Beyond the Self: Life Writing and the Nonhuman (19th-20th centuries)
11-12 March 2027, Université Paris Cité

Call for papers

'I now know that I'm made of nonhumans', Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer write in *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human* (2021: 18). Since the late twentieth century, criticism has shown the self to be entangled in ever-proliferating forms of life and matter. While the idea of the instability of the 'I' is anything but new, recent scholarship has built on the contributions of life sciences and physics to supply fresh insight into the porosity of the human subject.

The idea of a plural, unstable 'I' was thus famously articulated by Donna Haraway in the wake of Lyn Margulis's groundbreaking symbiotic theory. Haraway self-defines as a 'creature of the mud', 'vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions' as she 'become[s] an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates.' She concludes: '[t]o be one is always to become with many' (Haraway 2008: 3–4).

These theories nullify the singularity of the first person, unravelling the very idea of personhood. As Ina Batzke, Lea Espinoza and Linda Hess argue in the introduction to *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene*, 'integrating the human with other kinds of animate and inanimate matter implies that agency ceases to be regarded as an exclusive property of humans' (Batzke et al. 2021: 3–4).

Such a reconceptualization of human agency inevitably impacts our understanding of the writing subject, particularly in autobiography – a genre traditionally founded on the belief in an autonomous individual. In fact, recent scholarship has gone so far as to deprive the 'in-dividual' of its cohesive negative prefix: 'dividuals' foreground instead polymorphism and interdependency. As Jane Bennett underlines, '[t]o exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences' (Bennett 2020: 12). What even is an 'I'? The modern form of the human subject has been shaped and galvanized, in no small part, by the nineteenth-century embrace of liberalism and its bounded, monic notion of 'self'. Turning to the past might reveal that nothing is as unstable as those two notions (Roudeau 2017).

The posthumanist and materialist turns have offered thorough reappraisals of autobiographical literature. Scholars have even taken the word apart, dissecting and problematizing each of its components: Stephen Abblitt, among others, asks whether autobiography is still relevant 'when the *autos* is decentered, the *bios* is opened to a more multispecies interpretation of life, and even *graphe* can no longer be assumed' (Abblitt 2019: 507).

That is why this conference chooses the broader term of 'life writing', following a practice initiated by Marlene Kadar's seminal collection *Essays on Life Writing*. In her introduction, Kadar argues that the category of 'life writing' could serve as a useful taxonomy for autobiographical works by marginalized social groups defined by race or gender (Kadar 1992: 7) – as well as, it could be added, things and beings defined by their nonhumanness.

The idea of 'zoopoetics' once coined by Jacques Derrida (Derrida 2006: 20) might be a step, a flight, a swim in the right direction, yet is it enough? Environmental and animal historians have taken to tracking 'traces' of the nonhuman past, reevaluating what counts as 'archive' (Bonnell et al. 2022). Literary scholars, likewise, investigate the personal poetics and meditations yielded by these new materials. Like Clare Brant, we could let sea squirts halt us with their apostrophic 'O's (Brant 2021: 142) and read postcards from the ocean (Brant 2025). With Jesse Oak Taylor and Tobias Menely, we might be attuned to the 'literary dimensions of geology – a practice of *reading* stratigraphic inscriptions and *narrating* evocative, if improbable, stories' (Menely et al. 2017: 2). At the heart of what has been described by many as the Anthropocene, we could also pay attention to the many ways in which 'our singular species [can read] *itself* in the rocks, and, in doing so establishes new stories about its identity and this planet' (Menely et al. 2017: 3).

Nonhuman biological and nonbiological forms, then – from microorganisms and fungi to flowers, mammals, insects, minerals, and objects – can impede, intersect with, and even engage in the writing of life and lives. In exploring these ecologies of self-inscription, critics have sought to reconfigure our conceptions of identity around the contributions of ecocriticism, plant studies, and animal studies, but also new materialism and historical vitalism (Alaimo 2010; Allen 2026; Bennett 2010; Tompkins 2024).

Feminist and queer studies can also represent a point of entry into the reinventions of (more-than-human) life writing. At the turn of the century, Edward Carpenter's autobiography *My Days and Dreams, Being Autobiographical Notes* (Carpenter 1916) encourages the self to let itself be queered *by* and *through* the recognition of embeddedness. In the second half of the twentieth century, after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson [1962] 2002), and drawing on the legacy of 19th-century intentional communities, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of feminist and lesbian alternative ways of inhabiting in (and thinking) rural geographies. In some cases, these communities documented their experiences (WomanShare 1976), reimagining the networks and connections between natural surroundings and collective, boundless selves.

Decentering normative conceptions of life writing might also help us to be attuned to and resist racializing hierarchies. The seeds of racial, social, and political theories of who and what does or does not count as life were sown in the nineteenth century, and

continued flowering well into the twentieth century (see Fanon 2021; Jackson 2020; Mbembe 2003; Weheliye 2014). At the peak of white anthropocentrism, written testimony, understood in its narrowest sense, was required evidence of sentience and intelligence. Racialized authors from Phillis Wheatley to Harriet Jacobs to Anna Julia Cooper, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou, having to work with and against the grain of racist expectations, used the written word as a demonstration of their life's value. Writing, grievability, linguistic invulnerability and biopolitics have thus become hopelessly intermeshed (Butler 2020, 2021).

This conference welcomes proposals on any and all creatures of flesh, mesh, stone, or wood. We encourage scholars at all career stages to think creatively about who or what is capable of life writing in the Anglophone world. Since much of the recent scholarship on the question of nonhuman or posthuman lives focuses on contemporary texts, the goal of this symposium is to expand our horizons by looking back towards both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. We invite contributions that trace subjectivity, agency, and self-narrative back to the early days of the Industrial Revolution, or acknowledge the circulation and legacy of turn of nineteenth-century ideas in more recent literary texts.

Possible topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Human / humanist selves, their limits and redefinitions
- Nature diaries
- Representations of illness, disease, bacteria, microorganisms that make, inflect, or disrupt human / nonhuman trajectories
- Material traces of animal, plant, and mineral life understood as auto/biographical inscription
- Sedimentation and fossilization as life writing
- Petroculture and the impact of fossil fuels on self-inscription
- 'it'-narratives or fictional (auto)biographies of objects
- The vibrant materiality of book, paper, and manuscript in life writing

The deadline for paper proposals is **15 July 2026**.
Please send abstracts of no more than 300 words, along with a short biography, to lifewriting.nonhuman@gmail.com.

Scientific committee

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