, monitoring and assistive technologies.

Chapter 2, “Feral Touch”, is a fascinating discussion of posthuman care practices “as haptic phenomena” (p. 62). The human body, or all bodies for that matter, are a core focus for posthumanism because they are conduits of non-anthropocentric relationships. Touch is a particularly powerful inter-affective capacity by which life embraces and cares for itself: we are touched, in multiple ways, by what we touch. DeFalco selects two texts about feral children “that engage embodied porousness and ‘touchability’ in all of its caring potential and mortal

risk” (p. 69). Cases of feral children, whether authentic or fantastical, are famous for shocking moral sensibilities about human development and sociality. Beginning with Eva Hornung’s novel *Dog Boy* (2009), DeFalco examines the fictionalized story of Ivan Mishukov, the Moscow child who survived on the city streets with dogs, who are also homeless. The boy does not only eat and sleep with the dogs but is also part of their abandoned “fleshy” world, sharing the warmth, tastes, smells and textures of their bodies. Similarly, Banhu Kapil’s *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* (2009), is based on the story of the two wolf girls of Midnapore (India) in the 1920s. DeFalco again pulls from the text the ecology of animal tactility and sensuality, encouraging readers to try to *feel* the entanglements of a human/non-human world. As with the dog boy, the feral wolf girls have to be rescued to restore the normative boundaries of humanity itself, since stories of rescued feral children satisfy the moral narrative that care in human society means the regulation of animalistic wildness.

DeFalco’s adds to this chapter the science fiction novel *Under the Skin* (2000) (also a film) by Michael Faber. This is a story about human and alien contact seen from the alien perspective (humans are called “vodsel’s”). Human men are hunted and killed for their disposable bio-materials, making their skin and bodies permeable to extraction and human/non-human touch zones porous and intensified. While the traditional human male is taken apart as alien matter, the main female alien character becomes more human, entering into a different set of affective relationships. As with Chapter 1, I am intrigued by DeFalco’s insightful interpretations of the material lives of fictional characters and how they become opportunities to defamiliarize and shake up fundamental ontological assumptions. At the same time, I find myself asking two questions. First, do the texts and their interpretations give us a true ethological sense of animal life, of how dogs or wolves actually behave, or are they still characterized by a wildness that risks reinstating human limits? Second, are caring, touching and surviving necessarily complementary practices, even in extraordinary posthuman contexts, since the chapter tends to slide between them often without distinction?

These questions surface in different ways in Chapter 3 on “Care and Disposable Bodies”. Here the author asks “how one can care for and about the more-than-humans”, but “without belittling the ongoing battle for recognition by marginalized humans” (p. 103). In response, DeFalco selects the books *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro and Margaret Atwood’s speculative fictional trilogy *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). These fictions explore the lives of hybridized, bio/techno/human/non-human beings in unsettling conditions of waste that certainly create “curious” kinships. As abandoned beings, they come to matter because even “discarded matter, human or otherwise, can be a form of radical attention, a defiance of the binary colonial cultural logic that produces significant versus insignificant bodies” (p. 109). The texts also conjure up the anthropocenic calamities of global wasteland dumps and toxic dead zones. As with the book’s other chapters, the premise here is that a posthumanist ethic of care, based on reciprocity and co-existence must be inclusive of inhuman and disposable lives.

Chapter 4, “Decolonizing Posthuman Care”, continues in this vein by exploring impoverished wastelands, with a focus on posthumanist critique as an anti-racist style of thought. In her reading of the novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward, DeFalco describes its portrayal of a desperate abandoned American landscape (the pit) in which a southern

African-American community tries to survive before and after a Hurricane Katrina-like catastrophe. As the people struggle for recognition and livability against the neglect, violence and poverty imposed by white racist America, they also create kinship with each other and the wasted and discarded objects around them that refuse their disposable and dehumanized status. DeFalco's interpretation makes the point that posthumanist theory often fails to recognize racism (as well as "disabled and queer lives") (p. 138). This may be a larger problem suggesting a tendency in uncritical posthumanism that leaves the conventional human unaltered, along with the afterimage of its hierarchies and exclusions.

The book's Conclusion: "Care beyond Life – Imagining Posthumous Relations", addresses further gaps in posthumanist thought, including in *Curious Kin*, that overlook Indigenous and non-Anglo-European ontologies. DeFalco treads a path along "posthumous" relations that denote "existents" after life, associated with Povinelli's argument (2016) that not all existence, especially excluded existence, falls within the dominion of "life" (and its life sciences). By way of illustration, DeFalco reads Louise Erdrich's wonderful story "The Stone" (2019), about the comforting and lively relationship a girl has with her stone. The link to Indigenous ways of knowing is that the animation of existing things, like stones, became disconnected through colonial domination. Decolonizing kin and de-individualizing care, in various ways, are deeply implicated in Indigenous traditions and resurgence advocacy (Grande 2018; Hulko et al. 2019), where land-based identities, healing landscapes, spiritual temporalities, community resources and ecological affinity seem to complement posthumanist ethics. But is Indigenous Knowledge a posthuman style of thought? And what are the risks to Indigenous scholarship of celebrating it as such?

These are questions for a much larger discussion, but they are posed here because of the reflexive turn DeFalco takes at the book's end. There, she wonders "[w]hat might a society that acknowledges and values embodied vulnerability in more-than-human worlds look like?" (p. 171). I think part of the answer lies in how vulnerability, kin and care are framed as relatable and expressed as such in thought and writing, for which *Critical Kin* is a great example. In fact, as I began reading the book as a typical reviewer, I found instances of repeated ideas, sometimes rephrased in different vocabularies, and several dense and lengthy footnotes that would fit better into the text itself. But as I read it to completion, I sensed a kind of kin-making of its own inspired by DeFalco's hopefulness distilled from her exemplary fictional worlds about the possibilities of posthumanist life. Perhaps *Curious Kin* is a book that cares for its author too, so that repetitive language or dense footnotes or other lacunae are there to ensure that DeFalco's attentive empathy, respect for detail, critical curiosity and intellectual brilliance succeed in embracing a collaborative imagination between author, reader and text. I learned a great deal from reading *Curious Kin* and I expect many others will too.

References

- Braidotti, Rosi (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge*, Oxford (UK), Polity Press.
 De La Bellacasa, Maria Puig (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press.

- Grande, Sandy (2018) *Aging, Precarity, and the Struggle for Indigenous Elsewheres*, in “International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education”, 31(3), pp. 168-176.
- Hulko, Wendy, Wilson, Danielle and Balestrery, Jean E. (eds.) (2019) *Indigenous Peoples and Dementia: New Understandings of Memory Loss and Memory Care*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. (2016) *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Rose, Nikolas (2007) *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.