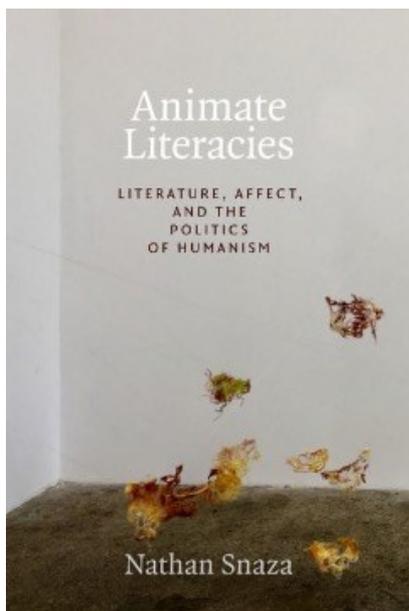


Expanded literacies

Ana Marques

UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA | CLP, RESEARCH FELLOW

ORCID: 0000-0002-7644-501X



Nathan Snaza. *Animate Literacies: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Humanism*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019. 232 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0562-9

A *animate Literacies* questions established humanist conceptions of literacy by posing two main questions: “what animates literacies, and how literacies animate particular forms of personhood and politics” (6). The notion of *animate literacies* looks at literacy situations by zooming out and refocusing on unacknowledged agencies in order to propose a posthuman critique of anthropocentric understandings of literacy. Through a series of close readings of works of literature, Nathan Snaza reflects on how the circuit of literacy implies an ensemble of actants and power relations – trees, pollinators, computers, glasses, power grids, workers, Amazon, roads, legislation... What animates a literacy situation is always rooted within such a field, which means that thinking about literacy must imply the

acknowledgment of the various dynamics at stake in what regards inscription and mediation, taking the material (cultural, social, political, ecological) basis of literacy into account.

This book calls attention to the ways in which educational institutions, and the western hegemonic tradition in general, produce the human at the expense of the dehumanization of the other. One example of the exclusion and dehumanization that characterizes institutional literacy is found in a scene from *Beloved*, by Tony Morrison, where white students learn their humanness against a background of slavery. The ink used in the school is made by Sethe, the black slave who is the protagonist of the novel, and although her work is at the basis of school, she is excluded from the literacy context and from the sphere of the human. Nathan Snaza's reading of this scene highlights the dynamics of domination and exclusion, and "the ways that human labor makes commodities like ink possible even though they can be seen as merely there" (16).

As Nathan Snaza puts it, "my task in *Animate Literacies* is to attune to nonhuman agencies at stake in literacy practices, including literature, while remaining intimate with intra-human politics and violences" (18). Regarding this double fold objective, one could argue that the link between nonhuman agencies and intra-human politics is already human in the sense that even the plantations of trees for making paper are the result of human techniques. Nevertheless, what Snaza is calling for is not a discussion about what the notion of "human" means, but rather an attention to otherness while attuning to modes of situatedness, inscription, and knowledge that are not modeled according to an understanding of otherness as a resource (human resources, natural resources, our language knows it better).

Considering literacy as a form of humanization, one that reflects and reinforces a certain version of the human (western, white, male), Nathan Snaza also looks at the geological costs of the production of the human: "there is a perverse fetichization growing today (...) which is inseparable from the rise of green capitalism on the one hand and the digital humanities on the other. It sees a turn away from paper toward virtual literacy as an ecologically sensitive alternative" (97). Calling attention to the ecologically catastrophic consequences of the programmed obsolescence of digital media, subjected to a neocolonial and neoliberal culture of extraction and consumption, Snaza concludes that "it is virtually impossible to imagine a way for literacy to be maintained as it is customarily though within imperialist humanism and its humanizing assemblages that is in any way ecologically sustainable" (98).

In contrast to such a tradition and its masculine imprint on history (conquest, domination, perennity of inscription), and to the "disturbing

pleasure that adheres in having read more, in having thought more about bigger ideas, bigger books, harder theories” (130), Nathan Snaza defends “a wild literacy that refuses capture” (98): “instead of a unifying rush toward assimilationist inclusion, I want to call for a mass exodus from Man’s classrooms” (142), and for “furtive, fugitive, ephemeral literacy events” (98). Such events would constitute what Snaza calls “literacies against the state”, literacies that “would make legible the violence of humanization” (147). José Saramago’s *Seeing*, the sequel of *Blindness*, is “the most dramatic staging I’ve encountered of a collective literacy against the state” (159): in the novel, after the citizens of Saramago’s imagined society recuperate their vision, elections are held and, although people attend to the polls, they massively vote blank: they participate in the state’s literacy event “but they engage by not leaving a mark. They refuse the legibility of the state” (160). Against “Man’s division and policing of space” (162) and “the violences of humanist unity” (154) Snaza defends plurality, openness, disruption and indeterminacy. Indeterminacy, of course, also has its costs. Defending such a “boundless unknowing” (156) leads to affirmations like the following: “we do not know what literature or literacy or even language means” (155). This radical relativisation risks becoming too general and, as a consequence, inoperative, by spreading its main concepts too thin.

Proposing the idea of bewilderment as a kind of disorientation that enables “a movement away from Man’s discipline” (83), Snaza provides examples that clarify what a non-anthropocentric approach to literacy would look like: “could we not think the spider weaving its web or the bird weaving its nest, to use obvious examples, as kinds of writing, ones that are always already caught up in multispecies assemblages?” (95). Or: “an orangutan named Watana who is especially gifted at tying knots, a practice that (...) must be included within the conceptual orbit of what counts as a literacy event” (96). Although such examples are to be understood as inscription in the sense of making marks on surfaces, this understanding of literacy is based on a dissociation between writing and reading, inevitably undermining the very notion of literacy as the condition for the possibility of meaning production.

Reading changes thinking processes and implies an “affective openness” (112). In praise of literature’s power to move beyond what is and toward what could be, Nathan Snaza highlights the ways in which literature creates an openness to alterity, “the imagination ready for the effort of othering” (134). One example of such othering, in the context of cognitive and communicative functions, is found on Shani Mootoo’s novel *Cereus blooms at night*, where the main character goes through a process of transformation

that enables her to develop more-than-human senses and modes of communication, gradually replacing speech with a sensory sensitivity to her non-human environment. Her newfound sensitivity illustrates the attunement to the “more than human swirl of the literacy situation” (159) that Snaza calls for in his defense of animate literacies.

Nathan Snaza argues that humanism contains in itself the possibility for a more-than-human approach to literacy, history, and culture. *Animate Literacies* clearly engages in such an effort. The book’s tone is one of enthusiasm and engagement with emancipated conceptions of human and nonhuman interrelations, both in the political and ecological spheres. Although it sometimes loses the sharpness of its focus by dwelling on highly metaphorical accounts of literacy, Snaza’s book provides a rich ensemble of literary accounts that illustrate his expanded notion of literacy. Written with a direct and clear language, the sixteen chapters of this book are carefully organized according to a genetic principle, accompanying, step by step, the author’s paths of reflection. *Animate Literacies* is a demonstration of both the vitality and the crisis of the humanities, sitting at a point where different roads cross, as it simultaneously takes on a speculative and a critical approach to the concept of literacy.