

## **Narratives of Sustainability in the Anthropocene. Interdisciplinary Dimensions**

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In his bestseller *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2015), Yuval Noah Harari noted that one of the most important cognitive faculties in the human species is the development of imagination, a faculty that, together with human capability for establishing cause-effect relationships and turning them into stories, has enabled the creation of narratives. But according to Harari, the importance of narrative not only lies on being able to tell about things that take place around us. “Rather, it’s the ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all. As far as we know, only *Sapiens* can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled.” (24) This means that humans can create unique forms of social organization beyond the present; that is, envisioning not only the past, as in myths, but also the future, as in all the religious narratives that foresee life after death.

Evolutionary narratology has suggested that human narrative capacity has co-evolved with the increasingly complex social interactions that took place among human ancestors. In *The Symbolic Species: the co-evolution of language and the brain*, neuro-anthropologist Terrence Deacon uses the metaphors of parasite and host in order to describe the relationship between language and the brain. He argues that “it is helpful to imagine language as an independent life form that colonizes and parasitizes human brains, using them to reproduce,” (1997: 111) because the structures of language have co-evolved to adapt to their brain hosts.

Shaun Gallagher has theorized that, unlike the ‘minimal self’ of complex animals, able to experience a certain consciousness of themselves only related to an immediate experience, unextended in time, the ‘narrative self’ developed by humans involves a sense of personal identity and continuity across time. This more or less coherent self (or self-image) is constituted by envisioning connections between past and future experiences, and is related to human capacity of telling, achieved by means of discourse

acquisition and the development of the ability to make the kind of cause-effect connections present in narrative. The building of mental narrative structures also aligns with intentionality, so that, in humans, “the normal experience of voluntary or willed action, the sense of agency and the sense of ownership coincide and are indistinguishable.” (Gallagher 2000: 16) Thus, although humans might be the only animals to possess storytelling abilities that project into the future, Gallagher’s distinction between the minimal and the narrative self allows for a modulation of agency. The ‘minimal self’ might be aware of self-agency but not have the sense of self-ownership for actions. In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall also inquired into the possibility of adapting our stories in order to learn to think differently.

Why do stories cluster around a few big themes, and why do they hew so closely to problem structure? Why are stories this way instead of all the other ways they could be? I think that problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped *for* story, so that it could be shaped *by* story (Gottschall 2012: 56)

Bearing these theories in mind, contemporary theorists coming from areas related to sustainability and ecocriticism are pursuing a similar inquiry: would it be possible to fill the narrative gap for those ‘minimal selves’ that make their presence felt in more than human ways? And if so, is it possible to translate into narratives the agencies of all those nonhuman others who, unlike humans, have not evolved shaped by stories? The argument is, then, to create and explore narratives that sustain a non-anthropomorphic point of view that gives voice to nonhumans in order to highlight the fact that every single entity in the world is involved in the sustainable co-creation of our common futures.

The term ‘sustainability’ was first used in a United Nations 1987 report entitled “Our Common Future”. Initially, the debate focused on social inequalities and migration as result of fragile economies, corrupt governments and war. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sustainable development goals included circular economy, bio-based economy, or improving efficiency by means of technologies. However, experience showed that tech production was not *the* solution. Instead, the rapid growth and the upgrading of tech products became part of the problem, with international organizations like the European Union recognizing the

need to extend obsolescence in 2017.<sup>1</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, climate change became the focus, with detractors preventing positive advance. Alongside environmental problems, the global pandemic and its associated crisis increased social fracturing, economic disparities, and other calamities. Recent wars also give us plenty of reasons to explore sustainable development from different angles.

Sustainability relations are simultaneously material (between human and nonhuman entities) and semiotic and axiological (between concepts) (López-Varela 2022). At the political level, for instance, sustainable development might involve the construction of policies that yield stability, social welfare and quality of life in communities all over the world, involving also health issues such as policies for the prevention of illnesses and improvement of life expectancy. At the environmental level, the sustainable management of natural resources, the control of pollution, or the promotion of green energy are among the tasks undertaken within the United Nations 2030 framework. At the scientific and educational level, sustainability is involved in the good progress of knowledge and training; the promotion of communal values, improving, for instance, awareness and understanding of climate change and stimulating public debate on the decisions concerning environmental and health risks. Capacity building is also a sustainable contribution to the education curricula, which should include pedagogical tools to improve the sustainable use of resources as well as forms of levelling equity across the infrastructures of world nations.

Thus, this volume explores sustainability from a comparative perspective that integrates aspects of social sciences and humanities, addressing the ‘third mission’ in education in order to raise awareness with regards to sustainable development and ecological concerns. Sustainable solutions include forward-looking forms of thinking in the face of the complexity and unpredictability. Since its inception, narrative fiction has boldly imagined utopian and dystopian scenarios. Some dystopic narratives have focused on the violent irruption of nonhuman agents that disrupt the apparent order of human communities. With fiction becoming reality, Robin Cook’s 1995 thriller *Contagion* was almost an omen of the Covid-19 pandemic that struck all over the globe in 2020. Planetary warming, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity decline, deforestation, are all present in the more than human worlds of speculative fiction. Hybrid graphic forms of fiction also hold interesting prospects to engage

in a dialogue with science, ecology, and topics related to sustainability and the environment, including political ecologies that involve the struggle for animal rights.

Along these lines, this special issue explores the role of narratives in the Anthropocene by focusing on a range of narratives around the core of sustainability. The topics involve aspects of language as well as political, ecological and environment aspects, animal concerns, and the need to highlight sustainable development in the education syllabus, perhaps by incorporating narrative fictions that pay attention to all these pressing problems.

The paper by Sanja Ivic emphasizes the crucial role that language use plays in climate change communication. The author examines public discourse and narratives about climate change and argues that the rhetoric of apocalypse, in which humanity is presented as a victim of an external threat does not allow for sufficient engagement and action.

Janez Strehovec looks at art-specific sustainability. He argues that the circular environmental economy coexists with the circular art economy, which implies changes in the aesthetics and poetics of the artwork, deploying upcycling to use art trash in creating new value objects. The paper defends art activism as an important driver in areas overlooked by current sustainability policies.

López-Varela's research inquiries into thingness, that is, the value attached to objects by means of storytelling, exploring and if insignificant things can become significant constructions that serve the purpose of eco-critical awareness. The paper examines the project "Significant Objects" a literary and anthropological experiment devised in 2009 by entrepreneur Josh Glenn and New York Times columnist Rob Walker, exploring one of its short narratives: "Mermaid Figurine" by British writer Tom McCarthy.

Weijie Song outlines the scopes, scales, and methods of Chinese storytelling and multimedia exhibitions on the topic of deforestation and afforestation, pollution and purification, wastelands and eco-systems. In so doing, the author brings to the light the awakening and formation of Chinese ecological consciousness, as well as the manifestation of biophilia-biophobia experiences in contemporary China.

The following two papers of the volume examine the power of graphic narratives to bring awareness to sustainable issues. Rina Ramdev's contribution looks at the Indian graphic novel *Bhimayana* and the way the

artisanal aesthetic of the tribal artists mediates current debates on posthumanism. Qingben Li's chapter looks at another influential graphic narrative; that of Cixin Liu, one of the most prolific and popular science fiction writers in China. The paper discusses *The Wandering Earth*, moving beyond the scope of human temporality to explore alternative forms of relationship with nature in the dialogue between images and text.

Seyyed Ali Kani Hoolari and Shamsoddin Royanian travel back in time to explore the phenomenon of environmentalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by looking at the novels of the Victorian novelist, Captain Frederick Marryat, a conservative and right-wing writer. The paper attends to the relationship between politics and the environment.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is the narrative taken up by Narie Jung to demonstrate the unsustainability that defines consumer culture in the Anthropocene by means of McCarthy's representation of cannibalism. The novel suggests that making consumer culture sustainable means recognizing the violence of individualism and the significance of empathetic consciousness.

Focusing on the sustainable limits of meat consumption as portrayed in narrative fiction, Simon C. Estok explores Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Ang Li's *The Butcher's Wife* in order to show how, in very different ways, these stories expose the strands of meat and gender enmeshments in Korea and Taiwan respectively.

Sustainable development also takes into account socio-political initiatives to preserve historical memory and contribute to the promotion of inclusion. The article by Soon-Ok Myong discusses a 1960s Soviet Korean novel dealing with the Korean hero Beom-do Hong. At the initiative of the Korean government, the remains of Hong were repatriated to Korea from Kazakhstan on the occasion of Independence Day in August 15, 2021. The repatriation of Hong's remains ignited a debate that has exposed a chronic division within Korean society, a conflict that still needs urgent solution.

Moving on to cinematographic narratives, Weiwei Ye and Maximiliano E. Korstanje center on a visual ethnography on the film *Contagion*, to lay the foundations towards a new understanding of health issues and their effects on ecological justice.

News media also offer interesting ground to explore trends related to sustainability. Aigerim Belyalova and Natalya Yem examine 1,203 articles

from the news archives in South Korea. Materials range from newspapers and broadcasting TV to Internet news channels. The authors inquire into the effectiveness of communication and the social response to sustainability and climate change in South Korea, where per capita greenhouse gas emissions have risen to the third highest in the world.

Jinghua Guo presents a case on the importance of heritage, natural and cultural, tangible and intangible, by exploring Liangzhu cultural heritage located in Hangzhou, China. The paper argues that cultural heritage is also a special kind of living narrative which, in accordance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, carries an important function in global sustainable development.

The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics is the topic studied by Huiyong Wu who shows the many difficulties faced by the organization in the field of sustainable development. Taking the Winter Olympics as an opportunity, Beijing improved its sports infrastructures and industry and made useful explorations in the management of the Olympic legacy on Sustainable Development.

Shi Yan reflects on the challenge sustainable development in Chinese education systems. Faced with the complex challenges of regional, urban-rural and inter-school disparities in education, China's central and local governments are working in order to promote sustainable educational equity. The paper offers some reflections on encountered and potential problems related to the solutions proposed to address these inequities.

The closing paper by Andrejs Kūlnieks defends that poetic inquiry can serve to help learners develop a closer relationship with their surroundings, paying more attention to local environments and awareness on climate change. Kūlnieks is an artist established in Canada and his paper includes several of his poems.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CIRIEC-International- Centre international de recherches et d'information sur l'économie publique, sociale et cooperative. "Recent evolutions of the Social Economy in the European Union", 2017. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-04-17-875-en-n.pdf>

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